Solar Winds

by Morkhan

Summary

Fusion!Fic: Glee characters in the Avatar: The Last Airbender world.

Avatar Kurt Hummel must travel the Four Nations and master the elements to stop a mysterious, unnatural plague from destroying the balance of the world. With water and earthbending under his belt, he must now learn firebending from Blaine Anderson, the Fire Prince.

Sparks fly between them, but just as things heat up, a bid for his father's throne turns Blaine's life- and the Fire Nation- upside-down.

Will Kurt and his friends escape with their lives? Or will Sue Sylvester and her minions snuff them out for good?

Notes

Author's Note: IDEK, you guys. Over the holidays, I watched an Avatar: The Last Airbender marathon or two and found that I really dig that show. But I also really dig Glee. So I decided to mix the two—however, rather than just toss them together like a bowl of Chex Mix, I decided to puree them and go for a more organic fusion; Glee characters in the Avatar world (which is why I didn't file this as a crossover- no Avatar characters will be used, just the setting).

Does it work? Hell if I know. But I couldn't get it out of my head, so here it is... my first fanfiction in months, and my first-ever Glee fic. Enjoy! :P
BACKGROUND INFO: For those who HAVE NOT watched Avatar: The Last Airbender, the world in a nutshell is this: there are four nations. The Fire Nation, the Earth Kingdom, the Water Tribes, and the Air Nomads. A significant minority in each country is born with the ability to *bend*, or control the element that their Nation is attuned to. Bending is a learned art that involves controlled movement and concentration, much like a martial art, and each element's art is different. No one can bend anything but their natural element.

No one, that is, except the Avatar.

Born and reborn in an endless cycle, the Avatar is the incarnation of the spirit of the world, and the spirit of balance. Each life the Avatar leads, he or she is born in one nation, and must travel to all others and master all four bending arts, as well as the incredible power of the Avatar spirit itself. Guided by the wisdom of their past lives, their purpose is to protect the world and ensure balance among the Four Nations, so that all people may live in peace and harmony.

Stylistically… do a quick Google Image search for Avatar: The Last Airbender to get a good feel for the look. Basically, the world is Medieval Asia mixed with Steampunk and Fantasy. Oh, and for some reason, most animals in this world are weird hybrids of existing animals. There are Elephant Rats. Seriously.

For those who HAVE watched Avatar: TLA, this occurs in a world where the Airbender Genocide never happened. The Fire Nation is not at war with anyone, though there is another problem plaguing the world at the moment. To say more would be to give away spoilers.

As for the Glee characters; they are their canon ages for the most part, though their backstories are wildly different. The Avatar generally learns of his/her identity and begins his/her quest on the 16th birthday, so Kurt is about 16 and ½ years old here.
Chapter 1

Beneath the clear, starry skies of the Fire Nation, in the backyard of the modest estate of the vacationing Wang family, two young men take turns attempting to light each other up. Err, figuratively speaking, that is...

"Fire," Blaine breathes against the back of Kurt's neck, "is the most dangerous element."

Kurt fights against the rising urge to roll his eyes. Must his teachers always lecture him? He's pretty sure there is no written portion to the Avatar exam. It's just one incredibly long (life-long) practical. The philosophy lessons are lovely, really, but he's in a bit of a hurry here. World to save, balance to restore, all of that.

"That's why the number one most important principle in Firebending," Blaine continues, "is control."

The young Avatar squishes the urge to tell his mentor to shut up in favor of telling his brain to shut up. The endless stream-of-consciousness is so not helping with what he is trying to accomplish here. Breathing exercises. Firebending is all about breath control. Something about Dragons, or somesuch nonsense.

"In," Blaine instructs, audibly inhaling. Kurt attempts to follow his example. "And out," Blaine exhales, his breath against Kurt's neck sending him into a shudder and totally ruining his attempt to do the same.

"Why," Kurt quietly seethes, "exactly, is it important that I perform this exercise half-naked?"

Blaine smiles. Kurt can't even see his smug little face, and he knows he's smiling. It's in his voice. "Because," the young Prince says. "It's not uncommon for amateur Firebenders to set their clothes on fire by accident. Your robes looked expensive, so I thought you might want to keep them safe on the off chance you actually ignite something tonight."

The growl that escapes Kurt's chest is definitely not good breath control. "This is impossible," he says. "We've been at this for almost a week now, and I have yet to produce enough heat to light a bong. How am I supposed to learn this stupid art if it takes me over a week to even learn how to breathe properly?"

"That's another thing," Blaine continues, his voice as calm and stupidly self-assured as ever. Stupid Fire. Stupid Firebending. Stupid Blaine. "Since I can see your chest, I can monitor how you breathe, and help you learn."

Yeah, Kurt thinks. That's why you've been eying my chest like a half-starved tigerseal. But he doesn't voice those thoughts. Instead, he pivots gracefully and voices these. "You know, maybe you're just not a very good teacher. Maybe you don't know what you're talking about. Maybe you don't even know how to Firebend and you just set up this entire charade as an elaborate excuse to ogle me in tight pants."

The Fire Prince eyes Kurt with an expression that he rarely seems to waver from- bemused nonchalance. An expression that Kurt has grown utterly tired of seeing, it serves only to spur him on further.

"Do I make you hot, Blaine?" Kurt mocks. "Do I set your coals alight? Do I make your timbers
smoke? Do you burn for me? Do I—"

Like a spark of lightning, Blaine's hand thrusts forward in a perfect open-palm strike. At the end of the motion, when the force reaches its apex, it happens—a ripple in the air, followed by a beautiful orange sunburst that stops just sort of singing Kurt's eyebrows. He can feel the heated wind blow his hair out of place, and while, under normal circumstances, this would be perfectly valid reason for him to declare open war, at the moment, he can't quite bring himself to care because that was hot, in every sense of the word.

"See?" Blaine says, the small smile still on his face. "Control. If I had been upset or affected by your… insinuations," he continues as the smile turns into a smirk, "I might have actually burned you." The red-robed man steps forward, putting a hand against Kurt's bare chest. "Your breathing affects your emotions, which, in turn, affects your Firebending. Learning to control that is the first step in learning to focus it."

Kurt is listening now, even though he is having a very hard time controlling his air intake at the moment.

"You let your frustration get the better of you. Listen to yourself! You're panting like a tired dragon dog," Blaine teases.

Frustration is so not the reason he is panting right now, but whatever. Let the Fire Prince think what he wants.

"Don't try so hard," Blaine says, sounding almost… fond, which is an interesting turn for him. "You're Water-native. You told me yourself—it's pretty much expected that Firebending is going to be the hardest art for you to learn. It'll come to you. Relax," he says, gently poking Kurt's chest and smiling full-on for perhaps the first time Kurt has ever seen, with teeth and crinkling eyes and actual mirth and everything.

It's not a bad look for him.

"Ready to try again?" Blaine asks.

Kurt's throat is a little dry at the moment (irony, much?) so he settles for a short nod.

"Great," Blaine says, slipping behind him again. "Now, I'm going to try something," he warns, and Kurt barely has time to think 'oh, please do' before the Avatar finds himself with a very warm Fire Nation Royal fully pressed against his back and in what way is this supposed to help him control ANYTHING? "This way, you can feel me breathe, and do it with me," Blaine says, and apparently, Kurt has regressed to a 13-year-old because the only part of that sentence that his mind really registered was 'do it with me.'

Oh, this will be such fun.

"In, and out…"

Approximately seventy eight-point-eight feet away, in a ramshackle old storage shed that contains, among other things, Kaji Wang's prized collection of antique rakes, a young man fights bravely against apoplexy, while a young woman tries to balance between ignoring his stupidity and protecting him from it. It's a tough act to balance...

Finn Hudson is choking to death on a pine cone.
Okay, probably not what's really happening, but that's what it sounds like. Big boy is over by the window, switching back and forth between gasping and gagging. It's really throwing off her mojo, and she's trying to meditate over here.

"You gonna live, waterboy?" Mercedes asks.

Finn turns to her with a look of equal parts outrage and horror. "Are you seeing this?"

"No, I'm not, because unlike some creepers I know, I don't feel like the need to follow people around and spy on them!" the irate Earthbender answers. Honestly, Finn is taking this 'protective big brother' thing WAY too seriously. Especially considering that his so-called 'little brother' is older than him and THE AVATAR.

"But… look!" the ginormous water-tribesman whispers, pointing out the small window he's been peeking through. "Look at this guy! He's all… rubbing himself against Kurt," he continues, sounding completely scandalized. "Like a cat!"

Mercedes takes a glance through the window and has to stop herself from smiling. One of the participants in that training session looks like he's about to start purring, and it ain't Blaine. "Finn, sweetie, I'm sure Kurt has it under control. The boy can take care of himself," she says gently, trying to massage the message through Finn's thick skull. She's noticed, over time, that Earth Kingdom bluntness just kind of bounces off of Finn—you gotta be gentle, give it to him easy, before he'll really take you to heart.

At the moment, Finn is too busy seething with righteous anger or whatever to notice. "Bending teacher…" he grumbles. "Bending teacher, my butt. I'll show him bending… bend that guy in half…"

"Finn," Mercedes warns.

"I'm sorry, but dude is perv-ing all over my little brother. You can't just expect me to be okay with that!" Finn sputters. "Knew there was something weird about that guy. He's too… smiley," he scowls.

"Look, why don't you just come over here and meditate with me?" Mercedes asks. "You need to calm down. You look like you're about three seconds away from having steam shoot out your ears."

"How can you be okay with this?" Finn seethes. Mercedes can see veins starting to appear in his neck, and for a second, she is seriously worried that he is going to blow his top in a literal sense. And that will be Hell to clean up. "You actually trust this 'Blair'—"

"Blaine."

"Whatever! You actually trust this guy?"

"No," she shrugs lightly. "But I trust Kurt. I trust him to take care of himself, and I trust him to know when he needs to ask us for help. And I don't get why you can't do the same."

Finn looks suitably chastised for a second, but it is all-too-brief. Suddenly, his eyes bug out and the choking noise starts up again, and all Mercedes can think is 'boy, you hock up a hairball on me, I will end you.'

The Earthbender looks out the window again to see Blaine with arms wrapped around Kurt from
behind, pressing his hands against Kurt's pale chest as they breathe together.

"He's—he's—" Finn sputters. "He's **touching his boobs**!" She can see it coming, knows it's already too late to change his mind. "That's it. I'm going out there."

She sighs. And here she was hoping she wouldn't have to do this. As Finn stomps towards the door to the small clearing where Kurt and Blaine are practicing, Mercedes stands up and does a little stomp of her own. Immediately, the ground beneath Finn splits open into a sinkhole, and he gives a pretty fantastic arm flail before he falls into it with a yelp. Giving him no time to recover, she takes a firm stance, holds her hands out, and brings them together, closing the ground around him and sealing him up to his elbows.

"Mercedes!" he grunts. "Hey, no fair! Let me go!"

"Uh-uh," she says, sitting back down. "Not until you calm down. I'll leave you there all night if I have to. **You're not** going out there!"

"I'm telling you," Finn grunts. "That guy is bad news."

"And I am telling **you,**" she smiles, "you're not going."

The half-buried boy pouts and scowls at her, but he seems to have run out of things to say for the moment, so Mercedes closes her eyes again and attempts to find her center.

"I need to pee," Finn admits, sounding mildly embarrassed.

"You're a waterbender," she says without opening her eyes. "You'll figure something out."
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 2/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: Blaine exists.
Warnings: More mild sexyness. Freudian slips.
Word Count: 2584
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current incarnation of the Avatar, learns Firebending from Prince Blaine in what is probably the least secret (and least appropriate) Secret Training Session in history.

Author's Note: I'm happy that this seems to have hit a mark. Just so you know—the story I have in my head for this verse is LONG. Like, multi-book epic long. But it will likely be divided into substories, of which this will be one. Another familiar face makes his debut here, with a few more to come next chapter. Enjoy!

His body is covered in sweat. His hair is wet and disgusting, bangs clumped together and dangling just above his eyeline, swinging distractingly with each movement. His life has been boiled down to a series of thrusts—over and over, in regular rhythm, while his partner shouts his orders.

"Harder," Blaine commands.

Kurt thrusts again.

"Faster!" he grunts.

The Avatar repeats the motion, a frustrated growl tearing from his throat.

"Put your hips into it," the Fire Prince commands, wrapping warm fingers around Kurt's naked waist to show him how it's done.

It is at this point that Kurt decides that Blaine is screwing him.

Errr, screwing with him, that is. No one can be this homoerotic by accident.
"Keep focusing. Remember your breathing," Blaine says as Kurt continues to strike at the air with his palm. He really can't figure out what it is that he's doing wrong. That, he supposes, is why Blaine is here, but at this point, Blaine is arguably the number one obstacle to his focus.

"Harder!" Blaine repeats, snapping him back to reality and snapping his wire-thin patience.

"I am hard!" Kurt groans. It takes him just a second to realize what he said. "I mean—I'm doing it as hard as I can."

Blaine eyes him with no small amount of amusement. "That can't be the hardest you're capable of," he says. "Surely you can up the ante just a little more."

With a concentrated effort, Kurt regulates his breathing and breaks his stance. "Why don't you show me one more time?" he asks, his voice infused with as much patience as he can muster (which isn't much). He gives a mock bow and gestures to his so-called teacher, who simply smiles and bows in return.

Blaine adopts his stance quickly. "Firebending movements are fierce and decisive. They're pure offense; strikes designed to create incredible force for just a moment. Watch," he says, giving Kurt a second to center his attention before bursting into action. The movement is explosive in a figurative and literal sense; all at once, Blaine's muscles snap into action, kinetic energy firing his hand like a cannonball in front of him, the speed of the strike nearly faster than Kurt's eyes can follow. A fireball bursts from the end of Blaine's hand as it whips to a stop, the kinetic energy seemingly transforming to open flame and spurting out in a straight line. It's a thing of beauty, involving nearly every part of Blaine's body in some small way, the years of training he has received in the art readily apparent. It's a movement as natural to him as blinking for most people.

Bastard.

"So, basically, I just need to do exactly what I've been doing, only better in every way?"

Blaine gives him a cheeky grin, and a mock-bow of a his own. "Pretty much."

"Fantastic!" Kurt says as he claps his hands. "Everything is so clear to me now. Thank you, oh sage, for your great wisdom."

"Now, Avatar Kurt," Blaine admonishes. "There's no need for that kind of attitude. Don't call me 'Sage.'" He smirks. "If you must use a title, 'Master' will do just fine."

"Really?" Kurt says, quirking a finely-trimmed brow. "Not 'Highness'? Or 'Majesty'? Or 'Most Dapper and Self-Assured Prince Blaine'?"

An unaffected shrug is the Firebender's reply. "I'm not Your Prince."

There are many things Kurt thinks in response to that, but nothing he says. Instead, he decides it's time for less conversation and more action, adopting the closest approximation of Blaine's stance he can manage and beginning to strike again.

"What are they doing?" Finn asks.

Mercedes says nothing.

"I hear... sounds. They're making sounds!" he continues.
The Earthbender continues to ignore him.

Finn struggles in vain against the solid earth holding him in place. "That's... that's grunting! They're totally grunting out there! Those are sex noises!"

She doesn't even twitch.

"How can you just sit there while Kurt and... and... Mister Hot Pants are out there doing stuff with each other?"

"I think 'doing stuff with each other' is kind of the whole point," a smooth voice says from the doorway. "Training generally involves lots of stuff. Stuff that must be done. I'm pretty sure you've seen that firsthand."

The Waterbender's face splits into a relieved grin at the new arrival. "Artie! Dude, I am so glad you're here."

The bespectacled boy has a wry grin on his face as he wheels into the shed. "Finn! You got short. Well, shorter," he says. "I like it! You're much closer to eye-level this way."

"Dude, you gotta let me out of here," he says, wiggling like a worm. A worm that seriously still has to pee.

"Really?" Artie asks. "We finally see eye-to-eye, and you just want to hop back up on your high horse? I'm disappointed, Finn," he says, shaking his head sadly. "Why are you doing a lawn dart impression, anyway?"

"Mercedes sunk me," he grouses.

"Mercedes," Artie sighs. "What did we decide about Finn abuse?"

The brassy young woman gives him a smirk, keeping her eyes closed as she speaks. "It's more fun than a barrel of poodle monkeys," she says.

"But?" Artie pushes, steepling his fingers.

"...but," she continues, "like all things, it must be taken in moderation."

"Exactly," Artie says with a nod. "You reached your quota for the day when you spiked his tea with ground up Fire Flakes."

"Nuh-uh," she says. "That was yesterday. It's after midnight, so the score is reset." To illustrate, she points to a downtrodden old clock hanging on the wall.

The boy in the wheelchair glances up at the clock. It looks about as old as Artie's grandparents, but it's still ticking. Sure enough, it's twenty minutes past 12AM. He turns to Finn with a shrug. "She's got a point. Sorry, dude, nothing I can do. It's the rules. We all agreed to them."

Finn groans and wishes he could bend over far enough to smack his head on the ground. "You guys suck."

"Anybody say anything to you?" Mercedes asks Artie, having settled the subject of Finn.

"Nope," he shakes his head.

"Give you any funny looks?" she presses.
"None," he grins. "I am a hundred percent incognito. Though this stupid bandage itches like crazy," he says, scratching at the white wrapping around his forehead. "The cast would probably itch too, if I could actually feel it." He knocks on the hard molding around his left leg to emphasize the point. "The Wanted posters are for a paralyzed Earthbender. They say nothing about an injured Fire Nation Border Patrolman. I'm in the clear."

"Well, good," Mercedes says.

"Does that mean I can drop the disguise?" Artie asks hopefully.

She shrugs in response, and Artie's grin grows twice as wide. The bandage comes off easily and lands on Finn's head, dangling just low enough to tickle his nose. With practiced ease, Artie reaches over and places his fingers on the clay cast, focusing for just a second before pressing down and cracking it completely without even so much as a huff of effort. The pieces fall to the floor as Artie's leg bounces once against the chair before coming to rest. He turns the wheelchair away from the debris, and with what could almost be seen as enthusiasm, grabs the armrests and thrusts himself out of the chair, landing on the ground in a surprisingly dignified flop.

"Ah," he sighs. "Feels so good to be back in touch with my baby." He pats the ground gently. "Did you miss me, girl?"

"Mercedes," Finn whines. "Artie's talking to the ground again."

"Artie," she says, still seemingly in a state of zen. "You know it creeps Finn out when you get all friendly with the Earth."

"Don't pay any attention to them. They're just jealous," he whispers at the ground. "They want what we have."

"Dude, I am so not jealous of your relationship with the freakin' dirt," Finn grumbles.

The paralyzed boy smiles as he uses his hands to fold his legs underneath him. "You know, it might not be wise to speak of my woman in such a disparaging tone when your vital equipment is currently well-within her grasp. I'm just sayin'."

The lanky boy goes pale and promptly clamps his trap shut.

"So, what'd I miss?" Artie asks.

"Kurt is out there, getting hot and heavy with the Prince of the Fine Nation," Mercedes says lasciviously.

"Oh, really?" Artie asks. "Lemme see."

Finn braces himself for what comes next. He's been travelling with this guy for months and it still freaks him out a little when he does this… folding his hands in his lap, Artie suddenly seems to start sliding along the ground of his own volition, without moving anything at all. Like some kind of demented human hovercraft, he propels himself below the window, sliding to a halt. Holding his hands cupped and low, he raises them quickly and finds himself raised in turn, sitting on a perfectly round pillar of earth just high enough to let him peek through the opening.

"Damn, Hummel!" Artie whispers with a rogueish grin. "Get some!"

Finn lets out a noise halfway between groan and whimper. "I can't believe you guys are okay with this! Kurt has… like… virtue, or whatever, and it needs to be protected!"
“What Kurt needs is to get laid,” Artie says simply. “Dude is hella tense.”

Mercedes can’t help it—she opens one eye, and winds up desperately trying not to fall over from laughing at the expression on Finn’s face.

“Ohkay,” Finn says, sounding a little sick. “If you guys are just gonna talk about my brother’s… virtue like it’s no big deal, can you at least bury me up to my ears so I don’t have to listen?”

Mercedes and Artie share a glance before turning to Finn with large, toothy smiles.

“No, no, guys, it was a joke, I was kidding, guys, come on, h-HEY—"

"ARGH," Kurt growls. "I am at a loss. I’m doing exactly what you were doing," he says, still unable to get any kind of fire going. He continues to strike, nonetheless, but it’s starting to feel more than a little pointless.

"No," Blaine says simply, "you're not. You're not used to moving like I am. You're too… graceful."

It is a damn good thing Kurt is still keeping up his breath control, because he would probably have started choking at that otherwise. "Excuse me?"

The Firebender shrugs, smug smile seemingly welded to his face. "It's how I spotted you. How I knew you didn't belong here… your walk is perfect. You flow when you move, every motion bleeding into the next, like you’ve had it all planned for years. Like," he pauses for a second, though it's plain to Kurt that he is in no way lost for words and he's just doing it for emphasis. "Well, like you're water. Like every action is just the natural result of you being you. It's nothing to be ashamed of," he adds, after a breath. "It's actually fairly stunning, to those who know enough to spot it."

The Avatar finds himself fighting a very different kind of heat rising to his cheeks. Blaine has apparently been studying Kurt fairly hard lately.

And the heat only gets harder to fight when Blaine steps behind him again and his calm, composed tone suddenly drops an octave and turns granite-rough. "But fire isn't like that."

The Prince walks around Kurt slowly as he speaks, his voice raw and primal. "Fire is alive. It wants, it breathes, it fights. Its existence is struggle from beginning to end, constantly seeking to grow, to consume, to burn brighter and hotter and farther. Every other form of bending relies on manipulating what is around you, shaping it and forming it to your will. But fire comes from within. It IS your will, channeled and released as power."

The young Water Tribeman feels it then. As Blaine's words begin to sink in, finally, he feels the heat rising.

"So, what is your will, Avatar Kurt?" Blaine says, his intensity on a steady uphill climb as he continues to orbit. "What fuels you? What drives you? What do you burn for, what do you live for, what do you fight for?"

The two of them reach fever pitch at the same time as Blaine hits his climax. "What. Do. You. WANT?"

At this moment Kurt knows exactly what he wants.

It originates in his chest, indescribable warmth that is not painful in the slightest, but far too hot to
keep inside. His breath holds it steady until he is ready, and then, in the motion Blaine showed him, he steps forward, releasing the warmth into his arm and channeling it outwards just as the strike reaches its apex. The fire erupts from Kurt's palm in a brilliant blaze of orange and yellow, causing the world to stretch and distort from the heat. Blazing for but a second, it streaks out into the night in a straight line before burning out. And even as the fire dies, Kurt does not feel bereft of its warmth. On the contrary, he feels a steady, slow burn within his center, hotter than ever, just waiting for Kurt to call it forth again.

A triumphant smirk graces his lips. He is hot shit. And even better- he totally hit what he was aiming for with that little fireburst.

"Kurt!" Blaine shouts, so bright with elation that he almost seems like a different person. "You did it! You made fire!"

"Errrr, Blaine," he replies, not exactly expecting this reaction.

"That was amazing, Kurt! That flame was huge for a beginner. I'm blown away," he continues, smiling like he just got a private island for his birthday.

"Blaine, ummm, you should… you're kind of…" Kurt gestures to the general area of Blaine's torso.

The boy blinks in confusion for a second before looking down and going wide-eyed. "Oh, shit!" he shouts, batting uselessly at the growing flames that are rapidly travelling up the hem of his robes. He flails and beats himself for a few seconds before finally catching a clue and tearing the consumable clothing off, tossing it onto the ground and stomping on it. Sadly, this doesn't help in the slightest—the flame pops up somewhere new every time Blaine stamps it out. Eventually, guilt moves Kurt into a waterbending stance—with smooth, deliberate movements, he pulls as much moisture as he can out of the air (you'd be surprised) and guides the resulting water mass over to the scene of the disaster, and upon seeing that Blaine's pants are now also on fire, he proceeds to dump it on the Fire Prince and his mega hot fashion accessories, drenching them both.

All is silent for a few seconds as a dripping, half-naked Blaine attempts to regain his cool.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" he says in that special not-really-a-question way.

"Yes," Kurt admits. "But to be fair, I was just hoping to get you topless. I didn't think Fire Nation regalia would be so volatile."

He expects a little outrage (the Spirits know Kurt would shit bricks over this), but instead, Blaine just grins and starts walking towards Kurt. When he gets close enough, he goes for a full wet doggy style shakedown, splattering Kurt with the drippings from his newly-unstyled hair. The slightly vain Avatar instinctively protects his face, but when he takes his hands back down, he is surprised to find Blaine's grinning mug within inches of his own. There's a flicker of light in his eyes when he speaks.

"I knew there was a spark in you."
Friends Like These

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 3/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: Blaine exists.
Warnings: Cursing, cockblock-induced rage.
Word Count: 2254
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current incarnation of the Avatar, learns Firebending from Prince Blaine in what is probably the least secret (and least appropriate) Secret Training Session in history.

Author's Note: So, since I've gone and decided to write this as an epic, I've come up with a few things. The full name of this story is now, technically, Avatar: The Legend of Kurt. It will tentatively be four books long...

Book 1: Terra Infirma
Book 2: Solar Winds
Book 3: Airtight Seals
Book 4: Northern Lights

If George Lucas can go and start in the middle of his saga, then I damn well can, too. :P

CHAPTER 3

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Friends Like These

You could cut the tension between them with a knife; slice it into even portions and serve it as a hors d'oeuvre to liven up any party. Both of them exposed and dripping wet, the air around them thick with the smell of sweat and pheromones, their faces mere inches from one another. Kurt can feel the universal forces brewing between them, magnetism and gravity and pure electricity just begging for them to close the gap, bond together and create a new element—fire plus water equals steam, and he has a feeling the two of them could fog up many a window. It feels like the air just before the first thunderbolt in a storm, and all it would take is a single movement, a single action
from these opposite charges to make lightning strike. The moment is absolutely *perfect*—

"TAP THAT."

—aaand it's over.

Blaine starts at the outburst, his eyes darting around like a frightened lemur on lookout for a komodo condor. "Did you hear that?"

"TAP THAT ASS."

"Yes," Kurt says through clenched teeth. "Unfortunately." His eyes immediately latch on to the old storage shed at the corner of the yard, and he thinks about Earthbending a small mountain on top of it.

"POUND HIM LIKE THE FIST OF AN ANGRY SUN GOD. GET UP ON—HEY—ACK!"

*Thud.*

The expression on Blaine's face is honestly slightly terrified, so Kurt stows away his murderous urges for the moment. "Don't worry," he says. "Ashamed as I am to admit it, I know that voice."

"Oh," Blaine says, the worry venting out of him like steam. "Thank Agni."

Kurt raises a thin brow at his bending instructor.

The Prince looks sheepish as he goes to gather the burnt remains of his robe. "Sorry, I just... can't let anyone I know find out about us. Hence the nighttime sessions. Firebending is stronger and easier during daylight, but you know that. Or, wait, do you know that? Did I cover that?"

"You didn't," Kurt says, slightly disappointed for reasons he can't quite describe. "But that's alright. I'm sure you would've gotten to it eventually."

"Yeah," Blaine says, distracted. "Anyway, I'd say that's enough progress for one night. You did really well, Kurt." Putting on his singed, wet clothes, Blaine quickly retrieves his heavy, hooded cloak from the tree where he hung it. "I'll send a messenger with our next meeting place as soon as I can."

"Don't wait too long," Kurt says. "This is kind of time-sensitive."

"I'll see you again soon," Blaine says, giving him but a brief glance. "I promise. Until then, try to lay low. And... put a little fire in your step." He allows just the briefest glimpse of a grin before pulling the hood over his head and walking off into the night.

"Until next time," Kurt softly calls after him. A sigh starts to seep out of his throat, but he clamps it shut when he suddenly remembers exactly why Blaine is now leaving. "Now, if you'll excuse me," he says to no one in particular. "I have some friends to murder."

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The rickety old door to the shed does not survive Kurt's entrance—it impacts the wall and promptly divorces itself from its hinges, falling over with a loud *clack*. Mercedes stands just beyond it, arms crossed and a sympathetic expression on her face. "I'm sorry. I tried to stop him."

Her boy's breathing is loud and furious, in and out through his nose. *Now* he's breathing like a dragon. "Surrender the cripple," he seethes, "and no one gets hurt." A short pause. "Except the cripple."
Mercedes just gestures further into the shed, and Kurt stalks forth, on the prowl and ready to pounce. Sadly, his predator-o-vision spots nothing of interest besides a lot of strangely elaborate lawn care equipment. He moves carefully, his steps light and fluid... his prey is cunning and crafty, and each step—

"Ow."

He can't help it—Kurt jumps about four feet into the air from sheer shock. Ever the master of improvisation, however, he lands in a combat stance and manages to salvage his dignity (at least he didn't squeal this time). His eyes scan the shed for the source of the voice, but still come up oddly short.

"Down here."

It's much easier to follow the sound when he's expecting it. The Avatar's eyes fall to the floor, where he finds...

"Finn?" Or, rather, Finn's upturned face, barely sticking out of the ground (with a small footprint on it).

"Hey, Kurt," Finn says, pulling his eyeballs as far over as he can to look at him.

He can't help but shake his head in awe of the situations his semi-brother finds himself in. "What are you doing? Why are you... how did you..."

"What?" Finn asks.

"How did you get down there?" Kurt repeats.

"What?" Finn asks again.

His blood pressure is beginning to skyrocket. Poke him with a pin and he could probably hit a bullseye with the stream at 50 feet or better. "HOW DID YOU GET DOWN THERE?" he shouts.

"Oh. Mercedes and Artie put me here," he says, simply. "...huh. The cracks in this ceiling kind of look like my mom if you stare at them long enough."

He starts to bring a hand up to massage his forehead before he realizes what he is doing and promptly drops it again. People have no idea how much oil is on their hands. It's terrible for his pores. "Why did they do that?"

"What?" Finn asks.

Kurt raises his foot and slams it down, causing Finn to sprout up out of the dirt like a fresh daisy. He looks incredibly grateful and like he kind of wants to hug Kurt, which does not sit well with him at the moment. Finn is filthy.

"Thanks, dude," he grins, and goes for a back pat which Kurt artfully dodges.

"It's nothing. Now, answer the question- why did my best friend and... Artie, feel the need to shove you in the ground like a turnip sprout?"

"I... ahh... I kind of asked for it," he admits sheepishly. "It's a long story."

That's Finn for 'my brain has reached its limit for today, try again tomorrow.' "Whatever," Kurt
says. "Where is Artie?"

Finn shrugs. "Dunno. I thought I heard him yelling, but I couldn't see him. Or, you know, anything else. Besides the ceiling." At this, Finn looks up again. "Hey! That one looks like Sam!"

Kurt grunts and leaves Finn to ponder the mystery of the ceiling people, heading over to the shack's only window. Artie had to have been here, but all Kurt sees is some rakes, a stack of picture frames, a dusty set of bongos, a statue of a sitting fat man, a wheelbarrow full of—

Hold up.

"Drop the statue disguise, Abrams. I know it's you."

Nothing.

"Come out! If I have to crack the shell myself, I'm going straight for the nougaty center."

Silence.

"I mean it. I won't stop until I hear squishing."

A single step in the statue's direction is all it takes. The statue's visage crumbles and Artie unfolds himself from within. "How'd you know?"

"One," Kurt says, counting off his first finger. "That's an Earth Kingdom deity. No one in the Fire Nation would have that statue, and Two," he says, counting off the second, "you've used that exact same disguise before," he says, shaking his head. "What were you thinking?"

"Well, I was hoping you wouldn't remember that particular instance—"

"With BLAINE, you idiot! What is wrong with you?"

Artie shrugs. "I thought you could use some encouragement. You guys were inches from eating each other's faces for—no lie—over a minute."

Kurt scoffs. "We were not."

"You were. I counted. 87 seconds."

"...huh." Is that all it was? It seemed to go by so fast. "You were... that's not the... we weren't..." he sputters in vain, before he finds a single line of thought to focus on. "Shut up. I am going to kill you."

"You'll have to catch me first!" Artie grins.

Kurt barely has time to make a single flail towards him before the paralyzed Earthbender rocket-scoots straight through the shed wall, speeding off into the night in a cloud of dust.

"Missed him again?" Mercedes asks as she walks in from the entrance.

The Water-native gives a frustrated sigh in response. "When I learn Airbending, I am going to chase him down and inflate him like a balloon. And then I will attach a string to him and carry him around until he teaches me how to do that."

Mercedes puts a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I'll help you plug his airholes."
Meanwhile, as the young Fire Prince walks along the dark, wooded roads that will lead him back to the Palace, he is unaware that he is being watched. High above, hidden in the leaves of the trees, a devious duo prepares to unleash double trouble…

"Target confirmed." A young woman in dark, skintight fatigues smiles from behind her binoculars, perched delicately on a high branch with no more than her head peeking out from behind the foliage.

"Wha—huh?" On a nearby branch, a young man in loose, piecemeal armor is (unhappily) startled out of his (way too short) nap. He blearily looks up towards his partner above. "'s goin' on?" he says, blearily. "'s it time for me to punch a douche yet?"

"Not yet," the woman says, a little testily.

"Why not?" the man scoffs. "the fuck are they doing now?"

"Uhhh, tell you what; why don't you come on over," she sneers, holding out her binoculars, "and look for yourself? Ain't nobody payin' me to be your narrator."

"Nobody's payin' you to be bitch either, but you pull that off pretty well," he shrugs, climbing over and taking the binoculars. It doesn't take him long to spot what he's looking for. "Well, if it isn't Prince Prissy himself. Sneakin' out from under daddy's nose for secret midnight encounters… it'd be kind of badass if it wasn't so gay."

The woman snatches the binoculars out of his hands, clearly unimpressed.

"So, do I get to punch him now? 'Cause I've gotta say," he says, "I see a lot of faces in this job, and that one is just begging for a fist."

"Sorry, but no," she says, holding up her finger. "We're on recon. We get the info, we report to the Lady. We don't strike until she gives us the OK." She smirks. "I guess you'll have to find something else to do with that hand tonight."

He returns the gesture, grinning like a shark. "I can think of a couple things…” He creeps his hand towards her, flexing his fingers deviously, and looks downright shocked when she deflects him with her forearm.

"Ohhhh, oh, no. You? Gets none of this," she sneers, gesturing to her astoundingly tight, all-black outfit. "Not tonight."

He has the nerve to pout. "What the fuck, Santana?"

"You slept through the whole damn thing, Puck!" Santana accuses.

Puck rolls his eyes. "Well, excuse me for not wanting to watch two dudes get all handsy with each other. Damnit, San…” His voice hovers at sadness for just a second, before descending straight to seduction. "Come on, you know you want some of this. This hand works wonders. 'sides, you deserve it for doing a good job and shit."

Santana ponders the offer for a second before tilting her head to the side and giving Puck a frank stare. "How 'bout this? You catch me, and I'll let you do whatever you want." She punctuates the whatever with a slow, limber back-bend, planting her hands on the tree and holding her whole body rigid in a perfect vertical line. She holds that pose until Puck reaches for her—upon which she launches herself into a full backflip, landing on the highest branch in the tree.
"Damn, woman. Why you gotta get all bendy like that in front of me if you're not gonna put out?"
Puck grumbles.

She shrugs. "You heard the rules. See you later, Puckerman." With that, she springs high into the air with the grace of a flying squirrelbat, darting through the trees and vanishing into the night.

Puck responds with a grunt, angrily jamming a small straw of wheat in his mouth and chewing on it like it sold his sister into slavery and didn't even cut him in on the profits.

Barely even bothering to brace himself, he drops out of the tree and hits the ground with a heavy thud. He's barely had time to pick himself up from the crouch he landed in when he hears a strange whooshing sound, followed by the sound of a high velocity impact with the back of his legs that flips him over and lands him on his ass. "The fuck?" he groans, raising his head to try and catch a glimpse of whatever leveled him, but all he sees is a cloud of dust fading rapidly into the distance.

With a sigh, he lets his head flop back down onto the dirt. Tonight is just not his night.

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**Coming Up Next:** THE PLOT! No, for real. Next chapter will be almost entirely Blaine POV and establish a number of things, including his family situation, his need for secrecy, and how he met Kurt and his happy band of Benderoos. Reviews are crack to me, so please, feed my addiction. :P See you soon!
The Monkey Prince

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 4/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: None for either series.
Warnings: 
Word Count: 3552
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. But is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world, and each other? Fusion Fic!

Author's Note: You'll notice the summary has changed. Or maybe you won't. Either way, this chapter is where the Plot makes its debut—some things are revealed, others hinted at. While my interpretation of his character is, (I feel) pretty close to canon so far, the show will likely wind up Jossing me hardcore past this point. Nonetheless, the story must proceed, and everybody's backstory is different here anyway. So… get ready, ladies and gentlemen. It's time to meet Prince Blaine.

CHAPTER 4

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The Monkey Prince

When Blaine was about 3 years old, he entered into his 'Monkey Phase,' whereupon everything taller than him was seen as something to be scaled. At that particular point in his life, the majority of things in the world fit easily into that category, so the Royal Guard quickly learned that when Prince Blaine went missing, they could save a lot of time simply by looking up. He never really came out of his Monkey Phase, though he did eventually learn he shouldn't climb people (he really didn't know what the big deal with that dip-lee-matt was, everybody in the castle just gave him piggyback rides when he climbed them). Only when he was allowed to start learning Firebending did he scale back his attempts to scale all of creation, and even then, he never actually came close to stopping.
It's a good thing, too, because sneaking out of the castle generally requires a lot of vertical movement.

The Prince propels himself through his open window, nearly flattening the sole other occupant of his room in the process.

"Gyah!" the man says, nearly falling over. He looks ready to fight—if not a little ridiculous in ornate, red robes with golden trim—until he is able to look at his almost-assailant's face. "For Sun's Sake, Blaine. A little warning before you meteor in would be appreciated," he sighs.

"Sorry, Wes," Blaine says. "Long night. Interesting night," he says by way of explanation, removing his hooded cloak and handing it to Wes.

"I'll say," Wes comments, hanging the cloak in a small closet. "You look got into a wrestling match with a volcanoboar, and lost. Badly."

"Nah," Blaine brushes him off, removing the remains of his tattered, soaked, singed robes and tossing them over the back of a fairly elaborate red and gold chair. "What I faced was much more imposing than a volcanoboar." When Wes raises an eyebrow to prompt further explanation, Blaine decides a subject change is in order. "So, anything interesting happen while I was out?"

"Not really," he says, stepping into Blaine's closet as he speaks. "Not unless you count David complaining incessantly of indigestion at ten minute intervals the entire time you were gone." When he steps out, the regal robes are gone, replaced by a Royal Guard uniform—dark, shining plate with deep red edges, and small fire insignias emblazoned at the joints. "It was excruciating. He finally bolted to the bathroom about ten minutes ago."

Blaine puts his hand to his chest. "Oh, poor Wes. I feel for you, buddy, I do. It's not easy being me. Even for a few hours."

Wes rolls his eyes. "Oh, yes, I don't know how you stand it. The endless opulence, the boundless luxury, the servants and personal guard at your beck and call... it's an utter nightmare."

Blaine shrugs and smiles. "Hey, I'll admit—as far as cages go, I'm fortunate to have such a nice one. But a nice cage is still a cage."

"I know, I know," Wes says. "Hence me risking my job to help you fly the proverbial coup."

"Speaking of coups," Blaine says, "and flying, and cages..."

"Yes, I fed Pavarotti. And he didn't even try to claw my eyes out this time," Wes says dryly. "I think we're on the verge of a beautiful friendship."

"See? He's a total sweetheart once you get to know him."

"Oh, yes, an absolute puppy," Wes says. "What with the razor sharp talons, powerful beak and earsplitting shriek. I want to cuddle him forever."

"Well," Blaine says. "You'll have another chance pretty soon."

The Guard gives Blaine a longsuffering stare. "I was deeply afraid you would say that."

The young Prince responds with his patented 'whatever-are-you-talking-about?' smile. "Why, Wesley! What could possibly be frightening about the opportunity to be my stand-in for another
evening?"

"Oh, I don't know. Discovery, dismissal, exile, imprisonment, execution…"

"Dad wouldn't have you killed for that."

"I absolutely agree. He wouldn't have me killed—he would do the deed himself before he had the chance to think about the situation. He is not always the most level-headed fellow when it comes to you."

The Fire Prince sighs, glancing away from Wes to a small, framed etching of a dark-haired woman he keeps on his desk. "I know…"

When Blaine was 4, he had a mommy. She was pretty and smart and funny—she made everybody laugh, all the time, even daddy. Sometimes he would laugh so hard he would turn funny colors, and that made Blaine laugh, too. At night, she would come to his room and tell him stories. Super amazing stories, full of brave young firebenders, noble heroes, evil villains, and even the occasional Avatar. Blaine always thought he had the best dreams because of his mommy.

But then one day, mommy didn't come out of her room with daddy when it was time for their morning walk. Daddy said she was extra sleepy that morning and that she would come out and play with them later, but she never did. Two weeks later, one of the guards put a funny mask on his face and carried him into their room. Mommy's skin was shiny and her hair was icky, and she looked like she was shrunk. She looked so different that Blaine didn't even know who she was until she started talking. He doesn't remember what she said—doesn't remember anything but wanting to go and give her hug after hug until she didn't sound so sad anymore. But the guard wouldn't let him go. Said it was too dangerous. He cried and squirmed and tried to get to her, but he couldn't get away. As he was carried out of the room, mommy blew him a kiss and smiled at him. "Don't be sad," she said. "I love you."

And then Blaine was 5, and he didn't have a mommy anymore. And everybody in the castle stopped laughing, for a long time. And even when they started laughing again, daddy didn't. Daddy just sighed a lot, and looked at the sun.

At first, Blaine cried and cried, because he missed his mommy so much. But then he remembered what she told him. And from then on, he tried his very best not to be sad, every day, because mommy said so.

He did a pretty good job, he thought. But sometimes he wondered if mommy said anything like that to daddy. And whether or not he listened…

"You have to admit," Wes says. "For once, his worries aren't unfounded."

"Yes, they are," Blaine replies. "The plague is isolated on the islands. It hasn't hit the mainland."

"It hasn't hit yet," Wes counters. "It doesn't take much to get it started. Just one person slipping through the quarantine…"

"I know," Blaine says.

An awkward silence reigns over the air.

"I don't know the man terribly well," Wes says after a moment. "But I can say, with reasonable
confidence, that if you were to be taken into the great beyond, he would not be far behind."

The expression on Blaine's face tells Wes that he is at least having SOME effect on the Prince. "... I know why dad keeps me in here. I get his reasoning, but... I can't spend my entire life locked up in the Palace. There's no point in living in constant fear of what might happen. He can't protect me from everything. Surely he doesn't want me to live like that."

"I'm pretty sure he does," Wes counters. "In fact, I'm pretty sure that's why he hired David and I."

"Well, yeah," Blaine grins. "But look how that turned out."

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**When Blaine was 8, he fell from the roof of a pagoda in the Palace Gardens and broke his ankle. Dad went nuts, and by the time Blaine could walk again, he had a 'bodyguard.' Or, as Blaine called him, the babysitter. The babysitter's purpose in life was to ensure that Blaine did nothing fun, ever, at any point in time. At least, that's what it was as far as he was concerned. No matter how much he tried to get rid of him, the babysitter always followed him, until finally he decided to take the matter up with his dad.**

The confrontation took place during one of the daily Firebending lessons his father gave him. He said that if he was going to hire someone to follow him around all the time, it should at least be someone cool or somebody he could be friends with. Dad didn't look too impressed when Blaine left him, but a few days later, the babysitter was gone and two boys, just a little older than Blaine, came up and introduced themselves. They were at the top of their class in the Dalton Firebending Academy for Boys, way advanced for their age. His dad pretty much told them that the Royal Family would make it so that they and all their loved ones would be set for life, and all they had to do was be Blaine's friend and keep him out of trouble.

It didn't take them long to get the first part down, thanks in no small part to Blaine being ecstatic at having someone even CLOSE to his age to talk to. The second part was much trickier. Eventually, they figured out that, metaphorically speaking, there was no way they were going to stop Blaine from climbing the pagoda. But they could help him up when he fell, make him wear a helmet, and keep lots of soft things nearby for him to land on, and the overall effect would be pretty much the same. From then on, the three of them were pretty much inseparable.

And that's how Blaine got his very own Wes and David.

"Eventually," Wes sighs, "someone is going to figure out what we're doing here."

"Pffft," Blaine waves him off. "No way. We've been doing this for years, and nobody's figured it out yet."

"Yes, but before, you were sneaking out once every couple of weeks, at times when we knew that very few people would be around to notice something amiss! Those were carefully planned and masterfully executed plans—these are ramshackle improvisations that are sending you out multiple times a week and leaving me here twiddling my thumbs and threatening to combust every time I hear footsteps! If it wasn't for David standing watch at the door, I would have been discovered six times over tonight alone!" Wes is red in the face by the end of his little tirade, and has to take a second to catch his breath and calm down before he starts breathing fire.

No, seriously, Wes breathes fire when he gets pissed. It was the number one reason he was permanently banned from the Dalton Debate Team.
The Fire Prince gives his friend a sympathetic stare. "Wes, this isn't like before. I'm not just going out because I—oh, let's see… what was it you said…?"

When Blaine was 14, Wes and David noted a truly disturbing trend in their intrepid young friend; he was getting bolder. Much, MUCH bolder. No longer satisfied to simply climb on things, he would scale them as quickly as possible, with as many dangerous and ill-advised acrobatics as he saw fit. He would run along walls and leap between rooftops. He would flip over balconies, shimmy along the railing, leap off, grab onto a flagpole in mid-flight and use the leverage to flip up and land on a statue's head. He would slide down wall hangings from multiple stories up. He would swing from curtains, he would sometimes just

jump off of things

with little-to-no-warning whatsoever, and his antics nearly gave the two of them premature heart conditions as each stunt filled them with very vivid images of broken necks, busted skulls, shattered backs, and slow, painful sentences of rotisserie-style death that would inevitably follow.

Blaine was eager and hungry for the world, and the Palace grounds were simply no longer enough for him. His antics were the only way he could make the old place exciting again. And so Wes and David sat down and attempted to solve the problem eventually faced by all guardians of teenage boys—how to stop their charge from killing himself (accidentally or on purpose) out of sheer boredom.

Eventually, they sat down with Blaine, and discussed their ideas.

"So… you want me to escape the Palace and go somewhere without you?" the young(er) Prince asked his friends.

"Blaine," David said, diplomatically. "What we want is to not have breathing problems caused by the way we choke every time you act like you can fly. What we want is to be able to not picture ourselves scraping you off of the walkway with a pushbroom every time you utter the words 'hey guys, watch this!'"

Wes picked up at that point. "We know you've got a lot of energy. You're young, you're hungry for life. You thirst for the heady milk of Adventure; to drink long and deep from her ample teat…"

The Royal Guard blushes. "I did not say that."

"You so did. And you honestly thought I wouldn't know you were quoting Flamingway. I'm sheltered, but I'm not that sheltered."

"…which is why we have arranged a way for you to get your energy out, and hopefully cure some of this infernal cabin fever you seem to have a terminal case of."

The 14-year-old Prince literally vibrated with excitement. "Are you serious? You're serious! You're seriously serious! Holy Dragon Shit… I get to leave the Palace!"

"Only for a little while!" David clarified, suddenly afraid the Prince would steal a Mongoose Lizard and flee the country the second he was beyond the walls. "You'll need to come back before it gets too late so Wes and I don't get found out."
"My sister will meet you outside the walls," Wes said. "She's agreed to... instruct you in the ways and customs of a normal Fire Nation citizen. She will help you act like a normal person," he said, 'And not like a demented spider monkey on amphetamines,' he thought and most definitely did not say.

"In the meantime," David finished, "we will give the impression that you're in your room, composing a concerto or writing a sonnet or something. You and Wes look similar enough from behind or at a distance, so as long as I keep people from taking a closer look, no one will suspect a thing. Your father and most of the guards will be too busy with the Council of Sages to notice."

"You get to see the world," Wes starts.

"We get the night off," David continues.

"Everybody wins!" they finish in unison.

Blaine stares at them incredulously for several seconds, before spontaneously tackling and hugging them both. "I love you guys. So freaking much."

"I'm not just doing this for fun and excitement," Blaine says. "Not anymore."

"So why are you doing it?" Wes asks. "Why won't you tell us?"

The Prince shrugs, looking pensive. "I promised not to."

"Blaine..." Wes sighs. "You are not the only one who is risking something here," he says gently. "My sister is attending the most prestigious institute in the entire Nation. David is helping his father start a restaurant with money from this job. If we get found out, all that could go down the drain. We could all be exiled."

"I would never let that happen," Blaine says with no small amount of conviction.

"Not on purpose," Wes agrees. "But you can't control your father, Blaine. Are you really willing to risk—not just us. Honestly, let's assume Fire Lord Anderson is exceptionally merciful and doesn't send our families to a volcanic wasteland. He would STILL kick us out. And then you would be truly stuck in here. All alone, no more friends, no one to help you escape, under tighter guard than ever."

THAT hits a mark. Blaine visibly deflates and pulls his knees up to his chest, leaning against the dragon-shaped headboard of his bed. "I..." he starts. "...this isn't just about us. It's bigger than that. It's more important, and... I wish I could tell you more," he shakes his head, "but I can't."

Wes sighs. They are at an impasse, and he knows it. "Alright, alright, I can tell when a line of conversation is closed. And I don't want you to go to bed all depressed and maudlin, so I a juicy bit of news for you to chew on."

The effect is instant—Blaine uncurls and rockets forward on the bed, looking at Wes with rapt attention. "Spill."

The Royal Guard smirks, purposefully holding it in for a few seconds to up the suspense. "Council meeting tomorrow morning, mandatory attendance."

Blaine looks shocked. "No way!"
Wes nods. "Way. David picked it up from the kitchen maids."

"It must be something serious. Dad almost never holds Council meetings without weeks of advanced notice."

"I know. I thought you might be interested. I take it you will be spying on the meeting?"
Blaine grins. "Why, Wesley! What an absurd accusation. Why ever would I do a silly thing like that?"

"I thought as much. David and I will stop for tea on our way in tomorrow. We will expect a full report when we arrive. Until then…” Wes gives a small, informal bow. "Goodnight, your Highness."

"Goodnight, Wes," Blaine replies with a nod. "Tell David 'I told you so' about the Cinder Quill Curry. Only a real man can stomach that without hurling."

"I will gloat about it for days, I assure you," Wes says, finally exiting the room and softly closing the door behind him.

With a wave of his hand, he extinguishes the lamps and candles keeping his room lit. It isn't even a minute in the darkness before his mind starts to wander, and he can feel himself drifting off…

By the time Blaine turned 17, the fidgety, bouncy teen had been refined into a calm, intelligent, observant young man. Although he still wanted to breastfeed from Adventure or whatever the crap Wes called it, his excursions out of the Palace helped him take stock of the larger world, and his own place in it. He quickly found that— thanks in no small part to his Father's inability to let him into the wide, scary world outside— no one outside of the Palace really knew what he looked like. He was perfectly incognito, and despite a few initial hiccups, Wes's sister Karen had guided him well, and it wasn't long before he could charm his way into and out of almost anything. He also found that although he loved interacting with people, he loved watching them as they went about their routines just as much. It was amazing to him how life shaped people into what they were, and how people in turn attempted to shape their lives. The way they carried themselves, the force with which they spoke, each little gesture telling a little more of their story.

That is why he found himself watching this one boy so carefully. He had only been in town for two weeks at the most, but he stood out to Blaine immediately as something he had never seen before. People are different, yes, but there are patterns one quickly learns to recognize, and this strange boy seemed to break all of them. The way he moved, the way he spoke, the air of untouchability that surrounded him, like he was invincible, utterly contrasted against the hidden fragility in his eyes. Life outside the Palace had always been a strong draw for Blaine, but this boy was intoxicating on a whole new level. He was the flame, and Blaine was the moth. There was simply no resisting the pull, no matter how dangerous or even deadly it might have proven to be.

"You're not from around here, are you?" he asked without preamble, falling into step beside the boy as he walked down the road.

"Oh!" the boy said, a little surprised, possibly even a little flustered.
"Don't worry," Blaine assured him. "I won't tell."

To his credit, the boy recovered quickly. "In that case… well-spotted. No, actually, I'm new here."
The Prince gave him an easy smile. "My name's Blaine," he said, extending a hand.
The boy hesitated just for a moment before taking it, almost as if he suspected some sort of trick. "Kurt," he replied.

"So, Kurt, what brings you to Capitol City?" Blaine asked breezily.

"Well, I'm looking for something... or rather, someone, but..." Kurt paused, attempting to gauge his conversation partner. "...at the moment, I'm just looking for a restaurant that serves food that won't scorch my tongue into a blackened piece of char."

Blaine couldn't help but grin at this. Fire Nation cuisine is definitely an acquired taste. "There are a few places in town that fit that description. One of them is just a few blocks from here."

As he looked at the boy beside him, the pull took over again, and on pure impulse, he reached out and grabbed the boy's hand, pulling him along into a run.

"Come on. I know a shortcut..."

Coming Up Next: Kurt takes some time to reflect, and Blaine helps us attain more exposition via spying. We meet the Council of Sages, upon which sits at least one familiar face which I'm sure you'll be happy to see. ;) Until then, if I could chop your love up into a fine powder and snort it, I would, but alas, I can't, so I'll just have to settle for reviews. Do leave me one, won't you? :-3
Enter the Dragoness

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 5/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: None for either series.
Warnings: Slight possibility of cursing.
Word Count: 2614
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

Author's Note: I highly doubt I'll be able to maintain this rate of updates, which has mostly come about due to being trapped under an enormous blanket of snow. School has started for me officially, so I must buckle down and get to work. Don't worry, though—I'll still be writing in my spare moments. ;)

In this chapter, we get a little more insight into Kurt and his crew. Again, some things are revealed, others merely alluded to, so let's see what you can catch. ;)

CHAPTER 5

Enter the Dragoness

So, imagine you're out walking by yourself in a big city late in the evening. You can't help but think you stick out like a sore thumb, being new in town and, indeed, new-in-nation, but so far, no one has noticed. Everyone seems way too caught up in their own weird gossip loops to draw you in, so you're more than a little surprised when a cute boy appears beside you so suddenly, it's like he dropped out of the sky. He immediately pegs you as a foreigner, which isn't a good thing to be in this town, but he assures you he won't tell anyone. After a few lines of subtle-ish flirting, he sprouts a rogueish grin, says something about a shortcut, and drags you into a sketchy-looking alleyway with no obvious exits. Your heart is racing, equal parts excitement and trepidation, the contact between your hands causing a small rush of blood to your cheeks. People never just touch you like this. And there are a thousand different possible scenarios playing out in your head as to how this
will end, most of them involving the two of you with very little clothes on.

Now, out of all those possible endings that you just came up with... did any

of them involve the cute boy suddenly climbing up the walls like he's part bug?

Yeah, thought not. So you can forgive Kurt for being a little surprised.

"What," Kurt says, "are you doing?"

"Taking a shortcut!" Blaine grins at him from a small balcony about halfway up the wall.

"I think you and I have a very different definition of 'shortcut,'" Kurt comments, which makes Blaine grin all the wider.

"Nah," he says, "the shortest distance between any two points is a straight line. The restaurant," he points behind him, "is that way."

Kurt's quirked eyebrow and skeptical frown say all that needs to be said.

Somehow, Blaine still doesn't get the message. "Come on," he says, and all of a sudden, he is hanging upside down from the balcony with his legs hooked at the knees, one hand outstretched to Kurt. "The climb is the hardest part. Once you're up, you'll be fine. Trust me," he says, like it's a perfectly normal thing he is offering, and he just looks so ridiculous(ly adorable) hanging there by his knees and smiling like he hasn't a care in the world, Kurt can't help but crack a small smile in return, and, with his most regal upturned expression, accept the offered hand—

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAHHHHHHHH!"

Kurt rockets out of bed with impressive agility, managing to land on his feet without even being fully awake, his bleary eyes rapidly scanning the room for the source of the scream.

He hasn't had two seconds to figure anything out before a half-naked Finn practically demolishes the door in blind panic. "Holy crap are you okay I heard screaming!" he says, with that exact punctuation.

"I know, so did I, but I don't know who—"

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAHHHHHH!"

He's pretty sure they each attempt a simultaneous leap into the other's arms, which is why they both wind up in an extremely uncomfortable tangle of limbs on the floor. Kurt honestly isn't sure who is on top of who—or, for that matter, which way is up.

"What are you two—" Mercedes grumbles as she enters the room, stopping when she sees the Hudmel pretzel in the doorway. "Uhhh, boys, is there something you wanna..."

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAHHHHHH!"

"FOR THE LOVE OF THE FREAKING MOON," Kurt says. "WHAT IS THAT?"

Mercedes takes a couple of seconds to look around the room before calmly walking over and
finding the offending—

"Is that a clock?" Finn asks, which… really. The hands and the numbers on the little wooden house should've been a dead giveaway. Although Kurt still isn't sure why she thinks that's what's making the noise, until the door of the house opens, and a pug-faced little bird slides out, pausing for just a second before opening its tiny beak into an enormous gape and…

"EEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

His giant brother reacts instinctively, reaching a quick, if slightly overzealous hand out and smashing the offending avian into splinters. Blessed silence reigns, and allows Kurt to properly take stock of the situation.

Finn is most definitely on top.

"Get off me," Kurt grunts, and Finn leaps up as if burnt.

"Oh, sorry, dude," he says, turning bright red. Kurt most definitely does not have the energy to deal with that particular can of maggot slugs this early in the morning, so he quickly redirects focus.

"What," he huffs at Mercedes, "was that?"

"The worst cuckoo clock I've ever seen," Mercedes says. "I don't know who thought it'd be a good idea to wake up to the call of a Screaming Dodo."

"…so, wait," Finn says. "That's, like, an actual thing? Those exist?" He gestures to the remains of the pudgy white budgie.

"Oh, yeah," Mercedes says. "My grandma used to keep one as a pet. It's great for keeping away wild animals. Or domesticated animals. Or people. Anything with ears."

"Oh, this country," Kurt sighs, running a hand over his face. "What is wrong with these people?"

Since arriving in the Fire Nation, they had never felt comfortable staying in one place for too long. Though Blaine assured him that this was normally not the case, news of the plague had spiked xenophobia in his country to all time highs. Anyone pegged as an outsider would likely be driven out of town at firepoint—if you came from outside, after all, you might be sick. To say nothing of what they thought of the Avatar…

So the four of them had to work hard to blend in, and even then, they knew the façade was such that it wouldn't survive any kind of close scrutiny for very long. Thus, the constant shuffling of living quarters to the various districts of the vast Capital City.

It helped that Kurt never took long to find fault with any hotel or house they stayed in.

These beds are filthy!
This room smells like a wet dogbear.
There is something growing in the shower. It moved!
If I am subjected to the sight of those horrific curtains one more time, my eyes will melt.
Will someone tell that woman to shut up? I am about two pitchy, toneless warbles away from a full-blown Avatar State flip-out…

Et cetera.

The Wang Estate belongs to a fairly well-off family that is friends with the Royal Court, so Blaine
knew for a fact that they'd be vacationing at Ember Island for at least another month, so he brought Kurt there last night. He figured it'd be alright for him and his gang to stay as long as they left the place relatively intact. And… well, considering the alarm clock demolition and the brand new Artie-shaped hole in the shed, they are doing a bang-up job of not disappointing him.

"We should probably try to find a clock shop," Mercedes says, casually sweeping the remains of the shrieking timepiece into a corner with her foot.

"Mmmm," Kurt grunts noncommittally. "Has Artie come back yet?"

"Not yet," Mercedes replies. "but it's about that time."

"Alright," he says, turning to Finn. "You know the drill. Go, stand guard."

"Can I at least eat breakfast first?" Finn pleads.

"No," Kurt says simply. "You suck at multitasking." With that, he daintily stomps into the bathroom and slams the door to do his morning routine.

Finn isn't sure how stomping daintily actually works, but Kurt makes it work. He and Mercedes share a brief look of sympathy before Finn heads to throw on a robe and take up guard duty…

His step-brother is not a morning person.

The offending Earthbender shows up about a half hour later, just as Finn was starting to nod off.

"Morning, big buddy!" Artie says cheerfully, sliding to a halt at Finn's feet just as the sun is just starting to peek over the horizon. His hair looks like a squished spider, little twigs and leaves sticking out in every direction.

"Morning, Artie," Finn grumbles. He doesn't like how cranky it makes him sound, so he tries to offset it with a grin. His voice is always super deep when he first wakes up. He thinks it sounds kind of cool, except for making him sound like he's, like, mad at the world, which he totally isn't. Not right now, anyway.

"Got the chair of confinement ready?" he says jokingly, even though Finn knows it isn't totally a joke. Artie hates that thing. "I mean, I could probably slide around on wood floors if I tried hard enough, but then I'd get butt-splinters. And I'm pretty sure you don't want to be the one to pick out my butt-splinters."

Finn makes a face of complete agreement. They'd totally make him do it, too. "Yeah, I've got it, but you know what we have to do first."

"Really?" he says, sounding like a pouty little kid. "Do we have to?"

"Dude, you sleep outside—"

"—in the tender arms of my beloved—"

"—and you're all covered in… stuff."

"So?" he shrugs. "Dirt don't hurt," he says with a grin, "unless I make it hurt."

"Yeah, but you know how Kurt is about being clean and stuff. Plus," he says, his face scrunching as he notices something, "uhhh… no offense, but you kind of smell."
Artie tilts his head to the side in confusion, and raises an arm to sniff at the pit experimentally. After taking a second to process the results, he reaches a conclusion. "Fine. Do your worst."

The water smacks the Earthbender with a little too much force, as usual. Finn is kind of an awkward Waterbender, his movements stiff and clumsy, and his control a little sloppy. He's getting better, though. At least he didn't knock Artie over this time. After blasting him and swirling it around for a few minutes, Finn parts the waters and does his best bend off any remaining moisture. In the end, his hair and clothes are only a little damp, and Artie can't help but smile. Finn really is getting better at this.

"There," Finn says.

"I feel like a brand new person," Artie deadpans.

"Ready?" the tall boy asks, pushing Artie's wheelchair into position.

The paralyzed Earthbender sighs, running his fingers through the grass. "I'll be with you again soon, baby girl," he says, with, like, seriously sincere sadness, which Finn can't help but be just a little weirded out by. Artie is too distracted to tease him about it at the moment, though. "Alright, let's do this."

Given the go-ahead, Finn kneels down and gently lifts his friend upwards, taking a second to brush off any leftover bits of grass before depositing him in the chair. The only thing Artie hates more than being forced into a wheelchair is being carried, and it makes Finn feel kind of nice that Artie still trusts him enough to let him do it, even after...

"I feel bereft already," Artie sighs melodramatically. "Woe. Woe be my name, this day."

"Come on, dude," Finn says as he pushes him inside. "It can't be that bad, can it?"

Artie twists his head to give an incredulous stare. "Excuse me? How would you feel if somebody forcibly separated you from all water?"

Finn thinks about it for a second. "I'm pretty sure I would feel dead. 'cause you need water to live."

Artie rolls his eyes and sighs. "Oh, Finn. Finn, my friend, you just don't get it. But that's okay. We all love you anyway," he says as he reaches up and pats Finn on the hand.

"Uhh, gee, thanks?" Finn says with a small laugh, acknowledging the joke even as he notes how nice it feels to be reminded...

The Council Chamber is a circular room in the West Wing of the Fire Nation Royal Palace. It centers on a large, circular table, covered in designs of red and blue dragons circling each other. Each council member has a seat around the table, with the Fire Lord's chair being slightly larger than all the others. The walls are decorated with a few paintings of past Fire Lords, a map of the Nation, and the occasional instance of a wise saying or notable quote. There is very little else to note in the room, besides the few pillars that exist near the edge of the chamber. These pillars are Blaine's best friends—they are just close enough to the walls to allow him to leverage himself between the two and slide-climb his way to the ceiling, where he can fit himself into the small wedge created where the wall meets the roof. The room has great acoustics—all the way up there, even with a pillar between himself and most of the speakers, he can hear pretty much everything perfectly.

It helps that Fire Nation Councilors tend to be loud.
Blaine knew that he had to get there much earlier than anyone else to avoid being seen by the guard, but that thought lead him to realize he had no idea when the meeting was actually starting. So he decided to take no chances and head out under cover of darkness, just before sunrise, and make himself comfortable in his customary spying spot. All told, having to wait an hour and a half for anyone to actually arrive isn't the worst thing that could've happened, but it still left him a little bored. He is perfecting his ability to maintain a small flame on his thumb when the door to the chamber is opened with just a little more force than necessary. He quickly blows himself out and slides a little deeper into his alcove, listening for the identity of the first arrival.

Oh, great. It's her.

"...does he think he is? I am not a hippo-cow to be lassoed and jerked around, taught to moo 'The Ever-Bright Spark.' tarted up and trotted out to entertain the mouth-breathing ash-wallowers he has arranged in the shape of a Council. My astronomically high standards of excellence do not maintain themselves—though I would like to note they would be significantly easier to uphold if he were any less of a complete and utter failure as a leader and example to the people of this rapidly self-destructing nation. So painful and depressing is his performance in the position of Fire Lord that were I actually inclined to have children, I would willingly drown them all in boiling magma the second they escaped from my womb to spare them the agony of watching the people of flame being lead by such a wet blanket. Hearing his voice is like shaving my head with sandpaper, and his face is giving me age lines from the involuntary expression of disgust I adopt every time I look at him." At this, she finally pauses to take a breath. "Did you get all that, Becky?"

"Yes, milady," answered the distinctive voice of her diminutive attendant.

"Excellent. Tell you what—pull a little pronoun switcheroo and replace all the 'he' and 'his' with 'you' and 'your' and we'll mail it to him. Think you can handle that?"

"Absolutely," the attendant replied. "Great idea, milady!"

"Outstanding. Add just one line: 'Basking in the Warm Glow of my Eternal, Roaring Hatefire, Yours Truly, Sue Sylvester, dictated but not read.'"

Blaine stifles the urge to groan. The meeting hasn't even started yet, and it's already going downhill.

He doesn't even want to think about where it will end.

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**Coming Up Next:** The Council meeting proper. We meet the Fire Lord, and get some much-needed exposition. Meanwhile, back in the City, Kurt and his crew take a walk in the city and note a few disturbing trends—and I'm not talking fashion. :P Reviews are love. Leave one, won't you? 3
Sickness, Suspicion, and Shopping

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 6/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: None for either series.
Warnings: Slight possibility of cursing.
Word Count: 4136
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

Author's Note: I am not fashion-forward in the slightest, and despite my best efforts, any sort of intrinsic understanding of fashion escapes me utterly, so I'm giving the basic building blocks and leaving most of Kurt's outfit to the imagination. If anyone can explain fashion to me, I'm all ears. :P

This is where the plot really hits. As such, it is the longest and most elaborate chapter yet. I'm quite proud of it, so I hope you enjoy it!

CHAPTER 6

Sickness, Suspicion, and Shopping

Kurt Hummel is seeing red.

Red, red, red, as far as the eye can reach. Bright red, dark red, regular red, bold red, bland red, faded red, ruby, crimson, scarlet, rosewood, sangria, maybe even maroon if you're feeling extra spicy… it's inescapable. At times, it's so bad that Kurt has to check to make sure he hasn't sustained a head wound that is causing him to bleed into his eyes unawares. Sure, there's a little gold here and there, but for the vast majority of the time, Fire Nation fashion is painfully monochromatic.

But then, Earth Kingdom fashion had a similar, if less pronounced problem with green. Not to
mention everyone back home and their obsession with blue… do they not understand that they are more than their bending? Really, matching one's element is not a prerequisite to controlling it. It doesn't even really make it easier! He can only imagine the nightmare he is going to have if the Airbenders try to dress him in those awful monk outfits. Yellow, he can deal with, but orange? Orange is no one's color.

Maybe that should be his legacy as Avatar—encouraging the trade of fashion and different colors across borders, so that all people can experience the full glory and wonder of the color spectrum. He would go down in history as 'Avatar Kurt, Champion of the Rainbow.'

After a minute or so of mulling it over, he decides that he will get right to work on that.

You know, as soon as he takes care of this whole 'population-threatening pandemic' thing.

In the meantime, he is faced with a difficult decision. He wants something tight enough to emphasize his figure, but just loose enough to make him seem a little burlier and less shapely than he actually is. Too tight, and people start to make… misjudgments, especially from behind (though the inverse is not unheard of). The awkwardness of flirting with someone only to find out they think you're a girl is not an experience Kurt wishes to repeat.

These are the thoughts that consume him as he waterbends through his daily skincare routine, cleansing his pores and infusing much-needed moisture with enviable ease. Really, when it comes to looking good, waterbenders just have a natural advantage over others. Moisture is the essence of beauty, after all. He finishes up by bending the remaining moisture on his hair into the shape of his famous coif, and giving the mirror a small smirk.

Hot damn, he is good-looking. Screw angsting over limited color options. So what if red isn't his best color? He can make it work. He can make anything work. He is the freaking Avatar, master of all elements and colors of the world. Not even an orange outfit could bring him down.

…okay, maybe an orange outfit. But very little else.

"Councilor Coleman, Chairman of Rail Services."

"Present."

"Councilor Keros, Admiral of the Royal Navy."

"Here."

Blaine fought hard against the urge to fall asleep. The role call is always the dullest part of these things, mostly because you never quite realize how many Councilors can fit around that giant table until someone with an incredibly monotonous voice reads out the name and full title of everyone in attendance. Slowly.

"Councilor Sylvester, Headmistress of the Chi-Ryu Firebending Academy for Girls."

"Present at the bare minimum level, against my will, I might add."

These meetings would be over a lot faster if you'd talk less, Blaine definitely does not say because he'd be an idiot to blow his cover at this point. He does, however, consider sending it as an anonymous letter, but quickly decides it's not worth risking Pavarotti getting roasted.

"Councilor Ryerson…"
The flat droning continues uninterrupted for what feels like long enough for Blaine to develop a 5 o'clock shadow, though his chin remains stubbornly smooth nonetheless. Then, after Council member and his/her pet iguanamutt (and said iguanamutt's favorite squeaky toy) is named, accounted for, and complimented on their hair, the meeting finally gets underway.

"All rise for the Fire Lord," the minuteman says, and Blaine grins as he stretches his head out to watch his Dad walk in.

A still, precise man with an air of simple dignity, Fire Lord Anderson moves with utmost care and control. When looking at him, one gets the distinct impression that his regal robes would not flutter in a breeze if he did not wish it so. His thick, black hair is carefully styled, just a few hints of grey peeking through here and there. The grey was much more obvious in his beard, which is probably why he decided to get rid of it. His father has always favored uniformity, so Blaine suspects that when his hair is finished turning grey, he'll grow it back, and not one follicle sooner. He wants a grey beard or a black beard. None of this half-and-half nonsense. As always, he assesses the room with a calculating expression before giving a nod. "You may be seated," he says, taking his place at the head of the table.

"All Councilors are present except for Rosebalm and Ganterson," the minuteman says, taking his seat. The Fire Lord nods in acknowledgment.

"The Sun is restless, my friends," he says, after a moment. "A great fear has gripped this Nation and this City. The people struggle beneath its weight."

Even though there is no one to see it, Blaine nods slightly. He knows what his father is talking about…

"Is it just me," Finn whispers to Mercedes as they crest the hill into town, "or are there, like, less people here every time we wake up?"

In front of them, what arguably used to be a small bazaar is now bizarrely barren, only a handful of merchants even bothering to show up to man their stalls.

The Earthbender surveys the strangely empty streets, and something in her gut clenches just a little tighter. "It's still early," she says, "I'm sure people'll be popping out of their holes soon enough."

"Still," Finn says, pushing a re-disguised Artie along in his wheelchair. "This is kinda… creepy." His eyes dart from side to side quickly, and Mercedes can tell he is probably feeling the same thing she is. There are eyes on them. From shuttered windows, peep holes, and mostly-closed doors, she can feel people peering out at them. The air is thick with suspicion and suspense.

"True dat," Artie comments, softly.

Just ahead, a peal of laughter echoes from an open doorway, as two children run into the street, one of them chasing the other with a large toy dragon head. Their laughter brings a warm grin to Mercedes's face. But the warmth is stolen just as quickly when a woman hustles out of the house, whispering angrily even as she bodily lifts the two squirming kids and carries them back into the house. She shoots a slightly unnerved look at them before slamming the door.

"Creepy," Mercedes agrees, "and sad."

"It's like everyone is just…" Finn starts.

"Don't say it," Kurt interjects, his voice barely above a whisper, but still vehement.
"Fear is the enemy of Unity," the Fire Lord says.

"Dragonshit," Sue coughs in a manner about as subtle as an explosion.

The Fire Lord reacts with little more than a raised eyebrow. "But," he continues, "Knowledge is the enemy of Fear. Councilor Coleman," his dad says, turning to the stout man. "You are in charge of the rail system. Tell me; what have you heard spoken about this mysterious plague on the outer islands?"

The Councilor stands, seemingly struggling a bit with his words. "I have heard… many things about the sickness. Some of it is merely strange. The rest is… unbelievable."

"I would like to hear some examples, if you don't mind," the Fire Lord pushes.

The man tilts his head to the side in thought, breathing out through his nose. "Well… some have said that it causes your skin to turn blue, before it sloughs off of you. Others have said that it causes boils that burst open to reveal stinging insects. My assistant once told me…"

"…it melts your brain, slowly," Finn overhears as he pushes Artie into the store. 'Clocks n' Things' seemed like as good a place as any to start looking for a replacement cuckoo clock. Plus, the 'n' things' could be all sorts of stuff. "Just before you die," the voice continues, "it all just squirts out of your ears."

"Ewww," a small group of voices choruses, and Finn turns his head to look at them. A few customers have gathered around some girl, and seem to be paying pretty close attention to whatever she is sayi—

"Finn!" Artie whispers vehemently, causing Finn to jerk to a halt just before his friend's outstretched cast knocks over a table of oil lamps. "Eyes on the road, dude!"

"Sorry," Finn says, pulling Artie away from the lamps and turning around to find—

"Can I help you?" a really smiley blonde lady says from, like, two inches away from his face. She's got one of those smiles that looks kind of like it hurts to hold up, and Finn kind of wants to make her sad so she can, like, rest, or something. But then she'd be sad, and he'd feel like a tool, so…

"We're looking for a timepiece," Artie says, taking over for Finn, who seems to have forgotten how to talk.

"Oh," the lady says, turning to him. She leans down to meet him eye-to-eye, and Finn totally would've given her credit for that if she hadn't suddenly started talking to him in baby-speak. "And what kind of cwocky-wocky can we help you with today?" she coos.

Oh, boy. Now Artie has one of those hurty-smiles. "Preferably," he coos right back, "one that tells timey-wimey!"

The lady looks a little shocked and not quite sure what to do, which (and Finn knows this from experience) is a normal reaction to talking to Artie sometimes, so he returns his buddy's favor from earlier.
"Uhhhh, we need, like, a bird clock," he says. "And it needs to be really, really loud."

At this, she brightens up again. "Oh, I know just the thing!" she says, scampering off towards the back of the store. "Come, this way! You can bring your friend, too, if you want," she says as an afterthought, and… really? Was she expecting him to just, like, tie Artie to a post and leave him there?

As he heads deeper into the store, he finds himself a little weirded out by all the creepy clocks with eyes, and the ticking quickly threatens to drive him nuts. Weird Smiley Lady is going on about something, but her voice is kind of grating and fake, so Finn tries to focus on something else.

"…get sicker and sicker. And then, you start sweating this… stuff…” It's the same voice Finn heard before, when they first walked in. "It's like marinating yourself in butter and honey sauce. Ants from miles around come and eat you alive. That is, if the fever doesn't get you first…”

"FINN!" Artie shouts, causing Finn to jump, which in turn causes Finn to hit his head on a low rafter.

"Ow!" Finn groans. "What is it?"

"The nice sales lady is asking you if this is the right clock," Artie says, a little louder than necessary. "Sorry, my friend here is a little deaf. That's why we need his wake-up call to be so obnoxious."

"Ohhhh," the lady says, and now she's gone from painful smiling to scrunchy-faced sympathy. "IS THIS THE KIND OF CLOCK YOU HAD IN MIND?" she totally yells, like, right into his face. He's pretty sure there's some spit on his cheek, but he can't reach up and wipe it off, 'cause that'd be rude. Still, ewwww.

"Ewwww," another group of voices says, and Finn wonders if there is an echo in his head before he realizes it's coming from the shop customers again.

"Uhhh, yeah, that's it," Finn says distractedly. It looks like pretty much the same clock, but all those clocks look similar to him anyway.

"GREAT," the lady yells at him again. "IF YOU WILL FOLLOW ME TO THE FRONT, WE CAN CHECK YOU OUT AND GET YOU ON YOUR WAY."

They head up to the front desk, and the lady checks them out with a minimum of shouting. "THANK YOU," she says after the transaction is finished, dropping their clock into a little paper bag. "PLEASE COME AGAIN ANYTIME."

Finn just tries to smile away the ringing in his ears, and… ow. It kind of hurts to smile this hard when you're not really happy... oh. Oh, shit. Is that what they've been doing?

"What is with you, yo?" Artie whispers as they head towards the door.

"Sorry," Finn says again. "Just… distracted." He isn't sure why, but his ears zero in on the voice of the girl talking to the customers, catching one more thing as they exit.

"…with the so-called Fire Lord too worried about his precious son to look out for the rest of us…”

"…singing at the top of your lungs for hours before you finally collapse of exhaustion. If the rumors are to be believed," the Councilor finishes, and yikes. If any of that is true, this plague is
one of the most terrifying things Blaine has ever heard of. If all of it is true... well, it can't all be true. He's pretty sure it's hard for something to grow uncontrollably before exploding and turn purple and fall off. Unless it does one, and then the other, and oh, Agni. This is a thought process he needs to abandon right now.

"Thank you, Councilor," the Fire Lord says. "Now, Councilor Keros," he says, turning to the Admiral. "You and your forces maintain the blockade around the islands and enforce the quarantine. Has any of what Councilor Coleman just said matched with reports from your soldiers?"

Keros is a little taller than Coleman, and much thinner, but with a strangely deep voice. "Well, Lord Anderson, my men occasionally spin wild tales, as well. I distinctly remember the part about your eyes liquefying and running down through your nose being mentioned, as well as…"

"…sneezing so hard, pieces of your lungs start flying out!"

"I know, right?" the young woman's voice replies. "And get this—the Fire Lord doesn't even care…"

"Getting in on the town gossip?" Mercedes says as she walks up, causing Kurt to jump just a little. "Salacious. Any good scandals you wanna share with me, boo?"

"Oh, Mercedes," he says. "I was just…"

He starts to gesture to the crowd behind him, but upon turning, he sees the crowd already dispersing, pinched, grumpy expressions on their faces as they grumble to each other in low voices. The young woman is nowhere to be found.

"…nevermind. What'd you pick out?" he asks, changing the subject.

The Earthbender holds up the basket in her arms proudly. "Ash Bananas are in season now, so I got a good batch of those. No more of that unripe bull," she says proudly. "There's a good price on Ocean Kumquats, too, for buying them together. Apparently, there's a sale on today."

"You always know how to sniff out a sale," Kurt grins. "Have you tried any of these?" he asks, gesturing to a bushel of berries.

"Oooh," Mercedes says. "Purple berries! These things cost a ton back home, probably because they get imported from here. They're good, as long as you don't mind having a violet riot in your mouth for a few days after you eat them. They make a killer pie."

"You've sold me," he says, picking up a small basket of his own and filling it with the plump, juicy little orbs.

They bring their haul to the front and pay the man, and the entire time, Kurt can't help but notice how strangely on-edge he looks. Kurt would almost say he seemed sick, if he wasn't so very, very
careful about using that word nowadays. "Thanks," the man says distractedly after they pay, glancing around for a few seconds before walking into the backroom of his store.

"Wow. Service with a smile, much?" Mercedes jokes, only slightly offended at the man's off-putting behavior.

"Some people just don't understand the importance of repeat business and customer referrals," Kurt replies. He starts to say more, but out of the corner of his eyes, he catches sight of something…

It's the woman who was in the grocer's. Now she's sitting in front of a tea house, another crowd gathered around her, their faces split evenly between horrified disgust and outraged indignation. A little extra effort, and Kurt manages to catch a snippet of her speech to the passersby.

"…couldn't believe it myself, but it's true—the sickness is being spread by the Avatar! He wants to remove the unworthy—"

"You okay, Kurt?" Mercedes asks.

Kurt suddenly realizes that she has been talking this entire time. He tries to mask the instinctive surge of hurt that swells up whenever one hears a lie about themselves. They're only rumors, after all. "I'm fine, Mercedes. Got a little caught up in the gossip ring again, but it's nothing worth hearing."

"Addictive, isn't it?" Mercedes grins, as they head back to meet with Finn and Artie.

As they turn the corner, Kurt notices the nervous little grocery store owner taking down his SALE sign and replacing it with something else. He tries very hard not to think about what the new sign might mean, even as the words pass out of sight.

INVENTORY LIQUIDATION – EVERYTHING MUST GO!

"…vomiting copious amounts of slugs before finally passing away due to internal bleeding." Keros sits down, and Blaine fights a truly epic battle against the urge to puke his guts out. True or not, these are some of the worst things Blaine has ever heard described in such morbidly vivid detail, and his imagination is having a field day at the expense of his stomach. With a pinched expression, he leans back and focuses on his breathing exercises as he listens and tries not to pass out.

"Thank you, Councilor Keros," the Fire Lord says. "Now, I'm sure many of you have heard similar stories, have you not?"

A murmur of agreement echoes from those seated at the table.

"I thought so. Now, having taken this into consideration, I would like to ask everyone at this table a question. Please, answer honestly—have any of you actually spoken with someone who has been in contact with or close to a diseased person?"

Silence. Despite lingering traces of nausea, Blaine smiles. He loves it when his dad does this.

"I thought not," he says, simply. "The quarantine is strong and capably managed by the Admiral and all who serve under him. None on the contaminated islands has been allowed to leave them for even a moment. Which is why I would like to thank him for his excellent work… even as I announce that I am ending the quarantine."

A much louder mingling of shocked noises echoes through the room, and now Blaine is sitting on
the edge of his perch, stomach troubles completely forgotten.

"WHAT?" Sue shouts, rising from her seat. "I'm sorry, my ears must be playing tricks on me, I could've sworn I just heard you announce that you were extending an open invitation to a bunch of shambling semi-corpses to come and leak their stinking, diseased ichor all over our collective faces. Surely you didn't say something so outrageously stupid—so egregiously idiotic that I would be required by the laws of common sense to commit ritual seppuku upon hearing them and not doin—"

"That will do, Sue," the Fire Lord cuts her off. "You have unwittingly made my point for me: even if the rumors are gravely exaggerated, which seems likely, the most common threads among all the rumors describe incredibly obvious and plainly visible symptoms among the diseased. At last report, Keros confirmed with me that even after months of quarantine, the Islands still have some inhabitants. Many of these were caught off guard by the quarantine and are eager to get back to their friends and loved ones after months with not even a word of communication. I suppose a better way to put it would be that I am 'relaxing' the quarantine. Those who do not display signs of illness may be disinfected and brought back here."

"Why? They're fine where they are!" Sue says. "Tropical paradise! I mean, sure, tropical paradise with a mild chance of slow, agonizing, fluid-filled demise, but…"

"Because, Councilor Sylvester," the Fire Lord says, "the atmosphere of Fear in this city is slowly tearing it apart. Knowledge is the enemy of Fear—with the people who have survived encounters with the diseased allowed to return home, we will not only reunite families, but have solid, verifiable information on the true symptoms of this outbreak, so that we may put these rumors to rest. Fear is the enemy of Unity—"

"Nonsense!" Sue counters. "Fear is Unity's soulmate. They go together like dynamite and explosions—one following right after the other, as natural and beautiful as boarcupine mating season is painful. An environment of fear keeps people sharp, makes 'em think on their toes, forces them to work together against overwhelming opposition and encourages a healthy attitude of mutual hatred even while they do it. Fear is the only way to get Unity off its fat, sagging, wrinkled, jigging geriatric buttcakes and into action."

"Enough," his dad says, still relatively calm, but with a measure of refined metal in his voice. "The decision has been made. I have weighed the options, and this is unquestionably the best course of action. The Sun is restless. I worry that our people are becoming the same. With the proper precautions, we can put many minds at ease."

Sue glares at him from across the table. "Fine," she seethes. "But don't come crying to me when Junior winds up leaking out of every orifice, dying a slow, painful death just like momm—"

"ENOUGH," the Fire Lord shouts, as every torch in the room suddenly flares to incredible heights, flames briefly licking the high ceiling before the fires return to their normal levels. Blaine's own rising anger sputters and dies in the face of his father's sudden fury. This is the first time he has ever heard his father raise his voice like that.

Sue seems largely unperturbed, and Blaine wants to wipe that smug look off her face himself. "Hit a nerve, did I?" she says. "Well, my apologies, Fire Lord. Good luck with your murder-suicide plot."

She strolls casually out of the room, leaving the rest of the Councilors in stunned silence. "If any of you have any objections," the Fire Lord says after a moment, his voice quiet, "I will hear them later. There will be three days before the plan is made official. Keros, I will discuss the specifics
with you later. In the meantime, I must ask you all to leave me in peace, for a moment."

One by one, the Councilors file out of the room, casting furtive glances back at the Fire Lord as they leave. When the last one is out, Blaine watches his father get up from his seat, move to the door, and quietly close it. Walking back over to the table, he places his hands on it and works to calm himself for a few seconds. Eventually, his breathing evens out, and the shadow over his face passes. Blaine smiles as he watches his father's mastery of the very Firebending technique he taught to his son.

His smile vanishes when his father suddenly adopts a secret grin of his own, and *looks right at him.*

"You can come down now, Blaine."

______________________________

*To Be Continued!*

*A/N 2:* If you missed it the first time, take a closer look at the name of Sue's firebending academy. ;) Reviews are love!
In the shade of a small overhang, Finn happily leans against a post and absorbs the not-sun shining down from above. The Fire Nation is freaking hot. Artie was waiting with him, but he carted himself off a few minutes ago to look at flowers or something. Kurt and Mercedes were supposed to meet them here, but Finn is willing to bet they got sidetracked by some kind of shiny new fashion thing. Ear buttons, or neck bracelets or something like that.

"Finn! Oh, good, you're here," Mercedes says as she rounds the corner, casually tossing a basket of little pea-looking things at him like she just expects him to catch it or something, like he's not even doing or thinking about anything else. He's not, but still. "My arm bones are about a minute from turning into noodles." She follows this up with basket of grey bananas, barely giving Finn time to slip the first basket onto his shoulder before he's flailing for another one. "Don't spill those," she
warns. "They bruise easy."

The tall boy barely has time to look put-out before Kurt appears, holding a bushel of purple berries. "Oh, thank Tui. I swear, these things are fermenting or something because this basket is twelve times heavier than when I picked it up." He shoves the basket into Finn's chest without looking and just barely manages to catch it before it falls to the ground. "Finn! Be careful with those!"

"Uhhh, dude," Finn says, shrugging both of his fruit-burdened shoulders. "Kind of out of arms, here."

"Oh," Kurt says, looking thoughtful for a second. "Well, in that case…"

The tall boy lets himself sag with relief as Kurt seemingly prepares to shoulder the bushel himself. This is his fatal mistake; Kurt immediately seizes the opportunity to toss the strap over Finn's head while it's low enough to reach. "GACKT," he chokes, trying not to fall over under the sudden added weight.

"Oh, Finn," Kurt says fondly, patting him on the shoulder. "You're the best pack mule an Avatar could ask for." With that benediction, he saunters off to join Mercedes, the two of them making weird happy noises at some stripy, scarfy thing on display in a store window. Finn feels himself teetering just a bit, and tries to adjust the weight so that it's a little more even, to no avail. Whatever. He's fine. He can totally do this. He's got great balance. He's, like, Mr. Balance. He's part of a balanced breakfast, with turducken eggs, sausage, boar bacon, milk—

Uh oh. The world is tilting. The world doesn't usually do that, so it's probably Finn. Except Finn doesn't really know how to stop tilting, since he doesn't remember starting. He needs time to think, but gravity is totally refusing to cut him a break here, and he can already hear stuff hitting the ground. It's a slow death, measured in degrees, and it is only going to take a couple more before…

CRAP. Oh, crap, crap, crap. Oh, great flaming dragon dong, he is so fucked. His dad knows. His dad knows. He's standing right there, looking at him like he is not even the tiniest bit surprised and oh, fuck fuck fucking fireballs FUCK. How much does he know?

Steeling himself as best he can, Blaine takes a deep breath and jumps out to wrap himself around the pillar, sliding easily down to the floor, where his father regards him with a sort of casual amusement. Probably imagining creative ways to ground him or force him to remain in sight at all times. Blaine imagines himself being forced to wear soft, fluffy mittens that would make climbing next to impossible. Oh, and a hippocow bell so that people always know where he is. Why? How? He was being so stealthy…

"So," the Fire Lord begins, "did you enjoy the meeting, son?"

What? "What?" Blaine's mouth echoes his mind. Because that was a little out-of-nowhere. "I mean, ummm…" he stammers, trying to come up with an answer. Well, honesty is probably the best policy at this point. "I can't say that I enjoyed it, but it was… surprising?"

A raised eyebrow represents his permission to continue.

"Because… well, you reacted pretty badly to news of the plague when Councilor Grothman brought it up a few months ago," he says. And then he realizes what he just said. "I mean… ah, not that I was… there for that, I just heard it… from the other Councilors, who I… talk to, and I'm just… I'm… I'm boned, aren't I?" he finishes, looking down at the ground.
To his surprise, his father responds with a soft chuckle. The shock must be pretty clear on his face, because the Fire Lord elaborates fairly quickly. "Blaine, you've been sitting in on these meetings for three years now," he says casually, and Blaine's eyebrows and jaw must have suddenly decided that they hate each other, because they move as far away from each other as is possible while still technically remaining part of the Fire Prince's face.

"You've known? The entire time?" he asks.


"*How?*" he asks.

"You're my son," the Fire Lord says simply. "Parents have an instinct about these things. And thanks to your brief 'I am the Great Comet' phase, mine is honed to perfection. I always know when you're around."

Oh yeah. Blaine remembers that phase. For some odd reason, when he was about seven he had taken to pretending to be the Great Comet, which mostly involved falling on people from space, or the nearest approximation Blaine could come up with. He also remembers how it ended. Last he had heard, Commander Farnsworth's neck only ached when it was about to rain, so at least he didn't cause *permanent* damage. "But… why didn't you say anything?" Blaine asks.

Lord Anderson gives a facial shrug, as if the answer is obvious. "Blaine, you *willingly attended* Council meetings. Under absolutely no obligation, I might add. There are Council members with worse attendance records than you. Your interest in these matters is not something I intend to discourage."

"…oh," is all Blaine can initially come up with in response to that.

"You will be doing this yourself one day, after all," his dad smiles.

Blaine scoffs. "Well, yeah, but that's not for a long time. Fire Lords live insanely long lives. Didn't grandpa live to be like a hundred and thirty?"

"One hundred and thirty-two," the Fire Lord corrected.

"Yeah, so I've got plenty of time to learn the tricks of the trade, right?" Blaine grinned.

"Ah, but what did Infernicus say?" Blaine's father adopts his 'teaching' posture, and the Fire Prince clamps his throat shut to stop an escaping sigh.

"…you'll have to be more specific," Blaine prods. "Infernicus said a *lot* of things."

"On the subject of time," Lord Anderson clarifies.

His memory banks are subjected to a quick search before Blaine finds the answer (he thinks). "A flame burns not for the past or the future, but for the moment?"

"Exactly," his father nods. "There is no time like the present to teach you, so let's get to work."

The Fire Lord gestures to the table. Puzzled, but ever-so-slightly intrigued, Blaine decides to play along. He confidently strides over to one of the council chairs, and sits. The Fire Lord moves next to his customary position at the largest chair, standing next to it and looking at Blaine as if he is waiting for something.
Blaine raises his eyebrows in an unspoken question.

"All rise for the Fire Lord?" his dad says.

"Oh," Blaine says, standing up with a quick grin before schooling it into the most pompous expression he can manage. "Right, right. Terribly sorry, my Lord."

"You are forgiven," the Fire Lord says with a gracious, imperious air as he sits and nods to his son, who sits in response. "So, Councilor Blaine," he begins, and already Blaine is having to fight off the urge to grin like an idiot. "What is your opinion on the matters discussed in today's meeting?"

"Well, my Lord," Blaine says, but his father interrupts him.

"Stand up when you speak."

"Ah, of course, very good then," Blaine says as he rises to his feet. "Like so?"

"Excellent," Lord Anderson says with mock-seriousness. "Flawless posture, my son. Continue."

"Well, my Lord," Blaine says. "I must admit I was taken aback by your sudden reversal on this matter. If I recall correctly, it was your decision to instate the quarantine to begin with. I suppose I would like a little more insight into the thought process that lead to this decision."

Blaine sits down, and his father gives a brief nod of approval before speaking himself. "An entirely reasonable request, Councilor Blaine. When I spoke of the Sun being restless, I was not merely being mystical or metaphorical." He gestures out one of the chamber windows, where the sun burns bright in the morning sky. "Firebenders have a primal connection to the Sun. We grow stronger and bolder in its light, and we are happiest when it is close. But this connection does not always play out in our favor, Blaine. The Sun is distant, impossibly powerful and complicated, but there are those who study it. One such scholar is a friend of mine, and he has helped to confirm what I have already felt in my heart. The Sun is restless, Blaine. It churns and thrashes, like the sea in a storm. Have you not felt it? An unexplained foreboding... a growing sense of unease?"

Blaine attempts to remember any kind of unsettling feelings he has felt recently, but all his emotions of late amount to a small hurricane of thrill and excitement and attraction, with an impossible, beautiful boy standing dead center in the eye of the storm. "No, not really."

The Fire Lord gives a small but fond smile. "Hm. You never were much for fear, were you?"

"I much prefer courage, my Lord."

"Admirable," he smiles. "At times, I myself fear that I have not displayed that quality near enough. Especially," he says, growing quieter, "in matters concerning you."

Blaine isn't quite sure what to say to that, so he remains quiet.

"Nonetheless... as I was saying, this is not the first time such an event has occurred, but it is the first in my lifetime, and the first time the Fire Nation has faced such a great crisis. In the past, the Storming Sun has heralded times of great upheaval for our people, and I wish to avert such upset as much as possible. To ease the heart of my nation is my goal, and if I must face and overcome my own fear in order to accomplish this, then so be it."

The Fire Prince sits in slightly stunned silence for a moment, attempting to take in everything that was just said. If his father was overprotective normally, the second news of the plague hit, it was like the Great Comet had arrived to enhance the man a hundredfold. It was an instinct Blaine could
understand, to a degree—to imagine his son, suffering the same slow, unavoidable demise that his wife suffered… he couldn't imagine what that would be like. "I see," Blaine says, though he isn't quite sure that he does. "Well, I cannot argue with your logic, my Lord. With proper precautions, I fully support your decision."

"Thank you, Councilor Blaine," the Fire Lord says. "I appreciate your input." The air of official business is broken with a warm grin. "There. Was that so difficult?"

"Psssh," Blaine waves him off easily. "Not at all."

"Good," his father replies. "Because that is how you will be expected to behave in these meetings from now on."

The nonchalant attitude Blaine has adopted does not survive that announcement. It dies a messy death as he nearly flips out of his chair with shock. "Wait, what? Are you serious?"

"Of course," he replies. "You are not the Fire Lord yet, of course, but I believe it is time you were trusted with some real responsibility. As of today, you have full standing as a Council member, so you will be expected to attend meetings, cast votes on various issues, and to participate in discussions. I expect you will have much to contribute."

"I don't… I… you're… you're trusting me," Blaine stammers, "with a Council position?"

"Well, I don't know how you expect to learn otherwise," the Fire Lord replies.

Blaine is utterly stunned. "Dad, I… this is… this is… awesome." With that, he abruptly launches himself over the table, runs along the top and grabs his father into a crushing hug. The Fire Lord is only shocked for a few seconds.

"Always when I least expect it… there is no place safe from you, is there?" he laughs as he returns the grasp.

Blaine chuckles into his shoulder. "I can strike from any direction, at any time. I am the hug ninja."

"I hope you can restrain yourself during the meetings. Wouldn't want to give the impression of bias, after all."

"Right," Blaine says, breaking the hug, and making an exaggerated return to prim-and-proper mode. "Of course."

The two of them rise and begin to exit the chamber, Blaine fighting a losing battle against the urge to grin like a catgator presented with a five-course dinner. His father is trusting him—really trusting him with an actual responsibility. This is huge. This kind of trust… this is…

This isn't something he deserves.

"Something on your mind, son?" the Fire Lord asks, as apparently, Blaine has the worst game face in the history of game.

"I was just thinking," Blaine starts to reply.

And suddenly it occurs to him that this is the time to earn it. If there was ever a time to come clean to his father, ever a door opened for him to walk through and lay everything on the table, this is it. 'Dad, I've been sneaking out from under your nose for years now, going into town and doing incredibly dangerous things even when you expressly forbade me from leaving the palace and I
knew how much you would freak if I ever went missing. I've been doing lots of stuff like that, pretty much subverting your authority and disobeying you at every opportunity. Oh, also? I met the Avatar and befriended him. I've been teaching him firebending despite rumors that say he is the source of the plague. I think I might like him.'

Whoa.

Wait, where did that last part come from? That's just… well, whatever.

In the end, he looks at his father and he just… can't. He can't bring himself to ruin this moment. He loves his dad, he really does, but it's felt like they've been growing apart for years, despite the man's best efforts to keep him close. This is something rare and incredibly valuable, and he doesn't want to sully it. Even though he knows his father would see reason eventually, Blaine just doesn't want that shoe to drop yet.

Maybe he isn't as courageous as he thought.

"…Sue Sylvester is kind of a smoke-spewing bitch, isn't she?" he finishes at last, turning his charm smile to its brightest setting.

The Fire Lord frowns. "Now, Blaine…" he starts, voice low and disappointed. "…that's 'Lady Sue Sylvester is a smoke spewing bitch.' It's important to use people's proper titles. They like that."

The Fire Prince gives a slight nod. "I'll try to remember."

Sue Sylvester's office is filled with things that want to eat you. Or, at least, they would want to eat you, if any of them were actually alive. Dragon statues, stuffed moose-lion skins, a nastily vivid painting of a platypus bear satisfying his munchies on a bunch of unsuspecting picnickers… it's giving him the shivers. He's into cougars and all, but not the kind that might actually eat him.

Puck's just started to doze against the doorframe when Sue Sylvester enters the room like a fucking avalanche, bitch-gliding through the door without even bothering with the knob and still nearly killing him with the force of it. "Hey, watch it, lady!" he says, and immediately, her crazy fire-bitch claws are grabbing him and forcing him to look her in the eyes.

"That's Lady, with a capital L. Don't think I can't hear your lack of proper capitalization, you uneducated, unhygienic mudskipper."

"Damn," he says after she lets him go. "Who put chilli peppers in your—"

"If you value the nerve endings in your man-parts, I recommend you do not finish that sentence," she says, storming over to the other side of her giant desk and sitting in the chair like it flipped her off and shat on her doorstep. "And if you must know, it was the incompetent, simpering boob that I am required by law to refer to as the Fire Lord. The man makes me want to cut off my own face and sew it on backwards just so I don't have to see, hear, smell, or taste anything associated with him."

Santana barely looks up from filing her fingernails. "We've been waiting here for three hours."

"Well, I must apologize for your incredible hardship. I understand that Neanderthals such as you have difficulty with the complicated, intricate muscle control required to engage in sitting down and standing up. If you'd like, I can call a few of my Chi-Ryu's in here to give you a hand when it comes time to switch from one to the other."
Santana looks vaguely interested in that, but she gets down to business pretty quickly. "Look, you hired us. You set up these appointments."

"Exactly," Lady Sue replies. "I created them; therefore it is my divine right to destroy them at my pleasure. I owe you no explanations and I am dangerously close to cutting your pay because of your foul attitudes. Report on your findings!"

"We found him," Santana says. "Confirmed his identity, and everything."

"Inadequate," Sue yawns. "Give me something more substantial."

"We have a confirmed location where he went last night, and a fine reason to believe he'll be going back there."

"Better," the Lady allows. "I'm still debating taking this information and having the two of you sedated and shipped to the South Pole."

"Alright," the dark-skinned girl says with a smile. "How 'bout this; His Royal Highness? Is training the Avatar."

At this, Sue's eyebrows rise in an expression of intrigue. Which is kind of a surprise to Puck, as he was pretty sure she was one of those people who felt nothing but differing amounts of rage. "You've caught my attention. How do you know it's the Avatar?"

"Homeboy was getting his bend on," she smirks. "Fire and water. I saw both. And furthermore, I'm thinking there might be a little somethin'-somethin' between the two of them."

The Lady looks pensive. "Well," she says after a few moments. "This might make things a little easier. I'm still not satisfied, but I'm as close as unevolved lifeforms such as yourselves could hope to make me, so that's something. I have three days to avert certain disaster for this country, so I'm going to have to up my operations. In the meantime, the two of you are on Prince duty. The next time that sneaky gay pops his curly little head out from behind the Palace walls, you," she says, pointing to Santana, "send me a messenger hawk. I will reply. When I do, you," she says, pointing to Puck, "will take him somewhere quiet and pound him into hippoburger meat. I mean it—I want him so thoroughly tenderized that even the fussiest of octogenarians will be able to gum him down and digest him without even so much as a burble of complaint from their decaying intestines. Do I make myself clear?"

"Finally," Puck grunts. "I get to hit something."

"Yes, my Lady," Santana says.

"Excellent," the Lady smiles. "Now get out of my office."

She doesn't have to tell Puck twice. He'd call her a maneater, but he's pretty sure she'd readily devour anyone or anything that stood in her way, regardless of gender, age, status, or species. She seems hardcore like that. As he heads out, he hears her bark from behind him. "BECKY," she says. "Send in my next appointment."

And then he sees her. A blonde chick so hot, she probably takes fucking lava baths. She's wearing her red-and-white school uniform, upping the hotness factor by about a billion, and walking toward Crazy Lady's office like she owns the place. There are HBIC vibes radiating off of her so hard he half-expects her and Santana to lock eyes and launch into a catfight right then and there, and he's seriously disappointed when they just settle for glaring at each other. Puck raises one eyebrow as
she passes, an open invitation, and he doesn't miss the flare of interest in her eyes in the second-long window before she flicks her hair at him to blow him off.

Oh, *Hells* yes.

As she closes the door, Puck finds the short little assistant girl sitting at her desk, and slips her a little card. "Hey, when hottie gets done with her meeting, give her this. It's the hotel I'm staying at, room number included. She'll know what to do."

The creepy little lady takes the card from him without a word, so Puck can only assume she got the message, which means hottie is going to get the message, which means he is going to get something else entirely. If everything goes according to plan, he'll get to bone a hot chick *and* make Santana jealous as fuck.

Maybe *then* they'll get into a fight.

Becky waits until the guy with the Mohawk rounds the corner before incinerating the card and sweeping the ashes into a trashcan without even looking up from her paperwork.

"You sent for me, Lady Sylvester?"

Sue eyes her protégé as she walks through the door with no small amount of (very secret, well-hidden) pride. Her poise is impeccable. She radiates confidence and command simply by existing, so deeply has she imbibed the teachings of the Chi-Ryu way.

"Have a seat, Q," the Lady says after a moment.

Quinn does as commanded.

"First, I'd like a progress report on *Operation Wonderful, Benevolent Lies."

Her star pupil nods, adopting a small smirk of triumph. "It's moving along perfectly, my Lady. The agents are deployed throughout the City, spreading rumors as we speak. The men hang on to their every word," she says, pausing to let her smirk grow a little wider as she flips her hair over her shoulder, "for *obvious* reasons. The women are a slightly harder sell, but we have our ways."

"Outstanding. I expected no less," Sue says. "But I'm afraid you're going to have to turn it up a notch."

Quinn arcs a perfectly trimmed eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Oh, indeed." Sue leans forward, steepling her fingers into the pyramid of evil contemplation. "The Fire Lord's stupidity is forcing my hand. There's been a change of plans, so listen carefully."

The Chi-Ryu leans forward slightly, absorbing her Master's every word.

"In three days…"

*Coming Up Next*: Kurt and Blaine reunite at last, oblivious to the wheels of political intrigue a-turnin' all around them. This will not work in their favor. The tension in town is rising, the Sun is restless, and the Sue is hungry for power. One way or another, life for our heroes -and for the Fire Nation- is about to be turned upside-down…
Reviews release happy chemicals in my brain. Don't you want me to have happy chemicals? ;)}
**Three Days, Part 1: Water**

**Chapter Notes**

**Media:** Fic  
**Title:** Solar Winds (*Avatar: The Last Airbender* Fusion, 8/?)  
**Rating:** PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.  
**Spoilers:** None for either series.  
**Warnings:** Slight possibility of cursing.  
**Word Count:** 4285  
**Summary:** Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

**Author's Note:** I lied! Bad author. I think I'm just going to do away with those 'Coming Up Next' sections, as these things always tend to get away from me. The next chapters are pretty much all build-up. To make up for it, I give you two things—more flashbacks to Kurt and Blaine's first meeting, and a little teaser: this build-up not only ends in a Klaine reunion, but a multiple-chapter-spanning *action sequence* that sets the plot moving in high gear and turns the story on its head. It'll be worth the wait. ;D

**CHAPTER 8**

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*Three Days, Part 1: Water*

The gang arrives back at home base about an hour later, with some much-needed necessities and a newly-empurpled Finn Hudson to make up for the ones they lost. Kurt turns to peer at him as he walks through the door.

"You know, Finn," he says, "that's really not a bad color on you. Well, *on you,*" Kurt says, waving his hand over his face, "it's kind of terrible, but that's to be expected. Body paint hasn't been vogue for a while now."

Finn groans. On top of having his clothes and his skin died purple with busted berries, he now smells like a fruit pie. And there are no fruit pies around, because most of the berries are spread across his butt, so he's getting all appetized for nothing.
Mercedes, of course, agrees with Kurt. "He ain't lyin'," she says. "I'm a little shocked. You look almost distinguished. A man of wealth and taste."

"You look like a pimp," Artie offers with a grin. "A big, purple pimp!" A pause. "…that's supposed to be a compliment, by the way."

Finn just sighs. "I'm going to go soak my life in water for a while. If I don't come down for dinner," he says as he droopily moves up the steps, "it probably just means I drowned, so you shouldn't worry."

From the way everyone else continues to mill about the small kitchen, they don't think too much of that. Kurt doesn't either—Finn's not actually going to drown himself. That's almost impossible for a waterbender to begin with. Sheer instinct would kick in and have him back breathing air in no time at all. But there was a note of resignation, of tiredness in Finn's tone that isn't there normally.

"Do you think we're taking this too far?" he says out of the blue.

Artie's wheelchair squeaks to a halt. Mercedes looks up from sorting the bruised ash bananas from the intact ones. But neither of them has anything to say for a few moments.

"Do you?" Mercedes says, after a little thought.

Kurt sighs. "It seems like… I don't know. I just don't think he's taking this as well as he pretends to."

Artie sighs right back at him. "Kurt, the guy practically begged us to punish him."

"Only because he didn't think we'd agree to what he actually wants," Kurt responds.

"Which is?" Mercedes shrugs.

The Avatar fights the urge to roll his eyes. "Oh, I don't know. Forgiveness?" he sighs again, attempting to snip the snippiness out of his tone. "I just… maybe he's been punished enough."

Artie gives him a frank look. "Let me ask you this, Kurt. Are you still hurt?"

He has to think about it, which, really, is an answer itself. "A little."

"I'm still mad," Artie nods. "Mercedes?"

"I still don't trust him," she says easily, though there is, Kurt is pleased to note, a small note of sorrow in her voice.

Artie turns back to Kurt with a blank expression. "So, there you go. When I'm done being pissed, when you don't feel hurt, when Mercedes feels like she doesn't have to keep tabs on him… then, we'll forgive him, and that'll be that."

"And until then?" Kurt asks.

"We stick to the agreement," Mercedes says.

"I'm not gonna lie to the guy," Artie says simply, shaking his head. "Telling him we're totally cool when we're not… I think that'd be worse."

"Besides, it's not like we treat him that badly," Mercedes continues, going back to banana-sorting. "Back home, I knew a boy who tried to get back with one of my girls after he cheated on her. He
was sorry—not 'oh baby, you gotta take me back, I know this is the twelfth whore I've slept with but this time it'll be different, honest' sorry, either. Any man who uses the words 'you have to' in an apology is not sorry. No, he was for real sorry—said he would do whatever she asked to earn her trust again. She told him if he was serious about getting back with her, she wanted him marked as hers, someplace where anybody could see it." She grins. "She didn't think he'd do it. He came back a week later with her name tattooed on his forearm. She smacked him upside the head and called him an idiot." At this, she lets out a little sigh. "They were engaged when I left. And they have matching tattoos—her name on him, and his name on her."

Artie makes a face. "Was… that supposed to be romantic? 'Cause my gag reflex is itchin' me something fierce."

"Shut up," the other Earthbender says.

"I'm serious! Whatever died to make my lunch is rolling in its grave as we speak. It wants to climb out of my throat so it can throw up."

The resident female pelts him with a bruised banana. "I think it's sweet," she says simply.

Kurt just sighs and imagines his own name tattooed across a certain someone, before quickly deciding that tattoos are terrible for the skin and entirely too permanent—if anything is to be written on his eventual boyfriend, it will be in erasable, washable ink. This leads to a particularly distracting line of thought involving body paint and Kurt's master plan to bring it back into style (in the bedroom, if nowhere else). It is this line of thought that is interrupted when the fucking window explodes next to him.

Mercedes is up and ready to smash immediately. Artie has two hands on his fake cast, ready to fire it like a rocket towards any intruder. There is only a split second delay before the thudding of Finn's footsteps can be heard from upstairs, followed by the slightly louder thudding of Finn falling down said stairs. To his credit, he salvages the tumble at the last second by taking a slightly awkward roll to his feet, where he stands, dripping wet, dressed in nothing but a towel, ready to face the impending threat of…

…a dragon hawk.

"Pavarotti!" Kurt says, hand still on his chest. "Learn. To. Knock. I swear, if you do that one more time, I'm going to sacrifice you to the moon. I don't particularly even care if she wants you."

Pavarotti is the most aggressive messenger hawk in the history of time. The thing has destroyed something every single time Blaine has used it to send a message, at least in Kurt's experience. It once dove through a ceiling, leaving a small, bird-shaped hole in the roof of their hotel room, which the manager took as a sign that the Year of the Chicken would be especially profitable to him. Kurt is pretty sure he could be eaten by a sea serpent, and Pavarotti would still find a way to get letters to him. Possibly by killing said monster with nothing more than its beak and sheer, foul-tempered determination.

Pavarotti shrieks at him in blatant defiance, and holds out its leg so that Kurt can take the note attached. He does, and the ill-mannered avian gives a spectacular farewell screech before launching itself through the broken window and back to the skies.

Finn, Artie, and Mercedes take a second to look at one another, and then, as if they had been rehearsing it for weeks, spoke in perfect unison.

"I hate this country."
At that, Finn began to drag his soaking wet self back up the stairs. "Stupid crazy birds, delivering love notes…"

The blush fights its way to Kurt's face before he even knows it's coming, and of course Mercedes picks up on it immediately. "Oh, is that what you've been getting?" Times like these are the only ones where he curses his skin—the thing about looking like a porcelain doll is that the slightest bit of color stands out on him like blood on snow.

"Absolutely," Kurt mockingly agrees. "Listen to the magnificent prose of my suitor." He unfolds the scroll and adopts his sulriest, most seductive purr as he reads aloud the words. "Breadsticks, in three days. I'll be waiting." The Avatar clutches the note to his chest. "How can I help but swoon?"

Artie makes a gagging sound.

Kurt smirks. "Oh, Blaine, take me in your arms!"

Artie continues to choke.

"My sweet, beautiful Prince, sing again of your bounteous love for me!"

Artie grabs his throat, has a minor seizure, and unceremoniously flops out of his chair and onto the floor, where he lies still.

Mercedes eyes him carefully. "Now, what in the Hills are you doing? Don't be acting like you're above all this. You were the one telling waterboy to 'get up on it' last night, if I recall."

Artie instantly recovers from his attack and pops his head up to prop it carelessly on his elbow. "And I still support that decision. But that is sex. Sex is a beautiful, natural thing. It's romance that I'm allergic to. It's unnatural. An abomination!" he declares. "All that pomp and circumstance… why you gonna climb over a mountain when you can go through a tunnel instead?"

"And Finn wonders why you talk to the Earth like it's your girlfriend," Mercedes says scornfully. "Boy, you don't know jack about how women work."

"I've already met the love of my life," Artie says with a grin.

The two continue to argue about the respective merits of dating and romance versus fucking every attractive person you come across, and Kurt happily tunes them out. Three days. He and Blaine will meet again in three days. At the restaurant where they had their first… meal together. So, all he has to do is wait three days. That shouldn't be too hard.

Right?

Well, Blaine was right—once you got to the rooftops, travelling was much easier, provided you quickly got over any fear of falling and had no trouble leaping from roof to roof like a lemur on a sugar high. The last stop they reach is an odd-looking building that doesn't quite gel with the surroundings. Blaine easily jumps down off the roof at a height that should snap his ankles like icicles, yet he lands in a roll and comes to a stop, perfectly unharmed.

"I am not doing that," Kurt informs him in no uncertain terms.

"It's not hard! Just do what I did," Blaine says breezily.

"Jump from an impossible height and not break anything or die?" Kurt says. "Oh, well, that should
Blaine continues to smug at him. "All right, all right. Maybe this drop is a little intimidating for a beginner. How about this," he says, moving closer to the wall, "you drop down, and I'll catch you."

For some odd, inscrutable reason, Kurt's heart forgets what it's supposed to be doing for a second. Then, to make up for lost time, it starts back faster than ever. "Are you **crazy**?"

"You can trust me," Blaine says, like it's the most natural, obvious thing in the world. "I won't let you fall."

"Actually," Kurt corrects, "you will. You don't really have a choice."

"Then how about 'I'll soften the landing?' Or 'I won't let you break?'"

"Let's just stick with 'I'll catch you,'" Kurt says, even as some strange, otherworldly force that is completely outside of his control and the bounds of common sense compels him to sit on the side of the roof like he is actually going to go **through** with this ridiculous plan. **He** cannot possibly imagine why his legs are being so strange. **There is absolutely no**—

Well, great, now he's falling. Way to go, legs.

For just a moment, it actually seems like he is going to land perfectly in Blaine's arms, and Blaine is going to cradle him with that stupid ever-present smile and say something pithy and strangely reassuring and they will have another

**moment**

together...

Then, Kurt smacks right into him and the two of them go down in a tangle of painful, flailing limbs.

And Blaine has the nerve to start **laughing**. "Kurt," he giggles, "are-are you okay?"

Kurt groans. "Nice catch, Prince Charming," he says, and suddenly, Blaine stops laughing.

The Avatar quickly gets up and looks down at the boy beneath him, who is staring at him with a strange, wide-eyed expression that almost looks like fear. "Oh, gosh—did I hurt you? I'm so sorry, I didn't mean—"

"No, no," Blaine says, getting up and brushing himself off. "I'm fine, I just… I thought… nevermind," he says, shaking his head. "Let's go inside."

There is something strange about him, Kurt can sense it. And he's not even talking about the obvious things like climbing up walls or roof jumping. It's a special air of mystery, and he can't help but admit that it's positively intoxicating to be around. "I'm guessing you imagined that would go a little differently," he says airily.

Blaine gives him a slight nod before regarding him with that same small grin. "A little," he admits. "But in the end, I did my job." As he finishes, he casually tosses a warm arm around Kurt's shoulders. "You didn't break."

_Dawn of_ THE FIRST DAY
Waiting has never been something Kurt is particularly good at. If Timebending were one of the Avatar’s abilities, he would’ve been all over that shit, first thing. As it stands, he has to settle for having his brain as thoroughly occupied as possible so he doesn’t have time (haw haw) to dwell on the sun taking its slow stroll from horizon to horizon.

So he decides to brush up a little on his training. He starts with Waterbending. Sadly, since he is the best Waterbender in the group, this essentially means that he is training Finn more than he is training himself. Still, the activity isn't without its merits.

"Easy, Finn," Kurt says as the two of them re-do their katas for like the tenth time in the Wang House's fairly large basement. "Slow and steady."

"That's what I'm doing, isn't it?" he says.

"Well, slow you've got. Steady is... something to work on," Kurt says as gently as possible, moving his arms in gentle, flowing arcs and guiding the snake-like stream of water through the air.

Finn is still a little awkward. The concept of 'flow' is clearly something that he just cannot grasp at the moment, and though his arms move along the correct pathways, the speed tends to vary unpredictably, resulting in Finn's water occasionally sloshing and dripping onto the floor. His expression is going downhill as he keeps losing water, and Kurt knows that without intervention, he will soon give up out of sheer frustration.

The strange thing is, not even Kurt himself can really say why Finn seems so bad at this when they are practicing. And suddenly, he remembers what Blaine had to say to him.

"Don't try so hard."

It had seemed like strange advice, at the time, but the more Kurt had thought about it, the more sense it made. Movement like this had to be natural, to a certain degree, instinctual. Too much thought put towards it would only muddy the waters and increase frustration at perceived failures. Finn is only thinking about his movements... but water doesn't think about where it flows. It just... flows.

"Finn," Kurt says with a small smile. "Drop your water."

The tall boy ceases his movements with a confused glance at Kurt, allowing the deteriorating rope of water to dissipate. With incredible ease, Kurt guides the discarded liquid over to his own water supply, bringing the snake between his hands and shaping it into a small blob. Finn stares at him in confusion, and Kurt smirks. "Catch!"

The whips the water at Finn casually, and Finn looks confused for only a second before instinct kicks in and he assumes his bending stance. The water flows around him easily as he bends it to his will. "Dude, what—"

"Now, send it back," Kurt says.

Finn throws the water in a small arc, and Kurt easily begins to bend it himself, smiling all the while. The Avatar bends the water into a ball and easily orbits it around himself several times before sending it back to Finn, who catches it again.

"What are we doi—"
"Just send it back, Finn," Kurt says. "Concentrate on me."

"O...kay?" Finn says, again sending the water back to him in a fairly simple arc.

Kurt grabs it and decides to occupy Finn's conscious mind even more. "So, how are you feeling?" he says as he bends the water into a small corkscrew and spirals it towards his step-brother.

"Uhhh," Finn says, catching the corkscrew and compacting it into a disk. "A little hungry, I guess," he says as he tosses the disk back.

Kurt bends it into an elongated blob before arcing it around his shoulders like a boa. "No, I mean... in general. How are you? Are you okay? You seemed a little down yesterday," he says, abruptly tossing the horseshoe shape at Finn.

"I'm okay," Finn says, catching the water with ease that makes Kurt grin. Finn's own crooked smile makes a brief appearance on his face, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes as he sends the water back in what vaguely resembles a teardrop turned on its side.

"Well, I do kinda suck. At... a lot of things," he says, looping the single stream in the air a few times before sending it back to Kurt.

"See, that is what I'm talking about," Kurt says, intercepting the stream, bending it into a ball, and sending it back at Finn, freezing it in mid-flight just for variety. "Faster!" Kurt says.

Finn melts the ball and sends it to Kurt low. Kurt loops it into two vertical rings before rolling them at Finn at high speed. Finn breaks the rings in half and lets the water go above and below him before bending it from behind him and sending it back at Kurt. The two of them continue like this for several minutes, getting faster and faster as they go, all conversation abating as their training session becomes a game, before evolving even further into a kind of dance. With Finn fully in the flow of the moment, he and Kurt feed off of each other naturally, predicting each other's movements in their very own cycle of push and pull, a tide of their own making.

There is a moment, towards the end, when Kurt is suddenly struck by the beauty of Finn and his movements while he is wholly engrossed in the moment. And this is what makes him falter—he can't let himself think of him like that, not anymore. He never wants to go down that road again. "I think that's enough for today," Kurt says, guiding the water into a nearby basin, ending the session.

"Dude, that was so fun," Finn says as he grins his stupid, crooked, genuine grin.

"I agree," Kurt says with a haughty smile. "We should do it more often. And... in response to what you said earlier, yes, Finn, there are some things you are bad at," he says. "But," he adds, pointing to the basement around Finn. "You're getting better. See?"

Finn looks around in confusion for just a second before the realization hits his face like the full moon rising. The basement is dry. Throughout that whole sequence, Finn barely spilled any water. "Oh... holy... wow..." He looks at Kurt in awe. "How did you do that?"
"I didn't do anything, Finn," he says simply. "It was all you."

"Huh," Finn says, going back to staring at dry room like he thinks the water is just hiding from him somewhere. "So… all I have to do to be good at Waterbending is talk to you while I'm doing it?"

Kurt fights the urge to bend a cold blast of water to his own face. Not only did Finn completely miss the point, he seems to be aiming in a direction perpendicular to it. "No, Finn, you just need to… not think so much."

"…wow," Finn says. "I really never thought I'd hear anybody say that to me."

"Well," Kurt sighs, starting up the stairs, "this journey has been nothing if not a new surprise around every corner."

"Yeah," Finn replies, following distractedly. "Anyway, I'm kind of glad we decided to take a break. All this water is making me thirsty…"

"Would either of you like a refill?" the perky waitress asks.

"No ma'am, but thank you," Blaine says politely.

"More water, please," Kurt says. This is only his… what? Fifth glass? He will be peeing for hours later, but it's a necessary evil. For all his supposed oneness with water, he can't seem to keep his mouth from drying.

"So anyway," Blaine continues, "this guy kind of wanted to specialize in different sauces, and he had a ton to work with, but he needed something to dip in them. Something relatively simple that wouldn't overpower the taste of the sauces. And thus we have," he gestures to the restaurant around him. "Breadsticks."

"Not a bad idea," Kurt says. The owner does have a pretty huge collection of sauces, many of which are quite delicious. Sweet and Spicy is Kurt's favorite so far.

"I quite like it, myself," Blaine agrees. "So, what brings you to the Fire Nation, Kurt?"

"I'm… visiting!" he says, a little too loudly, "my… sick grandmother," Kurt says, and really, he should not be at all surprised when the entire restaurant suddenly grinds to a halt in order to stare at him in horror. "Oh, no," Kurt says, "she's sick with… crazy!" He twirls his finger around near his head. "Sick in the brain, you know?"

This seems to do a reasonable job of reassuring everyone, but Blaine is now looking at him with the smugface again, which Kurt is pretty sure means he's screwed up. "I'm guessing you don't use the 's' word to describe your grandmother very much. Otherwise, you probably would've expected that reaction."

Kurt nods gravely. "We… don't talk about her much."

Blaine regards him coolly. "Does your grandmother know Jean?"

Kurt quirks an eyebrow in response.

"You know, Jean. She's very popular among the other patients. Is this your first time visiting? Do you know where the asylum is? I can take you there after we eat," he smiles.
Kurt is outwardly cool. Inwardly, he is flailing his arms and throwing things and bashing his head against the wall of his skull for not coming up with a better lie.

"You don't have a crazy grandmother, do you?" Blaine says after a few moments.

"...maybe not," Kurt quietly admits.

"Well, then," Blaine says, leaning forward. "I'll ask again—what brings you to the Fire Nation, Kurt?"

Kurt continues to flail for a moment before he calms himself. There's no reason for him to be acting like this. He's been letting Blaine control the situation, but there is no reason that should continue—he is a waterbender. His style specializes in reversals and counters. He can turn this around.

"Why are you so interested?" Kurt asks. "Who do you think you are, that you can just demand answers from me, when I don't know anything about you? I've seen the way you act… you've got a secret, too, don't you? Why should you have mine if I can't have yours?"

Blaine seems honestly taken aback. "...Kurt, I didn't mean to... I wasn't 'demanding' anything from you, I just... well, I was sort of hoping you'd trust me."

"I can't afford to just trust anyone. I don't have that luxury," Kurt says, simply.

Blaine looks pensive for a moment, before glancing around and leaning across the table. "How about this," he whispers. "We'll trust each other. When I count to three, we'll both spill. Okay?"

Of course not. What a stupid thing to ask.

"Okay."

"I'm the Fire Prince."

"I'm..."

"...the Avatar!" Quinn whispers conspiratorially.

She is not at all surprised when the restaurant grinds to a halt in order to stare at her in horror. Her 'BFF' (some underclass bitch who happened to be nearby) makes a terrible attempt at a shocked expression. "Oh, what?" she says coyly. "You haven't heard?" Taking a moment to lick the honey sauce off of her fingers, she lets the crowd marinate in suspense before she serves them the main course. "The Avatar is in the city. He's a special guest of the Fire Lord."

With that, she saunters merrily out the door, the whispers of spreading gossip wafting through the air behind her.

Phase 1, complete.

END OF DAY 1
To Be Continued…
Dawn of

**THE SECOND DAY**

-48 Hours Remain-

"...owwwwww," Kurt quietly seethes, shaking the dust off of his knuckles. He is dirty, he is sore, he is hot, and he can smell himself. So, you know, he is pretty much hitting his expected marks as far as Earthbending is concerned. The second of the Three Hateful Days is to be spent training with Mercedes in a nice, secluded area of woods. Mercedes and her trusty assistant, Lady Pain. It's too early for this shit. "...need some freaking tea," he grumbles.

"What you need, are roots!" she shouts at him as she stomps another torso-sized boulder out of the ground. "Dig those feet into the ground, boy! That stance is miserable; I could probably sing you off your feet," she says, holding the boulder in the air for a second before punching it at him.
You could probably sing anyone off their feet, Kurt definitely doesn't say, because he has no desire to introduce more pain into his life.

As before, Kurt roots himself to the ground as much as he can, keeping his stance low and squared, feeling the power of the planet coursing up through him as he sends his fist out and smashes the offending projectile into sand and pebbles.

And it still hurts like a bitch. "Okay, Mercedes, quick question—do Earthbenders just eventually lose feeling in their knuckles, or am I doing something wrong?"

"I'm telling you what you're doing wrong, waterboy!" she grunts. "You need to be firmer. Weigh yourself down. Dig in, feel the dirt between your toes and like it."

That will never happen. Dirt on his delicate flesh is not something he could ever enjoy. Maybe he should just invest in gloves.

"And don't even think about buying no gloves," she responds to something he didn't even say aloud. Kurt is less shocked by the event itself than by how much he has gotten used to it over the past few months. "We do this 'till you get it right."

The Avatar sighs, before changing his mind and grunting in frustration. Mercedes stomps up another boulder, holds it in front of her for just a second, and decks it at him. And he responds as usual. This time, one of the busted stone fragments pegs him in the forehead.

"FFFFFFFFFFFF—" Kurt starts, clamping his hand over his mouth to keep him from screaming to the heavens and alerting every living thing in the Fire Nation to his exquisite pain.

Mercedes just looks amused. "Awww, did you get a boo-boo?"

Kurt would probably be shooting fire out of his eyes if he were better at Firebending. "Woman, I shit you not—I will go glowy-eyed roid rage and punt you to the North Pole if you don't give me something to work with here!"

The Earthbender gives him a sly grin. "Well... I was really hoping you'd figure it out yourself, but I guess I can give you a break seeing as you're a little distracted right now," she says, with an absolutely lascivious wink.

Kurt rolls his eyes. He will not satisfy her desperate need for gossip. Well... not yet, anyway. Not while she's holding out on him.

"Honey, you're doing too much work," she says simply. "You can draw a lot of strength from the ground, but seriously—it's called Earthbending, not Earthbusting." She gives him a split second to mull that one over before she slams another boulder at him. "PULL!"

Fortunately, he is a quick study. Shifting his stance just slightly, he waits until the boulder is just out of range before lashing out with his hand. This time, the second he touches it, he immediately begins Earthbending, using his innate connection to soften the stone and get it to come apart on its own. It hurts less, which Kurt decides to take as a massive improvement.

"Better," Mercedes says, "not great, but you're getting there."

"Thank you," Kurt sighs.

"Don't thank me yet. It's time for the next part," she says, with a grin that could scare a sharkbear
into swimming in the other direction. "Don't move!" she orders.

The Avatar doesn't even have time to adjust his stance before a colossal column of earth shoots up from underneath his feet, propelling him high into the air. With little else to do with the situation, Kurt decides to spend his time airborne seeing how many curses he can let out before he hits the ground again.

The answer is twenty two.

"...you moved." Mercedes sighs. "Let's try it again."

Kurt punches the ground and goes from flat on his face to completely upright in record time. "TEA," he grumbles.

His Earthbending instructor quirks an eyebrow at him.

"I've had enough. It's tea time," he says, low and dangerous. "I am not bending another inch until I have some tea in me."

"Kurt," Mercedes says carefully, "honey, I am seriously starting to think—"

"Don't even say it. I can stop anytime. I just choose not to, because why would anyone do that?" the Avatar says.

Mercedes just sighs. "Alright, alright. Don't get all huffy on me. We'll break so you can feed your addiction—"

"It's not an addiction!"

"—but then we get right back to it, understand?" she says.

"...less talk, more tea," Kurt says simply.

So they go make some.

Back in the Kitchen, Mercedes shuffles through the tea supplies. "Alright, all we have left is some Green Tea..."

"Ugh," Kurt groans.

"...Spiced Tea..."

"Is there anything in that these people won't defile with spices?" Kurt pleads to the heavens for an answer. The heavens are just as lost as he is.

"...White Dragon..."

"I wouldn't dare waste something so precious on a day like this."

"...Ginseng..."

"Do it."

Mercedes puts the tea on to boil, and sits across from Kurt at the table. The two of them wait in silence for a few moments, as Kurt dolefully wipes dirt out of each individual strand of his hair.
She smiles in spite of herself.

"Am I amusing you, Mercedes?" Kurt says without looking at her, still concentrating on his grooming.

"Always," she assures him. "So," she says, cueing a subject change. "Where'd giant boy and his rollerbuddy get to?"

"Artie claimed him for 'bro time' last I heard. No audible screams yet, so I assume it was for benevolent purposes," Kurt says, with the tiniest twinge of a smile at the edges of his mouth. A small part of him is hoping that Artie took their little discussion yesterday to heart. It'd do wonders for Finn to have Artie as an ally again.

"He still won't teach you anything?" Mercedes asks.

"Flat refusal. The last time I asked, he told me that Omashian Skull Beetles had laid eggs in his cranium, and that disturbing the 'teachy' part of his brain would cause them to hatch," Kurt says, rolling his eyes.

Mercedes rolls her eyes. "There's something wrong with that boy's brain, but it's got nothing to do with beetles," she says.

"I just wish you guys would tell me why he's so uptight about it," Kurt whines. He wasn't trying, but it happened anyway.

"Kurt, it's not our story to tell," she says gently. Then she adds, not-so-gently, "Honestly, I'm surprised you haven't been able to wheedle it out of Finn yet."

He sighs. "I know. I feel so inept. My subtle machination skills are getting flabby. I need to brush up. Maybe I could practice on you?" he ends with a slight smirk.

Mercedes shakes her head and buttons her lips shut.

"Oh, come on! Just let me ask you a few questions. Not even really specific questions—all you'll have to do is answer yes or no. I won't need many. Say… twenty?" he asks. "Please?"

"No."

"Did he murder someone?"

"No."

"Okay, did he—"

"That wasn't an answer!"

"So he did murder someone! I knew it."

"No, he didn't!" Mercedes groans. "Damn it, boy—"

"Okay, did he seriously injure or maim someone?"

"That's two questions, and I'm not answering either of them."

"So… yes to both! I am on a roll—"
The whistling of the tea kettle is like a children's choir to Mercedes's ears (a good one too, not some crappy grade-school choir filled with kids who don't even want to be there). Without one more word to Kurt, she is up, pouring the tea, and plopping the cup down in front of him with a challenging look on her face. "Oh, look," she says, her tone flat. "The tea is done."

She knows how this standoff is going to end. Kurt is going to glare at her for a few seconds, before his eyes start nervously darting back and forth between her face and the cup of steaming, hot goodness in front of him. And in the end… the tea will win. The tea always wins.

"This isn't over," Kurt promises, before reaching down, taking just a second to bend the liquid to the desired temperature, before taking a sip and moaning like his tongue has just received its own private harem.

"Whatever you say, waterboy," Mercedes says.

From there, Kurt drinks his tea in silence, savoring every drop. At least, until…

She knows she probably shouldn't bring it up again, but… "Why'd you start with murder?" she asks. "That's a little morbid, boo."

The Avatar's eyes are closed, lost in the serenity of his cup and its contents, when he replies. "Well, really. That seemed like the go-to choice for 'What Artie Doesn't Want You To Know.' There are only so many things you can assume about a guy your stepbrother met in prison."

"…telling you, the Fire Lord wants to bring it here! He wants to cleanse the city while he sits safe and sound in his big, posh palace! Well he won't cleanse me without a fight! I won't stand for it, and neither should you!" An exceptionally loud and spit-tastic speaker shouts from the middle of the street in a significantly seedier part of the Capital City's merchant district.

"Okay, seriously, dude, what are we doing here?" Finn leans down to whisper in Artie's ear.

The paralyzed Earthbender just leans back in his chair, fingers drumming against each other in concentration. His left leg is elevated in his fake cast, as per usual, the one eye still visible from under his fake head bandage scanning the streetside vendors. "Browsing," he replies.

Finn blanches. "I knew it. You're stealing stuff!"

"No, I'm browsing," Artie insists. "The stealing comes later."

"Dude," Finn grunts. "No! We're supposed to be laying low."

"Buddy," Artie replies easily, "I don't know if you've looked in the mirror lately, but it's kind of impossible for us to 'lay low.' You're twelve feet tall, and I'm butt-bound for life. These are not things easily hidden."

"But…” Finn sighs, and looks around to make sure no one is paying attention to them.

"Chill, my brother," Artie says gently. "Nobody's looking at us. Interesting effect of the wheelchair —everybody wants to stare at you, but nobody will."

A loud, angry voice breaks into their conversation. "Stupid beast!" it snarls. "I said whoa!"

Artie's eye is drawn to a rickey-looking old cart, being pulled along by a relatively scrawny dragon moose and driven by a crotchety old man. The dragon moose seems oblivious to the codger's
commands, and only on the third shout of "**WHOA,**" accompanied by an extremely harsh pull on the reins, does the thing finally stop. A small grin fights its way to his face when he sees the cargo on the cart—some pots, vases, bowls, and a set of three monkey statues in the standard configuration, one covering eyes, one covering ears, one covering his mouth. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have our mark."

"We don't even *need* anything right now," Finn whine-whispers. "Come on, let's just go back."

"Finn, relax, okay? Just trust me. This is for the benefit of everyone," he replies. "Now, follow my lead. Pull into that little alley," he orders.

Finn complies, pushing Artie behind a large trash bin between an herbalist's store and a seedy-looking bar.

"Now, check to see if the coast is clear."

Finn pokes his head out from behind the dumpster to look both way, ensuring no one is watching. "We're safe, dude. What are you even…?" By the time he has turned back around, Artie's chair is empty. Of *course.* Finn tries to scrub the frustration out of his eyes before darting out of the alleyway to find his crazy ex-convict friend before he gets them both killed.

Back on the street, Finn has zero luck in the art of Artie location. He starts heading back the way they came, passing the grody-looking cart just as the mean old driver hops back up to take the reins. "YA!" he shouts, whipping them a little harder than necessary. Finn winces in sympathy, but he's got other things to worry about—

Suddenly, the cart jolts violently, as if it ran over something large… roughly human-sized. There is a loud clattering as several of the earthen items onboard are jolted off the cart, and the driver curses, loudly, as he pulls the cart to a stop to inspect the damage. Finn also curses, quietly, as he is pretty sure the guy just ran over Artie, but his panicked dash to check underneath the cart reveals nothing.

"Fuggin' bumpy roads…" the old man grouses. "Stupid fuggin' horn-beast, can't even see where it's going… hey, you!" he shouts at Finn. "Get over here! I'm too old to lift all this shit."

If nothing else, Finn has always been good at following orders. He quickly bounds over and helps the geezer pick up all the stonework that fell out of his cart. And by 'helps,' Finn of course means that he does the entirety of the work himself. Most of it is broken, anyway, but there are a few things that are salvageable, and the monkey statue isn't even scratched. Which is strange, because it's *super* heavy when Finn picks it up to set it in the cart.

"There's a good lad," the man says. "Not enough youngsters these days with the proper respect for their elders."

"Thanks," Finn says with a small grin. And then he wonders how he winds up working for people and then thanking *them* instead of the other way around, because this totally isn't the first time that has happened.

The old man nods and surveys the damaged earthware. "Huh," he says briefly. "Could've sworn there were only three of those. Oh well…"

As he shambles back to the front of the cart, Finn looks up to see what he was talking about, and… huh. There are four monkey statues. One with eyes covered, one with ears covered, one with mouth covered, and one with arms crossed. Which seems kind of… wait a second…
Finn stares at the arm-crooser.
The arm-crooser stares back.
"HYAH!" the old man shouts, whipping his moose into gear.
The statue winks at Finn.
Oh, shit!
Finn runs up and jumps on the back of the cart, jostling it again.
"What the blazes are you doing?" the old man shouts back at him.
"Sorry!" Finn replies. "I just realized, I... uhhh... needed a ride. To... a place... in the direction you're going. And I thought... since I helped you and everything... is that okay?"
"Fine," the old man spits. "Presumptuous little shit," he adds sort-of under his breath, calling Finn little even though he is easily as tall as two of this dude stacked on top of each other.
"Thanks!" Finn says again, before turning to the statue and taking a page from the old man. "What the blazes are you doing?"
"Striking a blow for equality," Artie replies from inside the statue.
"...what?" Finn asks.
"You shouldn't talk to statues. People will look at you funny."
Finn doesn't even know how to begin to address the hypocrisy in that statement.
"Just relax, and be patient. Neutral jing, my man. Wait for the opportune moment."
Left with little choice, Finn does exactly that. The cart continues on its way out of town, stopping only two more times to drop off more merchandise (a task which Finn is, of course, expected to help with). There's still plenty left in the cart as they reach the edge of town and keep on going, and Finn can't help but wonder where this old guy is going. A few trees line the path as they continue to move at a slow trot. Arm-crossing monkey Artie, now facing forward, speaks to Finn.
"Pretend you're asleep," he says.
Finn wasn't that far off from the real thing, actually, so he kicks back and halfway closes his eyes. Only halfway, because he is pretty sure this is Artie's cue to pull something.
Sure enough, the Arm-crossing monkey starts sliding towards the front of the cart of its own volition, stopping right behind the old man as they approach a particularly gnarled-looking flarewood tree. Artie's statue disguise turns out to be pretty flexible—it uncrosses its arms, gently grabs the back of the old man's outer robe, and at just the right moment, hooks it onto an overhanging branch and crosses its arms again. The old man has only a second's worth of surprise before he is suddenly hoisted off of his bum, held helplessly in the arms of the flarewood as his cart moves out from under him.
"Fucking fireballs!" he shouts. "How did I... conflabbed... hey!" he shouts at Finn, who shuts his eyes all the way and continues to 'doze.' "Hey! The damn carriage is leaving without me! Stop it! HEY! WAKE UP! HELP ME DOWN, YOU OVERGROWN ASHWEED!"
Finn just continues to relax.

"Fuggin’… HEY! WHOA!" he shouts at the dragon moose. "I SAID 'WHOA,' YOU WORTHLESS SACK OF MEAT-ON-LEGS! I SWEAR, IF YOU DON'T STOP, YOU'RE DINNER WHEN I CATCH UP TO YOU!"

The lanky waterbender can't help but grin just a little as the crotchety old coot continues to flail and curse as he watches his cart steal itself right out from under him. Artie's pretty smart when he isn't being crazy…and sometimes even when he is.

The moose apparently knows this road pretty well, because it turns the corner without even needing a driver to guide it. The second it does, Artie hatches from his stone shell, reconfiguring the pieces into a small disk underneath him. Placing one hand slightly in front of the other in a straight line in front of him, he brings the outer hand down and the inner hand up at the same time, tilting the disk and catapulting him right onto the dragon moose's back. Well… mostly onto its back. "Hey! Help me out over here!" he says, clutching tightly to the dark hair around the animal's neck as his legs dangle helplessly off of one side.

Finn gets up and quickly moves to the front of the cart, grabbing the reins and gently pulling the animal to a stop, before hopping down andrighting Artie's position on his new mount. "Dude, are we seriously taking all this?" he says, gesturing to the cart. "This stuff seems like it could be worth a lot of money. That guy might get in trouble, and we really don't need to piss off anymore rich people…"

"Nah," Artie says, leaning down to undo the clasps on the beast of burden's head. "We'll leave the cart. But the moose is coming with us. That guy's moose privileges have officially been revoked."

That's something Finn can agree with. He helps unfasten the reins, and pretty soon, the dragon moose is free of its leathery prison chains.

"Come on, let's get out of here before the old guy hobbles over and sees us," Artie says, patting the beast on the side and beckoning it forward. The moose seems mostly neutral on its newfound freedom, though it does seem to step a little lighter now that it isn't dragging that giant cart behind it.

The two of them get a decent distance away from the scene of the crime before they feel comfortable slowing down. "So," Finn says. "What are we gonna do with it?"

"Well," Artie says, smiling slightly. "I was thinking we could use a pack mule."

Confusion twists Finn's face into a semi-swirl. "But… I thought I was the pack mule."

Artie looks down at him from his mount, smiling and quickly looking away. "…maybe I think you deserve a break."

Finn stops. He doesn't really mean to, it's just… he can either process the ramifications of that statement, or keep walking. He doesn't have quite the brainpower to do both at once. "…you mean that?" he says, and he might be, maybe, just a little choked up.

Artie gives him a sincere smile. "Yeah, I do."

It's a nice, warm, heartfelt moment.

Which, for the two of them, means it can't be over fast enough.
"So, uhhh..." Finn says, running a little to catch up. "What are we gonna call it?"

Artie shrugs. "I'm thinking 'Horny' might be seen as inappropriate, and that's pretty much the extent of my ideas. Why don't you name it?"

"Alright," Finn says, "I'll try to think of a good one."

"...Drizzle?"

Mercedes is clearly not feeling Finn's awesome name. She stands in the doorway, hand on her hip, regarding each of them with a passive expression and a single quirked eyebrow.

"You go into town, break your disguise, lose another wheelchair," she says, counting off their offenses, and shit; Finn totally forgot about the wheelchair. By Artie's semi-sheepish expression, he wasn't really thinking about it, either. "Rob an old man, leave him hanging on a tree branch, steal his dragon moose, and on top of all of that," she says, gearing up for the big finish, "you name it Drizzle?"

"...yes?" Finn tries, because she totally said it like it was a question and Finn is pretty sure that's the right answer.

She looks at them for a couple more seconds before her eyebrow drops and her expression softens from 'you idiots' to 'you doofuses.' "You're feeding it. And cleaning it. And cleaning up after it. If I step in moose poop, I'm coming for you, do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Finn says. Artie gives a nervous nod.

Without further ado, she slams the door in their faces.

And that's how Drizzle the Dragon Moose joined the gang.

When Finn comes in later that night, filthy himself from having thoroughly washed the moose, he seems lighter and happier than Kurt has seen him in weeks, and he knows it isn't because he got a new pet. The Avatar smiles into his Jasmine Tea and tries to concentrate on the soothing, gentle aroma, rather than how much he is going to hurt in the morning. If it were any other day, he'd spend the entirety of tomorrow getting a deep tissue massage. But tomorrow is the last day before he and Blaine meet again. So tomorrow... although he technically only knows one move, he figures he can extrapolate a few things. His intuition is fairly good when it comes to these things. He's already made flame, so he's over the first major hurdle. Sure, it's a little dangerous, but he really wants to have something to show Blaine when they reconvene. How hard can basic Firebending really be?

Though the rest of his face is neutral, Blaine's eyes seem to sparkle in almost childlike awe as Kurt manipulates the water in the puddle, making it rise and dance like a liquid snake. They're in another small alley, having retired from the restaurant in order to speak more privately. Casting the water into the air, Kurt gives a quick, if light, stomp, causing a small pedestal of rock to shoot up from the ground, before cupping his hands outward and pressing them down, making a bowl-shaped indent in the top of the pedestal. He quickly guides the water into the bowl, and... voila! Instant bird bath.

"That's... incredible," Blaine breathes.

Kurt gives a bow in order to hide his slight blush long enough to get it under control. "You're too
"So," Blaine says, looking at him with a small, slightly eager smile. "You know water, and you know earth. Fire is next in the cycle. That's why you're here, isn't it?" he asks. "You need a Firebending teacher."

"You're awfully knowledgeable on the subject," Kurt says, quirking an eyebrow.

*Blaine's smile changes in a way Kurt can't quite describe.* "My mother used to tell me stories about the Avatar. Incredible, awe-inspiring stories—some of my favorite. I never imagined I'd actually get to meet one. Let alone... teach him," he finishes, looking at Kurt like he has found the key to life.

"...I beg your pardon?" Kurt says, because no. There is absolutely no way. This goes against everything he has experienced in his journey thus far—the universe does NOT like him this much. A beautiful boy drops out of the sky, befriends him, pretty much openly flirts with him, takes him on a semi-magical rooftop journey, takes him to a (sort of) fancy restaurant, turns out to secretly be a Prince, and on top of all of that... he wants to be Kurt's Firebending teacher?

This has got to be a trick. He is secretly a man-eating manticore, or a chi-vampire, or something. Nothing works out for him like this—any one of those things would have been amazing to find just wandering around in a strange city, but to find them all at once? In one person? How is it even possible?

"If that's okay with you," Blaine says, seeming to take Kurt's disbelief as offense at his presumption. "I just thought I would offer. With all the rumors going around about foreigners, let alone the Avatar, I didn't really think you'd have many options. I shouldn't have assumed, I'm sorry."

The Avatar looks at him carefully, still just a little unwilling to believe that someone like him could actually exist. "You know the rumors," Kurt says. "Why don't you believe them? Why are you so friendly?" Why aren't you afraid of me?"

"The Avatar in my mother's stories... he, or she, was always an amazing force for good. For balance. The Avatar was brave and strong and captivating—different in every life, but always on the side of life. Spreading sickness to cleanse the unworthy... that doesn't sound like the Avatar. You, on the other hand," he adds, stepping a little closer to Kurt. "You fit the position perfectly. I've never met anyone like you."

Without an excuse to bow, Kurt's blush must be plainly visible to the Fire Prince, but he doesn't seem to be bothered by it. Maybe... maybe this is possible. Maybe it's a sign from the universe that his luck is changing; that he is about to receive some yang to make up for all the yin he's had to wade through recently.

"All right then, hot stuff," Kurt says, pushing aside the butterflies and looking Blaine right in the eye.

"Let's make Fire."

**END OF DAY 2**
Three Days, Part 3: Fire

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 10/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: None for either series.
Warnings: Slight possibility of cursing.
Word Count: 5883
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

Author's Note: GIANT CHAPTER IS GIANT. Some of my reviewers seem to be abandoning ship, so it's about time to stop the teasing and get to the action. ;) Oh, and anyone else notice that all the new performances involve Blaine climbing on top of and randomly jumping off of things? MONKEY!BLAINE IS CANON, PEOPLE. You read it here first, folks. XP Also, another fun tidbit—I didn't know this when I started writing, but apparently, Darren Criss auditioned for the role of Zuko (The Fire Prince) in The Last Airbender. Let us all be thankful he was not cast, because that movie was awful, and he is with us now.

Oh, and another character makes a brief cameo at the end of this Chapter. I don't name him, but it shouldn't be too hard to figure out who he is. :D

CHAPTER 10
–
Three Days, Part 3: Fire

Dawn of
THE FINAL DAY
-24 Hours Remain

When it comes to sneaking away, Mercedes has always been his greatest obstacle. Finn sleeps like a log, and Artie sleeps in the freaking wilderness whenever he can help it. But Mercedes is
different. Her senses are fine-tuned to detect sneaking—both towards and away from her.

"Where're you going?"

Which is why that did not surprise Kurt in the slightest.

He turns around to face Mercedes, who looks a hot mess at this ridiculous hour of the morning, the sun having barely begun to stretch and rub the sleep out of its eyes.

"Just… heading out to get a little early-morning practice," Kurt says.

Mercedes gives him her standard x-ray stare to see if he is lying. Which he actually isn't, so there's no reason for him to be nervous.

She can tell there's something more to it, but it's early, and she clearly wishes she was back in bed. Just as Kurt planned. Maybe his subtle machination skills aren't too flabby after all. "Fine. Be careful. And find a good hiding spot." With that, she shuffles back to her temporary bedroom to get some more shut-eye.

And Kurt saunters off to practice instantaneous arson.

"Rise and shine, sleeping uglies!"

The Halls of the Chi-Ryu Firebending Academy for Girls echo with the scornful voice of Sue Sylvester and her chosen flunkies. Gongs are banged, pots are clanged, decent quality swords are clashed and given over to inappropriate wear and tear all for the sake of making as much racket as possible. Nothing quite gets the heart pumping early in the morning like waking up to pants-wetting terror.

"Up and at 'em, you lackadaisical pile of moist logs! I've met corpses less lazy. I expect every single one of you lined up and ready for drills in precisely 240 seconds and not one second more. MOVE!"

One by one, each door in the dormitories is kicked open, presenting the interior to Quinn and Sue's other chosen Captains. To Quinn's satisfaction, not a single girl on her hall is still asleep, which speaks volumes to the terror her Master has managed to instill in these girls. Each room's interior is inspected—the girls are more than expected to have made their beds perfectly within seconds of divesting themselves from its comfort. When this requirement isn't met…

"Marylou!" Quinn shouts. "Present yourself."

The slightly owlish girl with short, black hair is out of the bathroom and in front of Quinn in the time it takes for her to blink. "Yes, Captain!"

"What," she asks with more ice than any Firebender has a right to, "is this?" She points a perfectly manicured finger towards the bed, the sheets hastily thrown across the mattress in a shameful attempt to fool a less astute eye into thinking her bed was made.

Marylou gulps audibly. "...Captain Quinn, I'm so sorry, I'm not used to waking up like this yet and I just forgot, I swear, I—"

Quinn has heard enough. Adding a second finger to her already outstretched pointer, she gives a short thrust of her arm towards the bed, causing a spurt of bright orange flame to ignite the sheets. "Unacceptable," Quinn says, as the panicked girl attempts to run over and beat the flames out with
a towel. She succeeds only because Quinn is feeling merciful. "If you are not capable of taking
care of your bed, you don't deserve a bed. You will sleep on that," she sneers, nodding to the
smoking, ashen ruins of a mattress, "for the rest of your time here." She turns away from the
quivering girl, pausing for just a second at the doorway before turning and adding one more thing.
"And I still expect it to be made every morning."

The sound of the girl's frightened gasping and eventual sobs are music to Quinn's ears as she
marches down the hallways, finishing her inspections. "Water is weak," Sue always tells her.
"Anything that gets it out of you makes you stronger."

The more she makes them sweat and cry (and occasionally puke) the stronger they all become. And
the Fire Nation will be in dire need of their strength in the days to come.

"The weak Fire Lord cannot carry this Nation any longer. Soon, he will be relieved of his burden,
and it will fall on us. Be ready, because none of us will be stopping to pick up your mangled corpse
if you are crushed under its weight."

The first rays of sunlight that peek through the window into Blaine's room don't wake him. They
don't need to—he's already up, sitting cross-legged on the floor and practicing his breathing. The
warmth of the sun on his skin brings a small smile to his face, even as he tries to ignore it. The idea
of meditation is, of course, to clear one's mind utterly, eschewing any and all distractions and
achieving total clarity: a state of no emotion, no thought, no distraction. The state of Zero Mind—
achieving and being able to keep this state is supposedly the key to becoming a true Firebending
master.

Too bad Blaine isn't even close. Not today.

Every time he feels it all start to slip away, something slips in and grabs his attention. Something,
or rather, someone. Even the simple thought of Kurt is stubborn and beautiful and impossible to
ignore—the young Avatar flits through his thoughts like a mongoosnake, sliding in and out like
Blaine's mental landscape is a frozen lake for Kurt to skate across. And while normally, the
inability to keep trespassers out of his headspace would be highly annoying to Blaine, Kurt isn't an
unwelcome intrusion. He leaves a little smirk in his wake every time he glides through.

"...oh, dear. That smile heralds nothing good. Blaine, I'm going to have to ask you to purge those
thoughts and compose yourself immediately."

Now, a sour-faced David stands cross-armed in the middle of the ice lake. Kurt slides to ahalt and
gives him a truly fearsome hands-on-hips bitchface, and Blaine nearly laughs at the mental image
before Wes clears his throat and dispels it. "Sorry," Blaine says. "I was just thinking about—"

"Purge!" David says. "Get those un-dapper thoughts out of your head."

"The Fire Lord is going to be busy ironing out the logistics of the quarantine's end for most of the
day," Wes helpfully explains. "He wants to know if you would prefer an early morning training
session or if you would like the day off. And since any sensible person would take the second
option, I think we all know what you are going to choose."

Blaine puts on his most winning smile. "I'll be ready to go in one minute."

"You are inhuman."

"I like Firebending. And I happen to be quite good."
"All the more reason for you to take a personal day!" Wes insists, but David puts a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Now, Wes. What have I told you about trying to reason with crazy people? Just smile, and nod," David says, and immediately takes his own advice. "We'll be waiting!"

The Fire Prince follows through on his proclamation with spectacular aplomb, and appears at his door, dressed and ready for action in thirty-three seconds.

"Inhuman," Wes repeats. "No one should have that much energy at this hour."

"What can I say?" Blaine says, straightening his collar. "It's a new dawn, a new day, a new life…and I'm feeling good."

With that, Blaine struts down the hall to join his father in the training yard. He feels like he could airbend if he were any lighter, and he is completely unable to keep himself from the little spin he executes as he rounds the corner.

David goes slack-jawed. "Wes," he says. "Did you just witness what I witnessed?"

Wes looks mortified. "I'm afraid so."

"He… he just… pirouetted," David spits the word like the discarded shell of an Ember Nut.

"This is so much worse than we could have imagined," Wes says, turning to David with eyes swimming nausea.

David mirrors him, before turning to stare down the hall in the wake of the Prancing Prince.

"By Agni, he's in love."

Kurt Hummel is so ready for this.

Or, you know, that's what he thought until he actually found a decent place to practice. A short walk through the woods brought him to the bottom of a sheer cliff, which gave him total concealment from at least one side. He isn't too far off the road, but… well, if anyone sees him, as far as they are concerned, he is just another firebender.

"Okay," Kurt says to whatever spirits may or may not be hanging around. "So… now what?"

He should probably warm up or something.

Yeah, that's probably best.

Warm up. Firebending. HA.

"Alright… breathing. Breathing is a fabulous starting point."

So Kurt starts breathing.

And… okay. He's breathing. Air is flowing into, and subsequently out of his lungs. Inhale, exhale, he's got this shit down. Except… well… he isn't sure if he is doing it right. To be more precise, he isn't even really sure how he's supposed to tell if he's doing it right. Isn't this supposed to be calming? Because it definitely isn't—it's kind of stressing him out, actually.
Oh, fantastic. He's only barely begun to breathe and already he's approaching a frustration fueled freakout.

Whatever. He just needs to focus on something else. Like Blaine said… don't try so hard.

Hey, now there's a nice distracting line of thought. Blaine… if Blaine were here, he would be all over him. This. He would be all over this exercise, having Kurt strip (slowly?), carefully studying every inch of him with ravenous eyes, correcting any mistakes with strong, capable, confident fingers that know exactly where to go and what to do. Blaine's hands on his bare chest, guiding him, holding him, feeling every movement as his breathes in, and out, in, and out, inhale, and exhale, inhale, and exhale, suck, and blow—

…

…what? What was he doing? He is supposed to be doing something. Was he breathing? He was pretty sure he was breathing. Why did he stop? He should probably start again. Breathing is important for… some reason. Yes, he'll get right on that breathing thing.

As soon as he's finished coughing.

"SILENCE," Sue shouts into that strange metal cone that somehow makes her even louder. "CHI-RYUS, LINE UP."

All the girls in the gym do as she says, falling into a perfectly straight line in alphabetical order based on their names. It makes it easier for Sue to tell who is missing at a glance, so that no latecomers can slip into formation unnoticed. Sure enough, she spots an open space near the far end of the line, and zeros in on it immediately. Absentees are always identified by an open space—newcomers learn quickly that closing the gap gets you punished just like the latecomer for daring to cover for someone else's insubordination and disregard for procedure.

"You!" Sue barks at the poor girl to the right of the absentee, "Caterpillar brows! Where is Snaggletooth?"

'Snaggletooth' (actual name Emily, not that it matters) limps into the gym with an apology already spilling from her mouth. "Shifu Sylvester," she pants. "I'm sorry, I fell and twisted my ankle on the way here—"

"UNACCEPTABLE," Sue roars into the girl's face, utilizing the metal cone for extra emphasis. "Do I, or do I not teach you to walk on your hands?"

"…y-you do, Shifu, I am—"

"And why do you think I do that?"

"I… I…"

"For exactly this situation!" Sue bellows. "If your ankles are too rickety and fragile to support your bulbous frame, you flip yourself over and walk on those meaty paws of yours, do you understand?"

"Yes, Shifu!" the girl says, trying (and failing) to hold back her tears.

"You will receive the standard punishment. Present yourself."
"No, no, *please*…" Snaggletooth begs.

"*Present yourself.*"

With a slight wobble of her lip (*pathetic*), the girl stands at attention. Sue gives her a contemptuous sneer, raises her hand and flicks her wrist at the girl, resulting in a conical burst of fire which nearly causes Quinn to wince in sympathy. The flames engulf Emily's head for a second before Sue flicks her wrist again, extinguishing them. When the fire has cleared, the girl's skin is reddened (only very mildly burned), and worse—her hair and eyebrows are completely gone. She is as bald as a newborn skunkmole.

"Becky!" Sue shouts. "Fetch me some ashes."

The small girl quickly scampers over to Sue, holding a bucket filled with fine, grey dust. Sue thrusts the bucket into Snaggletooth's arms. "These represent your *failure*. Take them back to your room, spread them on your bed, and wallow in them for the rest of the day. And *never* come into my gym late again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Shifu," the girl sniffles.

"Get out of my sight."

Emily can't escape fast enough. Quinn scoffs—not visibly, of course, but mentally. That girl will never be Captain material. Even when Quinn had her own hair burnt off, she faced her Shifu and did not flinch. Not a single tear came from her eyes, and her expression was as blank and featureless as unused canvas. Sue regarded her carefully in the aftermath, and that was the first time Quinn saw something other than disdain on her face.

She approved.

From that point on, she has been Lady Sylvester's favorite. And not merely for her lack of emotion or killer good looks.

"Let that be an example for everyone; that is the face of failure. Quinn! Show them the face of success."

But because she is *damn good* at what she does. The Captain moves in front of her line, a decent distance away. "CHI-RYUS," she shouts. "FOLLOW MY LEAD. STANCES!" she says, crouching into a low stance. The girls follow suit. "READY?" she asks.

"READY!" they echo.

"BEGIN!"

The Royal Guards open the doors just in time for Blaine to sweep into the room with fantastic aplomb, straightening the lapels on his practice robes with a bright grin on his face and a skip in his step. The Fire Lord is taken aback.

"My word," he says, covering his eyes. "Blaine, what's gotten into you? You're competing with the Sun as the brightest thing in the world this morning."

The young Prince has a well-rehearsed shrug of nonchalance at the ready. "I'm just… happy," he says.
"Oh?" the Fire Lord asks. "If this is happy, then what are you usually?"

Blaine raises his eyebrows in thought. "Maybe... satisfied?" he tries.

"I see," is the response. "And what under heaven might have brought about this change?"

The Prince seems caught off guard only for a second. It's more than long enough to make him wonder. "It's a beautiful day. Why shouldn't I be happy?"

"Well, I can think of a few suitably depressing matters, but far be it from me to rain on your bonfire," Lord Anderson replies carefully, before adding... "So, clear skies and bright sunshine is all it takes to get you in such a mood? Perhaps I should gift you with even more responsibility. You could be Fire Lord of the Morning. All matters concerning the Nation before noon would fall to you, while I stayed cozy in bed for a few more hours. It would be a great boon for productivity for the both of us."

Blaine chuckles, but it is a reluctant laugh, nervous, as though it reached the tip of his tongue before getting nervous and turning back, only to be pushed over the edge regardless. "Well, as long as you wouldn't mind me waking you up to ask questions every five minutes..." His hands are clasped, and his fingers inch toward his sleeves before he stills them. A sure sign of nerves.

"Blaine," Lord Anderson asks gently. "Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

He watches as his son takes a moment to close his eyes and breathe, in through the nose, and out through the mouth just like he was taught. "No," Blaine says. The Fire Lord barely has a moment to register his disappointment before Blaine adds. "But... there is something I would like to show you."

"Oh?" He says it carefully.

"Yes," Blaine says, nodding more to himself than to his father. "Not now, obviously. We have our session, and you have a lot of work to do, but... soon."

The boy has a point, so there is nothing to be done but accept it. "Very well," Lord Anderson says agreeably, before moving the subject forward. "I assume that means Wesley and David have already informed you I will be spending most of the day with Admiral Keros, mapping the course for ending the quarantine. I'd apologize for having wakened you so early, but you don't seem bothered.

"I was already awake, actually," Blaine says, with a small smile. "Practicing my meditation."

"Achieve enlightenment?" the Fire Lord asks.

"So close," Blaine sighs. "Alas, a beetlefly chose that moment to try and fly up my nose. I'll just have to try again tomorrow."

"Curse those beetleflies," the Fire Lord sighs. "I shall have to get you a net to keep them out. In the meantime, we'll proceed with your lesson as planned. Ready?"

Blaine responds by adopting his stance.

"Good," his Father smiles. "Let's begin."

Kurt doesn't even know where to begin. He's pretty sure he remembers the basic strike Blaine
taught him, but just as before, all his efforts thusfar have produced little more than body odor and frustration.


The feeling he got before, like something sparked and ignited his internal timbers, is nowhere to be found. There is some warmth in his chest, but he's pretty sure that's only his mounting rage starting to get the best of him. His heart rate is steadily going up, his breathing is more or less shot to Hell at this point, but he absolutely refuses to give up. He did it before, he will do it again.

"I just want some fire," he breathes, continuing to strike. "That's all. Is that," strike, "so much to ask?"

Punch.

"I just,"

Strike.

"Want,"

Thrust.

"Some stupid,"

Punch.

"FIRE!"

FWOOOOOSH.

Well, his dad has always said that Kurt gets what he wants. Of course, he also used to tell him 'be careful what you wish for.' Both apply pretty well here.

His final strike produces a positively breathtaking blast of brilliant orange flame. Kurt is so taken aback that he gasps in shock, which is apparently precisely the wrong thing to do at that moment, because the flame suddenly increases its intensity twofold, blooming outward and forward from his palm until Kurt finally regains the presence of mind to stop the blast, flicking the remaining fire to the ground. On the one hand—bully for him, he made fire. On the other… he unexpectedly made quite a lot of it.

Perhaps too much.

"Oh, fishfuckers," he curses. In front of him, several trees are burning quite brilliantly already, with the fire steadily spreading to the surrounding patch of forest. It's been a solid two weeks since Kurt has seen any rain, so it's only a matter of time before the blaze spreads to the rest of the forest. How have these people not burned down their entire country yet?

He needs to put this out. He needs water, but there's none in the immediate area, the pitiful amount he keeps in his waterskin isn't going to make a drop of difference in this bucket of clusterfuck, and the amount of moisture in the air is already rapidly decreasing thanks to the heat from the fire. It occurs to him that Firebenders probably have some means of extinguishing flames as well as igniting them, but fuck if Kurt has any idea what that involves. He has only one other option… Mercedes usually puts out their campfires by burying them.
"Dirt. I need dirt."

It's pretty much everywhere underneath his feet, but he needs a large amount and it needs to go on the fire, preferably from the top down.

The cliff!

Running up to the wall of rock, Kurt squares his stance, digs his toes into the ground, and slams his fist into the wall. A line of force travels upwards from his hand, carving up the cliff in a zigzag until it reaches the desired height, where it abruptly detonates and triggers a rather dusty avalanche. The force of the bending propels huge clumps of dirt and rock outwards, showering the fire in nice, non-combustible soil and stone.

Of course, by extension, this showers Kurt in the same, but it's a small price to pay to prevent a full-blown forest fire.

Coughing from all the dirt and ash in the air, it takes a few seconds for the dust to clear enough for Kurt to survey the damage. Though there is a glowing ember or two still visible, the open flames were largely extinguished in the rockslide. Unfortunately, most of the trees in the immediate area were just as violently flattened. That will take a while to clean up.

Still, all-in-all, it could have gone worse. As it is, Kurt is basically whole, if profoundly filthy (again). All he has to do now is figure out how to wash the smell out of his clothes. Sod, pine, and smoke do not mix well, and to top it all off, Kurt is now catching a little whiff of burning…hair.

With the speed of a startled jackalope, Kurt dives to the ground, scoops up two handfuls of dirt and dumps them on his head. This will be an absolute nightmare to fix, and on top of it all, he's just come to a stunning realization:

All of this could have been avoided if he had just pointed himself at the fucking rocks.

"AIM!" Quinn shouts.

The girls turn their aim to the stone wall on the opposite side of the gym, where a series of wooden training dummies pops out of the ground to greet them.

"FIREBALLS!" the blonde bombshell commands.

The line of Chi-Ryus release explosive bursts of flame in perfect unison with Quinn. The targets on the far edge of the gym are decimated, and thanks to the severely underpaid workers Lady Sylvester kidnapped and keeps in the basement, new dummies rise up to take their place almost immediately.

"STREAM!" she shouts.

Long bands of flame extend from the assembled girls' hands and outstretched feet, setting the new dummies alight.

"SLICE!" she orders.

Again, in the exact pace Quinn is keeping, the Chi-Ryu warriors slice their fingers in vertical arcs, sending thin crescents of flame at the dummies, neatly slicing them down the middle.
"FORMATION HACHI!" she shouts.

With precision which can only be brought on by months of rehearsals, the girls gather into groups of four. Three gather around the center girl in a T formation, lifting her up and tossing her into the air, where she rains a punishing barrage of fireballs down on the wooden targets before landing gracefully.

"FORMATION KYU!" she commands.

This time, the girls form into two lines, one behind the other. The lines shift back and forth as the girls flip from side to side- the ones in the back shooting fireballs from their feet in the gaps between the girls in the front, who are shooting fireballs from their hands. The barrage is perfectly rhythmic and aimed to kill. The dummies don't stand a chance.

"FORMATION JUICHI!" the Chi-Ryu Captain bellows.

The girls form lines of five, jumping into the air in perfectly timed split kicks, launching diagonal fireballs from each foot. This formation is always one of the hardest to aim, but this is Lady Sylvester's Elite Squad. Not a dummy is left standing at the end.

"FORMATION NIJU!"

At this, the girls form diagonal lines at opposite ends of the gym. In seemingly erratic—but in fact perfectly calculated—pairs, they begin to flip and somersault across the floor, trading places with each other in each line and throwing arcing firebombs into the air with each flip. The targets are decimated. Finally, a single large, square target appears at the end of the gym.

"FINISH IT!" she commands.

The girls form a standing square of their own, forming extremely close lines behind one another. The front row sits, the next row kneels, the third row crouches, and the last row stands. With loud battlecries of "GO, FIGHT, IGNITE!" they launch perfectly formed bursts of flame at the target from various combinations of girls, resulting in giant, flaming letters and characters flying across the gym, smashing into the target and carving the name of the academy into the stone. The final burst comes from all of them, and shatters the target utterly in an amazing explosion.

The Lady takes a second to survey the damage. "Mediocre!" she shouts. "Hit the showers!"

Quinn allows herself a small smile. That's as close to giving actual compliments as the Lady gets. Which can only mean that she finally thinks they are ready to carry out her master plan. The smile grows wider when Quinn realizes that she agrees with her teacher. Never has a force of Firebenders been so perfectly trained and utterly unified.

The flaming rubble in the gym is testament to that.

The target explodes from dead center, Blaine's attack having impacted it perfectly. Only a small amount of burning debris litters floor of the stone-walled training room, which he extinguishes with a casual huff of air from his nose.

"Excellent," the Fire Lord smiles. "I think you've got it."

"Well, what can I say?" the Prince regards him with a casual air of 'look at me, I'm amazing.' "I'm a natural-born performer."
Under normal circumstances, such a statement would call for a fond eye roll, but this particular morning, Blaine really does deserve to revel in a bit of smug self-satisfaction. He learned the maneuver after barely fifteen minutes of practice runs, pulling it off near-flawlessly. Still… there’s no need to let that slide by him completely. "Alright, performer. If you're such a showman, I demand a show."

Blaine's eyebrows reach for the sky. "O…kay? What kind of show?"

The Fire Lord approaches his son with arms crossed. "Hmmm… let me think of something good. Ah, I've got it! I want you to run through all of your katas…"

"Pffft, easy…" he grins.

"…blindfolded."

"…oh." And the grin drops like a drunken monkey trying to climb down from a tree (something he had the distinct pleasure of witnessing once; Councilor Ganterson is an odd fellow).

The Fire Lord hands him a strip of cloth, which Blaine accepts smoothly, tying it over his eyes with smooth, confident motions even as his face betrays his nerves. It's this simple action that makes him confident that this is something Blaine can handle.

"Ummm… dad, are you sure…" the Prince says as his father gently guides him to the center of the room and points him towards the wall perpendicular to his intended viewpoint.

"Relax, my son," he says easily. "Put your mind at ease, and let your limbs remember the dance on their own."

"Okay." Blaine takes a breath to calm himself as his father gets into position to watch. "Here goes…" he says, and he begins.

It's practically poetic.

From the first moment, Blaine's movements are sure and swift. Each kata links naturally and easily to the next—a swift strike, a flurry of punches, a sweeping kick, and onwards, the maneuvers growing more and more complicated as he continues. Blaine executes them easily, and the slow smile that blooms on his face as he realizes his success is the very dawn to a proud father. Flame comes from the boy in bursts, in orbs, in streams, in waves and arcs and even rings, burning stronger and surer as he continues. The pace increases of its own volition as Blaine continues to gain confidence, and soon he is onto the more complex maneuvers, launching pinwheels of flame which curve in mid-flight, creating and maintaining brilliant, fiery whips of pure combustive force which lash at unseen targets. By the time he enters into a series of leaping and flipping kicks, the room is already bathed in a gentle orange glow.

Which makes it that much easier to see when Blaine kicks, and suddenly—

Agni's tits.

"Stop!" shouts the Fire Lord, realizing his mistake all too late as his outburst startles Blaine in mid-air, resulting in a rather painful-looking face fault on the floor.

"What?" Blaine says, sounding slightly panicked as he picks himself up and pulls off the blindfold. "What happened?"

You idiot! Lord Anderson chides himself for his stupidity. He's probably just ruined the chances of
reproducing very thing that so startled him—the exact thing he wanted to see again. There is always the chance, however... "Run through that last sequence again for me," he says.

Blaine looks at him oddly, but does as is asked. Unfortunately, this simply proves his theory correct—the moves happen slower, and the fire burns normally. Blaine is convinced he made a mistake.

"That's enough," the Fire Lord says.

"What did I do wrong?" Blaine asks, looking more than a little crestfallen. He curses himself for putting that miserable look on the face of his own boy, especially considering how bright and happy he was when they began.

"You did nothing wrong, Blaine," the Fire Lord says. "Your performance was absolutely splendid, I just... I thought I saw something, that's all."

"Oh," Blaine says, and the disappointment drains from his eyes. "So... I was really doing well?"

He places an arm around his boy, squeezing his shoulder as the two of them head towards the exit. "You were magnificent," the Fire Lord says, meaning every word of it. And though he wishes he could tell him more, something makes him feel as though drawing attention to it might throw off the boy's progress rather than help it along. For now, he'll remain silent on the matter.

But just for now. There is only so much paternal pride a man can hold before he bursts into a steaming geyser of praise. As much as he knows it annoys the Councilors, (and as much as it annoys him when the Councilors do it) there is just something instinctually satisfying about bragging to others about the accomplishments of your children.

And if he saw what he thinks he saw... well, he can't wait until the day he can attend one of Lady Keros's agonizing socials and inform all present that he might well have raised a genuine Firebending prodigy...

Mercedes opens the door to find a filthy, muddy, panting, slightly singed and completely done Kurt Hummel standing on the other side. Clumps of dirt hang loosely in his hair (which is arranged in kind of a strange shape). Grass is stuck to his clothes and skin at various places, along with twigs, leaves, and a couple of small rocks.

"What the Hills happened to you?" she inquires.

Kurt turns a cutting glare on her. If you really could glare daggers at someone, she'd be pinned to the wall right about now. "I don't," he grunts, "want to talk about it."

What Kurt wants, Kurt gets, generally speaking, and it looks like the poor guy could use a break. She steps aside to let him pass, deciding she'll squeeze the story out of him later.

"Whoa!" Artie says from his (is that new?) wheelchair. "Damn, dude. Did you and my baby girl get into a fight over me? 'Cause I've gotta tell you, that's a losing battle, my man. She is the only one for me, though if I did swing that way, you would be the first—"

He doesn't finish, as Kurt flips his chair over with one hand as he passes. He is in no mood.

His stomps up the steps are almost as noisy as Finn's elephino feet. So of course, it only makes sense for him to run into the extra-long gorilla goat himself. "Whoa, dude," he says, shocked, worried, and far too curious. "Did you sleep outside? I know Artie's been trying to get you to try it,
but I've gotta say, it's not that great, 'cause of… you know…" he gestures to Kurt, "all this. Plus there are bugs, and…"

Kurt doesn't hear the rest of what he says, as he stomps into the washroom and slams the door, a surefire cue for Finn to abandon any attempts at conversing with him for at least a few more hours.

Once inside, he thanks the spirits for the Wang family opulence, as theirs is a house with running water and a damn fine bathtub. He soaks himself for hours, not even bothering to care when he starts to get all pruny. When he is done with that, he spends the rest of the day attempting to find a way to comb his hair to hide the tiny bald spot that serves as the day's most egregious wound. It is yet more hours before he finally accepts that he is just going to have to comb over it as best he can and maybe hope that the Wangs have some semi-fashionable hats he can work into his outfit for tomorrow.

The sun is setting by the time he emerges from the washroom. He doesn't even bother eating before flopping down on the bed. For a number of reasons, both good and bad, Kurt has never wanted a day to be over so badly in his life.

His eyes stare out the window into the orange horizon, the last sight he sees before he finally drifts off.

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The sun is low on the horizon when he reaches the hilltop. Grinning to himself, the boy sets his bag on the ground and begins to unpack the contents. He can't believe his good fortune—he's a whole day ahead of schedule, which means he'll have more than enough time to set up his telescope and all his instruments before the time comes to use them—a real rarity for him as of late.

Staring out at the sky over the Capital City, the young astronomer lets out a small sigh at how amazing the sunset looks. When the hazy orange finally fades into purples and pinks, he breaks his reverie and resumes the work of assembling his telescope, smiling all the while, practically giddy with anticipation.

It only took him three days to get here, and it was worth every minute. Tomorrow night is going to be one spectacular show…

-END OF DAY 3-
Reunion

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 11/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: Cursing, innuendo.
Word Count: 5558
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

Author's Note: Here it is, everyone! The night of nights. A happy, fluffy Klaine reunion… followed by a series of plot developments and actions sequences and me being mean to everyone. Especially Blaine. Remember what Darren Criss said about introducing a character as seemingly perfect? Well, ladies and gents, it's time for the fall of the king. And he is going to fall hard. :) Hope you enjoy!

CHAPTER 11
-
Reunion

"So, when do we get to meet her?" David says out of the blue, clearly trying to throw off his concentration. The three of them are in the courtyard, playing a rather ill-advised game of three-man fire juggling. Starting with one fireball, they bend the ball around between them, periodically adding more fireballs to the mix until one of them fumbles and gets blown up.

Hey, it's Firebending. Getting singed and/or exploded pretty much comes with the territory.

"What are you talking about?" Blaine says, guiding the fire around his back and passing it to Wes.

"The girl you are so blatantly pining for," Wes says, spinning the flame around his arm before tossing it to David.
"The one you're in love with," David adds, trying to catch him off guard by passing the flame as fast as he can.

"I'm in love?" Blaine asks with a grin. "Awesome! Tell me more." He slings the flame at Wes, who catches it easily and conjures up a second fireball.

"Don't play dumb with us," Wes says, juggling the small sunbursts. "Excellent as you are at that particular emotion..." He arcs both balls to David, who uses some impressive handwork to orbit them around his head.

"You increase the frequency of your midnight escapades threefold, you walk around with this little smile on your face like someone spiked your tea with Si Wong Cactus Juice, and you dance when you think no one is watching," David easily lists off the rather damning evidence against him, before puffing up his cheeks and blowing the fireballs at Blaine.

Feeling a little cocky, Blaine loops one around his arm and another around his foot, utter nonchalance seared onto his face as he twirls the bright, burning orbs. "Guys, I swear, I am just as lost on this subject as you are. You'll meet this mystery girl as soon as I do. I can't wait—she must be amazing for me to fall for her so quickly," he says, passing his foot-fire up to his arm before taking a deep breath, and breathing a third fireball into the mix. "I hope she likes me."

When Wes's face goes slack-jawed, he takes the opportunity to pass all three flames at him. To Wes's credit, he recovers admirably and only has to lean back a little to keep himself from dropping them or setting himself alight. "When did you learn to do that?" Wes asks, annoyed.

"Dad taught me yesterday," Blaine replies.

Wes shares a significant glance with David, before conjuring a fourth fireball. "Look, Blaine, I know we tease you about a lot of things, and not without merit, but if you've met someone..."

He passes two of the balls to David, who begins juggling them himself. "We just want to make sure you're keeping decent company."

"Mostly we want to make sure she isn't going to abduct you and hold you for ransom," Wes adds.

"Or worse," David continues, "convince you to elope."

In somewhat of a scary moment of synchronization, they each add a fireball to their mix and toss all six of them at Blaine at the same time. The Fire Prince responds by catching and bending them in horizontal orbit around himself, making him look like an inverse solar system—a big planet orbited by several small suns.

"Okay, I'll admit," he says, "I have met someone. But we're not dating. I can't really tell you any more than that. Just... you know what? You'll meet him soon enough."

Of all the reactions Blaine expected to that statement, a fist-pump from Wes was not one of them. "I knew it! It's a guy! David, you owe me ten silver pieces."

"Damn it," David growls.

"...what are you guys talking about?" Blaine asks, still swinging the fire in circles.

David continues to pout. "Wes said it was a guy, and not a girl. He thinks you had the biggest crush on that boy who runs the aviar—"
He abruptly cuts himself off as he notices Blaine's shocked expression, but it's too late—the Fire Prince's lapse in concentration causes all the objects in his orbit to spiral off in random directions. Wes throws himself to the ground just in time to avoid losing his eyebrows. The three boys wince in unison as the projectiles impact various objects and detonate. Not enough to cause any serious damage, but definitely enough to piss off a lot of people depending on where those landed.

"...we have to find a better place to practice this," Wes sighs.

The master bedroom looks like the victim of a rogue closet bomber. Every surface is covered in pants, robes, tunics, shirts, vests, belts, sashes, scarves, and even hats. "Kurt," Mercedes says. "Honey, what did that closet ever do to you?"

"It stole my sense of style!" Kurt replies from within as several more articles of clothing fly gracefully from the opened doorway.

"I don't think you're gonna find it in there," she comments easily. "Probably flew out along with the... girdle?" Mercedes says, a little baffled by the strange item hanging off one of the bedposts.

"OH MY LA," Kurt shouts, rushing out of the closet. "That's exactly what I've been looking for!"

The Earthbender can't muster up more than a quirked eyebrow in response to that.

"Now, I just need to find that purple feather boa I tossed out... I threw it pretty hard, but it's not terribly aerodynamic, so it probably—"

"INTERVENTION," Mercedes declares, dragging him out of the room by the back of his collar.

"What," Kurt asks, "am I doing that requires intervening, exactly?"

"Kurt, honey, I know you worship at the shrine of Avatar Gaga and all, but seriously—you're supposed to be trying to blend, boo. Feathers, fabulous as you might look in them, is a shortcut to all the negative attention you could ever want from these people."

Kurt sighs. "I know, I just... I want to wear something that... you know, highlights me. I don't want Blaine to think I'm drab, or dull, or uninteresting, or—"

"He doesn't think any of that," Mercedes says. "And if he does, he's blind as a wolfbat and doesn't deserve your time anyway, do you understand?"

The Avatar takes moment to calm his proverbial tits, before nodding. "Okay. Yes, I understand." He waits a second before adding. "I'm... not sure I can trust my own fashion sense right now. But I will jump naked into polar waters before I allow someone else to dress me... could you maybe just... give me some advice?" he finishes sheepishly.

She takes a quick look at him. "I'd go for sleek. Something smooth and just tight enough to emphasize your curves. 'Cause sweetie, you have some fly curves."

"Sleek, and strong," Kurt says, nodding. "Like a tigerseal." He tries an experimental growl. "Rrrrrrawr," he growls, clawing at Mercedes in a way that seems less tiger and more playful kitten.

"You're gonna eat that boy alive," she smiles. "Now go put your stripes on."

Kurt answers with an excited hug and a quick kiss on the cheek, before dashing back into the room to change.
When he emerges, he is wearing a sharp red-and-gold ensemble that is surprisingly form-fitting, even if it doesn't seem that way at first glance. It's not too attention-grabbing for those at a distance, but once you're close enough, you see it much more clearly, and... well, what has been seen cannot be unseen.

"Now you're making me all hot-and-bothered," she teases.

"Mercedes, you are the absolute best. You are a diamond among coals," the Avatar whispers in her ear as he grabs her in a hug. "Okay," he breathes as he breaks away, taking a second to gather up some spare breaths to make up for all the ones Blaine is inevitably going to take away. "Wish me lu—"

A cacophony of smashing, scraping, breaking, and scrambling suddenly echoes up from downstairs. "It wasn't us!" Finn says, immediately defusing all suspicion with his mad denial skills.

"I'll give you something better than luck," Mercedes says. "I'll drag blockhead and gravelbutt out of the house and make sure you and His Royal Hotness have plenty of alone time. Get that slow burn," she adds with a wink.

"May La and Tui bless you and shower you with delicious seafood forever," Kurt exhales with wide, grateful eyes. "Alright... I'm going."

"Knock him dead, boo," Mercedes smiles.

"Blaine, I just don't understand it," David sighs. After cleaning up the minor shit-fire they started, it was close to go time, so the three of them have retired to Blaine's room so the Prince can prepare to part.

"What, that I like guys?" the Prince asks pointedly.

"No, that you fell for the bird guy of all people!" David is indignant.

Blaine's blush comes too hot and fast for him to hide completely. "It was just a crush. He had... interesting hair."

"Interesting? Interesting! A baboon-boar's butt is interesting, but that doesn't mean I want to put my lips on it," David scoffs.

Meanwhile, Wes is sitting to the side, grinning like he won the lottery, and the prize was his own island populated entirely by sex-starved warrior women. "David is just jealous."

"I am not," he says in a pout so obvious, his envy could be seen from a mountaintop.

"You are! Your entire reasoning behind your ridiculous idea that Blaine couldn't like boys was that he had never had a crush on you. You wounded his ego, Blaine."

"Awww, David. Don't feel bad. I totally love you... just, in a..." Blaine pauses in the process of getting dressed to search for a good way to put this. "...vertical manner."

"Vertical?" David asks.

"As opposed to horizontal," Wes clarifies lasciviously.
"Well, *there's* a mental image I will spend the night diligently scrubbing away," David shudders.

"I mean it. You guys are like… my big brothers," he says, charm smile set to full blast.

"And you are the annoying little brother we cannot legally give up for adoption," Wes says fondly. "Blaine, I don't care who you like…"

"I question your taste. Loudly," David interjects.

"…but I maintain an *extravagant* amount of concern for mine and David's personal safety should your father ever learn about this."

Having finished dressing in his casual 'civilian' clothes, Blaine pops out of the closet and regards his two best friends carefully. "Guys, I'm telling you right now—if tonight goes the way I plan, we will never have to do this again."

Wes and David look like they've just seen a pack of lion squirrels tearing apart a beloved family pet. "Oh no," Wes gulps.

"He has a **plan**," David says, looking halfway between barfing and fleeing (and quite likely to attempt both at once, overachiever that he is).

"You laugh," Blaine says, jutting a finger at them as he heads toward the window. "But just you wait…"

He skitters up the wall, taking a moment to pose dramatically in the window before leaping out into the evening light. "Tonight is going to be **spectacular**."

He exits the same way, every time. There's a specific section of the outer wall that encloses the Palace grounds that drops into a small patch of land with a few trees on the edge of a small lake. The Prince thinks that if he times it right, no one will notice him drop from the high wall and land easily in the tree.

He is wrong.

Santana's smirk as she watches him slide to the ground could make a man's heart burst out of his chest and run away screaming. The messenger hawk she rented already has her pre-written message in its claws, so all she has to do is open the door to its cage. "Go. Lady Sue Sylvester, Chi-Ryu Academy."

With that, she turns to her snoozing roommate, rolls her eyes, pulls out her whip and lashes it so that it snaps right next to his head.

The sound Puck makes upon being woken up fits squarely in the area between a **squeal** and a **yelp**.

"Wake up," Santana orders. "We've got a Royal Brat to bust open, and we need to keep track of him."

"I'm up," Puck grunts. "'bout time I got some action. The Hills know I'm not getting any from you."

The dark-haired girl rolls her eyes. They can't strike until they get the word, but she has no doubt it'll be coming soon. It won't be long before the bird arrives in the Lady's office with the message that will tip the first domino.
The fairy has flown.

The rapidly fading sunlight is totally throwing off his color scheme. There is only so much orange light can do for someone. Kurt is doing his level best to rock the look, making up for the unflattering lighting by taking on a bad-boy slouch underneath an awning, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms. It's intended to say 'don't mess with me,' but it really comes across more as 'pouting because I've been stood up.' Which is ridiculous. He knows Blaine can't sneak out until sunset at the earliest, and it probably takes him a while to walk here. There is no reason for him to feel so put out.

It's just…

The longer he stands here waiting, the longer he is alone with his thoughts. And his thoughts, apparently, have every intention of sabotaging the evening in a variety of colorful and painful ways before it even begins. What if he says something stupid? What if he starts choking on a breadstick and accidentally spits food in Blaine's face? What if he loses control during their training and accidentally burns all of Blaine's hair off? What if Blaine trips and falls during his crazy rooftop antics and breaks his neck and dies before he even gets here?

"...I'm telling you, any minute now, the Fire Lord is going to start rounding us up to be judged. I can just feel it!"

"It's all over the city. The Avatar has come to judge us, and the Fire Lord is helping him…"

…what if he is outed as the Avatar?

The tension in the air is thick enough to gag on. Everywhere he looks, the people seem on-edge and suspicious, jittery and nervous, irritable and snappish. Not unlike himself before a date, really. Not-date. Whatever.

His thoughts come to a screeching halt when he feels a warm shoulder press into his own. He knows who it is without even looking, but look he does—and like the shadows faced with the sunrise, all of Kurt's dark thoughts melt away and vanish to the other side of the world.

"Hey," Blaine says.

"Hey yourself," Kurt replies.

And when Blaine smiles at him, all he can think is that the wait was worth it. Nothing in the world could darken his day now.

"...so David has to cram himself inside the oven before the head chef gets back there, and firebend through the eye of the stove so he would think that Reggie had been cooking the entire time."

Kurt can't help but chuckle a little. "Ah, the perils of workplace love affairs."

The Prince's grin turns sly. "Yeah, making out with kitchen girls is a favorite pastime of his. But he was just expecting a quick check-up to make sure everything was okay. He wasn't expecting the chef to stay and have an extended conversation with Reggie about how he could improve his Ash Banana Soufflé. David had to keep that firestream going for ten minutes. He was drenched in sweat by the time the guy left, and I'm told the oven still has a faint musky odor to it once you get it going."
He has to concentrate very hard to keep from shooting tea out of his nose when he laughs. "The things we do for love…"

"Or lust," Blaine adds.

As he starts coughing from the liquid going down the wrong pipe, it occurs to him that drinking never used to be this hard. Blaine makes him stupid.

"Are you okay?" he asks, eyebrows curved in concern.

"I'll—" he sputters, "—be fine."

"Here, let me help," Blaine says, scooting around the table to pat Kurt on the back, which just makes him cough harder. *You and your touching*, Kurt thinks. Honestly, he goes for years where people seem afraid to lay a hand on him and all of a sudden, here's this guy who acts like he will shrivel up and turn to dust if he isn't in physical contact with Kurt at least once a minute. The mind, it boggles.

"Do you need some water?" he asks. "I'll get the waitress." His hand shoots up, and he politely requests, "Excuse me, is Jen available? My friend here needs some—"

"OZARK!" a thick, merry voice shouts from nearby.

Blaine's eyes bulge so wide that Kurt kind of wants to tilt his head back so they don't roll out of his skull. "Oh, crap," he whispers.

Before Kurt has even the tiniest chance to ask him what's going on, a stout, bulbous man appears next to their table, sporting a pair of round glasses, a wooden cane, and an impressive grey mustache that looks like it could lift you bodily off the ground should the need arise. "I thought I recognized that voice…" the man says. "Is that you, Ozark?"

"Hey, Barry!" Blaine says with a smile that is only slightly fearful. "Long-time, no see!"

"I'll say!" Barry chuckles. "I'd ask where you've been, but I can see you've been spending your time wisely," he says, with a rather obnoxious wink. "And who is this lovely young lady?"

Now it's Kurt's eyes that are perilously close to dropping into his tea. "Excuse me," he starts to say, but Blaine jumps in before he can finish.

"This is my friend… ummm… Truk!" he says, his eyes begging Kurt to go along with the charade. The glare Kurt turns on him could strip the finish off genuine Earth Kingdom woodwork.

"…pleased to make your acquaintance," Kurt seethes gently, offering him a hand to shake. Words cannot encapsulate his disgust when the man raises his hand to his lips and *kisses* it. Ewww, eww, eww.

"The pleasure is all mine, miss," Barry says, a giant grin on his face. *If only you knew*, Kurt desperately wishes to say.

"Barry is a friend of mine," Blaine says, using those expressive eyebrows to apologize to Kurt.

"I was down by the docks one day, carrying boxes into my shop, almost knocked the boy into the sea," Barry chuckles.

Blaine waves a hand in front of his eyes and mouths 'Blind as a badgermole.'
Oh, Kurt thinks. Well, that makes the gender confusion… slightly less offensive.

"And what does this kid do?" Barry asks. "Why, he offers to help me carry 'em! Helped me move a whole boatload. I tell you, Ozie, they don't make kids like you anymore. You're a good one, m'boy."

Blaine's smile is genuine, and Kurt warms to Barry ever-so-slightly. "He actually paid me for the help," Blaine says.

"And I've still got plenty of work for you, if you ever need a silver piece or two. Maybe to buy a gift for this pretty young thing," the large man adds with a wink.

Blaine activates his polite smile (though Kurt doesn't really see the point, as the man can't see it) and gently changes the subject. "So, what brings you to this neck of the woods, Barry? We're a long way from the harbor."

"Haven't you heard," the man leans in. "There's trouble brewing 'round here. **Big** trouble."

Blaine looks a little taken aback, so Kurt jumps in for him. "What kind of trouble?"

"The **sickness** is coming," the pudgy man says, sounding rightfully afraid. "Word on the street is the Fire Lord invited that damned Avatar to the city, gave him a nice house and everything. He's gonna let that bastard infect us all, so that only the **worthy** can survive." He spits. "Who does he think he is that he gets to decide whose worthy?"

The Prince sends another apologetic glance to Kurt, looking a little stunned himself. "Surely you don't believe that," he says. "That doesn't sound like the Fire Lord. And why would the Avatar be spreading a disease?"

Barry shrugs. "They're saying it all over," the man says. "There've been outbreaks of the sickness all over the Earth Kingdom since the Avatar showed up. And as for the Fire Lord… well, he always did seem a little off-his-rocker after his lady died. Hasn't been seen outside the Palace in years. They say he's been fortifying his defenses, so none of the sickies can get to him once it starts."

Blaine's face looks like he just watched the man step on a puppy and only stop to wipe its brains off his shoe. He seems so shocked and hurt that Kurt's hand reaches out to grab his before his brain even realizes it wants to. "Who… who is saying all this?" Blaine barely manages to ask.

"Lots of people," Barry says easily. "It's all over town. Now, usually, I wouldn't put much stock in lady gossip, but… I've got this feeling in my bones," he says, holding a hand to his chest. "It's been getting worse and worse lately… something bad is on the horizon, and I don't want to be caught off guard." His voice lowers to barely a murmur, and he leans in. "Me and a few other fellows are having a meeting about our course of action. You're welcome to join if you want. We could use a strong lad like yourself."

Blaine is so flabbergasted that he can't seem to form words. The way his mouth moves with no sound coming out reminds Kurt of a fish out of water.

"We have plans for the evening," Kurt says pointedly. "Tonight is a very special night for us, right?" he says, elbowing Blaine in the ribs.

"R…right," Blaine agrees. "Sorry, Barry, not right now."

"Ah, don't worry about it, lad," Barry says agreeably. "'twas my mistake to try and drag you into
this miserable business. You're young and in love; you shouldn't have to worry about nonsense like this. Miss Truk," Barry says, "I apologize for trying to steal this fine young gentleman from your company."

"It's quite alright," Kurt says, primly. "But we really must be going now," he continues as he rises, grabbing Blaine by the hand and pulling him up.

"Ah, puppy love," Barry sighs. "It warms an old man's heart. Whatever comes or doesn't come, I pray to Agni it passes over your heads while you sleep and don't disturb you one bit. Ozark, Miss Truk, you kids have a wonderful night."

"See you, Barry," Blaine says, having regained the use of his voice.

"Wonderful to meet you," Kurt says, even though it definitely wasn't. With that, he ushers the both of them out of the restaurant as quickly as he can without drawing attention. Outside, the sun has fully set, leaving just a little bit of pink and purple on the horizon. Kurt wraps an arm around Blaine, who still seems a little stunned and unstable.

After getting a decent distance away from Breadsticks, Kurt breaks physical contact to look at Blaine directly. "Are you okay?"

The Prince takes a breath in an attempt to gather some composure from the night air. "Yeah," he says. "I'm just… surprised. I didn't know people felt that way about my father."

"They're just rumors," Kurt says, trying for a reassuring smile. "They don't mean anything. Soon enough, they'll be proven false, and people will forget all about them and move onto something else crazy and equally unbelievable."

"I suppose you would know about dealing with hurtful rumors," Blaine says as his sad eyes seem a little more at ease. "Maybe… maybe we can do something about it."

"Like what?" Kurt asks.

Blaine steps towards Kurt, grabbing his hands. "I want you to meet my father."

The Avatar's eyebrows clutch their metaphorical pearls. "…really? I mean… are you…"

"I've been thinking about it for a few days," Blaine says, "and I really think he could help you. Actually meeting you in the flesh, the actual Avatar, I know he'll see past all the lies people say about you." He grins. "Plus, I think he's less likely to kill me if you're in the room when he finds out what I've been doing at night."

"You're confessing to that, too?" Kurt says, a little shocked, and a little flattered.

"It's going to be kind of hard explaining how I met you otherwise," the Prince says with a sly smile. "My father has invested a lot of trust in me lately, and I think it's time I return the favor. No more lying or sneaking out."

"Wow," Kurt says. "I'm impressed. It takes quite a bit of courage to just… come out like that."

"Well," Blaine says. "What can I say? You make me feel brave."

"Why?" the Avatar asks.

Blaine's hazel eyes lock with his own. "I believe in you, Kurt," he says. "I believe you can save the
"I'd love to meet your father."

"We can do it tomorrow," Blaine says. "Just come to the Palace. Some friends of mine will be expecting you."

"Why not tonight?" Kurt says, arcing an eyebrow.

A gesture which Blaine responds to by *wiggling* his own. "You said it yourself: tonight's a special night for us." With that, he starts walking again, and Kurt takes a moment to catch his breath before catching up.

"Sorry about Barry," Blaine says as they continue along the path out of town.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Kurt says. "I've had people with eyes make that mistake before. It's nothing new. I'm just wondering…"

"What?" Blaine asks.

"Ozark?" Kurt queries.

The Prince gives a wince. "It was… kind of a spur of the moment improvisation at the time. I couldn't go around using my real name, so I came up with an alias. Everyone in town who knows me, knows me as Ozark."

Kurt ponders this for a minute. "Kind of an odd name," he decides aloud, "but I suppose it works. Much better than *Truk*," he adds.

Blaine winces even further. "I'm really sorry about that. I was really caught off-guard. Your name backwards was the first thing I could think of."

"If you're just going to rearrange the letters in my name," Kurt says, "*Turk* rolls off the tongue just a bit better."

"*Turk*," Blaine tries. "You're right, it does hit the tongue a little better. Not nearly as good as *Kurt*, though," he says, gently nudging Kurt with his shoulder.

Kurt smiles and nudges him back. As they turn a corner, he catches the Royal Palace out of the corner of his eye, and all he can think is that if the Fire Lord is half as amazing as his son, Kurt can hardly wait to have him on his side…

The Fire Lord sighs as his attendant reads the report; a fairly long list of things that are making the quarantine difficult to undo. He has no doubt that each of these things can be dealt with—it's the sheer *volume* of them that is exhausting him. Not since he accidentally knocked over a hive of scorpion bees in his youth has he seen so many little things add up to so much pain.

"Sir!" a guard calls out from the far end of the throne room, running in with a small, wrapped scroll. "A messenger hawk just left this. It's addressed to you."

"Who is it from?" the Fire Lord asks tiredly.

"No return address," the guard says, sounding a bit nervous.
"Put it on the pile," he sighs. "I'll read it later."

"Sir, it says its urgent."

"Well, bring it here, then," he says to his attendant, who retrieves the scroll and hands it to him. And then the Fire Lord gently unfurls a message that chills him to the marrow of his bones…

It's after dark.
Do you know where your son is?

Because I do

He rises from his throne immediately, stalking out of the room.

"My Lord! My Lord, where are you going? Sir…?"

Another low wail echoes through the closed door, comparable to the sound a baby komodo rhino might make if it were being strangled to death.

"I'm telling you, I just can't understand this instrument," Wes says from inside the Prince's room.

"Then why do you insist on continuing to try and play it?" David sighs.

"It vexes me," Wes says simply, "and I don't like to be vexed."

The young guard opens his mouth to continue the banter when suddenly his blood is peppered with tiny chunks of ice from the sight that approaches him. The Fire Lord stalks down the hall towards him, looking like a man possessed.

"My Lord," David says, loudly, pointedly, so Wes gets the memo. "What are you—"

"I need to see Blaine," the Fire Lord says, barely acknowledging him. David makes what is perhaps an ill-advised attempt to impose himself between the ruler and the door.

"Blaine is… indisposed… at the moment, he—"

Without even a word, the Fire Lord brushes David aside with enviable ease and bursts into the room. Agni protect us, we're boned.

David rushes in to find a terrified Wes and a Fire Lord who looks ready to call the wrath of the entire Sun down upon their heads. Where is he? he demands.

"My Lord, please," David stammers.

"WHERE IS MY SON?" the man roars like an erupting volcano.

"We don't know," Wes says, sounding only slightly less ready to wet himself than David. "He didn't tell us."

"You don't know!" And now Wes is pinned against the wall, looking nearly ready to cry, and
David would help him if he wasn't currently paralyzed by terror.

"H-h-h-he sneaks out," Wes says in a pitch David would've never thought possible. "He used to tell us where he was going, but…"

"Sir, please!" the Fire Lord's chief attendant runs in after him, along with a smattering of concerned guards. "What is going on?"

Lord Anderson releases Wes, who falls to the floor in a heap, and presses his head to the ground. He turns to stare at David, the anger in his eyes nearly enough to incinerate him on the spot. "You don't know where he is?" the man seethes, awaiting confirmation.

"He sneaks into town," David says, his voice pleading. "That's all we know, my Lord, I'm sorry, he didn't—"

The Fire Lord turns to his guards. "Arrest them," he orders, and David's heart nearly bursts and kills him on the spot.

"My Lord," Wes says from the ground. "We'd tell you if we knew, I swear, but we don't. Why are yo—"

"Because someone else DOES!" the Fire Lord bellows, pulling him up and shoving a piece of paper into his face.

The boy's unsteady eyes scan over the page as the other Guards move behind David and restrain him. "Oh no," Wes whispers, before looking directly at David. The horror in his eyes has skyrocketed to a different level entirely, and suddenly David knows that this is much worse than a simple cause of being caught covering for a friend.

"Gather every single guard, on duty or off, in the square at once. We will scour every inch of this city until we find him," the Fire Lord orders his attendant, who scrambles off before he, too, faces this fearsome man's wrath.

"And as for you two," he says, turning back towards the two frightened boys. "You had better pray that we find him before they do, because if we don't, you will be the ones to suffer for it."

He storms out of the room, which the guards take as their cue to begin dragging the two of them towards the holding cells. It's a little difficult to see, but it doesn't take much longer of studying Wes's expression of abject terror for David to understand what was in that note.

Blaine… he prays, please be okay...

The fluttering of the hawk's wings is music to her ears. Setting down her binoculars for the moment, she reaches up to untie the scroll from the creature and send him on his way. The letter is exactly what she wanted to read.

End him.

It's go time.

TO BE CONTINUED…
A/N: So, the thing about losing reviewers is that I never actually know why they leave. I have to assume that it's because the story is boring them, so I hope this will win a few of them back. Yes, I know, I'm an attention whore, but there's no point in being dishonest about it. I love feedback, so if you have something to say, good or bad, please, let it be known! ;)}
Red Skies at Night

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 12/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: Cursing, innuendo.
Word Count: 5080
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

Author's Note: A crappy night just gets worse from here on out. ;) Lots of things start to become clear in this chapter, perhaps most notably, the significance of the story's title. I don't outright state it, but some of the nerdier among us might be able to put things together. And no, it's not an Avatar thing… it's really more of an astronomy thing. Hope you enjoy!

CHAPTER 12 – Red Skies at Night

The thing about science is that it involves a lot of waiting. A lot of waiting. The universe at large is pretty much completely unconcerned with your personal timetable (or anyone else's, for that matter) and will pretty much do its own thing regardless of what you actually want it to do. But the universe is in charge of this relationship—it has all the answers you are so desperately looking for and can totally crush you into squishy paste whenever it wants to, so there really isn't much to be done about this except to suck it up and deal.

So yeah, waiting.

It's cool. Sam Evans has learned to wait. He's kind of a champion at it, if he says so himself. He's got lots of things to keep him occupied, too, like inventions to work on, reports to write, puzzles to play with… the problem is that Sam Evans doesn't half-ass things. When he's doing something, he gives it his all.

Like this little puzzle cube thingy he got for four bronze coins at the Harbor Market. You're
supposed to twist it around until every side is composed of only one elemental symbol, but he's been at it for hours, and every time he thinks he's got it, he finds that one little cube…

…well, technically, by the very nature of the puzzle, it's at least two cubes, but still…

…anyway, what was he saying? Oh, right. The problem is that he has a tendency to give things his all when he's engaged with them, no matter how trivial they might seem.

Which explains why he damn near misses the beginning of the very thing he came here to see. Only a flash of red light out of the corner of his eye alerts him to his mistake.

"Oh, shit!" he says, dropping the cube and scrambling over to his telescope. "It's starting!"

It's a good thing he has excellent peripheral vision. He'd have been kicking himself for a while if he'd missed this…

"If I didn't know better," Blaine says with a smile, "I'd say you've been practicing."

Back in the backyard of the Wang Estate, the two of them are back at the grind again. It only took Kurt ten minutes to make a flame this time, though the flame was kind of a tiny, wispy thing. Better than the dragon fart he unleashed yesterday, but still, a little disappointing.

"Psssh," Kurt scoffs. "Like I would be silly enough to practice Firebending without an experienced instructor around."

Blaine just keeps on smiling. "Of course," he says. "That singed spot near the back of your head was probably just a cooking accident, right?"

Kurt's hand immediately snaps to cover the scorched hair, and Blaine has the nerve to laugh at him.

"You totally gave yourself away there," Blaine says. "I didn't actually notice anything."

Shock! Scandal! The Avatar is positively mortified. "You… that's… cheating!"

"My dad used to do that to me all the time," Blaine says. "It took me forever to realize he was doing it, too. I still fall for it occasionally."

"Well… okay, fine. Yes, I tried to do a little fire work yesterday and… might have gotten a little bit burnt around the edges for my trouble. Don't worry," he says emphatically. "That is not a mistake I will be making again."

To his surprise, the Prince shakes his head at Kurt. "You're going to have to bend on your own at some point. You can't be afraid of fire."

Kurt sighs. "I'm not afraid of the fire, I'm afraid of what it might do if it gets away from me."

"Ah," Blaine says with a nod. "Well, the solution is simple; don't let it get away from you."

"Your wisdom astounds me," Kurt deadpans, fighting an eyeroll. "I can't believe I didn't think of that myself."

The Fire Prince is as unaffected as ever. "There's a method to it, like with anything else, but the most important thing to remember when Firebending is that you are the bender. You bend the flame, not the other way around. When you start to panic is when you really lose control. So even
if things start to get out of hand, don't let the fear take over. Keep calm, have courage," he pauses, holding up a hand, "and watch me."

With that, he punches towards the ground, creating a jet of flame from the end of his fist and using it to lay down a line of fire. Kurt moves in closer to get a better look at what Blaine is doing.

The Fire Prince holds one hand above the flame, and begins to move it back and forth. The plumes of orange light twist themselves into following it, moving as Blaine moves. "See how the fire responds to me? It does what I do." Blaine takes a breath, and the fire swells. "When I breathe, it breathes." He exhales, and the fire returns to its normal size. "When I move," he says, bending over backwards, "it moves." Sure enough, the fire is copying Blaine's stance, bending over in a slight arc. "So by default, if I panic, and start flailing," he smiles, tossing his arms around for emphasis while the fire juts out in random directions, "it follows suit."

"Okay," Kurt says, still slightly mesmerized by the dancing flame following his boyfr—friend's movements. "But what happens if I do start freaking out?"

"That's what this next part is for," Blaine says. "The first lesson is how to make fire. The second," he says, pausing to take a short breath and huff it out through his nose, causing the fire to flicker out like it was no bigger than a candle, "is how to put it out."

"Ah," Kurt says. "That… would have been helpful."

Blaine, to his credit, acknowledges this. "Yeah… I meant to teach it to you the other night, but I kind of had a minor panic moment myself. Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it," Kurt says graciously. "We're all allowed to be a little flaily every now-and-then."

Blaine makes another line of fire in front of Kurt. "Alright, first things first—you have to establish a connection to the fire. It's like any other form of bending—just use your movements and your mind to reach out to it."

Kurt thrusts his hand out a little harder than he means to, but to his surprise, the fire responds very well to that. He can feel the… whatever in his core that connects him to this element stretching itself out and just like that, this powerful, wild heat is a part of him. Blaine makes it look so easy, but there is just something different about connecting with an existing fire as opposed to creating your own. Each element feels different to bend—this isn't the cool, comforting caress of water or the steady strength of earth. More than any other thing that Kurt's status as the Avatar enables him to connect with, fire feels wonderfully, frighteningly alive, dancing and wiggling like a fish in his grasp. Kurt has to fight to maintain control.


With deep, steady breaths, the feral power clawing around his insides is cowed into submission, and the struggle for dominance is over. This fire belongs to him now. With a small smirk of satisfaction, Kurt twirls his hand around in a little spiral, looping the flame in mid-air.

"Getting a little cocky, are we?" Blaine asks with an arced brow.

"Just stretching my proverbial legs a bit," Kurt replies easily, moving his arm in a slow, smooth, snakelike manner, twisting the fire into a semi-seductive dance.

The light flickers in Blaine's eyes as he stares into it, almost hypnotized. "Whenever you're ready," he says, seeming almost reluctant to move forward with the lesson.
"Enjoying the show?" the Avatar teases. He begins stirring the air with his hands, as though he were waterbending, twisting the flame into a helix.

"You're a natural performer," Blaine says. "Which is a polite way of saying that you like showing off." It seems almost like an insult until the Prince breaks away from the fire to look at Kurt. "It's something else we have in common."

"Well, in that case, forgive me for monopolizing the spotlight," he teases. "Next step?"

"Deep breath," Blaine says, inhaling deep and slow from his mouth.

Kurt follows suit, fully expecting the swell that comes with his air intake.

"And out, all at once," Blaine continues, expelling the breath through his nose in a single loud huff.

When Kurt follows suit, the fire shrinks into nothing almost instantly, barely an ember left glowing. "...wow," he says.

"Wow," the Prince echoes.

Kurt blushes slightly. "Well, I mean, it wasn't that great..." It is then that Kurt notices that Blaine is no longer looking at him, but his eyes are instead locked on the horizon. It doesn't take him long to figure out what the fuss is about.

"Wow."

"I," thud, "am," thud, "so," thud, "BORED." Puck continues to smack his head against a tree while Santana continues to perv over the Avatard and his Sparkly Princess Curly Cue. They're stuck in a ditch in the freaking woods just a few yards away from their target because Santana won't let them, you know, actually do what they came to do. "Why are we NOT killing them?"

"The Lady's contract only covers the Prince," Santana says without up from her binoculars. "We're only getting paid for fuzzy brows, and I don't know about you, but if I can avoid fighting the Spirit of the Entire World, I'd like to. We wait until they separate."

"They're not going to separate!" Puck whisper-shouts at her. "You're the one over there drooling over them. They're like two inches away from crawling down each other's throats. If we lose him, we're fucked."

"We're not going to lose him," Santana snaps back.

"You sure? That bitch said shit was supposed to get pretty crazy tonight..." He trails off, waiting for Santana to take the bait, but she ignores him. "Look, all I'm saying is: we get one chance to do this. He's right there."

Santana shushes him with a finger. "Follow my lead, and shut the fuck up."

With that, she grabs her whip, and stalks forward. Puck cracks his knuckles, and follows.

"What is that?" Blaine is barely breathing. The sight before him is pretty much stealing any opportunity for such that he might have. He hardly knows how to describe it—stretching across the entire northern sky, curtains of light, folding and fluttering as if caught in some kind of cosmic wind. The light at their base is green, but the rest of the lightscreen, which seems to stretch
upwards for *miles*, is a deep, spellbinding red. They weave in and out in patterns like ocean waves, and seem to be slowly expanding and shifting even as he watches.

"Those are..." Kurt says, sounding half-awed and half-unsettled. He walks towards the light, moving past Blaine as he speaks, eyes locked on the luminescent spectacle. "Those are *Spirit Lights*. I've seen them before... they pop up at certain times of the year, but they... they're *never* this far south. I've only seen them near the North Pole. And I've *never* seen one of that red before..."

"It's beautiful," Blaine says without even thinking about it. It feels like it's pulling on him somehow, reaching into him and dragging him forward. Or, backwards. Wait, no, something else is dragging him backwards. Something that is wrapped around his neck. Is that... a rope? "Wh—GCK!" The rope suddenly tightens as he starts to speak, and he finds himself being yanked to the ground and dragged away from Kurt. All his attempts to call for help are made impossible by the cord cutting off his airways. He kicks and flails as much as he can, but none of it makes any difference—he can't make enough noise to distract Kurt from the Spirit Lights, and he can't find anything to grab onto to stop himself from being dragged off.

Worse, he can already feel his body starting to go into serious panic mode from lack of oxygen. He isn't going to have much longer before he passes out.

The rope drags him behind a tree at the edge of the yard, where a strong, gauntlet-covered hand yanks him up and presses him against the trunk, covering his mouth. "No screaming, punk."

"Just stay still," a voice from beside him says as the noose tightens, "and this will be over quick."

He does *not* stay still.

"Search every inch!" the Fire Lord shouts. "Every home, every business, every tool shed, every *closet*. Leave not one pebble in this city unturned!"

The entirety of the Royal Guard is assembled in formation in the Palace Yard. Even those who would normally be asleep at this hour have been roused and put in uniform to join the search. The Fire Prince is missing and in danger, and they are not to rest until he is found. Fear like nothing he has ever felt before grips the heart of the young guardsman as he imagines what will become of the Fire Lord—what will become of them ALL—should the Prince meet an untimely end.

"Go!" Lord Anderson shouts, and in unison, they turn and march. The imposing Palace Gates creak ominously as they open, revealing a strange sight to the marching soldiers of the Fire Lord. People left and right stand in the street, on the sidewalks, at their windows and in doorways, pointing and shouting at some sight in the distance. Upon hearing the whining of the gates, a few of them turn to see the Royal Guard marching towards them.

"...by Agni, it's starting!" one of them shouts. "They're coming for us!"

"Run!" another shouts, and the people scatter like panicked roaches. "Run for your lives!"

"By the Spirits..."

"Protect the children!"

"Back! Stay away!"

Some of them run into houses, others scramble into alleyways, or simply duck inside open doors
"Wait!" a few guards shout, but none will heed them.

"You'll never take me alive," a portly man with a cane shouts, bounding away a little slower than the others.

"Stop that man!" the young guardsman's captain orders. He chases down the large fellow and tackles him as he rounds a corner.

"GET OFF ME!" the man says, whacking him over the helmet with his cane. "I'll not go quietly!"

"Hey!" someone shouts from his left. "Don't pick on him, you scumbag! Just because he's blind…"

"What?" the guardsman has time to say just before he is tackled by no less than three people.

By this point, windows and doors are beginning to open again. He can hear shouting and arguing from around the corner where he came from, the sound of doors being forced open, a window breaking. Someone screams, several other people shout and yell in protest.

"You jerk!" one of the guardsman's tacklers shouts, attempting to pummel him through his armor. "You have no right! You have no right!"

"Sir, please," he starts to say, but the man abruptly wises up and takes the opportunity to punch him in the face—the only part of him that isn't armored.

"We're not going down without a fight!" someone else shouts. The poor guardsman is rapidly losing track of how many participants are involved in this little drama. Distantly, he notes the sounds of the furor around the corner are increasing, and the street is slowly filling with spectators.

"JUDGE THIS!" his assailant roars as he delivers another crushing blow to his face.

"Stop that at once!" the guardsman dizzily recognizes the voice of his captain above the sound of his ears ringing.

The assailant raises his fist again…

…and is summarily blasted off of him by a stream of fire.

For a split second, the entire world seems to slow down and pause, as if taking a tremendous breath just before it unleashes a scream. It is like the tide rolling out, out, and further out, before the tsunami comes roaring back, harder and stronger than ever. Time stands still for just a moment. And then…

**Chaos** erupts.

Kurt is mesmerized. The Spirit Lights have always been something he enjoyed watching on the occasions when they would show up. Sometimes, he would head to one of the higher cliffs that enclosed the Northern Water Tribe's City, bundled up under as many layers as he could wear and still move, and just lie down and stare up at them until he could no longer keep his eyes open.

Sometimes—not often, but just enough to fill Kurt with that horrible false hope—Finn would come to join him.

But he can't make any sense of this. Everything he learned about these and everything he's
experienced of life so far says that the Lights showing up this far to the South should be impossible. And yet… here they are.

"This has to mean something," Kurt says to no one in particular. "But what?"

He figures Blaine might have a theory. "What do you think, Blai…" He trails off as he turns around, noticing the Prince is nowhere to be found. Huh. That's odd. "Blaine?" he calls.

No answer.

"Blaiiiiiine?" he sing-songs. "Where aaaaarrre yooooou?"

Still nothing.

Perplexed, he begins to wander idly around the field, looking for signs of his disappearing teacher. "You know, if you have to pause for a second to take a leak, I don't mind. I'd just appreciate a little warning before you vanish, you know?" he tries.

No one replies.

His eyes scan the surrounding area, but he can't come up with anyth… wait. There's something weird about the grass over to the east… it's laying down, almost like something smoothed it over. The line leads to the edge of the property, where there's a small group of trees just before—

There. He sees a small, barely visible flare of orange from behind one of the trees. "Blaine?" Kurt calls, his heart starting to thud against his ribs. Something is wrong here, he can feel it.

As he runs to the tree, whispered voices reach his ears.

"Shit. Shit! He's coming!"

"Just finish him!"

Without even thinking about it, Kurt's hands fly to his waterskin, bending the liquid inside to his will and drawing it out as he runs. He doesn't have time to think about what he sees when he gets to the tree—he simply reacts, lashing out with the water like a whip, smacking into the guy with the raised fist with enough force to knock him spinning through the air. The girl in black tightens her whip's hold around Blaine's neck, whose eyes are already starting to roll back into his head. With a quick, smooth strike, Kurt freezes the water into several daggers of ice and sends them at her head. She has no choice but to release Blaine in order to dodge. A quick stomp, followed by an upward jutting hand sends a spire of earth spiking up towards her from below, something she just barely manages to dodge by flipping backwards. Blaine collapses to the ground, coughing and gasping for air with a blood-chilling wheeze that horrifies and enrages Kurt in equal measure. Swift, sure steps carry him over to his friend, who he hoists up on his shoulder as the boy continues to cough and take shuddering, desperate gulps for oxygen.

The guy with the Mohawk is picking himself up when the girl in black flips over to stand next to him, her whip at the ready. Mohawk takes one look at Kurt's face, and assesses the situation quite deftly.

"Well, shit."

"You know," Artie says, wiping his mouth with little embroidered napkins that the restaurant provides, "I think I might actually be getting used to Fire Nation food. That wasn't nearly as painful
as usual."

To get them out of the house with a minimal amount of violence, Mercedes used the age-old tactic of dangling the prospect of food in front of them. Finn bit without hesitation, and Artie couldn't resist the siren's call for long. For a place called the Purple Parakeet, the number of birds on the menu was pretty slim. Instead, they seemed to specialize mostly in seafood.

"Probably a pirate joke," Finn had said in a rare moment of clarity (through a mouthful of de-shelled turtleshrimp, of course).

Mercedes has to agree with him on the food. "It only burns when I breathe," she says in amazement.

"I guess," Finn says (chewing on a baked scallop), "after a while, you just don't have that many tastebuds left to burn."

"Somehow, I don't think that's a good thing," Artie comments.

"I'll say," Mercedes agrees. "We've spent way too much time around here. I think it's about time we started moving again."

"Already?" Finn asks. "But why?"

"You know why," the Earthbender sighs, looking around to make sure no one is looking. Everyone seems strangely distracted by something going on outside, and the restaurant is mostly empty. "We've got things we have to get done, and the longer we wait, the more it costs everyone. We've got to get Kurt over to you-know-where, so he can learn you-know-what and get to the bottom of you-know-why!"

"I know…?" Finn says, brow scrunching in concentration.

Mercedes grunts. "I'm talking about—"

"Wait for it," Artie says evenly, holding up a hand.

Finn continues to focus.

"You can do it, Finn," he says gently.

The tall boy furrows his brow a little more, until finally…

"…ohhhhh," he nods. "Now I get it."

A longsuffering sigh is the only thing she can manage. "Look, all I'm saying is that maybe this is a sign. It's time for us to go."

Artie shrugs. "That's a pretty weak sign, if you ask me."

She rolls her eyes. "Well, what kind of sign do you think we should wait for?"

There is a slightly muffled sound not unlike the cry of a frustrated freight train, and suddenly, the front window of the restaurant is shattered by a high-velocity impact with an armored royal guard's fast-flying hindquarters acting as the projectile. A stout, angry man with brown mutton chops follows him through, attempting to climb on top of him to pin him down, but the guard pushes him off and tosses him back through the window, taking a moment to catch his breath. This proves to be a critical error on his part—with an earsplitting battle cry, a tiny serving girl from the back of
the restaurant launches herself at the guard and begins beating him about the head with a metal tray. "Out! Out! GET OUT!" she squeaks, as the poor guard tries in vain to defend himself. Eventually, he, too, dives back through the window, which enables those in the restaurant to take full stock of the exquisite mayhem taking place outside.

People are running and shouting in every direction, fighting and assaulting anyone in uniform they can find. Bottles are thrown, fire is bent, weapons are brandished and, as they just witnessed, people are violently defenestrated in both directions.

"...that'll do." Artie wipes his mouth one more time before setting the napkin on the table.

Mercedes raises a hand. "Check please!"

"We're boned," David says from his position in the corner of the cell, for approximately the fortieth time that hour.

Wes can't bring himself to disagree with his friend, but repeating the fact doesn't make it hurt any less. On the contrary, it simply heightens the anticipation of the eventual boning they are going to receive. He has already imagined at least twenty seven different painful executions involving everything from boiling oil to a pit of starving goatpanthers. He's kind of impressed at his own morbid creativity.

"We're boned," David repeats.

"Shut up!" Wes says. "I know we're boned. And… you know what?" he says, rising suddenly. "I won't accept it. I refuse to be boned… lying down," he says with no small amount of disgust. "If I am to be boned, I will be boned standing, thank you very much!"

David gives him a stellar fish-eye. "Wesley, I'm not entirely sure you fully grasp the implications of what you just—"

"Shut up, David!" Wes shouts, feeling strangely manic. "This is not the time for talk. This is the time for action! Come on, help me out here," he says, moving over to the bars of their holding cell.

"What, exactly, do you intend for us to do?" David asks.

"Look, the Fire Lord sent out all his guards to look for Blaine. He sent out all his guards," he repeats, with eyebrows-upward-emphasis. "There's no one actually keeping us here. All we have to do is get through these bars."

"And then what?" David asks.

"And then we find Blaine. None of those idiots know him like we do. They have no clue where to search," Wes says, attempting to rally his reticent cellmate. "David, our friend is out there, with Agni-knows-what sort of hateful people after him. He needs us." Wes walks over to David, offering a hand to his darker-skinned companion. "We must not let him down."

There is only a moment's hesitation before David's expression turns to steel, and he grasps it, pulling himself to his feet.

It only takes them a few minutes of combined effort to break through the lock—it's a holding cell, after all, and not an actual firebender prison.

"We'll leave the same way Blaine does," David says, suddenly taking the lead. "Hopefully, we can
track him down, or at least intercept him on his way back in."

With that, the two of them head out into the hallway, taking a moment to ensure the coast is clear before dashing to the outer wall and beginning their climb…

…what? You don't hang around with someone like Blaine for half your life without picking up some of his tricks.

"Who are you?" Blaine growls, his voice scratchy and rough from his near-strangulation.

"That's none of your business," the girl in black sneers.

"None of my business?" he asks, incredulous. "You just tried to kill me!"


The Prince finds himself at a loss for words at the… obscene anti-logic he has been confronted with, so Kurt takes the wheel. "How about you take your business elsewhere," he says, low and dangerous, "before we close you out?"

"Sorry, Ladyface," the girl sneers. "But this is a Fire Sale. Everything must go. I guess we just got ourselves a two-for-one deal, right Puck?" she says, lashing her whip.

"It's a real steal, San," Puck grins, cracking the knuckles on his one gloved hand.

Blaine divests himself from Kurt's support and adopts his firebending stance like he hasn't just recovered from oxygen starvation. "We don't take kindly to thieves around here," he says, a tiny burst of flame erupting from his outstretched hands to illustrate his point.

Kurt steps into place beside him. "Bitch, you haven't had a fight," he says with a slight smirk, "until you've fought me over a sale item. And this? I saw first. He's mine."

The young guardsman ducks into an alleyway, crouching down behind a trashcan to try and catch his breath.

It's complete pandemonium. He lost all sight of his fellow servants of the Fire Lord what seems like forever ago. Any time he does see one, they are quickly and summarily chased off by enraged or terrified citizenry, and he himself receives similar treatment. A man tried to beat him to death with a table leg. A woman threw a lit lantern at his head when she thought he was coming towards her daughter with a funny look on his face. The daughter followed this up by punching him in the groin.

Some of the guardsmen have begun fighting back, but that merely makes everything worse. The second a guard starts firebending at a civilian, all bets are off, and what could at first be considered mild harassment turns into an outright mob scene. He has no idea where any of this came from, no idea what everyone is screaming about. It's almost as if they think that the Fire Lord's soldiers are coming to abduct them for some reason, but that thought is so ridiculous and completely out of nowhere that he (and apparently, all of his compatriots) has no idea how to react to it.

"Why is this happening?" he asks aloud, his frustration and confusion bubbling over in the form of a completely pointless question.

"Because it's part of the plan," a smooth, smoky voice answers.
With a start, the guard leaps to his feet, only to be pressed against the wall by a young woman with blonde hair. "What—"

"Shhhh," she whispers, putting a finger against his lips. "Don't worry, baby," she purrs, "I'm just here to get you naked."

He doesn't even have time to process how hot that was before her hand moves to the back of his neck, and suddenly, the world goes dark…

In the insanity of the City, no one is likely to notice when a few Royal Guards go missing. After all, tonight, the guards are the enemy, so the less of them around, the better. With all the violence going around, no one is likely to notice a few stripped, unconscious young men tied up in alleyways or stuffed into dumpsters, either. With all the panic and confusion and anger, no one is likely to notice a group of about ten people in Royal Guard uniforms calmly escorting a well-known Firebending Academy Headmistress to the Palace Gates, striding in alongside her and closing them to ensure that no one follows them.

No one is likely to notice any of this…

At least, not until it is too late to do anything about it.

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: Told you I was going to be mean to Blaine. And I've only just begun. ;) Shit's getting REAL, and I hope this is as exciting to you as it is to me. By all means, leave a thought if you have one! Reviews and comments are love.
Blaine, rather appropriately, strikes first. He's not normally one to start a fight, but he has the right to be a little irate after the attempted murder. He punches a fireball towards Puck's head, who responds by ducking down and dashing forward. The Prince follows this up with a second punch, but Puck just tanks the fireball, using a thick-looking arm guard to intercept the fire and deflect it to the ground. By this time, he's close enough to strike, coming in with fist raised and swinging. Blaine leaps backwards, deftly avoiding the blow and intending to kick a slightly more forceful inferno at him as he flies. 'Intending' being the keyword here, because the tone of the battle changes pretty dramatically the second Puck's gloved hand hits the ground. Suddenly, an immense wave of force explodes outward from the armored assassin's fist, tearing up the ground and sending a small wall of dirt and debris at Blaine. The sheer power of the punch is enough to send Blaine flying backwards a few dozen more feet than he intended to go, but he lands in a well-rehearsed roll. He's used to taking large falls.

"Okay, so… that's new," Blaine says evenly.
Puck just smirks and pulls his fist out of the ground, heading towards him again.

Meanwhile, Santana takes Blaine's ignition as her cue to whip up some trouble, and she begins lashing her weapon of choice at Kurt. The Avatar responds in kind, arcing his back to avoid her strike while elongating the small amount of water he has on him into a whip of his own and snapping it at Santana. The girl proves exceptionally flexible, and flips to the side, taking the opportunity to swipe her weapon towards Kurt's feet as she does. Kurt jumps over the strike fairly easily, and starts to send his water whip at her again, when suddenly, the noise generated by the Puckerman Pummel shocks his system into a momentary awed stare-and-gape. He nearly loses an ear for his trouble—the sound of the lash so close to his head almost deafens him for a moment.

"Hey!" the bitch-in-black shouts. "Snap to it, Ladyface!"

"Snap this," Kurt growls, lashing his water supply at her face. This time, however, she responds by snapping her whip into his own, shattering the liquid lash in mid-air and scattering the droplets all over the yard.

"You can't compete with me in a whip fight, bitch," Santana sneers. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but whips and chains excite me."

The Avatar raises a prim eyebrow. "Sticks and stones? What a novel idea." And with that, he squares his stance, digs his feet into the ground, and prepares to Earthbend.

Back in Puck v. Blaine world, the Fire Prince decides a little more force is called for. He cups his hands together and swings his arms in a circle beside him, drawing in a deep breath as he does. Then, he thrusts both hands forward, lighting up the night with a blast of flame roughly the size of a small carriage (with horse included!). Puck's answer to this is to punch the air—generating a shockwave of moving wind strong enough to blast a hole in the center of the flame, which he dives right through.

The Fire Prince jumps up and shoots a jet of flame at the ground, creating a sizeable line of fire between him and his would-be killer. This finally causes Puck to slide to a halt.

"What kind of bender are you?" Blaine asks.

Puck scoffs at him. "The Puckasaurus don't bend," he says, sticking his fingers in the dirt near the fire. "He breaks."

With that, he snaps his hand upwards and forward, scooping up several yards worth of flaming dirt and sending it arcing towards him.

Blaine rolls to the side only to find Puck coming at him again. He's starting to feel a little lost here.

During most of this exchange, Kurt has been stomping up a steady supply of rocks and boulders and punching, kicking, slapping and smacking them at Santana. The dark-clothed assassin is pirouetting like a ballerina, spinning her whip in a spiral around her body the entire time. When she doesn't gracefully leap out of the path of the rocks, she snaps her whip with but a flick of her wrist and shatters the projectiles in mid-air, barely even getting any sand on her clothes. Kurt stops the stone assault after it becomes clear it isn't working. This lady is good. She's clearly fought benders before, and she seems to know how to handle them.

"Yawn," she says, glancing at her nails as she spins to a halt. "Is that all you got?"

The Avatar glares at her. "Look, tramp. I've been being nice up to now. You want this to get ugly? It can get real ugly, real fast."
"You mean it isn't already?" she says, still examining her nails. "Your outfit sure had me fooled."

A vein twitches in Kurt's forehead.

Oh, **SHIT** no. Bitch, you did **NOT** just say that.

"Blaine, I sincerely hope the Wang family has some form of homeowner's insurance. If not... well, I apologize for what I'm about to do."

With that, Kurt switches stances and begins waterbending the *shit* out of the Wang house. Inside, every glass, every washtub, every bottle, every fixture tips over, pours out, breaks open, and pops off, respectively, with the water rushing out and soaring through the air. It doesn't take a couple of seconds for every back window on the house to shatter open as the water from within comes out to meet its new master.

Santana's hand is still in nail-filing position, but her eyes are wide and her jaw is slack. "...oh," he says, blinking.

The water forms into a mid-air stream roughly the diameter of Kurt himself, and he curls it around his form like a snake preparing to strike. "Yeah," the Avatar smiles. "Oh."

Over on the other side of the field (and it is only now that Blaine notices that Puck has been steadily pushing him further and further from Kurt, and he has been playing right along. **Stupid!**), the Fire Prince has been momentarily forced to abandon strategy in favor of just punching and kicking as much fire as he can at the ham-fisted hillsmasher. It isn't doing much to drive him back, but it does seem to give him a little more difficulty than Blaine's other tactics. He can only punch through every third or fourth flame—the rest, he has to duck, dodge, or roll around. The field is starting to look like a recently abandoned campsite with all the stray fires dotting the landscape.

"Just hold still, bro," Puck says, seeming a little more irate. "I promise it won't even hurt. You know... not for long, anyway."

"I haven't stopped moving for anyone in my life," the Fire Prince says evenly, voice calm even as he feels his nerves starting to get the better of him. "I'm certainly not going start for you."

A shrug is all he gets in response from the other man. "Whatever," he says, picking up a stray rock roughly the size of Blaine's head and *decking* it at him. Blaine's dodge is barely enough to avoid having a giant hole in his torso, and it is this more than anything else that makes him realize... this guy could kill him in *one* punch. If he takes even a *single* direct hit from this punk, it's as good as over for him.

And it's *that* realization that makes him realize he is dangerously close to freaking the fuck out, which would probably sign his death certificate just as well.

Puck charges towards him like a freight train, and Blaine lays down another line of fire between them. The self-titled Puckasaurus prepares to devour it the same way he devoured the others, but this time, the second he raises the fist, Blaine takes control of the fire line, drawing in a massive breath to send it shooting skyward and punching forward to lurch it towards his attacker. It works beautifully—Puck's raised fist exposes his shocked expression beautifully as he tries in vain to screech to a halt, but with train tactics come train weaknesses, and he slides right into Blaine's attack, just barely managing to shield his face with his other arm before the flare knocks him on his back.

It's not much, but it's enough. The Fire Prince takes the precious spare second to slip back into his
training mindset, evening his breathing, calming his emotions, and correcting his stance. The fear that threatened to take hold of him melts away, replaced with calm, controlled focus. With this tiny opportunity to clear his mind, Blaine is able to start piecing together what he knows about this guy and his tactics, and a plan begins to form in his mind.

Puck springs back to his feet, looking for all the world like a rhino-bull preparing to charge.

Blaine just smirks, beckoning with his hand. "Come at me, bro."

Closer to the house, Santana has found herself on the defensive, as Kurt sweeps and swipes at her with his floating, portable river. He sends waves and wheels at her, attempts to wrap around her, even bends the water underground to try and hit her with a geyser. And through all of this, the amount of water he loses control of is barely enough to spritz her hair with. She flips like her life depends on it, putting her training to good use, changing directions unpredictably, leaping gracefully when the situation calls for it, using trees, the house, and pretty much anything else she can find as a perch and a springboard. She's managed to avoid everything so far, but she's fighting a losing battle, and she knows it. Worse, she can see from the look on his stupid, porcelain-colored face that he knows it, too. She's going to get tired and screw up long before he does.

"This calls for drastic measures," she growls, jumping out of a tree as Kurt's enormous wave knocks it into the forest. She lands in a crouch and in the same motion, pulls a weapon off of her waist and tosses it at him.

The little prick clearly was not expecting a thrown weapon, and before he can counter, the binding hits him just below his knees, the ball-weights on either end of the rope wrapping it around them and tying them together. He flails for just a second, bursting his proverbial water balloon, before falling over.

The ground is muddy and gross from all the liquid he just lost, and getting up would be difficult even if his legs weren't tied together. "Oh, so we're playing the bondage game now? Kinky," he deadpans with a glare.

"I knew you'd like it," she purrs. "Now, remember our safe word!"

"What safe word?" Kurt asks.

"Exactly," she smiles, before trying to whip his head off.

As for Blaine, he finds himself in the exact opposite position from Kurt. The battle has turned pretty definitively in his favor since he's figured out how to negate Puck's forward momentum. The Fire Wall he created has grown to encompass pretty much the entire width of the yard, and he's slowly pushing it forward, forcing Puck to back up and getting Blaine closer to Kurt, where he belongs. The smattering of flames he has already created are coming in handier and handier—even while focusing on maintaining his Fire Wall, he can quickly snatch control of any of them to attack Puck from an odd angle and keep him off-balance, making it impossible for him to punch through Blaine's defense like he no doubt wants to. Even better—every time the Fire Wall picks up one of them, it becomes a little easier for Blaine to maintain. It's not exactly a walk in the courtyard, but as long as he maintains his breathing and keeps his head about him, there's no reason he shouldn't be able to keep this up...

…and then he sees the Avatar on the ground, flopping like a beached fish to avoid Santana's cracking whip.

"Kurt!" he shouts without thinking, and shit—as soon as he lets that out, the exhalation dims the
fire wall to almost nothing, and Puck seizes the opportunity to dash over it.

There's no time to think. The raging rhino-bull barrels towards him and thrusts his thunderfist fight at Blaine's chest. The Prince, apparently having learned subconsciously from his mistakes, twists his body and dodges to the side instead of backwards, causing the blast of force generated by the move to miss him entirely. The shock plain on Puck's face is all the invitation he needs to grab the guy's arm and spin around him, pushing him further forward as Blaine dashes behind him, running towards Kurt as fast as he can.

Kurt continues to do his best trout-on-land impression, having no time to come up with any better ideas because the sadistic bitch won't give him a moment's rest from her snap-happy reign of terror. She seems to enjoy his interpretation of the Ancient Art of Fish-Dancing, though he highly doubts she fully appreciates the cultural value of his performance. He rolls away from her as much as he can, and is just starting to feel dizzy when suddenly, the next snap resounds from a place that isn't right next to Kurt's extremely valuable face. He stops twisting just in time to see Blaine expertly execute a roll underneath Santana's hastily re-aimed whip attack, sliding close enough to punch her right in the chest, following this up by grabbing her arm, spinning her around and throwing her towards the house. Kurt is almost impressed, but before he has time to congratulate the Prince, he notices the Puckarooski (or whatever the fuck that douchebag calls himself) steaming towards Blaine from behind. With not even a second to spare, Kurt juts his hands up, grabbing control of the muddy ground and springing it upwards just as Puck takes a step, causing him to rocket right over Blaine's head (who seems a little surprised that he didn't see him coming) and subsequently land right smack on top of Santana, who had just started to get up.

Blaine quickly dashes over to Kurt, burning through the rope that binds his knees and helping him up. "Thanks for the save," the Prince smiles.

"Likewise," Kurt nods primly, before the two of them turn to face the assassins again.

Both of them are muddy and positively fuming. "You punched me in the boob, dillweed!" she shouts at Blaine.

"Well, I am just so sorry," the Prince says, expression and voice as flat as Kurt's chest (seriously, how do people keep mixing him up with girls?). "Next time, I'll try not to offend your delicate feminine sensibilities, you evil, murdering skank."

"Oh, that's it," Puck growls. "You're toothpaste when I get through with you, fireboy."

"As if you even use that enough to know what it looks like," Kurt scoffs.

"Ho, it is so on," Santana says with a snap for emphasis.

The next part happens pretty quickly.

Kurt bends over, delicately raising his hands to draw a large ring of water from the mud around him. Santana lashes her whip at him, but Kurt brings the ring up to intercept it. The second the leather hits the liquid, Kurt freezes it, trapping the weapon in solid ice. With a quick whirl of his arms, the ring spins and jerks the whip out of her hand, bringing it around and back fast enough to smack her right in the face with the handle, sending her stumbling backwards, shrieking in outrage.

Puck, rather predictably, charges right for Blaine and attempts to punch him in half, but Blaine smoothly dives onto his back allowing the blow to pass overhead and putting him in the perfect position to deliver a flaming kick right to Puck's torso. His armor absorbs most of the heat, but the explosive force is enough to send him flying backwards. Ever the persistent one, Puck twists
himself so that he lands on his feet, and roars as he charges again. Blaine springs to his feet, takes a deep breath, draws his arm back, and lets fly with a—

**Whoa.**

Puck's eyes go wide as he tries to intercept the projectile with his fist, but when the two collide in mid-air, the fireball detonates with such force that all four of them are sent flying. Kurt lands roughly in the scorched remains of the yard several feet away, while Blaine smacks into the ground a little further off. Picking up his head to search for his opponents, all Kurt can do is wait for the smoke to clear, whereupon he sees two large holes, shaped roughly like Bondage Queen and the Fister, in the lower wall of the Wang house...

…which waits just long enough for Kurt to see it before summarily collapsing into beams, splinters, and glass shards.

The Avatar winces, more for the unfortunate Wang family than for the assholes the house just fell upon. You can't try to choke his… friend to death right in front of him and expect him to feel bad for you when you get your ass kicked.

And speaking of his friend…

Blaine is lying on his back, leaning on his elbows and looking both awed and slightly frightened at the demolished remains of the estate he just accidentally helped level. Kurt quickly runs over to help his seemingly shell-shocked friend, picking him up and brushing the ashes off of his singed clothing. "Are you okay?" he asks, if only out of the need to say something.

"...y-yeah," Blaine breathes, still staring slack-jawed at the wreckage, which has a few stray fires burning in front of it where the blast took place. "Yeah… I think so… I..." he pauses to take a breath, which winds up being more of a gulp. "Kurt, I need to ask you something. Be honest with me."

"Okay," Kurt says, a wee bit wary.

"Just now," he says, voice barely above a whisper, "when I shot that fire… was… am I crazy," he says, shaking his head, "or did it come out blue?"

"If you're crazy," Kurt says, "it must be contagious. I saw the same thing."

"I..." Blaine says, shaking his head in utter disbelief. "I made blue fire."

"It was pretty spectacular," Kurt says gently. "How did you do that?"

For the first time since it happened, Blaine tears his gaze off of the blast zone and looks right at Kurt. His voice is no more than breath when he speaks.

"I have no idea."

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**TO BE CONTINUED**

**A/N:** Now we know what freaked the Fire Lord out so much during their training session. The significance of this is pretty clear for Avatar fans, but for the rest of you—don't worry. 1. It will be fully explained in time, and 2. Blaine and his father's reaction to it already tells you a lot about it. ;)


It doesn't take Sam long to abandon the telescope in favor of his naked eyes. He had hoped he would be able to observe some kind of pattern or maybe even find a cause for this phenomenon with the powerful ocular instrument, but alas, the only thing he really achieved was having his vision colored all weird because of the stupidly high influx of red light.

Oh well. He's still getting some pretty good info.

The way the lights line up seems to run from East to West, and there is a slight curve to the overall pattern, like this might be just one visible segment of a massive, wobbly circle. The line seems to be curving away, but the thing is so massive that Sam still has a hard time guessing whether he is on the inside or outside of the thing.

He's just started writing on a parchment pad to do some extremely rough calculations on a possible circumference for the thing when his view is suddenly obscured by dark clouds. He grunts in frustration, wishing (not for the first time) that he was an airbender so he could just blow the damn things away. And he had been so sure the night would be clear…
…wait. Those aren't clouds.

Well, actually, technically they are, but they aren't clouds of… cloudy stuff. They're smoke clouds. Something is making smoke—lots of smoke. Which, considering his current location and the inhabitants therein, is a likely indicator of lots of fire. Who on Earth would burn this much stuff at once? And why?

Putting his detective skills to work, Sam quickly surmises that a large number of buildings in the Capital City are on fire, and thus are responsible for creating the giant smoke fingers that are currently making his life so darn difficult. There, mystery solved! The City's on fire.

...

Holy crap. The City's on fire!

The astronomer experiences a brief moment of conflict. The lightshow is certainly very epic and awe-inspiring and whatnot, and it's ostensibly what he has come to study, but… the City's on fire. In multiple places, in a manner far too widespread to be just one person or even a group of people setting them all. And then it hits him.

Rushing back over to his telescope, he adjusts the trajectory so that it is pointing to the city instead of the sky. The scenes of chaos that greet his roving eye feel like a vindication. There is no need to choose between studying the celestial phenomenon and studying the insanity on the ground.

Because as of right now, he's pretty sure the two are connected.

When attempting to make your way through a riot, it's generally a good idea to keep your eyes rooted to the immediate area, lest you get blindsided by something silly… like a human tidal wave, or a small child used as a projectile, or an angry moose. Finn might not have been the brightest bottle rocket in the box, but he knows that much. Which is why he is a little confused at the sheer number of people who are not following this axiom and are summarily leveled by a panicked Drizzle as a result.

"Whoa!" Finn shouts, quickly pushing Artie in the wake of the low-level carnage the mighty dragon moose leaves in her… his… its wake. (Wait… only the dudes have antlers, right?) "Drizzle, chill out! You're gonna kill someone! There's no need to panic!"

Drizzle most definitely does not heed him and continues to mow over tons of unfortunate souls.

"Uhhh, Finn, you gotta think about this from a moose's perspective," Artie says, the rough jostling of his wheelchair not bothering him one bit. "If there was ever a need for him to panic, it would probably be now."

"So it IS a dude!" Finn says. "Dang it, now I feel dumb."

Artie thinks about this for a second. "Okay, I'll bite—why just now?"

Finn rolls his eyes. "'Drizzle' is a girl's name. Duh," he says plainly.

"…right," Artie sighs, shaking his head.

The dragon moose lets out a loud moo as it rounds a corner (wait, mooses moo?), and Finn quickly follows it onto a more open street. As soon as they are a decent way clear of the buildings, he hears Artie let out a loud gasp.
"Holy crap," the Earthbender says.

"Dude, what is it?" Finn says, panting slightly from the exertion—mooses (or is it moosi? Meese? Meeses?) can really book it when they want to.

Artie doesn't answer him. Instead, he shakes his head in disbelief, and starts shouting, sounding almost on the verge of tears. "Oh, now you've gone and done it! he bellows, pointing angrily at the throbbing mobs of Fire Nation citizenry around them. "You bastards… you set the sky on fire! Are you proud of yourselves?"

"What are you…" Finn says, trailing off as his eyes leave the crowd and find the horizon. "…oh my La," he whispers, the brilliant, luminescent curtain of familiar lights causing him to screech to a halt in the middle of the street. "That's not fire," Finn says. "Those are… Spirit Li—"

He is cut off as Mercedes smacks into him from behind, nearly causing him to flip over Artie's chair.

"Finn, what are you doing?" she shouts. "Why'd you stop?"

Finn just points at the horizon.

The brassy Earthbender's eyes don't take long to register what's gotten them all in such a tizzy. "Oh!" she says, bringing a hand up to her chest.

"I know those lights," Finn says. "They shouldn't be happening here. What… what the…"

"I second that sentiment," Artie says, "but I think we have a more pressing issue to deal with at the moment."

Finn tears his eyes away from the hypnotic dance of lights above them to look back to the street. "Oh, shit," he says.

Drizzle is gone. Whatever path the mighty beast had been plowing through the crowd had long since closed and gotten lost in the confusion. Even worse—it now seems like half the buildings around them are on fire, and that number looks set to grow pretty quickly. And perhaps worst of all… where before they only had to deal with scattered throngs of panicked citizens, Finn can hear the shouting and roaring of the crowd quickly increasing in pitch and volume. A quick glance through the smoke reveals a huge wave of people heading right towards them, and this is totally not the kind of crowd you can surf on.

"Follow the moose," Mercedes scoffs. "Any more bright ideas?"

"Yeah," Finn says, pivoting Artie on the spot. "Run!"

Opening up his palm, Blaine forces out fire with as much concentration as he can muster. "Dang it," he says. "Still orange."

"I don't understand," Kurt says. "Why is blue fire so important?"

Blaine shakes his head. "For us," he says, "blue fire is almost like a legend. No one knows how to make it… it just seems to happen. Only a small handful of Firebenders out of… thousands is said to even be capable of it." He tries to conjure another flame, but it's just the same. "It burns hotter, flies farther and faster, and… well, you saw what happens when it detonates." With one more deep breath, Blaine forces out the biggest, hottest flame he can muster.
It's *bright* orange. Almost yellow… but a far cry from blue.

"Fuck!" the Firebender shouts, and Kurt nearly falls over. This is the first time he's heard Blaine use that word, and it is far hotter than it has any right to be. Of course, nearly everything Blaine *does* has some effect on his libido, so this shouldn't be entirely surprising.

"Blaine, calm down. It's going to be okay," Kurt says gently.

The Prince sighs. "Sorry, I just... I'm a little weird right now. Someone did just try to kill me." And yet, Kurt notices, the full force of that fact doesn't seem to impact the Firebender until he has said it out loud. Just like that, his eyes swell and his breath hitches. "Holy dragon shit," he says, his eyes unfocused. "Someone just tried to *kill me.*" He wobbles a little unsteadily, and Kurt swoops in immediately, wrapping an arm around him and gently easing him to the ground.

"Hey," he says calmly. "Blaine, it's okay. You survived. That's all that matters." He rubs gentle circles on the shell-shocked boy's back, listening to the sound of his slightly panicked breathing and wishing there was more he could do to soothe him. "It really got to me the first few times it happened, too," he tries, hoping the sympathy will help.

It does not. Instead, Blaine turns to him with bulging eyes, looking even more panicked. "This happens to you *regularly?* That's horrible!"

Kurt gives him a serene smile. "It was, at first, but it's like anything else, really. The more it happens, the more mundane it becomes. You get used to it."

"You shouldn't *have* to," the Prince says vehemently. It's such a *Blaine* thing to say; sweet and perfect and painfully naïve, and it is this more than anything else that reminds him suddenly that *Blaine is just a boy.* A boy not much older than Kurt himself, who seems so collected and so calm and so *knowledgeable* that it's ridiculously easy to forget that he is practically a newborn in many ways.

"I shouldn't, you're right," Kurt agrees. "But I don't have a choice. We all do what we have to, to survive."

Blaine stares at him, his mask of confidence nowhere to be found at the moment. Awe is stamped on his expression in bold, red letters. "You're amazing," he says. "I don't know how you can just… take everything in stride like this."

"It takes practice," Kurt says, "but I've got plenty of that under my belt. Are you going to be okay?"

The Prince inhales, exhales, and nods. "Yeah, I think so. I already feel a little better about… about…"

And just like that, all of the progress of calming him down flies out the window with barely a wave goodbye.

Blaine shoots to his feet. "Someone tried to kill me," he says.

Kurt stands with him. "Yes, we've established that, but—"

"No, Kurt," Blaine says, grabbing him by the shoulders and staring him in the eyes. "Someone tried to kill the *Crown Prince of the Fire Nation.*" This time, it's not the act, but the implications thereof that receive the emphasis.

"Oh my La," Kurt says. "Do you think…"
And again, Blaine is lost to Kurt. His wide, fearful eyes are suddenly focused on a point far beyond
the two of them. Kurt turns to share his view, and immediately, his own heart seizes with fear.

The Spirit Lights are still going strong, but something new has leaped up to join the chaos in the
night sky—smoke. Enormous plumes of it rise into the air and arc sideways in the wind. The red
glow of the Lights is now joined by a dull orange glow from town.

The City is burning.

And Blaine looks dangerously close to having an outright panic attack. "My Dad… my friends are
all in town."

"Mine too," Kurt breathes.

The two of them turn to face each other. Kurt's worried blue eyes lock with Blaine's shocked,
horrified hazel ones. And like an electric current, something automatic and unseen and powerful
seems to pass between them. Each draws strength from the other. The icy panic that holds Blaine
frozen melts into calm focus. Kurt's fragmented worry is welded into pure, steely determination.

"How fast can you run?" Blaine asks.

"I don't need to run," Kurt says.


"I'm with you," Kurt nods, summoning as much of his water as he can recover from the mud and
demolished house.

"Ready?" Blaine asks, having adopted an odd stance next to him, crouching slightly with his arms
and hands pointed behind him.

"Ready," Kurt replies.

With that, Blaine inhales with an audible gasp, and twists his arms. Immediately, fire begins to
pour out of his hands and his feet, skating along the ground on a self-sufficient sea of incendiary
propulsion. Blaine blasts off like a rocket skater, leaving a trail of fire in his wake.

It's fitting that Kurt is following him, then.

With a graceful twist of his arms, Kurt wraps the water around himself, the shape spinning itself
into a bubble. With a single push, Kurt floats to the top of the liquid, and with his entire upper
body, he propels the liquid forward, turning it into a self-propelled wave that Kurt surfs easily on
top of. He sails quickly through the night, following in the burning wake of the Prince (and rather
helpfully extinguishing the flames as he goes).

They've got friends to save.

---

No sooner than the Avatar and the Fire Prince are out of sight of the Wang Estate, almost as
though their departure was taken as a cue, a large segment of the shattered house abruptly flies
apart in all directions, revealing a single, gloved fist in its wake, which quickly withdraws, as
though preparing to strike again…

"Come on!" Wes shouts at David from the tree limbs.
"I'm going to break my ankle!" David shouts back.

The Firebender wonders briefly if it is possible to injure your eyes by rolling them too hard. 'I'm going to break your ankle so you don't have anything to complain about if you don't COME ON!'

His darker companion glares at him, and huffs for a moment before abruptly launching off the wall as though he needed to surprise himself and shove off before his legs balked on him. He sails gracelessly through the air, actually flapping his arms as though hoping to take flight or soften his landing by fooling the air into thinking he is a bird.

Wes would scoff, but he smacked face-first into the tree on his landing, so he doesn't have much room to criticize.

David somehow manages to land on the same limb Wes is currently standing on, and manages to balance himself with minimal flailing. He seems shocked… and entirely too pleased.

"Ha! That wasn't so bad," he says with a grin. "I certainly beat your landing."

Wes opens his mouth to retort, but it turns out, he doesn't need to. The limb, as though offended by his very presence, abruptly severs itself right in front of Wes with a loud crack, dropping David like an overheated pan handle.

He decides to take this as a sign that the universe loves him.

David is grumpily brushing debris off of his backside when Wes slides to the ground beside him. "You were saying?" Wes smirks.

"Oh, shut up," David grouses. "I so beat your landing. The tree sabotaged me, and it's only on your side because you… made out with it. It likes you because you're easy."

"Says the man picking splinters out of his sphincter," Wes counters. He starts to say more, but abruptly finds that all his words have packed up and headed for the hills. He longs to follow them. "…David, was the city on fire when we came to work this morning?"

"What are you talki—oh," David gasps as he turns to see the chaos taking place. "…no, this is definitely a recent development."

"This complicates matters."

"Considerably."

"Oh, look, the sky is also on fire. Did you know it could do that? I certainly didn't."

"I am as shocked as you," David says, looking away from the insane sight of their City and towards his companion. "Wesley, my friend, I do believe this might be the end of the world."

Wes turns to look at David, taking a second to mull this over. "You might well be right," he finally decides. "I suppose we will find out one way or another before it's over with. For now, let's just focus on our objective, shall we?"

"Let's," David nods.

And they set off into the chaos of the night, hoping against hope that their friend was alright somewhere in all of this madness…
"Maybe we should go back to the restaurant," Finn suggests, dashing into another dingy, dim alleyway to avoid a throng of rioters chasing a guard who, for some odd reason, is only wearing his helmet.

"Great idea," Mercedes huffs from behind him. "Lead the way!"

Finn starts moving, only to halt himself when he realizes, "...I have no idea where we are."

"Yeah, thought so," the woman replies.

"Okay, Mercedes," Finn says with a slight growl, "do you have any bright ideas?"

"Guys," Artie says.

"**My** idea was that we stay put to begin with!" Mercedes shouts. "You were the one who decided following a panicking, dumb-ass animal was a good idea!"

"Guys," Artie says a little more urgently.

"It was **working,**" Finn insists, "until we lost it, and we only lost it because—"

"Because you got distracted by something shiny!" the female Earthbender finishes for him.

"Hey!" Artie shouts, but Water and Earth are too deeply invested in the conflict already.

"Oh, of course," Finn growls. "**Everything** is my fault! Any time something goes wrong, Finn did it!"

"Well, if it walks like a turtleduck, quacks like a turtleduck, **floats** like a turtleduck," Mercedes shouts right back at him.

Artie cups his hands around his mouth. "**ATTENTION ASSHOLES. WE ARE CURRENTLY NESTED SNUGLY BETWEEN TWO BUILDINGS THAT ARE ON FIRE. NO BIG DEAL OR ANYTHING. PLEASE CONTINUE ARGUING OVER POINTLESS SHIT.**"

*That* finally shuts them up. They look up in unison to see smoke pouring out of the windows of both buildings, with barely visible flames occasionally leaking out.

"...we should go," Finn says.

"Agreed," Mercedes says, before they hear the sound that, unbeknownst to the three of them, effectively heralds the turn of this night from bad to worse.

"**Moooomyyyyyy!**" a high-pitched voice cries from one of the windows.

Three heads snap up to the source of the sound. And each of them knows that they won't be leaving this alleyway until the source of it is dealt with, one way or another.

"Cover me, waterboy," Mercedes commands, marching over to the window and crouching for just a second before thrusting both hand to the sky, erecting a massive column of Earth beneath her feet. She rises up to the window, shielding her face from the smoke and shouting. "Hey! Is there a little person in here?"

"**MOMMY!**" the voice shouts again, about ten times more panicked than before. It's all the cue she needs to barrel right through window, wall, and whatever else happens to be in her way, and head
in after the child.

Back on the ground, Finn is flailing a little. "Cover her?" he says, looking around helplessly. "With what?"

Artie shatters his cast and thrusts himself out of his chair, plopping to the ground and quickly arranging his legs. "I'll see what I can rustle up." With that, he Earth Slides out of the alley so fast he practically leaves afterimages, knocking over a trashcan along the way and not even stopping to give a single fuck.

Which leaves Finn to stand around somewhat uselessly. He has a bit of water in his waterskin, but it's not even going to be a drop in the bucket for this blaze.

"Hey!" Mercedes says from above. "I can't get to the window! The fire's spread too far! Now would be a good time for that water!"

"I don't have that much!" Finn shouts. "I don't think—"

"Back!" Artie shouts, sounding a little breathless as he seems to just appear next to Finn, his shoulders loaded down with a pole containing two decent sized, sloshing buckets of water.

"Where'd you get those?" Finn wonders.

"Doesn't matter," he pants. "Do your thing!"

"Any damn time you please, now!" Mercedes shouts, and Finn gets to work, bending the water out of the buckets into a single ellipsis, which he sends up and snakes through the open window before letting it fall. A loud, rewarding hiss follows shortly after.

"Is that good?" Finn asks.

His answer comes in the form of Mercedes barreling back through the hole she left, jumping on the column and lowering herself down with a small, slightly scorched Fire Nation boy clinging to her back like a baby monkey. "Yeah," Mercedes says, giving him a small smile as she catches her breath, "real good."

"We need to get out of this alley," Artie says, already positioned near his wheelchair. Finn hustles over to heft him into it, and the three (now four) of them run out of the alleyway just in time to hear a resounding crash as one of the buildings collapses. They slide to a halt on a sidewalk, taking it as a small blessing that there don't seem to be too many people around. Artie grins up at Finn, who smiles back at him and turns to Mercedes, who is starting to put the child on the ground.

It is then that Finn notices the child is still (slightly) on fire. Without even thinking about it, he pops open his waterskin and slings the entirety of it at the boy, who turns to look at him just in time to take the full brunt of the water to the face.

"Careful!" Mercedes shouts at Finn. "You nearly knocked him over!"

Finn ignores her, rushing over to the kid and kneeling down beside him. "Hey, sorry about that," he says gently. "Are you okay?"

The boy stares at him with wide, fearful eyes for approximately two seconds, before opening his mouth and effectively sealing their fates.

"WATERBENDEEEERRRRRR!" he squeals at the top of his lungs.
Several dozen people suddenly stop dead in their tracks to turn and stare straight at Finn. Their expressions say many things. 'Thank you, oh brave heroes, for saving this boy!' is not one of them. In fact, that is pretty much the opposite of what they are saying.

Finn gulps and takes a step back. "Ummm, I really… you know… uhhh…"

The little boy runs off to the safety of the mob, and the crowd takes this as their cue to start closing in on the three of them.

"No good deed goes unpunished," Mercedes sighs.

"Story of our lives," Artie sighs with her.

Finn just sighs.

Blaine slides to a halt at the edge of town, and very nearly collapses on the spot from the sight in front of him. Everywhere he looks, buildings are burning. People are doing everything from running to shouting to fighting to throwing things to lying on the ground, very, very still. None of it makes any sense. Things were fine when they left… weren't they?

Kurt's wave crashes into the ground behind him, and the Avatar quickly takes his place beside him, staring out at the chaos in abject horror. Kurt's hand flies to his mouth, a high-pitched sound that he can't quite describe escaping his throat anyway.

"What is this?" Blaine whispers. "Why is this happening?"

"I… I don't know," Kurt says.

Blaine shakes his head, attempting to gather his courage again. "I… I have to get to my father at the Palace. He'll know what to do," he says, hoping desperately that at least one of them will be reassured by the statement.

"My friends are out there somewhere," Kurt says.

"Where?" Blaine asks.

"Mercedes left a note… some restaurant. The Purple Portabello, or something like that."

"The Purple Parakeet!" Blaine says. "That's near the edge of town, that way." He points to a place that is most definitely not on the way to the Royal Palace.

And suddenly, Kurt is at a loss. The last thing he wants to do is leave Blaine, especially when there might be more assassins after him… but at the same time, he can't just assume his friends are okay and leave them in the pandemonium of the riots, especially not with the kind of his luck both he and his friends tend to have.

"I… I guess this is where we separate," Blaine says, sounding miserable.

"Not for long," Kurt replies. "As soon as I find my friends and make sure they're okay, I'll meet you at the Palace. Whatever is causing this, we'll face it together. Okay?"

The Prince's answer is to wrap Kurt in the fiercest, most clutching hug he has ever felt in his life. He has a hard time not tearing up at how strong Blaine is, and how desperately he seems to cling to him. Kurt squeezes him back, and neither of them wants to let go.
But eventually, Blaine does. "Be safe, okay?" he says.

Kurt nods. "You too."

And then, as if staying for even one moment longer would turn him to stone and keep him from moving at all, Blaine dashes into the city. Kurt watches for a second as he quickly scales a building like it's the most natural thing in the world and disappears over the rooftop.

The Avatar then turns his eyes to the section of the City that Blaine pointed him towards. Crouching low, he places his hands on the ground and dashes forward, a spire of solid rock jutting out of the ground beneath his feet and propelling him through the air onto a rooftop of his own. Finn, Mercedes, and Artie are capable benders, but they don't know the City like Blaine, can't rooftop run like Blaine, and have no friends in town. Blaine is in his natural element here... he will fare much better on his own than they will. Won't he?

He hopes against hope that he is making the right decision here, and that Blaine will be safe in the arms of his father before long...

"Well, well, well..."

Sue is all smiles as she enters the throne room, backed by what appear to be several of his own men. The Fire Lord has to fight against the rage that boils in his heart at the mere sight of this woman. Losing control will do him no good here. There are precious few reasons why this dragoness would ever visit him, even fewer as to why she would do so unannounced.

Almost none of them are good.

"So, Junior goes missing and you send the entire military after him," Sue says, smirking at him, "but a pandemic disease threatens to take the population of this entire country down to single digits, and you hold the door open and say 'come on in, the water's fine!' Where is the logic, FL? Where is the consistency, where—" she pauses, holding a hand to her heart, "is the love for the common man? Where—"

"Where," the Fire Lord interjects with no small amount of venom, "is my son?"

"Well, if the assassins I hired are even half as competent as one of my low-level Chi-Ryus, he's probably scattered liberally over the countryside, providing nutrition and essential vitamins and minerals to hundreds of beautiful flowers just aching to bloom when summer rolls around."

Lord Anderson's breath hisses as he exhales slowly. "I should have known you were behind this. You are a lying, manipulative, conniving, power-hungry—"

"No, FL, what I am," Sue cuts in, "is nothing more than a concerned, morally upstanding, incredibly well-qualified citizen who bravely steps into the position of Fire Lord even though the previous occupant of the office was so unpopular that he and his baby boy were slaughtered by their own rebelling citizens. At least, that's what the history books will say. And how do I know that? Why, because I will be writing them! Already finished the first volume, in fact."

The dragon faces on the arms of the throne suddenly crack and crumble to pieces, collapsing beneath the pressure of Lord Anderson's grip as every torch in the room flares to lick at the ceiling. "I tire of your endless chatter," he says, rising regally to his feet. "Let us see who history records this day."
"Bring it, Sparky," Sue says, arms wide and welcoming. "Let's you and me dance."

_TO BE CONTINUED_

_A/N:_ The evening is fast approaching its climax! In our next chapter, some not-so-vanquished enemies give the Fire Prince a run for his life, Kurt's friends find themselves under siege from an increasingly frenzied mob, and the Avatar must race against the clock before he loses both! Stay tuned, and leave a comment or review if you feel inclined. ;)

**Fall of the Prince, Part 1**

Chapter Notes

**Media:** Fic  
**Title:** Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 15/?)  
**Rating:** PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.  
**Spoilers:** None for either series that I am aware of.  
**Warnings:** Cursing, innuendo, violence.  
**Word Count:** 6368  
**Summary:** Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

**Author's Note:** Remember when I said I was going to be mean to Blaine? Yeah, I wasn't kidding. The Chapter title should tell you as much. The action is reaching a peak here—this and the next chapter or two form the climax of Act 1 of this little story. I hope you enjoy! :D

Master Post

**CHAPTER 15 – Fall of the Prince, Part 1**

Dad.

He has to find Dad.

This is Blaine's mantra as he blitzes across the rooftops of the Burning City, running as fast as the lightning he so desperately wishes he could make.

He has to find Dad. Dad will know what to do. Dad knows all about this stuff, about the… Crazy Sun, or whatever is causing this. Dad will know what to do and he will fix everything and he will be fine. They will both be fine. Even though… even though he knows that the only reason someone would try to kill him—*assassinate* him, is to remove a legitimate successor to the throne. And the only reason anyone would want to remove a successor to the throne would be if they wanted to sit on it themselves.
And you can't sit on a throne if someone else is already there.

Whatever. It doesn't matter. It can't matter. Because this… this is the only thing he can think to do right now. If this doesn't work, he's lost. If… if he can't find Dad…

Something whistles as it flies past his ear from behind, just barely missing him. He flicks his eyes over just in time to see some kind of rope trap spin and attach itself to a small, metal chimney. Immediately, he jumps to the side, pivoting on one foot just in time to see another trap fly through the spot he just vacated. The pivot lets him see the source of the attacks, even though he more or less already knows who it is.

Santana is crouched low on the roof behind him. Her hair is mussed, and her outfit is torn in a few places, but other than a few cuts and scratches, she looks fighting fit. The red of the sky mixed with the deep orange of the fires all around give her a downright psychotic glow.

"You again," Blaine challenges, sounding braver than he feels. "What? You didn't get enough the first time?"

"I like it rough," she smirks, "and I'm always up for sloppy seconds. I think the real question here is," she says, stepping forward seductively, "are you up to the task of pleasing me without your partner behind you?"

"Oh, I get it. You're afraid to fight Kurt, aren't you?" Blaine challenges.

"No, sweet cheeks, Avvy-boy has nothing to do with this. This little shindig is all about you," she grins, coming to a halt and posing with a hand on her hips.

The Fire Prince starts to reply, when he notices something—she doesn't seem to be looking at him, so much as she is looking at the roof underneath him. Two and two are put together in record time, and the Fire Prince backflips away just in time to witness his former perch explode from underneath. Titanic fragments of mortar and stone and wood fly into the air like an erupting geyser, and Blaine is well aware that he was a split second from going right along with them.

Puck sticks his head through the hole, grinning at him. "Hey, bro. Ready for round 2? 'Cause I'm just now getting warmed up."

Oh, dragon dong.

"Just hold still," Santana says gently, mocking him with an exaggerated pout. "And we'll make it quick. It won't even hurt."

"I'd rather go volcano diving," Blaine says.

"What are you gonna do, tough guy?" Puck says, pulling himself up onto the rooftop with them. "You think you can fight us both?"

The Fire Prince doesn't even have to think about this one. "No, I don't," he says, slowly pushing the air out of his lungs before finishing with, "but I bet I can outrun you!"

Before either of them has a chance to reply, Blaine jumps as high as he can and gasps as deeply as possible, raising both hands to draw forth a gigantic fireball, which he slams down onto the roof between them. He barely has time to turn his face away from the explosion, which propels him high through the air and sends him clear across the street.

He twists himself in mid-air just enough to land in an awkward roll that ends with him on his back
and slightly out of breath (as opposed to on his back and knocked out or with a broken leg). No time to catch his wind at the moment, however, so he quickly springs up to survey the damage. The building he used to be standing on is now burning brilliantly, a fairly significant part of the roof having outright collapsed, but it's impossible for him to make out anything that might be behind the smoke and the flames.

Then, he sees it—a sleek black figure leaping high into the air through the smoke. She is clearly aiming to cross the road herself, but Blaine, who knows his jumps, can plainly see she isn't going to make it…

…that is, until she lashes out with her whip hard enough to embed the thing into a stone statue, and uses the extra leverage to hoist herself on over.

Oh well. At least he doesn't have to worry about…

…the wall of the building buckles and blasts outwards, revealing the bulky form of Puck, who somehow manages to spot him right off the bat.

Double flaming dragon dong.

Well, Blaine supposes it's time to put his boast to the test. With nary a look back, he breaks into his fiercest sprint.

The chase begins.

The Avatar's feet slide easily over an arcing rail of solid ice between two rooftops. The second his feet make contact with tile, his hands begin the smooth movements of melting and regathering the water even as he runs. It isn't quite as impressive as Blaine's method, and it's more than a little conspicuous, but it works for him, and that's all that matters at the moment. He is so far beyond caring who sees him do this. He no longer has time to care.

Maybe he never did.

His flight over the City's ceilings feels a lot like jumping across ice floes at the North Pole, so employing a similar strategy to make it from one roof to the next seems like a sound idea. Really, the only difference is better traction for the most part… well, that and the fact that falling will probably lead to him being boiled or flash-fried instead of frozen.

Each time he needs to make a crossing, he lashes his water supply into a rope between the two rooftops and simply slides across. It gets stretched a bit thin at times, but he's more than capable of forcing it to support his weight so long as there are no distractions popping up, like, oh, huge jets of flame being shot upwards by angry/drunk/crazy Firebenders.

Oh, hey, wait, those are everywhere!

He supposes that past a certain point, a lot of Firebenders will make giant explosions just to make themselves feel better or something. Kind of like a steaming teapot—the pressure just builds and builds until there is no choice but to vent or outright explode. There is a whole lot of venting going on tonight, and he supposes that if anything ever qualified as a high pressure situation, this would probably be it.

As he passes over the collective heads of a street full of shouting citizens, a few of the sharper ones actually stream some fire directly at him, and a quick leap is the only thing that keeps him from falling to the street when his ice rail is melted and evaporated.
Unfortunately, the leap is a little more enthusiastic than he intends, and carries him right over the edge of the building he *wanted* to land on, instead resulting in an undignified flop on a slightly lower, significantly more *on fire* building adjacent to it. It doesn't take him long to recover from the fall—he's had much worse—but it's *just* long enough for the building to give a low, mighty groan, accompanied by a powerful shudder, before treating Kurt like the straw that broke the camelephant's back and caving in. The roof collapses and dumps him right in the middle of a room that is somehow burning inwards from every direction.

Well, *piss*. And just as he runs out of water, too…

The opening of the night sky is just encouragement for the flames to reach for the stars and make all their dreams come true—they burn brighter and higher than ever as soon as Kurt enters their midst. And as much as he hates to crush their dreams of becoming the best, most beautiful flames ever to scorch the earth, he really, really needs to not die. It's them versus him, so it's time to put Blaine's teachings into practice.

Kurt thrusts his open hand at one of the approaching flames, and is very nearly bowled over by the *power* of what he has connected with—this is wildfire, far bigger and more ferocious than the tiny campfire Blaine had him practice on. It makes every nerve in his body tingle and buzz, and the instinctive part of his brain wants to withdraw from it immediately. It's too much.

*Keep calm, have courage.*

Blaine's low, gentle voice pushes him forward, urges him to dive out of the nest without throwing him to the wind. He steadies his breathing and fights against the fire, keeping himself under control even when it feels like it isn't working, like he's about to spontaneously combust right there on the spot because it's just *too much*—

And then, suddenly, it isn't. The fire is his. And he extinguishes it without mercy, blowing it out like a matchstick in a hurricane.

With part of the room no longer obscured by flames or smoke, Kurt can see a window. It's his best opportunity at the moment, so he takes it, shattering it with a kick before leaping through. It's a second-story window, but the ground below is nothing but dirt and stone, so he's *got* this—his Earthbending instincts take over, and his landing immediately defuses all of his momentum into the ground, causing a small shockwave to spread from his position.

In keeping with his luck, he has landed right in the middle of a fairly busy street.

"EARTHBENDER!" someone shouts, and immediately, Kurt is confronted by a group of about a dozen disheveled-looking Fire Nationals.

"What do you think you're doing here, dirtbag?" one man sneers.

"Yeah, we don't take kindly to you mud-monkeys dragging your filth into our city!" another growls.

Kurt bristles at the hateful slurs, but he doesn't bite. "Please, just leave me alone."

"You leave *us* alone!" a woman shrieks. "We never asked for you filthy, disease-ridden curs to bring your illness to us!"

The crowd is attempting to back him against a wall, and it's working admirably.

"I don't want to hurt you," Kurt warns. It's the truth—he doesn't want to hurt people if it can be
avoided. But he is quite up to the task when it can't, a fact that he is afraid these people are going to learn the hard way.

"The feeling ain't mutual!" a spindly woman shouts, and then comes the fire. Kurt has just enough time to stomp up a solid, rectangular wall of rock between him and his assailants. The flames can be seen, sticking bright orange tongues out over the sides of the stone and licking at him.

He is getting ready to push the wall into their collective faces when the roar of an angry cow resounds from behind the wall, followed by several loud impacts and at least one man flying several feet into the air. The fire stops at this, and Kurt drops the wall just in time to see the tail-end of an animal charging off into the night.

"...was that a moose?" he wonders aloud.

"Yes," one of the unfortunate citizens in the beast's path groans.

"Ah. Thank you for confirming that," Kurt says, before checking to make sure the coast is clear and then dashing off in the direction the beast came from.

Drizzle probably isn't the only dragon moose in the city, but Drizzle or not, it was coming from the right direction. Hopefully, the crazy thing cleared enough people off the streets to give him an opportunity to get more water and (here's a phrase he never imagined crossing his mind) get back on the rooftops where it's safe.

People on the ground are crazy.

"What's wrong with you?" one of the manifold talking heads spits at him. "Attacking a child! That's low, even for a piss-bender."

"Hey!" Finn barks. "That's low, dude, and anyway, I wasn't attacking him! He was on fire!"

"YOU'RE on fire!" is the intelligent counter to that little outburst. Under certain circumstances, it might work. Sadly, the crowd is too worked up to capitalize on the moment and Finn remains blissfully fire-free.

"Look, everybody just calm down," Mercedes tries, calmly but forcefully.

"DON'T TELL US WHAT TO DO," someone shouts, and a bottle is thrown at Mercedes's head.

"Oh, Hills no, I know you did not just do that," Mercedes sasses, dropping her veneer of calm like she might drop a screeching cat trying to claw her. "Y'all hotheads try some shit like that again; see if I don't drop a mountain on your asses."

The crowd's response to that is a jumble collection of scandalized gasp, outraged squawks, and angry Earth Kingdom slurs thrown like knives. Finn glances over at Artie to see him starting to look antsy. There is a light sheen of sweat on his forehead, and his hands are twitching.

Shit.

"Please," Finn pleads. "Please, we don't want any trouble!"

"YOU'RE trouble!" responds the razor wit responsible for the similar counter from before.

"Hey! You stole my moose!" a very familiar voice joins in. Finn and Artie's respective eyebrows
leap so high in such perfect unison that the move seems almost choreographed, while the set of
Mercedes’s jaw and the furrow of her brow looks halfway between wanting to calm everyone down
and being ready and willing to tear a hole in the crowd with her bare hands.

"I… I don't know what you're talking about," Finn stammers.

"LIAR!" the old man shouts. "You're a lying little soggy sack o' shit is what you are! I knows it
was you! You stole my moose!"

"You killed my cat!" someone else joins in.

"What!" Finn cries, at this point wishing he did walk and quack like a turtleduck—at least then he'd
have a shell to hide in. Meanwhile, the accusations keep piling on.

"He ran over my leg!"

"He turned my husband into a badgertoad!"

"He gave me mono!"

"He told me he was deaf!"

"I'll leave!" Finn promises. "We'll all leave, I promise, please, we just don't want anyone to get hurt
—"

And then comes the biggest and most profound accusation of all.

"Hey! Isn't the Avatar supposed to be a Waterbender?" a darker-skinned woman wonders aloud.

Finn realizes a few seconds too late that the enormous eye-bulge and the 'oh shit' on his face that
could probably be seen from space was the worst possible way he could've reacted to that.

"You're right!" a young man says, pointing. "Look at him turning all white! I bet that's him! He's
the Avatar!"

"No, I'm not!" Finn insists in vain.

"He is!" someone from the back of the crowd shouts. "I saw him Earthbend the other day!"

"No, you didn't!" Finn shouts with increasing desperation!

"You really didn't," Artie tries. "He's just a Waterbender!"

"Yeah," Finn agrees, "not even a very good one!"

But the crowd isn't listening. Shouts of "Avatar!" grow more and more feverish, and the fury of the
crowd seems to feed upon itself, getting louder and louder by the second. More and more people
seem to crawl out of the woodwork and pop out of the increasingly smokey streets to join in the
cries, and the mob swells and throbs like a particularly juicy pimple, just waiting for someone to
pop it.

"Shit," Finn says, backing away from the increasingly indecipherable roar of the crowd. "Shit! I'm
sorry, guys."

"It's not your fault, sweetie," Mercedes says, gently taking his hand and rubbing circles on it with
her thumb. "For once," she adds with a small smile.
"Should we…" Artie says, starting to breathe a little harder. His hands twitch and begin to nervously rub his arms through his oversized sleeves. "If we really needed to, I could—"

"No!" Finn says. "Don't. I don't want anyone to get hurt."

"Someone is going to get hurt," Mercedes says just as another bottle flies past her head. "It's just a matter of who."

Finn's back finally hits the wall as he and his friends are boxed in by the crowd. There's nowhere left to run. He stares up at the glowing, crimson sky and manages to spot the half-moon through the haze. "Tui," he pleads with it. "If you can hear me, umm… could you help us out here? We could really use some spirit intervention right about now. Please," he adds, near tears, hoping desperately the heavenly body will hear him.

"Please don't let us die."

Blaine really doesn't want to die.

The Prince's footfalls as he desperately dashes away from his death come fast and hard. He's surprised he isn't leaving a trail of flames across the roofs he is crossing, as he is running like he has never run before in his life. Behind him, Santana remains steadfast in her pursuit, tailing him with incredible speed and agilely leaping over the same gaps he leaps, occasionally using her whip to gain extra leverage and play catch-up if he gets too far ahead. Below him, Puck follows them both on the ground, outright barreling through any obstacle, be it a moose-drawn cart, a merchant's stand, a wall or even an entire building. He can hear the crash of falling walls, the shattering of glass and mortar and brick and wood flying apart as the beastly man tears apart the City in his single-minded obsession with chasing him down.

If he falls behind, he's dead.
If he falls down, he's dead.
If he falls at all, he's dead.

So there's not much to do besides keep on running.

Reaching the edge of the roof, he handsprings over the low guard wall, flipping around in mid-air on his way to the next building, landing in a small rooftop garden. With every new environmental obstacle he meets, Blaine's mind reflexively maps his way over, under, around, or through it. The garden is loaded with plants—the building next to this one is higher. He takes a diving leap over a trough of Fire Lily buds, rolls underneath a hanging rail of In-Fern-O's, turns to the side mid-stride to dodge a thornbush, and without a second thought, jumps up, tucks himself into a ball and flies right through the third story window of the next building, landing in the hallway in a shower of glass and not even breaking stride.

Santana seems to have little trouble with these obstacles. She can jump a hell of a lot higher than Blaine can, but she can't run as fast and doesn't seem used to circumventing the entire universe like Blaine is. It's pretty much his only advantage, and he damn well intends to keep using it.

He seems to have landed in a hallway, and it doesn't go all the way through the building. He runs along the wall and kicks off of it to take the corner, seeing a window at the end and bolting for it just as he hears Santana's footfalls on the broken glass he left behind. Unfortunately, it doesn't take him long to realize this particular window doesn't face another building—it opens out onto a street.
Oh well. A little late to be precious about that now…

He jumps, kicking the window out and using the momentum to turn himself around in mid-air, grabbing the frame just long enough to stop himself from flying butt-first into the street, and then dropping down the face of the building to grab the next window. Below that is an awning, which he happily lands in, intending to run along it for a few feet before leaping down to—

Suddenly, none of that matters. The wall beneath the awning explodes with such force that the transferred momentum turns the thing inside out and catapults Blaine through the air. He twists himself around just in time to avoid smacking face-first into the bar across the road, but there's no avoiding the wall completely, and it still hurts like hell to absorb the full momentum of the impact. He is momentarily stunned as he drops to the ground, which is one moment too many, because Puck is charging *right at him*.

"Ozark!" someone shouts, at the same time as another voice bellows "Prince Blaine!"

His head jumps up just in time to see Puck slide to a halt as a large fireball detonates at his feet. "Get away from the Prince, you fiend!" the extremely battered-looking guard shouts, attempting to impose himself between Blaine and Puck.

"Prince? Who are you talking about?" a weather-beaten woman shouts at the guard.

Santana pauses at the window Blaine just exited, and spies him almost instantly. She immediately begins descending to join them.


"Get back, beast!" the Guard growls, and starts to attack.

"No!" Blaine tries in vain to warn, but it's too late, Puck steps forward, puts one hand on the guard, and shoves him clear into the second floor of a bath house over a block away.

"Ozark, what's going on?" the woman (he thinks her name is Bertha) demands of him as she rushes over to fret.

"Get out of here! Run!" he shouts, pushing her away. He's so pleased when she actually listens that he finally regains enough of his breath to Firebend. He scrapes his foot along the ground towards the armored man, sending a shower of sparks towards his face and a wave of flames along the ground at his feet. Puck steps back to shield his face, and then quickly retaliates in exactly the way Blaine had hoped he would—by smashing the ground. Blaine jumps just before impact, attempting to angle himself correctly, as the powerful punch's force sends him flying farther and faster than he could have ever hoped to get himself. He doesn't land on the roof like he had hoped, instead having to quickly pivot himself to run diagonally down the wall so he doesn't smear himself across it, but it's an awesome head start.

As he lands, he notices the street ahead of him could not be more perfect. He still needs to get back to his high happy place, but the path to that is so perfect, it's almost miraculous—all he has to do is run along a wall, flip off and land on the roof of an expensive-looking carriage, jump from that and handspring off of a street lamp to reach a balcony, where it's an easy task to run up the wall, grab the gutter, and flip himself over the side. He's getting closer and closer to the Palace, and he now has an awesome head start. He might even lose them if he keeps going—

Santana lands on the roof in *front* of him. He is flabbergasted. "Wh… how…?"

"That was a slick little move you pulled back there," Santana sneers. "Thanks for showing us. We'll
make good use of it after we finish you."

He starts to try and dash past her, but her whip lashes out and wraps around him, pinning his arms to his sides and effectively immobilizing him. She yanks him in close, smirking and leaning in so that he can practically taste her breath when she purrs at him. "It's a shame it has to end like this. You're kind of cute. If I didn't have to kill you, we could've had so much fun."

Her breath on his face is what inspires his next feat. "Not cute," he smiles, leaning so close his nose practically touches hers. "Hot," he corrects.

Then he breathes a shit-ton of fire right at her face.

She shrieks and jerks her head backwards, but she isn't quite fast enough. The whip goes slack, and he dashes past her. Even amidst her flailing, Blaine can see her eyebrows are completely gone, and even better; the rest of her hair is on fire. She lets out an earsplitting scream of rage that promises a horrifyingly slow death before she runs and jumps off the building, probably to bury her head in the sand.

Blaine just takes that as an impetus to run even faster.

"Mmmmmm," Agatha sighs. *This is the life. After a hard day at work hauling feed to Turducken farmers, nothing beats a nice, relaxing soak in a hot tub. Her husband is quite possibly the most wonderful man ever—for her birthday this year, he gave her a gift certificate to the Delicate Flesh Day Spa, a full package deal including a manicure, pedicure, facial, a deep tissue massage with scented lotion, and finally, a soak in a hot tub surrounded with soothing, fragrant oils, with a nice man playing sitar in the corner to provide a relaxing ambiance. She has no idea how long she has been here—hours, most likely, with the way her skin is pruning. She just can't bring herself to leave. In this blessed, wonderful oasis, it's like the problems of the world don't even exist. All she has to do is kick back, relax, and let her worries float away with the steam…"

"OH, GOOD GODS," a high voice blurts suddenly. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I had no idea anyone was back here!"

Agatha starts and immediately makes to cover herself from the young man standing in the doorway and covering his eyes. "What is wrong with you?" she scolds. "Don't they teach young people to knock these days!"

The young man seems so thrown by this that he momentarily drops his hand to glare at her in utter disbelief. He quickly remembers himself and brings his arm back up, hiding his eyes with his elbow. "Do you seriously not know what's going on outside?"

"What are you talking about?" she grumbles. "What is going on outside?"

The young man sighs, and she recognizes the tone—it is a sigh of true weariness, carrying a tone that can only be pulled off by one who has been truly burdened. It startles her to hear it coming out of one so young—the weight of the world rarely presses down so hard, so quickly, and she finds herself wondering who this mysterious boy is and what terrible weight he carries that makes him sigh so.

He speaks. "Lady, if you want my advice, you should stay in here. Unless this place catches on fire, do not go outside. Sit, smell all of these wonderful fragrances, and ignore the rest of the world."

She was planning on doing that anyway. At least, until…
"But… ummm, I'm going to need that bathwater. Sorry," he winces, and suddenly, the warm, soothing water she so loved seems to slosh in the tub of its own accord, before lifting up and into the air and following the fleeing boy out of the room with nary a look back.

It takes her a few seconds to realize that she is standing naked in an empty hot tub with a man in the room. She quickly covers herself, scrambling to wrap the nearby towel around her before climbing grumpily out to go get dressed.

As she passes the sitar playing man, his eyebrows are wiggling and he is wearing a sly smile.

When she leaves the room, his eyebrows are clenched and he is wearing the sitar.

She is married. And she and her wonderful husband have got a very long letter of complaint to write. Whoever owns this place had better be prepared to pay for this offense. Preferably with more gift certificates.

This is insane.

Sam can only thank his lucky stars that he is watching this madness from a distance instead of up-close and personal. His powerful telescope gives him a great view of the action—massive groups of people move throughout the city in mobs that transfer to one another and collect like rain droplets sliding down glass. Where they once appeared to have some kind of goal in mind, now they just seem to be caught up in a whirlwind of chaos, smashing and looting and destroying whatever is unlucky enough to catch their collective eye. It's a special kind of madness, the kind that infects many instead of one, and can only be abated when the many are separated. One particularly large group of people that seems to be growing by the second is surrounding a small, partially collapsed building with three tiny figures backed against it. This mob seems to be among the most furious of all, judging by the way it seems to toss and shudder, like the ocean during a storm.

He can't help but wonder what all the fuss is about, so he ups the zoom on his telescope, focuses it on the three figures backed up against the building, and—

"Finn?" he shouts, not entirely sure who he's shouting at, but needing to shout nonetheless. Zooming in even further, he is able to confirm it—it is him! Artie and Mercedes, too! They are backed against the wall, shouting desperately at the crowd, which just seems to be getting more and more agitated by whatever they are saying. Whatever is happening, they are clearly in deep shit. He kind of wishes he could do something about it.

Except… wait, where is Kurt?

Though he knows he probably isn't going to be able to see much, he can't resist at least doing a cursory sweep of the area for the freaking Avatar. Unfortunately, all the smoke makes it a little hard to see… wait! Oh, Holy Fish, he is awesome. Kurt is waterbending his way across some rooftops a good distance away from the troubled trio. He's coming to save the day!

Sam gives an enthusiastic fist-pump in honor of the awesome Avatar.

Wait, why is he stopping? Why is he looking around like he doesn't know where to go? Hey! He's going the wrong way!

"Shit," Sam curses. Kurt must not know where the others are. And if he doesn't find them soon…
…huh, maybe there is a way he can help.

Finally breaking contact with his telescope, Sam scrambles over to his massive backpack, opening one of the many side pockets and digging around until he finds…

*Aha!*

Pulling the sizeable device out of his backpack, he goes back to his telescope, checks once more to confirm the trio's location, and then takes aim. Adjusting himself for windspeed and directional compensation, he… basically prays to the spirits that his aim doesn't suck and that he at least gets this in the general area.

Then he pulls the trigger on his flare gun and hopes for the best.

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A wise man once told him that the speed of travel is meaningless if you do not know your destination. Of course, he also said that not all who wander are lost. Sayings are funny and contradictory like that sometimes, which is why he prefers to ignore them most of the time. Except right now, those sayings are all he can think about because he IS wondering and he is DEFINITELY lost. He has no idea where he is in the city, besides that he is in the general direction Blaine pointed out. Even if he does find the Purple Poncho, or whatever, there's no guarantee his friends are still there or even that the building is still standing. His water supply has been helpfully renewed via a well-timed visit to a spa, but it doesn't mean anything because he has no idea where he is supposed to be going.

"Give me a sign!" Kurt shouts to the heavens. "Please! Something, *anything*, I just need to know where to go—"

For once in his freaking life, the Heavens actually decide to answer him. A bright red ball of light seems to shoot out of the sky from nowhere, streaking across the cityscape before falling between two buildings.

"…wow. That was quite possibly the best customer service I've ever gotten out of you guys!" he says, waving towards the sky with a smile. "Thank you!"

With that, he begins to mid-air ice skate towards where the ball of light landed, hoping against hope that his friends are alright even as the roar of the crowd grows louder and louder…

"I swear," Finn shouts, "I swear to every single God and Spirit I can think of, I am **not** the Avatar!"

"Preach!" Artie concurs.

"I don't know how to bend anything but water! I can't even bend myself over that far. I'm totally not flexible at all!" Finn continues.

"Speak the truth, my brother!" Artie melodramatically cries in support.

Behind them, Mercedes is *very subtly* attempting to Earthbend a backdoor into their current situation, but she still finds time to roll her eyes.

"I can't bend Earth," he says, gesturing at the ground, "I can't mess with Air," he continues, hands towards the sky, before finishing by tossing his arms out to his side and yelling, "and there is absolutely, positively, no freaking way I can do *anything* with **FIRE**!"
The universe hates him. There is no other explanation.

Because at the exact moment Finn utters the word 'Fire,' a bright red fireball slams into the building right above their heads and blows out every single upper-level window with a powerful and resounding explosion of flame.

The crowd falls completely silent.

Finn's arms flop to his side. He cannot even. He just. There is no. Why.

Fresh out of both patience and time, Mercedes knocks down the wall to the building behind them, grabs Finn and Artie, and pulls them both inside just before the crowd detonates into a raging inferno of fury and chaos. She just barely manages to erect a wall of Earth between them and the half-a-gazillion people out there baying for their blood.

All three of them know it's a temporary solution at best. They can hear the people smash against the stone wall like a tidal wave, hear the explosions of fire being hurled at them from practically every direction, feel the ground tremble with thousands upon thousands of footfalls…

…feel the heat of the fire now burns right above them and grows larger and hungrier by the second.

"I'm sorry," Finn says again.

This time, his only answer comes in the form of two sets of hands gently squeezing his in the dark.

Maybe the burning her hair thing was a mistake. Because now Santana is chasing him down with the singleminded fury of a mother platypus bear with a kidnapped cub. The look on her face would make a saber-toothed moose lion cry and curl up and suck its thumb, and the rate of her attacks has increased a hundred times over. Seriously, where is she even getting all of these rope traps? They seem to be wrapped around her in various places, but it seems like she should run out at some point. Is she drawing them from her clothes? Is she going to run out when she's naked?

Even worse (and even more baffling) Blaine's assault seems to have sent Puck into a frenzy as well. The boisterous bruiser has taken to finding any random object on the street large enough to cause property damage, benches, to tables, to entire moose-drawn carts, and heaving them towards Blaine on the rooftops with as much force as he can muster (which is, you know, a lot).

He screeches to a halt just in time to avoid a large gong that Puck somehow got a hold of, which tears through the building with enough force to cut off a small part of the corner. He stumbles backwards, only to hear Santana behind him and know that he can't even afford to look- he just ducks down and falls into the hole Puck created, landing in what used to be a bathroom. Santana lashes her whip at him, but he quickly flips out of the way and goes for the door to head further into the house.

The fucking knob comes off.

He is incapable of doing anything but staring at it blankly for a second, as though it had personally betrayed him.

That second is all the time they need.

The floor beneath him shatters and bursts upwards, sending him flying and showering him in shrapnel, shredding his clothes and a decent bit of flesh. The impact stuns and jars him severely,
but the beat-down isn't over yet—as he flies past her, Santana lashes out with her whip, wrapping it around his neck and slinging him down onto the rooftop. He lands with a flop and a loud cry that he is barely even aware of, rolling and flopping violently across the stone surface before coming to a rest on his side inches away from the edge of the building.

He coughs and groans, his head feeling like it's been split in two and his entire body seeming to have turned to jelly from the impact. He tastes blood. His vision is mostly white, and every sound seems to echo a dozen times in his ears. He can't even think about moving.

Not even when his hazy, swimming vision forms into roughly the shape of Santana and Puck standing above him, or when all twelve of them growl at him…

"We changed our minds. This is going to hurt. A lot."

**TO BE CONTINUED**

_A/N: *standard issue polite request for reviews/comments.* :)_
The crowd thuds against the walls of their makeshift fortress at regular intervals. As fortresses go, this one is pretty crappy. It's got holes everywhere, it's unstable and badly damaged in several places, and... oh yeah, it's on fire. But as far as 'things between us and a bloodthirsty mob,' it's pretty much the best they can do at the moment. Sure, the interior is dark and musty, but it's four walls and a (slowly burning) roof above their heads. It keeps them from drowning in a human tsunami.

But they know that won't last much longer.

The building shakes as another explosion rocks the walls. Plumes of dust and debris fall from the ceiling, showering the three benders in soot. Finn sneezes, though he helpfully makes enough of a spectacle to warn everyone to dodge well before anything is expelled.

"Well, this sucks," Artie says, righting himself in his chair after having leaned over to avoid Finn's snot explosion. "Guys, I think it's time."
"You really ready to pull out all the stops, big boy?" Mercedes asks.

"If we have to go down, I want to go down swinging," Artie replies.

"I guess we really don't have a choice, do we?" Finn sighs.

"The only other option is to sit here and twiddle our thumbs while we wait for them to pull 'em off and make necklaces with 'em," Mercedes says simply.

Finn sighs again, before scrunching his face a bit and sniffing the air. "Huh," he says, abruptly departing to follow his nose. When he returns, he is bending a small supply of water in the air in front of him while simultaneously chanting a mantra comprised of "ew, ew, ew, ew, ew, ew," and various permutations thereof.

Mercedes is almost afraid to ask. "Where did you get that?"

Finn looks slightly sick. "Toilet," he replies, confirming her theory.

"Keep that mess away from me," Mercedes says, holding her hand up and backing away from the Waterbender.

"I admire your resourcefulness, buddy," Artie says with an exasperated smile. "Everybody armed and ready?"

And just like that, the three of them shift into 'combat mode.'

Finn gets into position beside Artie, whipping and lashing his water supply a few times to loosen himself up. He bends the rather gross-looking liquid into a fairly smooth sphere and freezes it solid, orbiting it around his body a few times before floating it out to his side, between his hands. His face is the very picture of serious business—just because he doesn't like to hurt people doesn't mean he isn't capable of such. "Ready," Finn says.

Mercedes reaches down to undo her expensive-looking shoes and kicks them off with enough force to embed one of them into the ceiling. Her toes dig happily into the dirt exposed from the damaged building's broken floor. She flexes her fingers a few times, and the ground rumbles in response. Her face is a mask of defiance. "It's about to go down," she promises, half to her companions, and half to the unsuspecting crazies threatening to bring down the walls around them. These people know nothing about tearing down walls, but she is all-too-happy to give them a demonstration.

It's amazing how quickly and powerfully the two of them transition into warriors, even someone as goofy and good-natured as Finn suddenly dropping his softness and sweetness and preparing to use every inch of his massive frame against you.

The most dramatic transformation, however, is Artie.

The paralyzed Earthbender smiles to himself and closes his eyes. "Alright then..." With a slow, almost ritualistic motion, he withdraws his hands into his oversized sleeves and crosses them in front of him.

Suddenly, as if someone flipped an internal coin, a whole other Artie emerges.

His normally laid-back, easy-going expression becomes a portrait of deadly calm. A small, slightly menacing smile replaces his usual sly grin. His eyes open to reveal the hint of mischief that customarily glints from within has morphed into something altogether darker and far more sinister. And those are nothing compared to what has happened to his hands as they emerge from his
sleeves.

For all intents and purposes, they appear to be made of rock.

A pair of solid rock gloves covers every inch of them, formed from a large number of interlocking tiles and fit so perfectly to his hands that it honestly seems as though he has transmuted flesh to stone.

Thrusting himself out of his wheelchair, he assumes a cross-legged position on the ground and tries a few experimental chops through the air, his hands appearing as nothing but dark blurs as he strikes at an unseen opponent. Satisfied with the results, he holds them in front of him like twin snakes poised to strike. When he speaks again, it is in an even, almost formal tone.

"Let's get dangerous."

Kurt slides to a halt at the edge of a roof above what is quite possibly the most massive crowd of frothing crazies he has ever seen in his life. The mob looks so much like a churning body of water that Kurt has to suppress the instinctive urge to just bend them out of his way. It's nothing but utter clusterfuck down there, chaos on stuffed with anarchy wrapped in pandemonium and topped with a gentle glaze of nut sauce. But even amidst the uncoordinated screaming and shouting of an army's worth of angry citizens, Kurt can hear one common thread linking all of the fury...

**Avatar.**

Huh. If they think the Avatar is in that dinky, half-collapsed little shack, they are sorely mistaken. There is obviously someone in there (and Kurt is more than willing to hedge bets on whom), it isn't who they think. Well, this is a simple problem with a simple solution. If these people want an Avatar, he will give them a freaking Avatar.

"Excuse me," Kurt says.

The crowd doesn't listen.

"Excuse me!" he says a little louder.

Nope, nada.

"EXCUSE ME," he tries shouting, but the crowd still drowns him out.

They continue to act like he doesn't even exist.

"Rude," he sniffs.

Well, he knows what to do with rude people. If it's early enough in the morning, Finn sometimes likes to pretend that Kurt doesn't exist. He will deal with this problem the same way he deals with that one.

He sprays the crowd with his entire water supply.

Sadly, even an entire tub worth of water isn't quite enough to gather the attention of over a thousand hot-headed Fire Nationals with a major axe to grind. He gets a few looks here and there, but it barely lasts a second before the crowd sweeps everyone back into their unilateral siege.

The Avatar sighs, placing his hands on his hips, looking around the immediate area and debating
tossing a fireball just to get everyone's attention. He doesn't particularly like hurting people, but past a certain point, Kurt will absolutely throw down with any number of bitches who feel like they can step up. Fortunately, he is in no way under the impression that he can take on a thousand people at once (not yet, anyway). All he really needs to do is get their attention.

He could use some more water.

Suddenly, a violently clashing color leaps out to greet his eye. Resting gaudily on the corner of a building and daring you not to notice it, is a large statue of a Purple Parakeet. And just beyond the Purple Parakeet…

Oh, praise La. This will be magnificent.

His mother once told him a story about a legendary warrior who never cried out when struck. He trained himself day and night to increase his pain tolerance, and to never show weakness even when he was in agony. Combining this with incredible fighting prowess, he eventually became legendary as 'the Invincible Man,' to the point where those who tried to fight him would become so unnerved by his stoically shrugging off their attacks that they would often run away or surrender outright after only a few moments of fighting.

Blaine would give just about anything to be that guy right now.

He can't help it. As much as he wants to deny them the satisfaction of crying out while they smack him around, it hurts. A lot. They were definitely not lying or bluffing about that part.

"Do you have any idea how long it takes to grow these back?" Santana says as she lifts him up by his collar, and Blaine thinks she might be trying to wiggle her eyebrows that are no longer there. It takes a second for him to realize this isn't a rhetorical question. She actually seems to want an answer.

"Ummm, no?" Blaine tries.

She decks him straight to the ground, and he lands with a yelp. "Exactly," she seethes.

"Well," Blaine says, apparently having had all decent judgment beaten right out of him, "if it makes you feel any better, it took me seventeen years to grow. I'm pretty sure you're coming out on the better end of things."

That earns a steel-toed boot to the stomach, which wrenches from him another embarrassing cry of pain.

"We tried to make this easy," Puck growls, grabbing Blaine and yanking him up by his hair, "but you had to go and make it hard for everybody."

Actually, you're the ones making it hard, Blaine kind of wants to say. He doesn't. One, they'll just hit him again, and two, after they do that, they might well stop beating around the bush and actually kill him. Definitely not something he wants. "I'm sorry?" he tries.

It's the wrong answer. "Apology accepted, little man," Puck smiles, raising his destructo-fist.

There's nothing he can do but brace himself. He clenches his jaw and prays to Agni that there is enough of him left for a decent funeral pyre…
The East Wall gives out first. Artie immediately jets off into the shadows as a wave of roaring rioters pours into the room. Mercedes thrusts her hand forward, causing the ground to buckle and bulge in a wave towards them like there is a large ball rolling just under the surface of the ground. The earth wave knocks several of them back into the street, but a few maintain the presence of mind to jump over and keep moving towards them.

They never even see him coming.

Artie darts from the shadows with expert timing and precision, quick hands lashing out and sweeping people off their feet left and right. He is gone again before anyone even thinks to look, and Mercedes uses the opportunity to bend the earth beneath the stunned rioters, using small segments like catapults to launch them back into the street.

Finn keeps his eyes on the other walls. He knows it's only a matter of time before another one falls.

Sure enough, the North Wall bulges and cracks, opening up a hole just large enough for two people to slip through at once. The Fire Nationals charge towards them, but Finn decks two of them with his ice ball, knocking the wind out of them. It's not as elegant or graceful as most waterbending, but it gets the job done. No matter who you are, getting slammed by a ball of ice twice the size of your head fucking hurts.

"Mercedes!" Finn shouts, drawing her attention to the newly opened hole.

The powerful woman turns at Finn's direction, and utilizes more of her human pinball skills, creating vertical flippers of stone and flinging the stunned attackers back at the hole, before plugging it with a spire of earth. It's a stopgap measure at best, but any reprieve they can get at this point is something they damn well intend to take.

Meanwhile, Artie continues to jet back and forth near the East Wall opening, totally ruining the day of anyone who dares cross his path. His human hovercraft act seems to catch everyone off guard; most people don't see him coming, those that do have no idea how to react, and by the time they figure it out, Artie has effectively removed them as a threat. His hands are impossible to keep up with—he can knock a guy off his feet and hit him a dozen times before he reaches the ground. Sometimes the gloves even fly off as he strikes, arcing and jetting through the air like they are tethered to him, merely an extension of his movements, striking and returning to their owner fast as you can blink.

But while Artie is fantastic at beating the ever-loving crap out of people, he's not so great at moving them, which is where Mercedes comes in yet again—it's up to her to roll the crowd back into the street. Waves, slabs, blocks of earth, pretty much anything seems to do the trick. Unfortunately, the more she does this, the more she can feel the building they're in groaning and cracking in protest. She knows it isn't going to be long before the thing gives out on them.

Finn spots a few hands breaking away the North Wall around Mercedes's rock blockade, arms sticking through the opening and flailing at them threateningly. It's kind of mean, but hey; they're kind of asking for it. So Finn obliges by smashing his ice ball into their arms with great gusto. He is rewarded by several agonized howls and a quick withdrawal of all offending limbs. Assholes. Serves them right.

Artie takes out three people by forming an earth ramp and launching off of it, soaring through the air and clotheslining them, when suddenly, it happens. The building gives a mighty moan, and half the upper floor buckles and collapses through the middle of the room, creating a diagonal wall of debris between the East and North Walls that nearly buries Mercedes. Finn manages to make himself useful by dive-tackling her out of the way.
"Are you okay?" he says.

Mercedes scoffs at him. "I could've handled that," she says truthfully. "But I appreciate the sentiment."

She rises to her feet without even waiting for Finn to get off, effectively dumping him on the ground. The collapse seems to have momentarily scared any rioters out of the immediate area, but she knows it won't be two seconds before they come back in. The building doesn't seem to be in danger of collapsing completely at this point, but that is hardly their biggest concern at the moment.

Finn might not be the first to realize it, but he's definitely the first to vocalize it. "Oh, shit," he says. "Where's Artie?"

The cowards refuse to come out of their little hidey-hole, but Otis knows it's only a matter of time before the snakes are flushed out into the open. Either their burrow collapses and buries 'em, or they come into the crowd and get some good old fashioned speed justice. Serves that snooty-assed Avatar right for meddling where he doesn't belong. 'sides, they're only trying to kill him, and it's not like he won't just get born again anyway. He honestly doesn't see what the big deal is.

He lights up a bottle of Torched Throat (his favorite brand) and prepares to hurl the flaming cocktail towards the busted old building when suddenly, the gentle, red glow that seems to have defined the evening is eclipsed, plunging the street into a much darker state. Only the fires and streetlamps light the place up now. Turning up towards the sky, he sees the problem—a massive cloud of incredibly thick fog has moved over their heads, eclipsing their view of the sky. The fog sweeps over all of them, soon enough, and damn if he can barely see more than three feet in front of him. Son of a bitch! What the—

THUD.

The fog seemed to dampen the noise quite a bit, but it ain't until the ground shakes underneath their feet that the crowd goes completely silent. People get real nervous, real fast, and Otis can't help if his own hackles start to raise. This ain't a sign of nothing good, that's for damn sure.

THUD.

He damn near jumps clean of his skin. This one sounded closer than the other'n. The air seems to get real cold all of a sudden, and he can practically hear every ticker around him beating around inside people's chests like a rabid squirrelmeleon trying to tear through the bars of its cage.

GRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR—

It's the most awful racket he's ever heard, like the whole earth just opened up its mouth and started grinding its teeth. The sound makes the ground rumble and shake even more, and it sounds closer than ever before. Suddenly, somebody points up and shouts "Look!"

He looks, and he wishes he hadn't. He doesn't know exactly what it is, but he sees something moving in the fog, a gi-normous shadow twice as tall as any building in the city. It looks almost man-shaped—two arms, two legs, and a head, but he can't make out more than the outline through this ocean kumquat soup-thick cloudy mess. But he doesn't need to see much more than that. Apparently, neither does the rest of the crowd.

"Run for your liiiives!" somebody screams, and if that ain't the best idea he's heard in years, his
name ain't Otis.

He gives it his all, he really does, but in the crowd is too crazy, he's too old, and the monster is too giant and scary and almighty powerful. The raging river of folks chews him up and spits him out on the sidewalk, and he can already tell the monster is far too close for him to escape. Ain't nothing to do but stare death in the face and spit if it gets close enough.

The fog parts, the monster steps forward, followed by… a boy? He rubs his eyes to make sure he isn't hallucinating, and sure enough—a thin, wispy-looking lad in expensive-looking robes walks between the feet of the giant, casual as you please. Every few seconds, he'll stop, square his feet, and stomp the ground at the same time as the monster.

"Boy!" Otis shouts, "are yew outta yer head? D'yew not see that huge-antic monster stomping around behind ye?"

Wisp-boy gives him the old side-eye, and where does he get off lookin' at his elders with that kind of attitude? "Oh, you mean that?" he says, pointing to the dark shape what looms above them.

"Naw," Otis spits, "I mean th'other giant shadow thingy stomping and roaring around the city."

"Ah," Wispy says. "Stomping. So when it stomps, does it sound… kind of like this?" The boy stomps on the ground and sure enough, the earth shakes with a thud just as mighty as the beast.

"Well, I'll be," Otis says, scratching his head.

"And this alleged 'roar,'" the boy says, using damn finger quotes at him like he's some kind of idjit. "Does it sound anything like… this?" He digs his feet into the ground and sticks his hands out in front of him, fingers jagged. The ground in front of him cracks open. At that, he begins moving his hands back and forth past one another and the roar of the beast comes from within as the cracked ground grinds against itself.

"What the coal-fucking—" Otis starts, but the rude little snot cuts him off.

"I'll take that as a 'yes,' then," he says, breaking his stance and examining his nails. "Yeah, that would be me."

Otis juts his hand out at the city-smashing shadow. "Then what in tarnation is that?" he demands.

The boy glances up at the menacing beast glowering above them. "That, my friend," he says, "is nothing more than theatrics."

He then swings his arms in a smooth, slow spin, and just like that, the monster turns to smoke and disappears, like it was nothing but thick fog the whole time. "How the… what the…"

"So, I hear the Avatar is somewhere around here," Wispy says. "Could you point him out to me, please?"

Otis dumbly points at the building on the now-lonely street.

"Thank you, kind sir. May the spirits bless you, and your household."

With that, he saunters off down the street, leaving old Otis alone and confused. Them fancy movements he was doing was almost like bending, but that means he was an earthbender, AND a cloud-bender. Which could only mean…
"There's two Avatars!" he sighs. "By Agni, they're multiplyin'!"

Wait until the wife hears about this.

Finn stumbles into the foggy street, falls to his knees, and supplicates himself on the ground. "Oh, thank you Tui," he says reverently. "Thank you, thank you, thank you, ."

"My name is not 'Tui,'" Kurt says as he approaches his step brother. "But you're more than welc— ACK!" His snark is cut tragically short as Finn wraps him in a gopherbear hug, lifting him off the ground and squeezing him like he's trying to get the last few droplets of water out of a particularly stubborn rag. "Down, Finn!" he gasps. "Down! Heel!"

"Sorry!" he says, releasing Kurt and backing off. "Sorry, it's just… I'm really happy to see you." He looks around. "Did you do all this?" he says, gesturing to the fog.

"Indeed I did," Kurt nods. "The seafood restaurant you guys ate at was rather helpfully located next to a small lake," he says pointedly, "which really raises the question of why you ever left it."

Finn grimaces. "I thought we weren't supposed to be bending in public," he says. "Plus… well… Drizzle ran away and I kind of wanted to save her. Him," Finn corrects himself.

"I am amazed that you survived as long as you did without me in your life," Kurt sighs.

"You have excellent timing as always, boo," Mercedes grins as she steps out of their half-demolished shelter.

"Timing is just one of my many talents," Kurt says, allowing himself a small smirk of triumph. "So, where is the only person I can forgive for not giving me a standing ovation?"

Finn looks confused.

"Artie," Kurt clarifies.

"Ohhhhh," the tall boy says. "We were looking for him ourselves, actually. He was on the other side of the building when part of it caved in. We got cut off."

Mercedes is already at the East Wall of the building, looking in through the large opening. "… yeah, I'm pretty sure I found him," she says.

Finn dashes over, with Kurt prancing not far behind him. They peek through the opening to see nothing but a large pile of battered, unconscious Fire Nationals.

Kurt tilts his head to the side.

"That's not—"

"Back here," Artie says, his gloved hand popping up from behind the body pile to wave at them. "I hear no more pandemonium. I assume Kurt has arrived to save the day?"

Kurt bows, even though Artie can't see him. "You assume correctly, good sir."

The KOed rioters groan slightly as Artie pushes the pile of them over and makes a small ramp to launch himself over them. "I'd accept nothing less from the Avatar," Artie says, still speaking in that careful, measured tone that kind of makes Finn's skin crawl.
"Okay, dude," the lanky waterbender says. "No more danger or anything. Can you… like… take the gloves off and be cool, not-creepy Artie again now?"

The paralyzed earthbender shrugs. "If you insist," he says, drawing his hands into his sleeves again. When they emerge, they are gloveless, and Artie seems to relax again. "So," he says, grinning again. "Now what?"

"Now," Kurt says, "we get to Blaine at the Palace as quickly as possible."

"Road trip!" Artie shouts excitedly with a fist-pump for emphasis. "I call front seat," he says as he slides out of the shelter and onto the street.

"What's up with Blaine?" Finn asks.

Kurt sighs. "I said I would meet him there and… I don't know what it is, but I just… I have a very bad feeling."

At the beginning of their journey, Finn would've smiled and told Kurt not to be such a worrywart. Now, however, he just nods at him. "Cool. Let's go."

For the Avatar, a bad feeling is rarely, if ever, nothing.

"I'll make this quick," Puck says, preparing for the blow."

"Not quick enough."

Fortunately, the blow never comes. Something else arrives instead.

A dark shape slams into Puck from the side, knocking Blaine free of his grip and sending the Prince to the ground. He lands just in time to witness David sweep Puck's feet out from under him with a flaming kick. Santana tries to whiplash him, but David grabs Puck mid-fall and uses him as a very effective human shield.

"OW!" Puck shouts, stumbling back and clutching his bleeding face. "What the fuck, Santana? Watch where you put your toys, you crazy bitch."

David hurls some fire at Santana and dodges another whiplash, and Blaine has every intention of struggling to his feet to help when suddenly there is another pair of hands pushing him back down to the ground.

"Wes?" Blaine says. "What are you—"

"Are you hurt?" Wes asks.

Blaine gives him a fairly magnificent side-eye. "Am I hurt? Really?"

Wes gives badly battered Blaine a once-over, and winces. "Fine, more specifically: is your head firmly attached to your shoulders?"

That doesn't sound promising. "I think so, I—"

"Fantastic!" Wes grins, before bodily scooping Blaine up off the ground and carrying him straight off the roof as David continues to distract Pucktana. They land in a dumpster that someone thoughtfully filled with mushy, days-old fruit, and to Blaine's credit, he manages to suppress the urge to vomit until after Wes puts him down. He is thoughtful towards his friends like that.
"Owww," Blaine groans, wiping his mouth. That shock was *not* good for his system. He'd probably have passed out altogether if they had landed in something less forgiving, like the ground.

"I apologize for the landing, but it's the best I could come up with on such short notice," Wes says, gently pulling him up.

"No," Blaine says, before taking a second to cough and spit a little more *blech* from his mouth. He leans heavily on his friend as the two of them move slowly down the alley. "You and David are fabulous people who deserve nothing but wonderful things. Dad will probably have statues commissioned in your honor. You might even get a holiday."

Wes sighs. "I wouldn't hold my breath for anything more than a pat on the back and *possibly* a small shower of confetti. We are not exactly in your father's good graces, at the moment."

Blaine stops. "Wait..."

It is at this point that he realizes that there should be no reason for Wes and David to be out here.

"What are you doing here? How did you find me?" Blaine asks.

The Prince's friend regards him sadly. "Your father knows, Blaine. Someone sent him a very unsettling message concerning you, which means someone else also knows, and I would venture a guess that it is the same person who hired those assassins. He had us thrown in prison. We only escaped because he sent all his guards to look for you." He looks down. "Even if we were to deliver you to him personally at this point... we failed you, Blaine. We put you in danger. David only found you because of the sounds you were making while they *beat* you."

Huh. Well at least those did him *some* good. "It's my fault," Blaine says. "He'll understand. I'll make him understand."

Wes gives him a rueful smile. "Hmph. Ever the idealist..." he says, patting him on the back. "I'm really going to miss you."

"*What?*" Blaine says, stopping to fish-eye his friend and hoping he didn't hear what he thinks he heard.

Suddenly, the sound of distant explosions can be heard. David's voice can be heard echoing loud curses around the corner, the sound drawing nearer by the second.

"Can you walk?" Wes says urgently.

The Prince shifts away from his friend, experimenting with his legs and finding them adequate. "Yeah," he says.

"HELP! HELP ME! FOR THE LOVE OF THE SUN, WESLEY!" David shouts, running towards them full tilt. A short distance behind them, Santana swings through the alleyway with her whip, while a slightly scorched-looking Puck charges after him.

Wes gives him a significant look. It seems to last for minutes, even if it isn't even a split-second before he violently shoves Blaine forward. "Then *do it!*" he commands.

Before Blaine can even think of reacting, there is a wall of fire between the two of them, which rapidly expands to the width of the alley. "What!"
"Get to the Palace as fast as you can!" Wes shouts. "Run away, and don't ever look back, do you hear me? Go!"

With that, Wes turns away from him, forming twin lashes of luminescent flame and snapping them towards Santana. The two of them begin another whip fight, swiping at each other at every opportunity. Even though Wes's whips cause small explosions where they hit, he can't help but feel his friend is outmatched. Further off, he sees David run up a wall and barely avoid a Puckerman Punch that blows a hole clear through a small apartment building. Small, blowtorch-esque jets of flame emit from his fists, and he swipes the flames at the armored man like a pair of daggers.

He can't. He can't leave his friends here to fight these two.

But he can't really help them, either. The deadly duo did a bang-up job of banging him up, and it's likely nothing more than adrenaline keeping him on his feet at all. There is nothing he can do in this fight besides acting as a liability and a source of worry for Wes and David.

And suddenly, something Wes said to him smacks him right in the face.

We only escaped because

he sent all his guards to look for you

The dots practically connect themselves. Someone found out Blaine was sneaking out, sent his father a threatening letter knowing he would overreact, and now the Fire Lord is unguarded in the middle of a City that seems to have gone completely insane.

Wes was right. He has to get to the Palace, now.

And so, hating himself more with every step, Blaine turns his back on his friends and runs towards his father. The Palace isn't too far away.

All he can do is pray that he isn't too late…

**TO BE CONTINUED**

**A/N**: Next chapter is the final part of *Fall of the Prince*, and the end of this hellish night. All roads lead to the Palace—will Blaine arrive in time to save his father? Will Kurt arrive in time to save Blaine? You'll just have to wait to find out! ;) Reviews and comments are strong motivators for writing.
The streets are quiet here.

The riots seemed to have started here, in the center of the city, and moved outwards. People roaring and raging, shouting and smashing, looking for something, anything to destroy. They've moved on from this place, because now there is precious little left to ruin. Most of the buildings are in shambles—broken windows, splintered doors, crumbled walls, scorched rooftops. And that's the ones that are still standing at all.

Blaine doesn't see many people as he runs. More notably, the people he does see don't seem to notice him at all. They all have their attention on other things.

He passes a woman staring at the remains of a house, tears running down her face with no accompanying sound. She cries soundlessly, as if no longer able to contain her grief but still afraid
to draw attention to herself.

He passes a man sitting against a burnt wall, staring off into space with a clenched jaw. His eyes don't even flicker when Blaine passes in front of him. He doesn't even blink. Between the sound of his own footsteps, Blaine is fairly sure he can hear the steady grinding of teeth.

He passes a boy, no older than 12, clutching a smaller girl to his chest and whispering softly to her as he rocks her back and forth. His eyes are rooted to the ground in front of him, as if afraid to look at anything else. Not even the sound of approaching footsteps is cause enough to look up. He never stops his soft chanting, and as Blaine passes him, he realizes the boy isn't even using words—he's whispering gibberish in the most soothing tone possible.

He wants to stop. To help them, to ask what's wrong, what happened, what he can do, how he can fix this. But he can't. These people are giving him all the regard he deserves—he doesn't know what to do, he doesn't know how to help. He is useless to them.

He has to get to the Palace. If he can just get to his father, everything will be alright.

Unfortunately, by the time he reaches the Royal Gates, his injuries have caught up with him. No, that's an understatement—they've caught up with him, passed him, run all the way around the course and lapped him, leaving him in their proverbial dust. He feels like his entire body is a giant bruise, his chest is on fire (and not the way he likes), his legs are sending jolts of pain through his nervous system with almost every step. Now that 'the Chase' seems to be over, the adrenaline that enabled him to ignore his injuries has started to ebb, allowing pain to come in and make itself comfortable. He's hurt, he's tired, and… worst of all…

He is so, so scared.

Collapsing against the massive iron doors, he tries in vain to catch his breath. It doesn't work, because his mind refuses to rest even as his body begs for reprieve. The gates are closed. The gates can only be opened or closed from inside. If what Wes said is true, all the guards are in the city, looking for him. Not only would they not have closed the gates and locked themselves out—they wouldn't have been able to. Someone else had to close them.

Surely… surely there is a gatekeeper or something. The guards wouldn't be that shortsighted. Someone has to be in there, because the alternative is that his father is locked in his own Palace with someone who wants his throne and is willing to do anything to get it.

There has to be someone there.

"Hey!" Blaine yells, standing up and pounding on the door. "Open the gate!"

He is greeted by nothing but silence.

"HEY!" he shouts again, his voice cracking slightly, rough from use, dry from all the running, clogged slightly with blood. "This is Prince Blaine! I'm RIGHT HERE! PLEASE, OPEN UP!"

His cry bounces uselessly off the massive doors.

Growling in frustration, he slams his fist into the metal again. "COME ON!"

An identical nothing, same as before. Nothing after nothing after nothing parades out to greet him.

He has no idea what to do. He can already feel panic and hopelessness climbing up his windpipe,
threatening to lodge themselves in his throat and choke him to death. His only other option is to climb the wall, but **fuck** if he can climb anything right now. He can barely stand.

He's stuck. Helpless. **Useless.** To his father, and everyone.

The Prince has just started hobbling away from the door, aiming to at least **try** to climb back up the Wall, when he hears the sound of the massive, mechanical gates grinding slowly open. Just a crack. Just large enough for one person to fit through.

He approaches them cautiously. The glow of the Spirit Lights paints everything a strange shade of red, and it looks far too much like blood for his liking. "Hello?" he says. "Whoever opened the gates, please, come out so I can see you!"

It takes a few seconds, but Blaine can hear the sounds of movement echoing through the enormous doors. The sight that pops up to greet him could not possibly be more welcome.

"Oh, thank Agni," he breathes, smiling and nearly collapsing with relief right there on the spot. A Royal Guard appears through the crack. The sight of the familiar armor, helmet and facemask included, has never relieved him more in his life. "I was afraid there was no one in here."

The Guard just seems to stare at him for a moment.

"Hey," Blaine says. "You guys are looking for me, aren't you?"

The Guard continues to stare. Blaine is just starting to feel a little uneasy when the man finally speaks. "Prince Blaine," he says, his voice oddly distorted by the mask. "Yes. I apologize. I didn't recognize you due to your… injuries."

"Oh," Blaine says. "Yes, I'd imagine I look pretty rough right now. But I'm still in one piece. That's all that matters, right?"

There is a slight hesitation before the Guard answers. "Right." He slowly moves aside to allow Blaine entrance to the Palace Grounds.

He feels the tension easing off of him as walks into the familiar courtyard. "I've got a lot of explaining to do, I know. But I promise, there is a good reason I was out. I just need to explain it to Dad. I know he'll understand, even if he's ma—"

He stops short, both in his trek towards the Palace, and his speech. The Guard has a tight grip on his shoulder, his gloved hand digging into a fresh bruise. The Prince winces and sucks air through his teeth, but the Guard doesn't seem to notice. "Wait here," he says, "while I close the Gates. Then, I will take you to your father."

"It's okay," Blaine says. "I can find my own way to the Throne Roo—"

"He is not in the Throne Room," the Guard says quickly. "Wait here," he continues, sounding almost impatient. "It is not… safe, for you to travel alone."

The armored man is climbing up to the Gate Controls before Blaine has a chance to reply. Other than the sounds of his boots on the ladder, the Courtyard is powerfully, eerily silent. The Palace seems darker than ever—the primarily red color scheme has become black in the red light of this night. There seems to be no one else on the Palace Grounds at all. Everything is incredibly still.

The metallic screech of the Gates grinding shut is so jarring that he nearly trips and falls over himself when they smash through the silence. The mechanism takes its sweet time, gears clanking
loudly against one another for several seconds before the Gates are sealed with an echoing *clang*.

As the Royal Guard descends the ladder to rejoin him, Blaine voices a question. "Why isn't it safe? Is something wrong? Are there enemies in the Palace?"

The Guard finishes his descent, and turns to face Blaine before speaking, his voice still sounding odd through the thick face guard. "*We have reason to believe that your life is in danger,* he says. "*It is merely a precaution.*"


"*Indeed,*" the Guard says, walking past him without even glancing towards him. He seems to be heading towards a side-area of the main Palace. Blaine has no idea what his father might be doing in there, but he has certainly witnessed stranger things than this during the course of the night. "*Prince Blaine,*" the Guard says when he notices that Blaine has not yet moved.

"Sorry," he says, walking up to join him. "Just a little winded. It's been kind of an awful night."

"*Don't worry,*" the Guard says in a tone that Blaine can't quite place. "*It will all be over soon. Come...*" he finishes, moving again. "*The Fire Lord awaits.*"

"Alright," Kurt says. "So we need to get there in a hurry. We don't care who is tracking us, and the City is inside-out-pants-on-head insane at the moment, so I think a little property damage is justifiable."

"You thinkin' Rockmobile?" Mercedes asks.

"Awww, yeah!" Artie grins, sliding up to slap his fellow Earthbender some skin.

"Isn't that, like, dangerous? We don't want to run anybody over," Finn says.

"Don't worry your precious little potato head, Finn Hudson," Kurt says gently. "If anyone wanders into our path, I will gently sweep them aside with La's loving arms."

To illustrate the point, Kurt begins a series of graceful steps and arm motions, condensing a great deal of the fog in the air into a pair of large water ropes, which he slips over his own arms to use like a pair of tentacles, before casually bending the water into an ice block and setting it down so he can come back to it later.

Finn is mostly okay with this plan. Well, except for one thing. He turns to Artie. "Do I have a potato head?"

Artie purses his lips and tilts his head, squinting at Finn.

His silence is answer enough. "Thanks a lot, dude," he grumbles.

"What?" Artie asks, honestly confused. "I'm just trying to give you an honest answer!"

The Rockmobile was an idea born from an ever-so-slightly tipsy conversation between Mercedes and Artie about bending-based transportation. One minute, Mercedes is trying to wheedle the secret of Artie's high-speed Earth Slide out of him, the next; the two of them are carving up some kind of vehicle out of rock. The results were surprisingly successful, if a bit... destructive.

Mercedes and Kurt square themselves and stomp in unison, calling up a large, rectangular block of stone. Artie slides in and chops it a few times, tossing in a few punches for good measure, causing
a series of seemingly chaotic cracks to appear in the stone before it crumbles into roughly the shape of a bullet. Kurt carves off a large portion of the stone in the back, leaving just enough of the foundation to support their combined weight. Mercedes hollows out the 'tip' of the bullet, leaving a semi-spherical shield where Artie slides into place as 'Driver' of their little device (punching out a hole so he can see where they're going). Mercedes takes her place in back, while Finn and Kurt hop in the middle. The overall effect looks kind of like a small boat made of rock, with a shield in front.

"Everybody ready?" Mercedes calls out.

Kurt melts his ice block and 're-arms' himself with the tendrils of water. "I was, quite literally, born ready."

"Wait!" Finn shouts, bending a little fog of his own into just enough water to refill his waterskin. "Okay," he says, capping the thing and stepping onto the large earthen device. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"Destination is the Palace. Property damage to be avoided if possible, but it's not the end of the world if a house or two gets knocked down. Kurt is on pedestrian duty, and Finn, as usual, is holding on for dear life and trying not to die. Do I have everything right?" Artie calls out.

"Try really hard not to knock down any houses, but yes, other than that, you've hit the proverbial bullseye," Kurt says.

"Very well then. Mercedes, my lady! Propulsion, if you please," Artie shouts.

"Hold on tight," Mercedes replies. She thrusts her hands to the 'rear' of the vehicle, and the thing launches itself forward, blasting over the top of the street at a shockingly high speed and making a terrific racket the entire time. The Rockmobile is noisy, obnoxious, and incredibly easy to track thanks to the sizeable ditch it cuts into the ground and leaves in its wake. It's also taxing to propel, difficult to steer, more difficult to stop, and highly dangerous to both people and property that might be in the way. All-in-all, it's not a great way to get around…

…unless you happen to have a desperate need to get somewhere fast and no better transportation options than a couple of Earthbenders. Then, it's fantastic.

The Rockmobile takes a corner about as well as you'd expect from a hastily-created land-boat made of stone (which is to say, 'not well') but Kurt manages to avert any serious damages by sweeping his newly added watery appendages around, and knocking several unsuspecting citizens out of harm's way. Well, okay, not completely out of harm's way—he hits them kind of hard and it probably hurts like a bitch, but in the grand script of life, bruised is better than flattened, creamed is preferable to crushed, and being hurt is much better than being dead.

The Palace looms in the distance, getting closer with every second. It isn't fast enough. Kurt has a really bad feeling about Blaine. Something is calling him urgently, telling him to get to the Prince ASAP, and as much as he hates to admit it… he has his priorities. He has to help Blaine, and if helping Blaine involves inadvertently causing a few extra injuries to the Fire Nation citizens, then so be it.

Because he's only just gotten Blaine. He just got someone beautiful, amazing, kind, intelligent who honestly seemed to like him, maybe even love him. He can't lose him so soon. He can't lose him because he made the decision to save his friends and left Blaine to fend for himself.

He just… can't lose him. Period.
So, so quiet.

Blaine has never seen the Palace this empty. There were always Guards patrolling, on the lookout for thieves or trespassers. Always a servant or two milling about, attending to cleaning duties, delivering messages among the staff, running some odd errand for one of the officials. Gardeners, cooks, musicians, all sorts of odd characters could be seen in the Palace at various times. But now, the entire building seems deserted—an empty, lifeless shell, like a body left to rot in the night air. It honestly seems like Blaine and the Guard might be the only ones here.

"Where did you say my father was, again?" Blaine asks.

"I didn't say," the Guard states simply. Burn it! That usually works.

"I see no harm in telling me where we're going," Blaine says simply.

"You will understand when we arrive," the Guard says shortly. It seems Blaine is beginning to wear on the man's patience. It's understandable that the evening's events might be taxing on a defender of the Royal Family, but… really. There's no need to be rude. None of the Guards has ever spoken… to him… like that…

It suddenly feels as if something dark, cold, and slimy has wrapped itself around Blaine's heart. There is something off about this guy. His attitude isn't the best, and Blaine still can't place what's wrong with his voice, but now that he is leading him around the Palace, the Prince has gotten several chances to watch him move. There is something wrong with it. It's like he isn't used to moving in armor at all.

Oh.

"The kitchens are right around here," Blaine says, keeping his voice even. "I'm really thirsty. Can we please… stop for a drink?"

"Not now," the Guard says. "It is important we get you to your destination as soon as possible."

Oh.

Oh, no.

I'm going to die, Blaine thinks. I made it this far, and now I'm going to die because I'm too stupid to recognize when a Guard isn't a Guard...

"Stand watch," Sue had told her. "Make sure no one gets in or interferes."

They were right outside the throne room when the Lady had drawn her aside and given her special orders. "But… my Lady," she had said, "I don't understand. I'm your top Captain. I should be with you in your moment of triumph."

"Oh, pah," Sue replied. "I don't need you to triumph. I can triumph on my own. What I need is someone I can trust to make good and darn sure that my moment of triumph is not unduly interrupted. I want enough time to cremate the Fire Lord and use his ashes as confetti. You're the best of the best, Q. I'm putting you on this job because I trust you. Are you saying that's a bad idea?"

It isn't a question so much as a threat, and Quinn gets the message. "No, my Lady. I understand."
"Good," Sue says, giving her a swordshark smile. "Now get to it."

With that, Sue and the rest of the 'Royal Guards' had entered the throne room, leaving her alone in the silent Palace. She had accepted the Lady's reasoning, even if she didn't entirely believe it. She'd never imagined she would actually need to stifle a would-be intrusion, let alone one of such vital importance to their mission…

Speaking of which… the stupid brat seems to have forgotten how to walk, again.

"Prince Blaine," she says, keeping her voice in the lowest register she can manage. "Is something the matter?"

The boy looks sick. Well, truth be told, he looked sick when she first saw him, but there's something different about it now. His breathing is off. His eyes seem twitchier. He looks… afraid.

Quinn has seen that skittish look before. She hovers her hand near the hilt of her sword, just in case he tries to run. Lady Sylvester made her reasons for hiring the (apparently grossly incompetent) assassins perfectly clear—the Fire Lord can be taken down however, but the Prince needs to be killed by something other than Firebending. If Sue and her Chi-Ryus kill the Fire Lord and the Prince, it's a coup. But if the people fly into an uncontrolled rage and murder their leader and the successor to the throne… well, that's another matter entirely. And while she would much rather just stuff him in a closet somewhere until the Lady decides how best to deal with this minor setback, she is willing to do what must be done herself should he give her occasion.

"Please," the boy says, moving towards a doorway. "The kitchens are right here. I just need to get a drink. Just a little sip of water." His voice is pitiful, and Quinn feels perfectly comfortable rolling her eyes at this display of weakness. Does he think this is hard? Try not eating, drinking or sleeping for twenty-four hours and still pulling off a flawless Chi-Ryu kata series from first stance to hundred-and-eighth. That's hard.

If he thinks he is getting away from her, he is sorely mistaken. She steps forward and grabs the shoulder she knows is injured, prompting a gasp from the pitiful Prince. "Do you not listen?" she growls, slowly running out of patience. "Your life is in danger. Any shadow could hide an assassin. If you wander off alone, you could be killed."

Alright, maybe she is being a little too overt with the naked aggression. That probably sounded more like a threat than a warning.

"Please," he pleads with her, breathing heavily and seeming unsteady on his feet. "I just need a drink. Just one drink. You can go first, I'll follow you, I'll stay close, just… please."

She stares at him for a moment. His whining is seriously starting to grate on her nerves. She debates the merits of just running him through, right then and there, but decides against it. The Lady is very specific when making her plans. The boy was supposed to die in the City. That he is here now presents a significant problem, one that Sue will want to know about so she can come up with the perfect solution. Until then, the brat remains alive.

"Very well," Quinn sighs. "But do not wander away again."

The Prince nods. "Thank you," he rasps, obediently standing down and waiting for her to take the lead.

She fights off a sigh as she opens the door to the kitchens…
…only to find what is very much not a kitchen on the other side.

It happens quickly. Before she can even turn around, she feels the impact of a snap kick on her helmet, striking with enough force to knock the thing off of her even as the force sends her right into the closet she has inadvertently opened the door to. She recovers quickly, but not quite quickly enough—the boy has just enough time to take a good look at her face before he slams the door shut.

If held at firepoint, Quinn would admit she was ever-so-slightly impressed. Clever little boy. She's underestimated him.

"You're not one of my father's men," he says through the door. "You're… actually not a man at all," he continues, sounding honestly surprised.

"Excellent deduction," she coos mockingly as she turns the handle and tries push the door open, to no avail. "What gave me away?"

"You don't know where the kitchens are," he says simply. "There's not a single guard who works here who would not have memorized the kitchen's location on their first day. The food here is that awesome."

"Great," Quinn says. "I can't wait to try it for myself!" She punctuates her statement with a twin-footed kick to the door, but is shocked to find it rebuffs her easily.

"Yeah, I don't think so," the Prince says, and she can practically feel his smug, self-satisfied smirk through the wood. "This door is one hundred percent refined Blazewood. You could throw a fireball at it, and all you'd do is cook yourself. Every door in the Palace is this tough."

Part of her wants to call his bluff, but it isn't worth the risk. There are easier ways to get out of here.

"Who are you?" the Prince demands.

"It doesn't matter who I am," Quinn says. "I am not important in the evening's events. I'm just one of many."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asks.

"Exactly what I said," Quinn says, smirking and hoping it comes across in her voice. "There are plenty of others here, Prince. It's not safe for you out there. Maybe you should just come in here with me until the Fire Lord is killed. I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

"…what did you just say?" the Prince growls. Ha! Hook, line, and sinker.

"Do I look like a fortune cookie?" Quinn bitches at him. "Take your quest for answers to someone else. Maybe Daddy can tell you something useful. Better hurry, though. I don't think he'll be in a position to take questions much longer."

She can practically hear the panic pumping his heartrate through the roof. "Shut up," he says. She hears the sound of something heavy being moved in front of the door, and curses the royal pain for having the presence of mind to think of that. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go find my father. I'll be back for you later," he promises through the door.

She waits until she hears the sound of his rapid footsteps trampling off into the distance. "Not if I come for you first," she smiles, lighting up the dark closet with a small flame from her manicured
fingers. Holding the flame to the edges of the door, she moves up and down until she finds what she is looking for through the cracks.

Any door is only as strong as its weakest part.

And with a powerful, concentrated explosion, Quinn quickly proves that the weakest part of this particular door is its hinges.

"HEADS UP, FIRE PEOPLE!" Artie shouts, his fingers digging into the stone street-sailer and bending the crap out of it to keep it together and under control. It's a harder job than you might think, but he pulls it off.

Ahead of them, Kurt's aqua-tentacles sweep the streets clean of human debris, smacking folks aside like the backhand of a bothered pimp. The Avatar does an admirable job of keeping vehicular homicides at zero. Unfortunately, there are certain heavier things that Kurt's arms aren't quite equipped to handle, like the fountain they are about to plow through.

"EVERYBODY DUCK!" Artie shouts to his companions, and is pleased to see that they listen to him. Well, Kurt and Mercedes listen to him—Finn is already laying flat on his stomach, clinging desperately to the rock floor with his eyes clenched shut and possibly whispering more prayers to the moon (and he thinks Artie is weird for talking to Lady Earth. Pffffffft).

The stone fountain is actually pretty nice—two dragons coiling around each other in a spiral, squirting water out of each of their mouths at the top. He really appreciates the chance to admire it up close and personal before the Rockmobile smashes it into so much soggy gravel. A few bits fly back towards his passengers, a problem that Kurt solves by bending his water tendrils into a convex circular shield, guiding the bits of stone and mortar over and around them. Finn remains blissfully unaware that he almost got his own head replaced with a stone dragon's.

"This is taking too long!" Kurt says, and Artie just resists the urge to take his eyes off the road to give him his best 'you crazy?' face.

"I am truckin' it as fast as my earth-moving ass can handle," Mercedes says, continuing to bend them forward with motions like she is pushing the Earth behind them. "If you want to take over, be my damn guest!"

"No," Kurt says. "It's not you. It's the City! It's..." He trails off as Artie takes another corner, staring at a burning building. The paralyzed Earthbender kind of agrees with the Capital A on this one—they're doing way too much bobbin' and weavin' to pick up any kind of decent speed. They need more straightaways.

"Artie!" Kurt shouts. "New rule! If you see a building in our way that is more than fifty percent on fire, I think it's safe to assume there is no one inside."

Artie grins. "Shortcut?"

Kurt nods. "Shortcut!"

Finn's eyes go from clenched shut to bulging out of their sockets. "Wait, what!"

The first opportunity presents itself almost right away, so Artie takes it with aplomb, guiding the unwieldy vehicle on a collision course with Red Letter Tailoring, which is currently looking more like bright glowing orange than red. "Hold on tight!" Artie warns.
The burning building proves little obstacle to a fast-moving rock the size of about three narwhalruses stacked on top of each other. It's much more of an obstacle for the people who happen to be onboard said rock. Fortunately, Kurt is as quick on his feet as ever, and uses his water supply to make a canopy to protect them from flaming debris. His makeshift shield absorbs and extinguishes all manner of combusting combustibles, including large beams of wood, several books, twelve shirts, nine tunics, seven sets of robes and fourteen things that give whole new meaning to the term 'hot pants.'

When they emerge on the other side of the building, the thing seems to realize that it now had a large hole in the middle, and promptly falls inward. Kurt busies himself with slinging the scorched clothing out of his water supply, something he does with plenty of force—many are the Fire Nationals who wind up with soggy, slightly scorched underwear plastered to their faces on that evening.

"I think we saved a few seconds there!" Artie shouts, giving the Avatar a brief thumbs up. "Good thinking!"

He chances another brief look back to check on everybody. Finn's eyes are closed tight again, and either he doesn't notice the hot pink bra that is caught on his head, or he can't bring himself to let go long enough to remove it. Either way, it's awesome. Mercedes is starting to look a little tired and sweaty, but Artie knows for a fact that woman has stamina out the wazoo. She could keep this up for hours before she gave out, if she needed to. And Kurt… Kurt looks almost...

Oh, shit. Kurt looks seriously, seriously afraid, which is not something Artie sees on him, like, ever. If Kurt looks scared of something, Artie knows that shit is now real. Shit is beyond real.

"We have to hurry," Kurt says. "Please."

Artie doesn't know who he is even talking to, but he takes it in all the same. The Palace is getting closer and closer, and if he has to take a few more shortcuts to get his boy there in the nick of time, that's just what he'll do.

It's just how he rolls.

Blaine makes it to the main wing of the Palace in record time. Fear has given him a fresh surge of adrenaline, and he knows he is going to feel this in the morning, but right now, he doesn't care. If he makes it to morning, he'll be more than happy to deal with the aches and pains of tonight.

Charging down the halls towards the throne room, he can feel the air beginning to heat up. Every few seconds, a slight tremor works its way through the walls and floors, rattling windows and knocking loose fixtures and scrolls. He has no idea how he missed this—maybe it wasn't quite obvious from outside, or maybe the battle hadn't quite reached this level of power when he first arrived here—but there is clearly a stupendous Firebending battle happening in this building. The shockwaves from the explosions grow stronger as he gets closer to the throne room, until it seems as though the walls are threatening to buckle from the strain with each detonation. Fierce bursts of heat blast against Blaine's face long before he catches even a glimpse of visible flame. He can tell, even from this great a distance, each time a new attack is launched. That level of power is something awe-inspiring. Breathtaking. Frightening. And Blaine has no idea what he could possibly do to help during a clash of proverbial dragons like this, but he can't stop running, he can't stop anything. He wants… no, he needs to see his father. There is nowhere left for him to go.

Later, he will wish that he had stopped. He will wish that he'd had a better plan. He will wish that he had known what was coming.
He will wish for many things that can never be.

The Throne Room doors are wide open when he reaches them, stopping just outside the room, standing unseen to watch the firefight. Within the room, his father—of course—and who else but Lady Sylvester are engaged in a ferocious, terrifying battle. Flame springs from them in walls, in tsunamis, in bursts the size of rhinoboars, in continuous streams and short flares larger than any fire Blaine has seen in his life. The force of the explosions rocks the room—several pillars have already been demolished, and the walls are beginning to crack from the strain, even with the Royal Guards (or not-Guards) who dot the perimeter of the chamber to keep the fire from catching. Fires so bright, he has to cover his eyes to protect them. Fires so fierce, the mere force of their birth is almost enough to topple him in his weakened state. Outside of the coming of the Great Comet, Blaine never new Firebending like this existed.

Later, he will ask himself what he could have done. He will ask himself what could have gone differently. He will ask himself why, why, why.

He will ask himself many questions that he cannot answer.

Out of all the possible paths he could choose, all the possible actions he could take, all the possible courses he could embark upon… he can't choose any of them. Out of all the possible things he could do in a situation like this, Blaine does the last thing on anyone's list. The worst thing a Firebender can do in any situation.

He freezes.

His chest tightens and clenches to the breaking point. Fear seizes every limb, every nerve, every muscle, locking them into place. He cannot move, he cannot breathe, he cannot think. The battle unfolds right in front of him with neither side able to gain an advantage and he cannot. Do. Anything. He wants to make a sound, but nothing will come out. He wants to move forward, backwards, side to side, anywhere, but his legs absolutely will not obey his commands. His mind rails against his rebellious, uncooperative body, he screams at himself mentally to do something, but nothing listens, nothing happens.

He stands, a human ice sculpture, unable to thaw even as the blinding heat from the impromptu Agni Kai makes him drip with sweat. The fight continues, oblivious to Blaine.

Until suddenly… it isn't.

Time seems to slow, as it always does for moments like this.

A head turns towards him—one of the Not-Guards has noticed his presence. Blaine sees him (her?) alert another Not-Guard. They begin to move towards him.

And still he cannot move.

They draw closer.

In the battle, Blaine's father takes a high position at the far end of the room, deftly dodging a roaring dragon of flame from Sue. In the short space of time that constitutes her recovery from the maneuver, his father brings two fingers on each hand together in front of him, slowly drawing them apart. Between them, sparks of crackling energy—the ultimate firebending technique—the cold fire—lightning—leap erratically in anticipation.

And still he cannot move.
Sue punches a two-handed burst of flame at the Fire Lord from the far side of the room, but it is too late. His father has weaved the lines of energy into a circle, bringing his fingers back together. The lightning is complete and waiting for release, and Sue is in mid-attack. She will not be able to deflect or dodge. The battle is over.

The Prince's enemies draw closer. Their hands are raised already to strike.

The ice that holds him thaws just slightly. Just enough for a single, unstable step backwards.

His father sees him.

He sees the enemies moving towards him.

He takes but a single glance at his son—at the panic in his eyes, at the blood that dries upon his lips, the bruises easing to the surface of his cheeks, his sweat-soaked hair, his tattered clothes—and the decision is made.

Blaine's eyes lock with his father's. It isn't even a split second. It feels like a lifetime.

His enemies begin to strike.

The Fire Lord strikes first. As Sue's fire approaches him from the side, Lord Anderson unleashes his lightning…

To the front. Towards the Throne Room doors. Just above Blaine.

The impact is nigh-instant. The arch of the door is hit with the full force of the attack. The explosion knocks Blaine down the hallway, just in time for the entire entryway and a portion of the ceiling to cave in and collapse, sealing the Throne Room behind a thick pile of smoldering rubble.

And just like that, it is over.

The Prince, still reeling from the impact, rises on shaky arms to unsteady feet, and turns wide eyes to the wreckage in front of him. He… he can't believe… he can't even…

…

It's silent.

There is not a single sound coming from behind the rubble. Not the slightest tremor of combustion. Not the briefest whiff of heat. It is cold. It is still. It is terribly, awfully, utterly silent.

It is over.

He doesn't know what to do. His mind can't even begin to process what just happened. He rakes his eyes uselessly over the destruction. He doesn't know what he is looking for. His mouth opens and closes soundlessly, his voice having abandoned him. He doesn't know what he would say if it hadn't. He can't… he can't do anything.

He didn't do anything.

And suddenly, he can't take it. He can't take this hallway, can't take this wreckage, can't take this silence, this stillness, this soul-cutting chill. He can't take himself, his actions, his inaction, and everything he just caused. He can't.

So Prince Blaine does what he does best. The only thing he truly knows how to do anymore.
He turns away and runs.

The royal brat definitely knows his way around the Palace. Quinn is booking it towards the throne room (and she's no slouch in the sprinting department) and she still hasn't seen hide nor hair of him. Granted, it took her a little longer than she thought it would to knock over the armoire that he had positioned against the door, hinges or not, but still. It seems like she would have caught up with him by no—

**OOPH.**

They collide just as she rounds a corner. Tiny though he may be, Quinn is not much larger, and the Prince was going much faster (little snot really can run). Quinn is knocked to the floor and ever so slightly dazed. It isn't long, but any hesitation in a Firebending battle can (and often does) spell death. The Prince takes one look at her, screws up his face and roars as he thrusts his open hand towards her, and…

…nothing happens.

The boy stares at his hand like it personally betrayed him. It's a strange time for him to lose his spark, but it's an advantage, and Quinn will happily take it. From the ground, she sweeps his legs out from under him and kicks him in the chest as he falls, laying him out on his back. To her surprise, he isn't even down for half a second before he springs right back to his feet and sprints past her. She is shocked. From the way he was acting just a few minutes ago, she would have thought he would pass out the second she knocked him off his feet. To say he's running like his life depends on it is an understatement—he's running like his life doesn't matter. Like he has absolutely no regard for himself or anything else. Like he's trying to run himself to death.

She chases him clear out to the Courtyard before she finally realizes she isn't going to catch him on foot. The Lady might have wanted him to die a certain way, but she is pretty sure that any dead Prince is better than a live one. So she starts with the Firebending. It doesn't take much—he's not making any particularly erratic movements, just moving in a straight line very, very fast. Her third fireball hits him in the back and sends him sprawling.

He is still trying to crawl forward when she catches up to him. Pathetic, yet strangely admirable. He refuses to stop. He is nothing if not dedicated to his blind panic, but the time for running is over. She is done playing, and she is not giving him another chance to escape. Her boot slams down onto the large burn mark on his back, prompting a full-bodied scream. His struggles cease even as she presses harder on his wound, and he collapses to the ground, his face turned sideways just enough for her to see his expression.

It's awful. For the tiniest, briefest of moments, Quinn actually feels sorry for him.

It's not much, but any pity is too much. She squashes it mercilessly, and prepares for the killing blow. "Shhhhh. It's over now," she says gently, raising the fireball above her head, before bringing it down…

…and having her hand lassoed in mid-air.

"Ay! Blondie! That's our contract. Hands off, ho," the trashy girl in black sneers at her.

It is only now that she notices the gates seem to have been blasted clean off their hinges by some kind of tremendous force.
Quinn rolls her eyes, taking her foot off the Prince to face the dysfunctional duo behind them. She crosses her arms. "Yes, it is. And if you were any good at your jobs, we wouldn't be in this situation."

"Hey!" Puck says, offended. The two of them look like they got into a fight with a dragon. Both are slightly scorched, Santana has no eyebrows and is missing a large portion of her hair, Puck's armor has been chipped and broken off in several places and his Mohawk has lost its 'moh,' leaving only an awk-ward line down the back of his head. "We're damn good at this, okay? We just had… obstacles. A shi*t ton of obstacles. Obstacles that explode. Plus, that little shit is fast," he finishes.

"And yet," Quinn says, tilting her head, "here I am, one lowly little Firebender, having successfully accomplished what two so-called 'professional assassins' could not. I caught what you couldn't."

"You best be double-checkin' your 'capture,' bitch, cause it looks like he's getting away from you again," Santana snidely points out.

Quinn pivots to see the Prince has again stumbled to his feet, and is running forward, hunched over like he's carrying something on his back. The Gates are wide open, but the burn seems to have slowed him down quite a bit.

A loud, grinding sound reaches her ears just as she is aiming another fireball. What appears to be a boat made of rock slides through the gate, several people jumping off the back as the Prince dashes towards them.

Her brief moment of hesitation is what costs her the kill. Puck steps forward with a piece of the broken gate. "HEY!" he shouts at the Prince. "HOLD UP!"

He punches the large piece of iron straight at the royal pain.

It's a direct hit. The iron slams him to the ground and flies past him, smashing into him with enough force to make him bounce off the earth, flying ragdoll limp through the air for a few moments before hitting ground again, rolling several times, and falling utterly still on his back. He doesn't even cry out upon impact.

But someone else does.

"NO!" cries a high, pained voice. The lead figure in the little group of land-sailers rushes forward to kneel at the fallen Prince. Apparently, it's someone Puck recognizes, because his eyes expand to the size of shelled ember nuts, and he whispers. "Oh, shi*t."

Santana looks over and quickly agrees with him. "Ohhh, SHIT! Go!" she shouts at Puck. "Finish him! MAS PRONTO!"

Puck takes off towards them, fist raised, and Quinn is suddenly seized with an intense feeling of foreboding… like she's looking at a millenias-old volcano that is preparing to erupt.

The sight hurts him at least as much as it thrills him. Blaine looks awful: burnt and cut-up and beaten and limping and hunched over. But he's alive, and he's headed straight for them. In the scheme of things, battered is better than dead any day of the week, and it looks like he has finally—finally—managed to get something wonderful and hold onto it, even if it is a little crisp around the edges…

And then it happens. Too fast for Kurt to stop, too fast for him to even warn Blaine. A huge piece
of iron, courtesy of Puck, levels the Prince as he flees. Everyone around him gasps and spits out various permutations of 'oh, no,' and 'oh, gods,' but Kurt's proclamation is a little louder. "NO!" he shouts, uselessly. Blaine flies through the air, lands on the ground, tumbles limp and unresponsive several times before coming to rest sprawled on his back and so very… very still.

"Kurt, wait!" Finn shouts, rushing after him, but Kurt pays him absolutely no attention. Blaine needs him, Blaine needs him and he isn't there, he needed him and he wasn't there and now he has to lose something else. It seems like everything good he gets or even might have is taken away just because it's his and he hates it.

He can't have Finn, he can't have a mother, he can't have a family, he can't have a normal life, and now he can't have Blaine, either.

And all he can think about as he kneels next to the boy who helped him is how unfair it is…

He's done.

He knows it as soon as he feels—or rather, doesn't feel—the metal slam into him from behind. The impact is definitely present, but it's distant, and muted. His brain is too muddled to properly process the power of the hit, and it doesn't matter anyway. The world spins around him and he flops over onto the ground, rolling Agni-only-knows how many times before lying still. He couldn't move if he wanted to. There is nothing left inside of him that works correctly.

He's just… done.

It's fitting that he dies running, with his wounds on his back. A coward's death is pretty much appropriate after everything that happened this evening.

There are bones loose inside of me, he thinks, distantly. He can feel them floating. It's odd. It seems like it should hurt, but it doesn't. Everything hurts, and yet the actual sensation of pain seems to be falling away from him, like the gold piece he dropped down a wishing well with his father when he was six. He doesn't even remember what he wished for. Does that mean it worked?

It doesn't matter now. All that matters is that Kurt is safe. All he can do is pray that Kurt stays safe, and be thankful that Kurt isn't here to see him go out like this.

…and then Kurt is here, looking down at him with this heartbroken expression, and Blaine doesn't understand.

Blaine recognizes him, and the only thing more painful than watching what happened to him before is watching what is happening now. He starts trying to talk, with zero success, his mouth moving and a strange, painful hissing sound coming out. And the thing that ruins him is how confused Blaine looks, like he just doesn't understand any of this. Doesn't understand what happened, how it happened, or why, and he's hoping Kurt does.

He doesn't.

The Avatar leans down further. "Shhh, don't talk," he says, sniffling, and already he can feel the tears starting to flow. He is so tired of crying, and yet the universe just seems determined to keep the tears flowing now, forever, and ever and onwards.

It isn't fair. To either of them. He shouldn't lose Blaine. Blaine shouldn't lose his life. None of this
should be happening.

He can't lose Blaine. He can't…

He wants to ask him why he's here. How he's here, why he has to see this, why isn't he leaving? But nothing will come out. There's nothing left inside of him that works correctly. Most of all, he wants to tell Kurt not to be sad. Because Kurt is sad now, and it's one of the most painful things Blaine has ever seen. Kurt is crying, and Kurt should never cry. His face should never look this wounded; he should never make these sounds.

But… even though he knows it's selfish to think this… he's glad Kurt is here. The other boy just makes him feel better. Even at the end of his life, after everything that has happened to him, Kurt's presence makes him want to smile.

So he does.

And then Blaine smiles at him, and that just fucks the proverbial dam inside-out. This sweet, gentle boy is dying right in front of him and he smiles at Kurt and it is the most fucking unfair thing he has ever seen in his life. He hates it.

He absolutely hates it. He refuses to let it happen. He can't lose Blaine. He can't lose him. He can't.

No, no, no, no…

And even that just seems to make things worse. He wishes there was something he could do to comfort Kurt, but he is slipping. He can feel it. With the strength he has left, he forces his eyes open and looks at Kurt. Blaine wants this to be the last thing he sees.

He's beautiful, even when he's like this. His eyes are stunning in the light of the night…

…no, no, no, no, no, no, no…

…the way the stars and moon reflect off of them…

…no, NO, NO, NO, nononononononono…

…it's almost like…

…no… no…

…they're glowing.

No.
The guy's not even *looking* at him. Easiest, kill, ever. Puck slides to a halt, and brings down his fist.

…which the Avatar meets with a punch of his own. *Bare-fisted.*

The force from the blow is completely deflected sideways—there is a crack like point-blank thunder, and a ring of destruction demolishes the ground between them, blasts outwards and tears out a perfectly straight section of *both sides* of the Palace Wall, wrecking them like they weren't even there.

And now the guy is looking at him, and oh, *fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck FUCK.* This is the scariest shit Puck has ever seen in his life, because the guy's eyes are *glowing white,* and he has the most utterly wet-pants-inducing "take no prisoners" expression that he has ever wanted to run screaming from. But he can't go anywhere. The guy has Puck's fist in his hand, and he is pretty sure that he could use every ounce of strength he has in that hand and still not break this guy's grip.

He speaks. And if Puck didn't think he was scary before…

"*Leave.*"

…the fact that he just spoke with like *a thousand different voices* would've just put him over the top.

And then Puck does leave, but not because he chooses to, but because the guy has blasted him with a spear of solid air that carries him all the way back to, and *through* the Palace.

He makes it through about three walls before he passes out.

Finn stands slack-jawed. They are so screwed. They are *so* screwed, because Kurt's gone Avatar. He's gone Avatar and Finn doesn't know if he can pull him back this time.

"*Dude!*" Artie shouts at him, as the ground beneath them all begins to rumble and split beneath the weight of Avatar Kurt's fury. "*This is all you!*"

"*Go!*" Mercedes concurs, actually shoving him forward to boot.

They're right. Finn has to get his shit together and fix this. If anyone can make this right, it's him.

"I can do this, I can do this, I can do this," Finn chants to himself as he runs over towards the knocked-out Prince guy. Kneeling down beside him even as *Avatar Kurt* stands up to walk towards their enemies, Finn experiences only a brief moment of hesitation before he gets over himself and tears Blaine's shirt open. Bending the water out of his waterskin, Finn gathers it into his hands and gently presses the liquid over the broken boy's chest. A gentle, azure light appears wherever the liquid makes contact with the skin. "He's still alive!" Finn says, kind of shocked himself, before incorporating that into his chant. "He's still alive, he's still alive, he's still alive, I can fix him, I can fix him, I can fix him."

He puts everything he has into the healing process, praying to Tui that it is enough as he gently, skillfully moves the liquid around, redirecting chi flow and repairing, or at least stopping the spread of, any damage he can find. He has to do this. He **has** to do this, because if he doesn't, Avatar Kurt is going to tear this entire City a sparkling new asshole before he is satisfied…

Santana is super-panicking right now.
"FUUUUUUCK."

**THIS** is why she didn't want to fight the chucklefucking Avatar, and if Puck were still anywhere near her and not probably embedded in drywall somewhere, she would be gloating so fucking hard right now. Instead, she's throwing a rope trap at the chucklefucking Avatar. Why is she doing this? **FUCK IF SHE KNOWS!** She doesn't make good life choices when she panics, okay!

The rope trap never makes it. It fucking *vaporizes* in mid-air, disappearing into dust with little more than a burst of orange light. Fucking white-eyes didn't *even blink* and it's just 'POOF' gone!

"...yeah," she says, backing away. "I'm done here. Lopez out, bitches."

She tries to run, but the fucking ground splits into about a hundred different pieces and pillars, which start rising and falling at random. The Palace quivers with the quaking earth, and large pieces of it start to crumble and fall off. The wind starts to pick up and nearly beats Santana to death with the scorched remains of her own hair. She can't even open her eyes long enough to run away before the pillar of Earth beneath her feet shoots up like a 15-year-old who she just promised to let touch her boobs. She is flying high through the air, and it'd almost be nice if she didn't know what comes afterwards.

All she can do on her way to the ground is reiterate her previous sentiments.
"FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU—"

"Come on, dude," Finn gently pleads with the fading life in front of him. "Don't die, *please* don't die. Kurt seriously needs you. Like, *seriously*. He is flipping the fuck out and he is about to, like, tie your entire country into a pretzel, dude, I shit you not. You don't even have to do anything—like, talk, or *anything*. All you have to do is not die, and then I can tell Kurt you're not dying, and we can be cool again. Okay? Deal?"

He is trying as hard as he can, but *shit*, they really pulverized this guy. There's one really bad wound that he can feel there, but for some reason, he just can't *get* to it. He could probably stabilize the guy if he could just...

...duh. *Duh*, Finn.

Very, *very* gently, Finn rolls the unresponsive Blaine onto his side, revealing the sizeable, nasty-looking burn on his back. It's definitely going to scar. But if Finn is lucky, that's *all* it will do...

It would be a lie to say Quinn wasn't just a *little* frightened as the prospect of the *full Avatar* walking slowly towards her with nothing but light in his eyes and death in his expression. But she has been trained to perform in the face of fear, even *overwhelming* terror that would make most people crap their entire guts out onto the floor.

The tumult is finally drawing some of the other Chi-Ryus out of the Palace. Quinn wrangles them quickly. "CHI-RYUS," she shouts. "LINE UP! CONCENTRATE FIRE ON THE AVATAR!"

Flipping and leaping into place, the Chi-Ryu warriors form a horizontal line and begin punching rapid fireballs at the approaching omni-bender. The Avatar responds easily and naturally, raising his hands and swiftly swirling them around. The fireballs seem to impact an invisible barrier in front of him, the flames dissipating and swirling around in mid-air like an infernal whirlpool. The flames grow more and more intense with every fireball that impacts the barrier, beginning to flicker and flare wildly. Through the shimmering, shifting veil of heat, the image of the boy Avatar...
is suddenly transfigured, becoming a woman with bright, beautiful hair, in an elaborate, shimmering outfit. The small face mask that surrounds her eyes does nothing to dim the powerful light that shines from within. The image shifts again, to a tall man with long, curly hair, wearing Fire Nation armor—this is an image she recognizes, one from her history books. Again it shifts—a dark-skinned woman with long, light hair, attired in Earth Kingdom robes. Each image swirls and flickers between countless others, each with the brilliant light shining from within their eyes, all superimposed over the boy—countless past Avatars, countless past lives, thousands upon thousands of years of experience and power brought to bear before her. The Avatars move in time with him, for he is them, and they are him.

She might be in over her head here.

"CHI-RYUS," she shouts as she notices him taking a breath. "FALL BACK! FALL BACK!"

They retreat into the Palace, as deep as they can get, just as the Avatar unleashes his counterattack, taking all of their combined fire and expanding it a hundredfold, into a wall of iridescent flame so massive that it quite literally encompasses the entire Royal Palace. The impact destroys every single window in the building, blows out most of the doors, strips the very face off of the ancient and noble home of the Fire Nation Royal Family. And all Quinn can do is be thankful that he didn't demolish the entire Palace with them inside.

Of course, it isn't over yet…

"Come on…” Finn says. "Come on…” He growls, large, nimble fingers guiding the water over, under, and around the burnt flesh. It's subtle, and it's so, so skirting the line, but he feels it when it happens. Blaine… stops dying. The light of life that was so rapidly fading before has settled into a dim, but stable glow. He'll survive. If they can keep him safe, he'll survive.

The tall boy jumps up and dashes towards Avatar Kurt as fast as his ostrich legs will carry him. "KURT!" he shouts, desperately trying to get the attention of the boy within the Avatar. "KURT, I'VE GOT HIM! He's okay, dude! If we can get him somewhere safe, he'll live, dude, I promise! Just PLEASE CALM DOWN!"

Kurt turns those blinding, white-light eyes upon him and Finn has to fight VERY hard not to fall over and pass out right then and there. Because this isn't Kurt he's talking to, not really. This is the Capital-A AVATAR, the whole shebang, a cosmic force of unimaginable power that could crush him as easily as breathing. The magnitude of what he is facing is something he can't even fully grasp, not really—which, he supposes, is one of the very few advantages of being the dim bulb in the group.

The Avatar nods to the abandoned Rockmobile. "Take him there," it says in way more voices than should ever come out of one mouth. Finn just nods. What's he gonna do, say 'no?'

Blaine is kind of tiny and very much knocked the fuck out, so Finn is careful when he picks the guy up and gently carries him over to the land-boat, where Artie and Mercedes are already making preparations for a quick escape, if necessary. "He told me to bring him here," Finn says, laying Blaine down on the floor.

"Is he gonna live?" Mercedes asks, crouching next to him and gently bending the stone so that it encompasses most of his body, holding him in place and protecting him without stifling or crushing him.

Finn nods. "If we get him somewhere safe, yeah. He'll live."
Artie is staring at something in the sky. "I assume he has a plan?" the Earthbender says, pointing at Avatar Kurt, who has began rapidly spinning around, rising into the air on a cushion of whirling winds.

Finn feels his senses being tickled slightly, and hears the distant sounds of breaking glass. "I think so. You guys might want to hold on for this…"

It happens for miles.

Every house, every bottle, every jar, every well, every tub, every pipe, every sewer grate—all of them open up and divest whatever water they hold, letting it rise into the night to join the irresistible calling of the Avatar. The impurities are left behind as a matter of course—only pure, clean water will join with Kurt tonight. The streams pass over the heads of thousands upon thousands of onlookers, causing even the most riotous of rioters to stop and stare at the full power of the Spirit of the World, manifested. The Avatar rises high above the ruined Royal Palace, the water swirling around him in layers and streams, forming into a massive sphere that makes him look vaguely like a frozen sun. When he is satisfied with the amount of water he has, the water supply dives down and swirls itself into a 'pipe,' sweeping in and picking up the Rockmobile and all four passengers therein.

It swoops back into the sky and flies above the city like a translucent dragon, snaking through the air with the glowing-eyed boy in the lead, Mercedes and Artie doing their best to hold the stone boat together in the midst of the swirling waterspout while Finn dutifully watches over the sleeping Prince on behalf of his currently-omnipotent, super-pissed stepbro-but-not-really.

They continue to air-sail in this pattern until they reach the road well outside the City's borders, there, the Avatar gently guides them to the ground, letting the land-boat come to rest in a small clearing of trees before unceremoniously dropping the entire water supply he just gathered and probably causing more than a few localized floods. Finn knows as soon as he hears the water drop that the Avatar State is about to drop as well, and he hops off the boat with grace he never knew he possessed, rushing towards his brother just as the light leaves his eyes and he collapses.

Finn doesn't let him hit the ground. He cradles the exhausted, unconscious Kurt just as carefully as he did Blaine, walking back to rejoin his two awake friends and decide what to do next…

Sue surveys the damage with a careful, calculating eye. Tons of fire damage to the Palace proper, not to mention the severe destabilization of the foundations due to sporadic Earthbending… the entire place will probably have to be torn down and rebuilt from scratch.

The perfect opportunity to give the old place a new paint job!

She wisely hung back as the porcelain Avatar threw his cosmic hissy-fit and ruined everyone's evening, but now that she has the chance to take a good look at things (gotta repair the Palace Wall, too, maybe a little refortification), she feels like she oughta thank that sparkly little fairy.

"Well, this is going to be easier than I ever imagined," she smirks, taking a moment to bask in her triumph before stalking off to yell at her Chi-Ryus…

…assuming they're still alive. They'd BETTER be. She does not take kindly to failure, even and especially in the event of death.

They move both boys away from the road as quickly as possible, finding a small cave that
Mercedes is able to disguise the entrance to. It takes a little while, seeing as they weren't really able to bring any of their possessions with them, but they still manage to soften the earth enough to make a couple of decent beds and turn some of their excess clothing into decent blankets, wadding up any leftover cloth into pillows for them.

With few other options, and few reasons not to, Finn, Artie, and Mercedes lay Kurt and Blaine down next to each other. Kurt will be out for hours—he always is, after an Avatar State freakout—and Blaine will be down even longer, maybe days. It doesn't really matter at this point. They can cross that bridge when they come to it. For now, all they can do is watch over their friend and prospective friend, and make sure they reach the morning.

And so, under the watchful eyes of two Earthbenders and a Waterbender, the Avatar and the Fire Prince rest side by side in the dark hours before dawn. Neither is consciously aware of their proximity, but no one is really surprised when they go to check on them and find that their heads are tilted ever-so-slightly towards one-another.

None of them has any idea what the dawn will bring.

But whatever comes, they know they will face it together.

**END OF ACT 1**

_A/N: _So… like I said, I worked HELLA hard on this chapter, and on the story in general. Please, PLEASE leave a comment or review on this Chapter so I know what you think. I love detailed comments, but even if you just leave a brief 'STILL LOVING THIS STORY,' I'll be happy because at least I'll know you're reading it. :)
Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 18/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: Cursing, innuendo, violence.
Word Count: 4204
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

Author's Note: Well, that went well. XP

As of the end of Act 1, Blaine's life is in figurative and literal ruins. The Fire Lord is no more, the Royal Palace is wrecked, and the Burning City has decisively lived up to its name. A powerful enemy has poised themselves to take the reins of power in the Fire Nation, and Kurt has loudly confirmed his position as the Avatar. Perhaps too loudly.

The Fire Prince was exactly what Kurt needed, when he needed it. Now, Blaine is the one in need. Can Kurt be the same for him? Only one way to find out….

Act 2
~
Candles

CHAPTER 18 –
The Morning After

"…so, uhhh, Tui... I'm really not used to this kind of thing, but... now that we're out of danger of, like, immediate horrible death, I just wanted to thank you again."

The rough, warm tone of Finn's voice budes through the gaps in Kurt's subconscious. His body begs him to roll over, to cuddle closer to this warm thing next to him and gently float back into the
land of dreamless sleep, but his brain is curious and wants to keep listening.

"I know you're probably busy, with... like... important moon duties, or whatever, but I want you to know; I'm not gonna forget this. I asked, and you totally came through for all of us. Next full moon, I'm gonna leave you a super nice offering. 'Cause you totally deserve it."

Oh, dear La, this is fantastic. Finn is actually talking to the moon. Oh, Artie is going to have a field day with this. He can't wait to share it... just as soon as he finishes his nap. He sighs softly, rolling over and draping his arm over the wonderful heat-producing body next to him, blissfully oblivious to the world.

"So, uhh, yeah. Thanks again. Keep doing what you're doing, 'cause you're awesome. And... you know, watch over Kurt. He's got a lot to deal with. Oh, yeah, that Blaine guy, too, I guess, though I'm not sure if he's, like, in your territory or whatever. I think Firebenders like the Sun, or something. I know, right? Weirdoes..."

Kurt's brain is irked by this. Blaine is not a weirdo. He is a wonderful, kind, sweet, handsome, warm...

Warm.

The Avatar's eyelids perform an instant split. He is lying next to Blaine. Blaine is lying next to him. They are two inches from each other and his arm is wrapped around Blaine and...

**Blaine is alive.**

Some kind of undignified squawking noise bursts from his throat as every part of Kurt's body attempts to wake up and move away from Blaine independently, resulting in him making a rather loud and flail-spectacle of himself and more or less crab-walking away from the boy he was crushing on who he just witnessed being crushed.

"Kurt!" Finn says from the mouth of the cave. He quickly dashes in and grabs the panicking Avatar. "Dude, chill! It's okay, okay? We're safe here. Everything's alright."

"Alright?" Kurt asks, incredulous. "How is... what are you even... I was sleeping in dirt!" he shouts, half-outraged, half-shocked. "And I have no idea how we got here. Or why! And Blaine... Blaine was..."

"Shhhhh," Finn says, pulling Kurt into a hug. "He's fine, dude. Well, he's not fine... he's pretty fucked up, actually, but he's alive. I got him."

The smaller boy immediately breaks from the hug to look Finn in the face. "You saved him?" he asks.

Finn shrugs. "Well, yeah. What else would I d—"

He has a hard time finishing the sentence because Kurt immediately reinstates the hug with ten times the ferocity. Kurt doesn't look like much, but that wispy little frame hides some serious muscle and... well, long story short—ow. "Thank you," Kurt says. "Thank you thank you thank you thank you. Oh, Finn. I was... I was so sure he was..."

Something catches his eye, and Kurt pulls back again. Finn clothes are torn. Most of the sleeves on his robes are gone, and everything more than a few inches below the waist has also been torn off. "What happened?" he asks. "How on earth did we even get here, how did we... oh La. Oh my dear
sweet merciful spirits. I flipped out, didn't I?"

"Mercedes said you'd say that. She told me to say 'Like a flapjack on crack,' when you did. So… 'Like a flapjack on crack.'" Finn finishes with a sympathetic grimace.

Kurt groans and flops onto the ground, burying his face in his pillow…

…which he is horrified to discover is made from Finn's sleeves. "Ewwww," he says. "You let me sleep on your sweaty clothes?"

Finn rolls his eyes. "You're welcome. And they're not even my clothes." The rolled up cloth smacks the taller boy in the face as Kurt unceremoniously rejects Finn's hospitality and replaces it with his own, burying his head in his arms.

"What did I do this time?" he sighs. Finn has a little trouble making out what he says because his face is still buried in his arms, but he gives the best answer he can.

"You kicked the crap out of a bunch of people. And made a huge earthquake and sucked up, like, everybody's water everywhere." He stares off into space, as if trying to remember something. "Oh, yeah. And you exploded the Palace."

Kurt's jaw drops. "I blew up Blaine's home?"

"Yeah. It was pretty intense."

The Avatar resists the urge to bury his head in the dirt. "Oh, La. He's going to hate me. He's never going to speak to me again."

"Dude, you kind of saved his life. I think he's kind of required to like you now. It's like, a law," Finn tries.

Kurt just sighs with all the dramatic fluster he can muster, turning to look again at the boy he has… shared a bed with. He can barely stand to look for more than a few seconds. The boy is as pale as the frozen tundra, making the dark bruises on his face stand out even more. His breathing sounds pained and ragged, and his hair is so slick with sweat that it isn't even curly. "If he even wakes up," Kurt says, sadly. "I can't believe I let him go off alone. I knew people were trying to kill him, and I just… let him go."

"People are always trying to kill us. It's not really a thing for us at this point. Maybe you just forgot that it's not really like that for everybody?" Finn is trying so hard to help, bless him, but it's just not taking. He gets up and moves around to the other side of the 'bed,' kneeling next to Blaine. "Anyway, he's alive, dude. He'll wake up. Maybe not anytime soon, but… eventually." He pauses for a second. "Ummm… I'm gonna check on him right quick. It's about time for another session, and…"

"What?" Kurt says.

"…I don't think you want to see this," Finn warns.

The smaller boy considers this for a second. If that was supposed to warn him off of this, it was a spectacular failure. Now he can't rest until he actually sees it. "Go ahead." It can't possibly be any worse than he is imagining—

**OH GODS.**
Kurt hits a note that not even he knew he was capable of reaching, and covers his mouth, turning away almost instantly. Beneath the blanket, Blaine is half-naked, but any pleasure he might once have drawn from the sight is crushed mercilessly beneath the weight of the enormous patches of dark blue and purple that line his torso. His skin is swollen in strange places and oh, this is horrible. This is… he has these wounds because of Kurt. Because Kurt made the wrong choice. This was never a case of the universe taking away the things that make him happy. This is Kurt failing to protect what he loves.

"That's nothing, you should see his back," Finn says.

The Avatar shudders. "Finn, I understand that you are trying to help, but you are failing miserably. Please, stop talking and just… do what you need to do," Kurt says, his voice thick.

Finn doesn't say anything after that, and Kurt continues to stare at the wall, nothing but the gentle sloshing of the water Finn is using to occupy his senses. It's not really enough. "Where is Art- cedes?" he asks after a few minutes, still not turning around.

"Mercedes went to kill the crap out of dinner. Which is great, because I am super hungry."

Kurt's stomach grumbles slightly at the mention of food. He bitchfaces it right back into silence.

"Artie's sneaking around town to see if he can figure out what the fuck actually went down last night."

"Ah," Kurt says, nodding to… the person he isn't even looking at. "Statue or rock?"

"I think he went as a bush this time," Finn says.

"Master of disguise," Kurt comments idly.

The echoes of moving water continue to bounce around the interior of the dimly lit cave for a few more minutes, before Finn finishes his work. "Okay, I'm done. You can look now."

He turns around just in time for Finn to finish pulling the sheet around the slumbering Prince, with gentleness Kurt is surprised to see he possesses. With the worst of the wounds out of sight, it's easier to pretend that Blaine is just sleeping and not recovering from the night that almost took his life. With slow, cautious steps, he moves next to Finn and sits, his eyes only on Blaine. He wants to touch him, offer some kind of comfort, but he isn't sure where he isn't hurt. He eventually settles on running a hand through his hair, which—to be honest—feels kind of gross. It's a small price to pay to be able to feel that he is alive.

"What did happen last night?" Finn asks Kurt.

"I'm as much in the dark as you. These two nutcases in armor and a gimp suit—respectively, not at the same time—came out of nowhere and tried to kill Blaine. When I stopped them, they tried to kill us both. We flipped them upside down and mopped the floor with them, of course," Kurt says, offhand. "But… everything after that is just a blur. Blaine had to go to the Palace, I didn't know where you guys were, we split up, the entire City was tearing itself apart for no apparent reason…"

The Avatar folds a hand into his sleeve and rubs his eyes with it. "And the Lights… you saw those too, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Finn says. "Mom always told me those were a North Pole exclusive. This is definitely not the North Pole."

"The world has gone insane," Kurt says, laughing almost deliriously. "And, lucky me, I'm the one
Finn looks down at him, more comforting than sad, but sad nonetheless. "Not just you. Me, and Artie, and Mercedes... we're not going anywhere. Well, not anywhere that you're not going. I mean... we're not gonna stay still if you leave. We're not literally not—we're with you, dude."

Watching the tall boy stumble all over himself verbally never fails to make him smile. He grins up at his stepbrother. "I'm glad you're here," Kurt says, sincerely. "And not just for this," he says, gesturing to Blaine. "Just... in general."

Finn smiles and ducks his head a little. "Me too. Thanks for not... you know... dumping me in the Earth Kingdom."

He isn't sure who strikes first, but before Kurt knows it, there is an arm around his shoulder, and he has one arm around a waist and the other gently combing through a head of (gross, sweaty) hair. A little line of comfort, passing it on to whoever needs it the most.

"You wouldn't have lasted a week," Kurt says lightly.

"I so would have," Finn denies. "Like... a week-and-a-half. At LEAST."

By the time their companions get back, Finn has taken Kurt's awakening as a cue to break his bedside vigil, and is snoozing against the wall of the cave while Kurt watches over Blaine. Mercedes returns first, carrying a couple of jackelopes by their antlers, unceremoniously dumping the things near the entrance to the cave. "Food's on. Somebody better be building a fire for these, or... Kurt!"

The strong young woman rushes into the cave, and sweeps the Avatar into a hug that is only slightly less crushing than Finn's bear-squeezes (and only because she is more careful). "Honey, we have got to get you on some kind of anti-stress diet."

"I know," Kurt sighs into her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I just... it was just too much. It's not every day that someone you love is nearly killed right in front of you."

"Everybody flips out once in a while," Mercedes says comfortinglly. "But not everybody goes into earth-busting trances when they do."

"One of many job hazards," Kurt sighs. "I know it's scary to see me like that, but I honestly just can't..."

"Sweetie, I know you can't. It's not your fault. But there has got to be a way to stop that thing from popping out of you like a jack-in-the-box every time you get wound up. We need to look into that."

"Out like a wet candle," Kurt sighs.

"He got it pretty good last night," Mercedes nods. "He's lucky to be breathing."

"I'm so worried about him," Kurt admits. "Even with Finn's help... what if he never wakes up? What if he can't remember who he is, or he can't talk, or he has some kind of horrible permanent disability?"

To prove to Kurt that the universe likes to laugh at his expense (if nothing else), Artie slides in...
behind him at that exact moment. "Seriously," he deadpans. "How _will_ he survive?"

Kurt winches. "I… didn't mean it like that."

Artie waves him off. "It's fine. Now that I think about it… there aren't many things that I can imagine a Firebender in my position doing. And the ones I _can_ imagine seem really painful and bad for your junk."

Kurt's eyes bulge as he makes some kind of unbidden bizarro-snorting sound. Regaining his composure is not an easy task. _That's what you get for feeling bad for freakin' Artie_, he thinks. "Okay!" Kurt announces loudly. "New topic of conversation! How was your trip?"

Artie grimaces. "I'mma go with… _educational._"

"Oh, _that_ sounds promising," Mercedes says, sitting down next to the paralyzed boy.

"Spill," Kurt says as he sits next to her, and the three of them have a little pow-wow.

"Alright," Artie says, folding his hands. "So, last night. All that craziness… from what I heard, it sounds like the whole thing started with a fight between the Royal Guards and a bunch of civs. Some kind of freakout over the plague or something. From there, it just kind of spread through the City, to the point where every Guard everywhere was a target. The whole City freaked out, and I think it's something that's been brewing for a while."

Kurt thinks back to last night—which already seems like it was ages ago—to the rude man who interrupted Blaine's and his dinner. "I spoke to someone last night who seemed to be laboring under the impression that the Avatar and the Fire Lord were in cahoots."

Artie purses his lips. "Yeah… I _really_ don't think that's the case anymore. While I was poking around at the edge of town, I caught some poor fool putting _these_ up." He reaches inside of his robe and pulls out a small poster. On it, in bold print just below the center; "FIRE LORD MURDERED BY THE AVATAR." Below this, a small blurb attributing basically everything that went wrong last night to Kurt. It ends with "Prince Blaine missing and presumed dead. Emergency Fire Lord to be appointed by the Council this afternoon. Please remain calm."

Above those, the most interesting part of the poster; a rather… _unique_ artistic interpretation of Kurt himself which dominates the majority of the page.

"Putting these up? As in 'there was more than one?" Mercedes asks.

The other Earthbender nods. "A _lot_ more."

"How did they get these out so quickly?" Kurt asks.

Several hours earlier, Chi-Ryu Firebending Academy for Girls

"WAKE UP, YOU PATHETIC BUNCH OF SLACKERS! I HAVE MALICIOUS LIBEL TO COMMIT, AND I WANT EVERY SET OF HANDS WORKING A PRINTING PRESS! THESE LIES WON'T SPREAD THEMSELVES!"

"No idea," Artie shrugs.
The Avatar peruses the drawing with a critical eye. "You know… of all the posters of me that I have seen, I think this might be my favorite."

Mercedes leans in next to him. "Oh, wow. I'm with you there. It really captures the essence of Kurt Hummel."

"And in terms of my actual appearance, it's shockingly accurate," Kurt continues.

"You mean besides the fact that you're fifty feet tall and breathing fire?" Artie says with a raised eyebrow.

"And, apparently, part-dinosaur?" Mercedes continues.

"Huh. I didn't notice the scales before, but you're right, there they are," Kurt says. "Still, I like it. After I save the world, I'm definitely looking into this artist to do my official portrait."

"Be that as it may," Artie says, "we still have a big-ass problem staring us right in the face. Before, people just had rumors about the Avatar. Last night, they more or less got to watch you flambé the Royal Palace and high-tail it out of the city. And judging by this drawing, they have a pretty good idea what you look like."

"Wait," Kurt says. "Is this true? Well, I mean, obviously it isn't true… is it? Is the Fire Lord…?"

"Dead, by all accounts," Artie confirms with a solemn nod. "People seem really broken up about it, too. Which is weird, because yesterday, everybody was hating on the guy like crazy."

Kurt would comment on that himself if every single cell in his brain wasn't crying 'Oh, Blaine!' in unison and weeping and consoling each other. He stares at the unconscious boy lying just a few feet away, feeling more tears spring to his eyes and not even caring this time. It isn't often he feels compelled to cry for someone else. "His father is dead, his home is destroyed… he's lost everything."

Mercedes follows his line of vision. "Damn."

Artie turns to the same sight as his companions, sad eyes speaking volumes. "At least he's in good company," is his contribution.

It's a nice moment of unspoken solidarity. He almost wishes Blaine could be awake for it. "So, what do we do?"

"I recommend we get the eff outta here," Artie says sagely. "If anybody sees you, we're going to have one Hill of an unwelcoming committee rolling out to meet us."

"Uhhh, you seem to be forgetting something," Kurt says, pointing to Blaine. "I'm no healer, but I'm fairly sure that we can't just wrap him in a tarp and drag him behind us."

"Are you sure we should bring him with us?" Mercedes asks. Kurt knows her well enough to know she's being practical, not callous. "He's already hurt. We don't exactly get a lot of rest and relaxation time. It might be best for him if we find someone who's willing to hide him and help him get back on his feet."

The Avatar shakes his head vehemently. "No. Absolutely not. Someone sends assassins after him, the entire Capital goes insane, and now the Fire Lord is dead and a new one is set to be appointed. All of this happened in one day. Call me a cynic, but this smacks of the foulest of foul play, and I can't leave Blaine to face that alone. I can't trust anyone else with him. I won't leave him."
leave him alone again, he thinks.

The two Earthbenders share a significant look. "Well," Artie says. "There is one thing. I kind of wanted to surprise you guys, but I guess now is as good a time to spring it as any." He picks up a small rock and expertly pings Finn in the forehead, causing him to wake with a start. "Hey! Big buddy!" Artie says with a smile. "Get up and come outside with us. I've got a surprise for you."

Finn looks caught somewhere between bleary and wary. "Surprises usually mean pain. Can I not be surprised?"

The paralyzed Earthbender rolls his eyes. "You'll like this surprise, trust me. Come on," he says, sliding through the vines obscuring the entrance to the cave. Finn stares at the door for a moment before dutifully following after.

Mercedes looks at Kurt. "And what about me?" she asks (rhetorically, of course). "Am I gonna like the surprise? Does anybody care what I like? Hills, no they don't," she grumbles getting up off the ground.

"Oh, please," Kurt says, rolling his eyes as he rises primly to follow his friends. "You are the High Queen of this little bad of misfits, and you know it."

"Of course I know it," Mercedes scoffs. "I'm just wondering if anybody told them."

When they get outside, Finn looks to be on the verge of tears, staring at something he was certain he'd lost forever. "Drizzle!" he shouts happily, dashing over to hug the dragon moose, who seems largely unperturbed by his tearful caretaker's affection.

"Told ya," Artie says smugly. "I found him munching on the grass a little ways up the road."

"Artie, you are so awesome," Finn says.

"Yeah, I know," he says, smiling even wider.

"Great," Mercedes says, tossing her hands up. "Another mouth to feed! That's just wonderful. Boy, do you even think before you—"

"Ah, ah, ahhh," Artie says, holding up a finger. "My surprise isn't done yet. I figured since we have a dragon moose, why not get a few accessories to go along with it?"

He slides a little ways deeper into the woods, gesturing behind a small group of close-knit young trees. "Feast your eyes on this!" he says, bending the trees aside to reveal a fairly magnificent carriage. It's incredibly ornate—a pagoda-style roof, painted a deep red with images and sculptures of golden dragons and lions decorating the exterior.

Kurt's jaw drops. "Artie, are you insane! This thing is probably more expensive than most peoples' houses! Where did you get it? How did you get it?"

The sitting boy shrugs. "It fell off a cart."

Mercedes gives him a side-eye. "It is a cart."

Artie smiles. "It fell off a bigger cart."

The dynamic duo continues to glare at him while Finn pets his dispassionate moose.
The thief finally holds up his hands in surrender. "Look, I just thought that if we're going to be taking care of Crown Prince Comatose for a little while, we might as well make sure he rides in style. The interior of this thing is pimped out. I could live in this carriage."

Kurt crosses his arms and walks over to the butt-bound bandit, staring down at him imperiously. He keeps up the affronted look for a few more seconds before breaking into a wide grin and sweeping the Earthbender into a hug. "Oh, you wonderful kleptomaniac lunatic! I could kiss you."

"I'd be much more appreciative if you'd put me down," Artie says uneasily, and Kurt returns to himself so fast he nearly drops the other boy.

"Sorry, sorry!" he says. "I forgot, no lifting without warning."

"It's cool. I appreciate the sentiment," Artie says with a smile.

Meanwhile, Finn gently guides Drizzle towards the entrance of the cave, while Mercedes continues to eye the obviously stolen carriage with no small amount of disdain. A long silence passes between them, before she sighs and gives Kurt a gentle smile. "Oh, fine. We'll add one more name to the Mercedes Jones Traveling Home for Lost Boys. If he wants to come," she adds.

"He really doesn't have a choice in the matter," the Avatar replies simply.

"Kurt," the lady Earthbender warns.

"What?" Kurt says. "He doesn't! He's not even awake yet."

"Actually," Finn says, sticking his head out of the cave entrance. "I think he's about to be."

A pained groan echoes from behind the tall boy, and he quickly heads back into the cave. Kurt is immediately right behind him, followed by the Earthbenders. They arrive to see Blaine tossing his head weakly back and forth, letting out pitiful moans and putting Kurt's heart through a meat grinder with every single one. This is it, he thinks, and he isn't even entirely sure what it is. He knows Blaine is going to be conscious soon, and he is suddenly brought into sharp awareness of how very not ready he is for this moment. What do you say to someone who has just been through what Blaine survived? 'Sorry about your entire life and all of your childhood memories?' 'Get well soon from the near-death experience you just suffered?' 'Shame about your country. How about a road trip?'

Everything he can think of is just terrible and grossly inappropriate, but he can't not say anything. So when dark eyelashes flutter open to reveal bleary, hazel eyes, Kurt says the first thing that comes to mind. "Good morning!" he grins. Never before in his life has he wanted to smack himself in the face so hard.

For La's sake, it's not even morning!

A/N: You may be interested to learn that I have retroactively titled Act 1 'Sparks.' This Act is 'Candles.' The third and final act? 'Fireworks.' ;) Reviews and comments are love!
Imagine being born.

One minute, you're nowhere. It's nice, it's quiet, it's dark, it's warm, it's safe. Then, all of a sudden, with no warning and for no apparent reason, you are expelled into harsh cold air, loud noises, bright light, and about a dozen people looking at you and saying random things you don't understand, at least one of whom usually hits you. Looking at it from that perspective, it's no wonder the first thing babies do when they're out is flail and scream for all they're worth.

This is kind of like that.

Blaine opens his eyes to four blurry shapes staring down at him in a world much brighter than the one he just left. One of them says something unintelligible, and that's about as far as he gets before OW FUCK OW OW OW SHIT EVERYTHING HURTS FUCK FUCK AHHH WHY AGNI HELP ME OWWWWW. His conscious mind takes a leave of absence, leaving only pure animal
instinct to lash out at the unknown and attempt desperately to either escape or destroy whatever is hurting him like this. There are hands holding him down and voices talking to him and shouting at each other and none of it makes any sense and it won't stop and he can't escape and—

It's more or less a relief when he passes out again. For all involved.

Before anyone even realizes what's happening, Mercedes, Kurt, Artie, and Finn suddenly find themselves in various positions around Blaine, pinning his thrashing limbs and head to the ground to stop him from further hurting himself—or, you know, them. Each attempts to calm him down in their own way, which has the net effect of none of them really being heard over the combined sound of each other and Blaine's own terrified, animalistic cries. By the time he finally stops screaming and goes slack once again, they're all panting slightly and staring at each other with wide eyes. Well, all of them except Kurt, who appears to be staring at nothing in particular and not breathing very much at all.

"Kurt?" Finn says gently, to no response. "Hey, buddy? You okay?"

Kurt's answer is succinct beyond comparison.

*Flop.*

They share a collective wince. Artie, ever the bastion of sensitivity, pokes Kurt a couple of times. The Avatar doesn't move. "And now we're back to square one," he sighs.

Mercedes looks at Finn. "Is he gonna do that every time he wakes up?"

Finn's answer is also fairly concise. "I fucking *hope* not."

Kurt takes much less time to recover from his second fainting spell in twenty-four hours. Well, in terms of 'waking up,' at least. It'll take him much longer to recover from seeing Blaine… *like that.*

"Well, the good news is, he didn't hurt himself that much," Finn says, finishing his examination and a miniature healing session. "He'll probably wake up again soon. The bad news is… there's no way to figure out if he's gonna do *that* again."

Kurt shudders, trying desperately to shove that image out of his mind. Of course, nothing ensures that you will remember something forever quite like the desperate desire to forget it. During the frantic minute (which felt like an hour) that Blaine was 'awake,' Kurt saw nothing of the boy he more or less fell in love with. It was blind, feral panic, born from an overwhelmed mind that had no way of telling what was going on. His eyes were not *his* eyes, his voice was not *his* voice, his movements were nothing like *him.* For one agonizing, horrible minute, Blaine was not *Blaine* at all.

"It's…" Finn starts, glancing at Kurt, but for some reason, he balks on his speech and clamps his mouth shut.

"What?" Kurt asks.

"Nothing," Finn says, not looking at him.

"Dude, no way," Artie says. "You can't get away with that. We all know you thought something, even if you don't say it."
Mercedes looks at him from the cave entrance where she is cooking the jackelopes. "Matter fact, if you don't say it, we'll just have to assume the worst. And I can get pretty creative. Would you rather be grounded for a thought you had, or one you didn't have?"

Finn sighs. "I was just gonna say… when the guy… Blaine," Finn corrects, still trying to get used to using his actual name. "When he was freaking out just now… it kind of reminded me of Kurt when he's in the Avatar State."

Three sets of eyes snap to Finn with varying degrees of honest shock. The tall boy quickly realizes he needs to clarify or he's going to get smacked down for being thoughtless.

"No, really!" Finn says, gesturing to Blaine. "Think about it. Dude was just… out of it. Out of himself, out of his mind, out of his body… he was hurting so bad that he couldn't even think. He just… lashed out. He wasn't himself. He wasn't anyone." At this, his eyes go back to Kurt. "It's the same thing when you go all glowy, dude. It's like… you're hurting so bad that you can't even be you anymore. You become somebody else, somebody who really fucking scares me, and it's not even all the monster-sized bending you can do. You're just… like, pure rage. You're lashing out and none of us knows what to do to make you better."

He finishes and quickly looks away, not quite able to take the look on Kurt's face.

The four (five?) of them sit in silence for a moment, before Finn speaks again. "That was so stupid, I shouldn't have said anything, I'm sorr—"

"No," Mercedes says. "This time, you're right on the money."

"Wow," Kurt says. "I knew it was bad, but… is it really that bad?"

"You're our friend," Artie says, looking at the Avatar frankly. "I don't even know fire-dude here, and that little fit freaked me right the fuck out. It's worse when it's someone you care about. As I'm sure you just realized firsthand."

Kurt breathes deeply for a moment, attempting to reign in his emotions. "Alright, it's settled then. The very next time I speak to the other Avatars, I'll ask them about the Avatar State. In the meantime, we'll just have to make sure I don't freak out anymore."

They nod in agreement. Finn grins a little and nudges Blaine with his foot. "Hear that, dude? We have to take super-good care of you so Kurt doesn't have anymore freakouts. And… uhh… it would be easier to do that if you didn't have them either. So, you know, if there's anything we can do to help out with that, let us know."

Blaine remains stubbornly silent on the subject. Kurt reaches out to pat his foot, before quickly reconsidering and going for his pant-covered leg instead. "It was a nice thought, Finn."

The second time Blaine wakes up is considerably easier than the first, because at least now they're sort-of-kind-of prepared for the worst. He starts groaning again, and Finn is instantly beside him. Mercedes stands ready to Earthbend him into the ground if he starts freaking again. Artie sits near the Prince's head with a bowl of water he made himself (the bowl, not the water, obviously), and Kurt stands at the edge of the room feeling completely useless with his head turned towards the wall. He can't even stand to look at Blaine until he knows for sure that the Prince is going to be capable of looking back at him.

The groaning becomes louder, his breaths begin to come rapidly, and the sounds of sudden movements make Kurt's stomach do pirouettes until Finn's voice breaks through the scuffling. "It's
okay, dude! It's okay, shhhhh, chill. You're okay. I'm Finn, I'm Kurt's brother…ish… guy. We're not gonna hurt you, I promise."

Miracle of miracles, this actually seems to have some kind of effect. Blaine's breathing starts to slow down and he stops making quasi-ghost noises. With utmost caution, Kurt permits himself to slowly turn around and look. Blaine's eyes are still more than a little panicked, but he's not struggling and he's focused on Finn, who has him pinned, very gently, by the shoulders. He opens his mouth to try and say something, but nothing more than a hiss comes out.

"Easy, there," Artie says, and Blaine's head rolls over to look at him, seeming shocked to find someone sitting there. "Name's Artie. Friend of Finn and Kurt's. Your throat's probably a little dry, am I right?" he asks.

Blaine nods slowly.

"Here," the Earthbender says. Finn tilts Blaine's head up while he drinks from the bowl Artie offers him.

His next attempt is much more successful, though his voice is still raspy and weak. "What happened?" he asks.

Now that it's clear that Blaine isn't a danger to himself or anyone else, Mercedes moves over to sit beside him. "Blaine? My name is Mercedes, sweetie. I'm Kurt's BFF."

"Pleased to meet you," Blaine says, almost automatically. Dear La, this boy would be polite to a bear before it ate him. Thank you for choosing me for tonight's main course. I sincerely hope you enjoy your meal!

"Back at you," Mercedes nods with a small, sincere smile. "Though I wish it were in better circumstances… how much do you remember?"

The Prince closes his eyes. "…Kurt," he rasps.

This, while flattering, is not very helpful. 'Kurt' covers a lot.

"Kurt was… there. I was…" He seems to have trouble finding the right word. "…squishy." Huh. That… fits.

"You're still pretty squishy," Finn says, "but we're gonna fix you up. We'll take good care of you, okay?"

"Okay," Blaine says. He turns his head from side to side a little, bleary-eyes looking around the room. "Kurt?"

He is instantly at Blaine's side with no idea how he got there. Strange, how fast you can move when you're not even thinking about it. "I'm here," he says. "I'm here, I'm sorry, I just. You woke up once before," he says. Blaine looks plainly confused. He doesn't remember. At least one of us doesn't, Kurt thinks. "And you… let's just say you weren't your usual self. It wasn't pretty," he says, shaking his head.

Blaine smiles at him like a complete idiot.

"What?" Kurt asks. "Did I say something funny?"

The Prince's grin takes on a smug air. "You think I'm pretty."
It's the most patently ridiculous thing that he has ever heard. He purses his lips and shakes his head at Blaine, and then someone around him has the nerve to snicker, and that's the end of that. He just loses it, laughing as silently as possible in a way that has him shaking and nearly-collapsing on top of the injured Firebender. Blaine gives him an honest grin as the laughter causes him to double over. Instead of trying to recover, Kurt just uses his as an excuse to rest his forehead against Blaine's blanketed chest. "You... you are just, the worst... I cannot even..." He turns to the side and smiles at the Fire Prince. "I am so, so happy you're alive. I was so scared."

For some reason, this admission seems to trigger something in Blaine's brain, and his eyes cloud over, his smile fading faster than an expensive scarf left outdoors in open sunlight. "...me too," he whispers, not looking at Kurt. His eyes wander unfocused to the ceiling, and it's more than a little strange.

"Blaine?" Kurt asks.

"M'tired," he rasps, his eyelids drawing closer together, seemingly against his will.

"Yeah, you probably will be for a little while," Finn says. "It's cool. You can sleep. I think we have to feed you at some point." He looks to Mercedes for confirmation, which comes in the form of a 'Really? Really?" look. "Yeah, we definitely have to feed you."

Blaine looks a little disgusted by this.

"Hey!" Mercedes says, half-joking. "What's up with that face? I am a fine cook, I'll have you know."

The Prince's eyes widen, and he quickly shakes his head. "No, no, not that... I just... how long?"

Artie tilts his head to the side, looking at Blaine.

"How long will we feed you?" Finn says. "Uhhh... I guess until you're not hungry anymore."

The Firebender quirks an eyebrow at Finn. "No," he says. "How long..."

"How long are you going to be an invalid, you mean," Artie clarifies. Blaine nods. "F-Dog here is pretty good with the healing mojo. You'll be on your feet in no time."

"By that he means you'll be able to walk, not that you'll be, like, 100% better," Finn elaborates.

Blaine nods, and Kurt can tell he's already slipping away—temporarily, this time, but still. He hates to see him go, but he knows he can't make him stay. "You can go to sleep now, Blaine. We'll be here when you wake up."

"Promise?" Blaine asks, teetering on the verge of sleep, hanging in that special place where you automatically become completely honest and don't even realize it. It's framed like a joke, but the question in the Prince's eyes is sincere.

"I promise," Kurt says.

"Okay," Blaine nods. He almost nods himself off to sleep, but he can't let go just yet. "Nice to meet you all," he says to the gang at large. "Thank you for saving me. Good night." Then he goes to sleep. Pretty much instantly.

"I like him," Mercedes says. "Boy has manners. You two are taking etiquette lessons from him as soon as he'll teach you." Her fingers leave no room for argument as she points at Artie and Finn.
Finn is confused. "What? I'm… nice."

Artie is offended. "Pffft. You can't tame me!"

Kurt is simply staring out the cave entrance at what is plainly bright afternoon sunlight. Well, at least he doesn't feel quite as bad about his 'good morning' faux pas. This makes them about even.

Oh, wait, Blaine has yet to blow up Kurt's house.

Nope, definitely not even.

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*Meanwhile, in a series of large tents set up in front of the ruined Palace…*

Sue Sylvester prances through the ashen remains of a recently scorched field of daisies. She feels light and supple as a trained coal-stepper, smiling at the sunshine and grinning just a little wider every time she feels the skeletal remains of a small animal crushed beneath her magnificent boots. She stops to bend over and pluck a blackened flower from the ground, sniffing it and sighing happily as it crumples to ash in her grip. The wind swirls the cinders around her as she spins gracefully. In the distance, a volcano violently explodes, and Sue holds her arms wide as if trying to hug the sky as the embers and ashes rain down around her…

**That's how good her day has been so far.**

"Ladies and gentlemen," she begins, "This Emergency Meeting of the Council of Flame is now called to order. I thank you for being here on such short notice and in the event that any of you actually liked Lord Anderson, I extend to you my deepest condolences. I myself feel a slight pang of sadness when I contemplate all that we have lost today."

Councilor Arguson, a well-kept man with an *immaculate* beard, raises his hand at the end of the table. "Councilor Sylvester, with all due respect, not more than a few days ago you were loudly trumpeting your disdain for him at absolutely every opportunity."

"Well, Arguson, you know that old saying 'you don't know what you got 'til it's gone?' I'm feeling it today. **Boy** am I gonna miss that wet blanket. Alright!" she says, slamming the gavel down on the table. "First order of business—new Fire Lord! Let's get on that, shall we? I, of course, nominate myself."

Councilor Keros shoots his hand up. "I second."

"**What?**" Councilor Coleman says, incredulous. Keros shrugs.

"All in favor?" Sue calls with a smile.

A little less than half the hands present rise in support of her. This simply will not do.

"Arguson!" she says, noticing the man's hand is firmly in the down position. "What's your problem?"

"Well, **where** do I begin?" the man says, face turning red. "You berate the Fire Lord at every opportunity, constantly undercut and undermine him in every way you can conceive and in several that you *can't*, you openly threaten his life and family, and not more than four days later, the Fire Lord and his son are dead at the hands of 'the Avatar,' you just happen to be there to witness the entire event—"
"And singlehandedly save the town by facing him in personal combat and forcing him out of the city, don't forget that part," Sue interjects.

"—and now you just expect us to elect you to lead the entire country? Even if you weren't plainly a smirking psychopath, what are your qualifications? Why should we trust you to lead anyone?" He sits down.

Sue contemplates his words for a moment. "Becky?"

"Yes, my Lady?" the diminutive girl says from her (slightly raised) chair at the council table.

"I do believe my honor was just insulted. Would you read that back to me?"

"Yes, my Lady!" Becky recounts Arguson's speech word for word.

"Yup, that's my honor you just poked at. And that, my friend, simply cannot stand," Sue says, rising from her seat. "Councilor Arguson, I challenge you to an Agni Kai!"

The entire table gasps and swoons in varying degrees. The Councilors are all atwitter at this shocking breach of etiquette.

Arguson's face is an entirely new shade of red. "I accept! It's about time someone stood up to you. You are poison! When will we meet?" he growls.

Sue grins. "Why, right here and now, of course!" At that, she snaps her fingers, and Becky hops down out of her chair to stick her head out of the tent.

"ATTENTION CHI-RYUS! AGNI KAI HAS BEEN DECLARED! PREPARE AN ARENA!" the small girl bellows.

The Chi-Ryus, who were previously tasked with moving debris from the courtyard and salvaging what they could from the Palace, immediately drop what they are doing and form a large perimeter a short distance outside the tent. One girl is seen rolling a large gong out from behind a pile of rubble.

Arguson is a bit taken aback. "What is the… how do you… why would—"

"What's the matter?" Sue sneers at him. "You're not going all turducken on me, are ya? BWAK, BWAK, BWAKAAAAK!"

The Councilor is approaching purple at this point. "Very well! Let's settle this!" he shouts, storming out of the tent.

Sue follows after him. The other Councilors start to get up, but Sue holds out a hand. "I wouldn't bother, this won't take long."

As if on cue, two Chi-Ryus suddenly part one of the tent's walls so that the circle formed by Sue's minions, and the gong just outside of it, are clearly visible. Arguson steps into the circle, moving to the right side and sitting with his back towards the rest of the arena. Sue steps into the left side and does the same.

"READY?" the girl near the gong shouts.

Both combatants rise to their feet, turning to face each other before shedding their outer robe (carried off by an attendant Chi-Ryu). They adopt their stances and face each other.
"KAI!" the girl shouts, clanging the gong.

Arguson sucks in a breath, moves his arms in a small circle and shoots a line of fire at Sue.

That's about as far as he gets before he is obscured from view by a titanic stream of flame that is easily five times his size. The fireburst is so bright that it momentarily makes the day seem dim in comparison. Instead of dispersing the flame like they usually would, the Chi-Ryus who make up the perimeter of the arena panic and dive out of the way, allowing the firewave to slam into the damaged Palace Wall, knocking a segment of it over and blackening an enormous swath around the impact site.

When the Councilors' eyes recover from Sue's blindingly bright assault on their retinas, Arguson is nowhere to be seen. There is a small collection of charred lumps near where he used to be, but so much of the ground is blackened anyway that it's hard to tell.

"WINNER!" the gong girl shouts, and the Chi-Ryus bow to their Master before returning to their previous tasks.

Sue re-enters the tent replacing her outer robe and grinning like the owlcot that ate the canary. "Well, that was refreshing. Nothing like a little fire duel to get the blood pumping! Now, where were we? Oh yeah!" She claps her hands. "We were just about to vote on making me Fire Lord. Let's do that now! All in favor?"

Each hand seems determined to outdo all others in terms of the speed and enthusiasm with which it is raised.

"A unanimous vote! By Golly, it's a sign from Agni. Well then, motion carried, and I thank you all for your support!"

She raises the gavel…

"By vote of the Esteemed Council of Flame, as a light in these dark times, Lady Sue Sylvester is hereby deemed… Lord of the Fire Nation!"

…and slams it down so hard that damn near every talking head at the table winces in perfect unison. She smiles so wide she practically tears holes in her cheeks.

Yep, today is pretty much the best day ever.

A/N: Yes, the position is apparently called 'Fire Lord' even if it is held by a woman. :P Reviews and comments are love!
"So, you think this scar'll help me pick up chicks?" Puck pokes at the stitches that run along his forehead, above his right eye. Everyone tells him to stop poking at it, but it fucking itches, okay? How is he supposed to ignore that? Pain, fine, bring it on, he'll fight through anything. But itching? Fuck that noise, no dice. He scratches his itches. All of them, if you catch his drift.

Santana refuses to even dignify that with a response. She continues precision eyebrow stenciling with her compact mirror as guide. The two of them are waiting for Lady Sylvester to finish taking over the universe or whatever the fuck she is doing so they can collect their pay and leave. They're currently sitting in one of the many tents set up on the front lawn of the Condemned Building Formerly Known as the Royal Palace. "The money for my weave is coming out of your cut, by the way," she says, wiggling her drawn-on brows to make sure they're in roughly the right positions.

"The fuck?" Puck says, disbelieving. "Why do I have to pay when some twerp sets your face on
"fire because you're flirting with him instead of killing him?"

"Because," she says. "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have been up there to begin with."

"You **told** me to throw you!"

"No, **idiot**! I mean," she says, snapping her mirror shut and turning to berate Puck directly, "You had more chances to kill him than anyone! You're little… fist… thing pretty much guarantees a bowl of chunky salsa ala Prince if you land one punch, and you couldn't even do that. You **suck**."

"Oh, like you were any better," Puck scoffs.

"Hey! I was fighting the freakin' Avatar. And I'm pretty sure my Fire Guy could've beat up your Fire Guy."

"What, short, prissy and yellow? Pffft. The black guy was way tougher."

"The black guy was a chickenshit who spent half his time running up walls to avoid you—a trick you fell for every single freaking time, I might add."

"Look, whatever!" Puck shouts, standing out of sheer frustration and wincing a little when he stretches against his bandages. "We took care of them, we took care of the Royal Flamer, we survived the Avatarpocalypse, we **won**! Why are you so wound up about this?"

Santana stands as haughtily and prissily as she can with crutches and one leg in a cast. She doesn't like to look up at people when she smacks them down. "We didn't confirm the kill," she hisses, not wanting any prying ears to hear. They're ostensibly alone in this tent, but that doesn't mean their words won't travel.

"No fucking way he survived that," Puck scoffs. "I **know** my dead people, okay? Guy was on a one-way express train to Corpseville. Punched his ticket myself," he smirks.

The sheer awfulness of the pun threatens to topple her. "You did not just say that. You just… I… UGH. Why do we even work together? I don't like you, you don't like me—"

"We have smoking hot sex, though. Hate sex is the best *kind* of sex." Asshole waggles his eyebrows at her. It's supposed to be cute and endearing. It's not. It just reminds her of the fact that hers are now made of make-up instead of hair. She smacks him in his bandaged knee with her crutch and tries not to smile too wide when he falls over, bug-eyed and wordless in agony.

"Are you all hot and bothered now?" she sneers.

Before he has a chance to answer, the entrance to the tent is suddenly tossed aside with incredible flair, revealing Smiling Sue Sylvester on the other side, complete with Serious Business Becky right beside her.

"All bow before the Fire Lord!" Becky announces.

Puck, already being on the ground, simply stops trying to get up. Santana rolls her eyes and stays where she is.

Becky scowls and walks over to her. "**All bow before the Fire Lord!**" she repeats pointedly.

"Look, little lady," Santana says, jiggling her crutch. "I'm not exactly in *bowing* condition right now, so if you could just **imagine** me—"
Becky listens for about three seconds before unceremoniously kicking the crutch out from under her. Puck watches her fall with no small amount of satisfaction. Her funny language cursing is just music to his ears.

Sue practically floats into the room on a cloud of pure triumph. "Excellent work, Becky. It's important that we drill proper etiquette into people's heads, and your lesson plan was both memorable and entertaining for all involved." As she strides past them, several Chi-Ryus suddenly hoist Puck and Santana from their positions on the ground, holding them upright and politely brushing them off. Sue sits down in an ornate and strangely uncomfortable-looking chair near the far end of the room.

"Today just keeps getting better and better!" she says with a grin, and it will never quite make sense to Santana how some people can make an honest smile look more disturbing than any scowl. "Here I thought I was gonna have to hunt you two down, and you just hobble right up to my doorstep! That kind of sheer dedication to customer service is all too rare in assassins these days, and very much deserving of recognition. So," she says, snapping towards Becky, who pulls out a small scroll and a pen, "because I'm in such a good mood, I'll let you decide how you want to die. You can either be dipped in boiling oil, put before a very literal Firing Squad, or we can tie you up and toss you into one of my fabulous Nation's many active volcanoes. I hear Juku is lovely this time of year."

The two assassins shoot worried glances at each other as the Chi-Ryus almost instantly go from 'helping them stand' to 'holding them in place.'

"Die?" Puck says. "But why? We did what you wanted! We killed the punk!"

"Is that so?" Sue asks. "Well, show me a body."

Santana fucking told him. And now she's telling him again with her deadliest bitchface.

"Well, I mean, I kind of… dude… with the glowing-eyed rampage kind of… I don't know where it is," Puck finally admits.

Sue sits back, crossing her legs and placing her arms on the angry-looking dragons that make up the armrests of her chair. "My rule with assassins is always the same. 'Corpse, or it didn't happen.' For all I know, he's in the City right now buying obscene amounts of hair products to tame the wilderness on his scalp in preparation to address the Council. You have failed, and my own success was carried out in spite of your lack of such. I am now the Law in this Nation, and I have a couple of infamous career criminals right in front of me. I feel like using you to make a statement."

"No way dude survived that," Puck says. "It's not possible."

The New Fire Lord is unimpressed. "I accomplish ten impossible things before breakfast each morning. Who am I to say lesser mortals can't accomplish at least one every once-in-a-while?"

"Look," Santana says. "You want a body, we'll get you a body."

"Oh, dragon balls," she waves them off. "The only reason I hired you at all was because I needed this done outside of official channels. Now that I'm in charge, I can do as I damn well please, and I've got someone much more competent to handle that little bit of dirty business. Hey, Q!" she shouts. "Hop on in here for a sec."

The blonde bitch from last night walks primly into the room, a small smirk of satisfaction on her face at the sight of the restrained assassins. Santana feels like choking a bitch.
"Yes, Fire Lord?" she says, bowing low as she speaks.

"Never get tired of hearing that," Sue remarks. "You got your squad all picked out for the Great Avatar Hunt?"

"Of course," she says. "Only the most elite will be traveling with me."

"Well, duh," Sue scoffs. "That's like saying the sun only rises in the morning. I've sent out a few messenger hawks through the official channels. Got you some nice rides waiting for you down at the military stables. In the meantime… oh, what the hey, I'm in such a good mood, I'll let you decide." She juts her chin at the two injured assassins. "Got any use for these two?"

Quinn rests a mock-thoughtful hand on her chin as she turns to survey Santana, who does little more than glare at her and try to look pissed (it's a lot harder with cartoon-brows, especially since they aren't quite even). She then turns to assess Puck, who smirks at her and puckers his lips (is that where he got his name? What a cowpig). A neatly-trimmed eyebrow is all she raises in response, but the armored idiot just nods to himself and smiles like she just signed a sex slave contract. Santana hates her, Puck wants to fuck her, but both of them seem to have some pretty unique skills. Plus, this will be the perfect opportunity to humiliate and degrade them in retaliation for them foiling her kill last night. "I can think of a few things they'd be good for," she says. Laughs, mostly, she thinks.

"Well, they're all yours," she says, tossing her arms out. "Hear that, you miserable bags of moist fertilizer? As of today, Q here is your God. You'll do exactly as she says, when she says it. If you don't, she and anyone she pleases can kill you both with no legal ramifications at all. Shucks, I might even reward her for it if it's particularly sneaky and gruesome."

"I trust," she says to the two of them, "that you will make yourselves useful to a degree where I won't be tempted to do that. Won't you?"

Santana cocks her head to the side, a challenge in body, if not in words. "Of course," she says.

"Trust me, babe," Puck says. "One night with Puckzilla, you'll want me around forever."

Quinn rolls her eyes and makes a mental note to have him collared and neutered if he keeps this up. She turns back to Sue. "I leave on your command, Fire Lord."

"Hit the road," she says. "Be sure to stop by and pick up those mounts. My Elites ride in style. I'll expect regular progress reports with actual progress, and, of course, you should know that failure is the absolute worst fate a person can endure. If you have to choose between failure and death, choose death. And by that I mean 'complete your mission at the cost of your life if necessary' not 'die like a loser.'" She waves them off. "Dismissed."

Quinn bows again, and exits the room. "Come," she calls behind her. Santana hobbles angrily along on her crutches, while Puck limps up beside her. "We leave immediately," she says. "You two will carry my bags."

"I don't know if your eyes have gone bad because of all that smirky squinting you do," Santana says, "but we ain't exactly fighting fit right now."

The Chi-Ryu captain turns to stare at her archly. "When I said 'make yourself useful,' I didn't mean 'when it pleases you.' Do you want to sever our professional ties? Because if you're going to be baggage, I'd rather not waste my time keeping you alive." A small flame appears just outside of each hand as she speaks.
"Look," Puck says, stepping between them, honestly shocked at himself for stopping an impending catfight. "I'll carry all the shit you want me to, okay? If San snaps her leg in two because she's carrying too much heavy shit, that's not gonna be good for the mission, now is it?"

Both ladies stare at him with what is mostly skepticism, tempered with the tiniest amount of surprise. "Fine," Quinn says, whistling at a nearby Royal Guard, who dutifully hobbles over with the blonde's luggage and dumps it in Puck's arms. "We're wasting time," she says, turning to walk towards the carriages that will carry them to the stables.

Ostensibly, she is hunting the Avatar to avenge the death of the Fire Lord. That is the official story she'll be feeding anyone who asks. But of course, as is typical with Sue Sylvester, the true reasons are much more insidious.

"The Avatar is secondary," Sue says, in a low voice. "I want him dead, if only because he's one less goody-four-elements I'll have to worry about during my reign of benevolent terror. But your job," she continues, pointing a finger at Quinn, "is Prince Curly-cue. He's still out there, I know it. I can practically smell his gay from here. You make good and damn sure that the Prince is capital D-E-D dead. Preferably in such a way that Swishy the Super-Bender doesn't notice until the two of them are having tea in the Spirit World. Do this, and I'll forgive your failure to kill him when you had the chance."

Quinn is taken aback. "But… Fire Lord, that was not my fault. Those two imbeciles—"

"—wouldn't have had a chance to steal the your opportunity if you. Hadn't. Hesitated. You flinched, Q. You said yourself you had him on the ground. There's no reason you shouldn't have finished him right then and there." The New Fire Lord regards her Chief Chi-Ryu with a cold air of assessment. "Now, you're still the best I've got by a long shot. If you weren't, you wouldn't be breathing. But you're sitting on a volcano, Q. Every screw up brings her a little closer to blowing her top. And believe me, if she goes off, it won't be pretty. So don't screw up."

The blonde didn't really have much choice in the matter, so she steeled herself, crammed her emotions into a tiny pocket of her mind, and looked her Master in the eye. "I understand, Fire Lord. I will not fail you again."

It is a blotch on her perfect record, a smear on the work of art she has been crafting since her acceptance into the Chi-Ryu Academy, a blot of ink that suspiciously resembles a mass of curly, black hair. It is a blight on her honor, and she intends to remedy it, swiftly and without hesitation. In her mind, this time, there are no ifs, ands, or buts.

Prince Blaine will die, and she will be the one to finish him.

Tons and tons of rubble pin him to the ground. He can feel it pressing into him from all sides, pressing down on him, crushing him and piercing his flesh as he struggles weakly to escape its hold. It's no use. He is far too weak. He cannot move an inch. All around him, the Palace burns. Fire seems more alive than it ever has as it spreads and consumes and devours his entire world, collapsing the ceiling to reveal the red sky and the moon staring down at him. Suddenly, all the flames seem to coalesce into a single, massive column of combustion, an entity of living flame that hungers for him. It roars with fury as it approaches him, and his struggle to escape is renewed. He increases his fervor and uses all his strength and still he cannot break free. He is useless. He is helpless.

A man in Fire Nation Regalia steps between him and the flame. He does not look at Blaine, but Blaine recognizes him. How could he not? With purposeful steps, he walks towards the fire-
monster, his gaze locked squarely on its glow.

'Stop,' he tries to say. 'Don't. Wait…'

But fear has stolen his voice.

He needs to get his attention. There has to be a way. He attempts to Firebend, drawing in air and letting out a tremendous breath of what should be flame.

Nothing. Fear has stolen his fire.

The man steps into the flames, which swell with delight and glow brighter than ever. And suddenly, they vanish outright, leaving him in darkness and silence, trapped and alone beneath the cold night sky.

The rubble shifts, and collapsing on him further, and he can feel it poking at his face. He tries to shift away from it, when suddenly the moon sprouts a face and looks down at him.

"Hey!" it says in a strangely familiar voice. "He is NOT dead. You are NOT allowed to eat him! Go away!"

The sudden shift is just jarring enough to cause him to open his eyes, revealing a rather starved-looking elephant rat poking at his face with its trunk. The moon—better known as… if Blaine remembers correctly, 'Finn,' swipes at the small creature a few times before it finally ducks down and skitters away. The Prince—or is it 'the boy formerly known as Prince?'—blinks blearily up at his savior. Well, one of them, anyway.

"Oh, hey," Finn says, noticing his charge is awake. "Crap, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up."

"It's fine," Blaine says, the tiniest of smiles on his face. "I'm tired of sleeping anyway. I actually feel a lot better ERRRK," he says, crying out towards the end as he tries and fails to sit up.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Finn says, kneeling down beside him. "Easy, dude, you're gonna pull something. If you want to sit up, just tell me."

"Okay," Blaine says, nodding to Finn.

Finn nods back.

And… nothing happens. He decides to clarify. "I'd like to sit up now, please."

"Oh!" Finn says, the realization hitting him like the back-end of an angry beaverfish. "Sorry," he says, reaching under the former Prince and gently easing him to a sitting position against the wall. "There you go, dude," the tall boy says with a strangely disarming smile. "We saved you some jackelope, by the way. You should probably eat while you're awake."

"That'd be great," Blaine smiles, though he isn't entirely sure what jackelope actually tastes like. It can't be too bad, right? "Where is… everyone?" he asks. Truthfully, he's primarily concerned about Kurt, but that's no reason to disregard the Avatar's friends.

"Mercedes is looking for some kind of plant. She says it'll help with your pain. Artie's making a new disguise. Kurt is meditating," Finn says, moving over to a small, smoldering fire where the mostly-picked remains of a living creature slowly roast. The sight is a little unsettling to Blaine, but he wipes the fish-eye off of his face with impressive speed when Finn turns to look at him. "I think
he's trying to get in touch with himself. Or… you know, the other hims. The past hims."

"The previous Avatars," Blaine tries.

"Yeah!" Finn says, giving him another smile. "You're pretty good with words, dude."

"Thank you," he says, automatically. Finn starts pulling at the jackelope carcass, and a slight breeze from the entrance causes Blaine to notice that he is half-naked. It was harder to see when he was covered by a blanket, but Agni's nipple clamps, he looks awful. He resembles a drawing colored by a two-year old with ink on his fingers. "Ummm," he starts. "Is there a shirt that I can wear? I don't want to be too much trouble, but…" I really don't feel like looking at myself right now. Plus it's kind of drafty in here.

Finn snaps a leg off the jackelope and drops it into a bowl. "Sure thing, dude!" he says, moving over to a small bag. "Since we found Drizzle, we actually have a lot of our stuff this time. Most of the time we high-tail it out of town, we have to leave everything behind. Here, you can have one of my spares." Finn tosses a red robe towards him, and Blaine extends a hand to catch it… only to have the thing cover him entirely from head to toe, even with his arm out.

The tall waterbender doesn't seem to notice, continuing to speak as Blaine attempts to fight his way out of the ginormous cloth cocoon. "We kind of stock up on clothes for me whenever we can. I'm not as… like… prickly about clothes as Kurt is. Plus, for some reason, it's really hard to find things in my size."

The ex-Prince finishes wrapping the robe around him, sticking his hands into the sleeves. "I can't imagine why," he deadpans, as he holds up an arm and is unsurprised to find the cloth extends several inches past his fingertips. He shakes his hand loose just in time to accept the bowl Finn offers.

"Here you go," he says. "Eat up. Mercedes is pretty good for having to cook stuff she kills on the fly."

That merits an eyebrow raise, at the very least, as he eyes the slightly charred meat with a little skepticism. Still, food is food, and it would be rude to turn down his host's hospitality. He doesn't want to make a bad impression, so he cautiously picks up the leg of 'lope, and takes a bite. He chews slowly.

Finn looks at him in anticipation. "How is it?"

Blaine gives him a small smile and a thumbs-up.

"Awesome," Finn says, doing a little fist pump as he turns away to fetch… something. Blaine isn't really paying attention because the second his back is turned, the ex-Prince's face rebels against his better nature and immediately displays every iota of the extravagant disgust he is feeling. And he's not even done; he has to swallow this. The thought kind of makes him want to cry.

"Hey, you think you might be up for a little healing?" Finn says, turning to back to Blaine almost faster than he can slap his show face back on. "It can kind of hurt while you're awake, but you'll feel better after."

He nods. The conversation change is impetus enough for Blaine to force the meat down his throat. "So… you're a healer. Does that mean you're the one who saved me?"
Finn ducks his head a little, which is Blaine's cue to subtly hurl the contents of the bowl as deep into the cave as possible. Maybe the Elephant Rat will get something out of it; Blaine is no longer hungry at all. He'll be surprised if he is ever hungry again. "Yeah," Finn says. "I mean… not by myself. Kurt laid the smackdown on everybody while I did it, but I healed you."

"Thank you," Blaine says. He means it on most levels, he knows he does, but there is a small-but-insistent part of him that calls him a liar. "Though I kind of thought Kurt would've done the healing."

"He can't," Finn continues, pulling a small, sealed skin of water out of the pack. "He doesn't know how."

"Why don't you teach him?" Blaine asks.

"Because… I don't really know how, either," Finn sheepishly admits.

The Prince suddenly has second thoughts about letting the Waterbender near him with that water. Apparently, he's tired enough to let this show on his face, because Finn immediately clarifies. "No, no, I mean… it's something I can't, like, put into words. I grew up at the North Pole, and healing… well… it's kind of a girl thing," he rushes, sitting down beside Blaine. "They only teach it to girls, but some people can just kind of… do it. With no training. And apparently, I'm one of them."

"You… don't sound too happy about that," Blaine observes. "I would think having a natural talent for something is a good thing."

"You don't know the Northern Water Tribe," Finn says. "There's all these… rules and expectations around what you can and can't do. Like, only girls can heal, and that's all they can learn. I can't heal, because I'm a guy. I have to learn the fight-y kind of waterbending. Except I really kind of suck at the fight-y kind, and I'm good at healing. But if anybody ever finds that out, I'll become an outcast and everybody'll point and laugh at me for the rest of my life."

"But that's ridiculous," Blaine says, a little taken aback. "That kind of prejudice makes no sense. There's no form of Firebending where either gender is better than the other. Why can't people just… do what they're good at?"

Finn shrugs. "Beats me. And it's even worse for me, because my dad was, like…" He stops suddenly, as if remembering something, and takes a quick look around the cave before continuing. "…this big war hero who died in this super-awesome battle. So everybody expects me to be this… great warrior, and, I'm not. I suck."

"You don't suck," Blaine says gently.

"Yes, I do," Finn says, suddenly turning to Blaine with a serious expression. "Believe me, I do. You have no idea, dude, I just… I always disappoint people. Sooner or later."

"Well," Blaine says, "I can't say much, because I don't know you terribly well, but you did save my life, so I'm disinclined to agree with your assessment of your suckitude."

The tall boy stares at him blankly.

"I don't think you suck, Finn. And I have no expectations for you at all, so you can't disappoint me," he adds, giving his best charm smile.

It works. Finn smiles back. "Thanks, dude. So, it's like we're starting out on a clean slate."
"Total blank canvas," Blaine agrees, offering his hand. "Blaine Anderson."

Finn shakes it. "Finn Hudson."

"Nice to meet you. I hear you're pretty good at this healing stuff," Blaine smiles.

Finn frowns. "Dude, you said clean slate!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Blaine holds up his hands, before switching to an angry expression. "Who are you and what do you want from me?" he asks seriously.

The tall boy adopts a slightly wary expression. "Okay, so… maybe not that clean."

Blaine can't help but laugh, wincing a little when he is painfully reminded that his entire torso has been pulverized. "So, yeah, about that healing…"

"Lie back," Finn says, offering a helping hand to ease him back down. Once he's on the ground, the tall boy bends the water he has into a small blob between his hands, and gets to work.

It doesn't exactly hurt… but it isn't terribly pleasant, either. At least, not initially. The sensation is hard to describe. Imagine a group of people set upon a specific task. They aren't terrific by any means, but they are doing a passable job. Suddenly, some big jerk comes up and starts bossing them around, ordering them to do specific things and constantly telling them to go faster or work harder. The guy annoys the crap out of them, pisses them off, makes the whole thing much less pleasant… yet, at the end of the day, they accomplish the task ten times faster because of his direction. By the time Finn finishes, Blaine feels like his insides have been rearranged, but he also feels much stronger and… well, less squishy than he did before.

"Sit up, and take the robe off," Finn instructs. "I need to see your back."

"Why?" Blaine asks, even while doing what Finn told him (and happily noting that he only barely needs the other boy's help to do so this time).

"…you don't know?" Finn answers his question with a question. "Well… I guess, there's no reason you should know. I mean, you can't really look at your… uhh," he stammers a little. "You've got, like, a massive scar on your back."

The former Prince's eyes go wide and—so taken aback is he by this announcement—he actually tries, for a split second, to turn around and look at his own backside. It doesn't take him long to recover from this lapse in judgment, which leads to him attempting to reach around and feel for it. This works, but not in the way he expects—attempting to bend his body in that way causes the burnt tissue on his back to be compacted, which hurts like fuck. "Ah," he hisses.

"Yeah, that would be it," Finn says with a sympathetic wince, and gets to work. Again, it is less than pleasant, but the sensation itself is a secondary concern. Much more worrying is the sudden, vivid flashback the healing seems to trigger…

…in total, blind panic, because nothing matters except getting as far away from everything and everyone here as fast as possible. He can't stop for anyone or anything, not even when a searing, white-hot pain tears through him from behind and sends him sprawling to the ground, the smell of burnt flesh fresh in his nostrils even as he continues to crawl forward. He can't stop, he can't stop, not until a fresh wave of agony bursts outwards from his spine as the girl from before grinds her boot into his back. His limbs give way and he collapses, and all he can do is wonder why she won't let him leave. He can't stop, he can never let himself stop…
"Dude!" Finn shouts, suddenly in front of him… or is it above him? Finn is holding Blaine in his arms. When did that happen? "Hey, dude! Blaine, are you okay?"

He shakes his head, feeling more than a little jumbled. "What happened? And why are you shouting?"

"You don't remember? I… okay, dumb question. You passed out, dude. Just went all floppy and fell over. I was freaking out," Finn says.

"Sorry," Blaine sighs. "Just… something happened. I…" he shakes his head again, but it's no good. The cobwebs are here to stay for the moment. "I'm tired again. I think I should go back to slee—"

He is cut off when suddenly, Kurt rushes in from outside. "Finn, pack everything up. We need to wake up Blai—"

It is at this point that the sight of his not-boyfriend, shirtless and awake and cradled gently in the arms of his pseudo-brother-slash-former crush, registers in his brain. He tilts his head to the side and primly raises an eyebrow.

Finn adopts his best 'oh crap' eyes, and Blaine feels his arms begin to loosen before Kurt speaks. "Finn Hudson, don't you dare drop him." The arms tighten again, but Blaine is still feeling a little unsteady.

A deluge of snark threatens to spill forth from the Avatar's lips, but before it is allowed to pour, he changes his mind. "Okay, I am not even going to ask what this is. Finn, put Blaine down gently and start packing."

The bleary Prince is deposited against the wall again, and Finn scurries off to follow Kurt's orders. The Avatar himself, meanwhile, kneels down in front of the ex-Prince. "Blaine," he says, "do you feel up to traveling? We really don't have much choice, but if you're feeling really bad, we might be able to get away with staying another day."

"What's wrong?" Blaine asks. "Why do we need to leave?"

"I just spoke with some of the other Avatars," Kurt says gently. "I learned… well, a lot of things, actually, but most urgently, I learned that people are being sent to track us down. Both of us. We need to get as far away from the Capital as we can, and we need to do it fast."

Logically, it makes perfect sense. He knows Kurt is right, that he is in no condition to fight anyone, but there is a tiny, insistent part of him that speaks just loudly enough to be heard over everything else. 'Running again?' it sneers. Blaine has no answer for it.

"I'm okay," Blaine nods. "I mean, I'm not going to be walking for any length of time—"

Kurt cuts him off. "Don't worry. We have transportation. We just need to get you from here to there. Stand up with me?"

The ex-Prince nods, and Kurt drapes Blaine's arm over his shoulders, wrapping his own around the Prince's waist so the two of them can rise together. It takes more out of Blaine than he expects, but he manages to stay upright. Finn is finishing the last of the packing as they hobble towards the doorway.

And suddenly, Blaine stops.

"What's wrong?" Kurt asks.
He has no idea what it is, or why, but the thought of going out into the late afternoon sunlight as he is suddenly makes him incredibly self-conscious. He is wearing an oversized robe that is half-open, revealing a damaged torso that has enough spots to make people think he is part-cow. He has an ugly scar on his upper back and he has no idea how far it travels or if anyone can see it and he normally isn't this vain but…

These are marks of shame.

"It's stupid, I…" he trails off. "Can we…" His words toss up their hands and walk away in frustration, as Blaine is apparently incapable of properly utilizing them. Instead, he pulls the flaps of Finn's giant robe shut, and Kurt gets the picture.

"Ah," Kurt says. "Let me help you out with that." With utmost care, the Avatar gently ties the former Prince's robes shut.

Blaine gives him a shy smile, and his hand moves to scratch semi-nervously at the back of his neck. And then, he feels them—angry little lines of scarred flesh, running up his spine to just below the base of his skull. His smile falls for a second, and Kurt is far too fast for him to mask it.

"Is there something else?" he asks gently. He doesn't sound impatient at all, which sort of just makes everything worse. Blaine is plainly being a ridiculous brat and Kurt isn't even calling him on it. Without waiting for his respond, Kurt gently turns him around to see what he is poking at. A small gasp escapes him unbidden when he sees the hints of Blaine's scar.

"I just," he admits, haltingly. "I don't want people to see it, I—you know what, I'm being ridiculous. I just need to suck it up and deal. Come on," he says, trying to pull Kurt along, but the Avatar won't move.

"Wait," he says, glancing back into the cavern. The small bag rests near the remains of the fire, which Finn is thoroughly dousing. With a quick stomp and slide of the foot, the bag is shuffled along the earth to Kurt's feet. He rummages through the contents for a few seconds before finally coming up with his objective.

"Here," he says, moving in front of Blaine with a thin, striped scarf in his hands. With careful hands, he wraps it around Blaine's neck and fits it to him easily. It isn't too tight or too loose. "Perfect," Kurt says, his face mere inches from his own. "It makes you look dashing."

"I think the oversized clothes diminish the effect somewhat, but…" he trails off, the proximity of Kurt intoxicating him in ways he never expected. "I like it," he says, barely aware of just how many things those words apply to. They're so close. It would be so easy to just… bridge the gap… and…

…Kurt suddenly blinks, and breaks away. "We should go," he says, taking up his position beside him. Blaine tries not to look too disappointed. He doesn't feel terribly successful.

They exit to the sight of a moose-drawn carriage that he has no idea how they managed to afford, being driven by a strange, bearded man he's never seen before. "Who's this?" Blaine asks.

The driver pulls at the brown beard, which comes right off of his face with zero protest. Artie waggles his eyebrows at him. "I am a man of many faces," he says, letting the disguise snap back into place and pulling a large straw hat over his head.

"Huh," the Firebender says. "That's… interesting."

"Get used to that phrase," Kurt sighs from beside him. "You will be using it a lot around Artie."
Before he even realizes what's happening, the ground beneath Kurt and himself suddenly raises up, courtesy of Mercedes, allowing him to walk straight into the carriage without even using the steps. The dark-skinned Earthbender smiles at him as she holds the door open from inside the carriage. "We decided to go for a little extra luxury, for your sake," she smiles.

"What's this we business?" Artie snorts from the driver's seat.

"Quiet, you. As of now, you're a chauffeur. Get into character," Mercedes orders. This time, the only response from the other boy is a bit of annoyed grumbling.

Once inside, Kurt gently lays Blaine on one side of the carriage, while he and Mercedes sit on the other. "You look a little sleepy," Kurt explains, and Blaine has to hand it to him. The boy is observant. And smart. And beautiful. And so many other things…

The bags from the cave slide in the open door, and Blaine turns to see Finn starting to climb up. The look on Mercedes's face is almost beatific as she calmly gets up, stands in the doorway, waits until he climbs up enough to see her, and then… shoves him off the carriage and closes the door.

"Bag boys don't ride inside," she says by way of explanation, sitting down regally as a grumbling Finn climbs up to sit beside Artie.

He can already feel himself sliding away from the waking world as the carriage starts to move. "Thank you," he says on impulse. "I really… appreciate all this," he yawns.

"You're welcome," Mercedes says. Kurt smiles softly, but seems to be looking away. "Now go to sleep."

As the cart moves out of the trees and onto the main road, Blaine becomes dimly aware that he is moving away from the only home he has ever known. He can count on one hand the number of times he actually got to leave the Palace before he started sneaking out, and even then, only a very, very few times… when mom was still alive… did they leave the Burning City. A small part of him wants to sit up and look out the window, to watch the City he loves fade into the distance and disappear.

He doesn't. Instead, he very pointedly closes his eyes. With Kurt and Mercedes making soft conversation in the background, it isn't even a minute before he is asleep again.

_A/N:_ They're on the road, folks, and the plot is moving right along with them! Up next, we learn about Kurt's conversation with his predecessors, and the gang meets a familiar face on the road for a healthy dose of exposition. :P Stay tuned, and please remember, reviews and comments are love!
Blaine groans loudly. *Picks his head up off of his pillow, and then flops it back down. Flops his other limbs as well (the ones that aren't restrained by a sling, at least). Sighs again, and repeats the process. It feels like someone filtered out all of his blood and replaced it with... cotton candy or something. It's preferable to the sensation of constant, concentrated agony, but it still feels super weird and vaguely like he needs to keep shaking his limbs to make sure they're still there.*

"Are my legs still attached?" *he asks aloud.*

"Yes, Blaine," Wes *sighs.* "They were still attached five minutes ago, and they will remain attached five minutes from now. Unless you continue to ask that question, in which case, I might cut them off while you're not looking just to annoy you."
The Prince sits up and uses his non-casted hand to point condemningly at Wes. "You'd better not!"

David snickers in the background. Wes rolls his eyes and continues to read his copy of 'THE FIRE NATION: Blazing a Path Through History.' And Blaine goes right back to groaning and flopping like a lethargic fish, growing slowly more aggressive with his flailing as the effects of the Zaru Leaf really take root. His life is nothing but fuzzy. Fuzzy, fuzzy fluffy numbness that makes him itch in places he is pretty sure he does not actually have on his body. He attempts a full-body spasm, just for the sensation.

"Stop that," David deadpans. "Stop this instant. You'll hurt yourself." His voice is as flat as his current girlfriend's chest, and Blaine sort of wishes he could summon the cattiness to tell him this. Instead, all he can do is slur something vaguely accusatory at his traitorous friends who mock his misery.

"You guyssss… suck. I hate you."

"Hate away," David grins at him as he practices calligraphy on Blaine's desk. "You brought this on yourself, as always. After a certain point, I would think the laws of gravity and momentum and their combined effect on your bone structure would be lessons firmly ingrained in your mind. Alas, it is not so. You continue to climb things, and you continue to fall off. And we continue to make fun of you when it happens. Such is life, Little Prince."

That totally rubs Blaine the wrong way. "I'm not little!" he slurs.

This time, it's Wesley that starts laughing. "Oh, you poor, deluded spirit," he smiles. "Are you really still in denial?" He looks to David. "My friend, I think it's time we gave him 'the talk."

"As much as I hate to admit it, I believe you are right. Blaine, my friend, we cannot allow you to labor under this pretense any longer. Though it truly pains us to tell you this, we… you're… gah, I can't do it, Wesley. Look at his face! He looks so pathetic," David sighs, shaking his head.

Wes scoffs at him. "Courage, man! This is for his own good." At this, the older boy turns to Blaine, who is seriously confused. "Blaine, my friend, this is not easy for me to say, but it's time you faced reality. And the reality is… you're short."

Blaine makes what he is fairly sure is an offended face.

David nods gravely. "It's true. You're tiny."

"Small."

"Miniscule."

"Diminutive."

"Petite!" David cries melodramatically. "I'm so sorry. I wish there were something we could do."

The Prince's cotton-cushioned mind struggles to argue against their conclusion. "Nuh-uh, I'm not… I could maybe still grow s'more," he says with shockingly good enunciation considering his state of inebriation.

Wes simply shakes his head. "You're 14, Blaine. You might get another growth spurt, but it isn't likely, and even then, you've got long way to catch up. I'm afraid you're stuck down there, little Prince."
"Ah, but chin-up, man!" David smiles. "Console yourself with thoughts of all the tight spaces you can fit in that we tall people would never dream of entering."

Blaine just groans even louder and kicks his feet, petulantly throwing his pillow over his head. "Haaaaaaaaate you guys. Gonna tell dad to hire better friends."

"Please," David scoffs. "You know you love us."

Blaine considers this for a few minutes, after which he decides that they might be right. After all, they are more or less spending their day taking care of him. Although they are basically making a living by doing so, so there's that to take into consideration. But still, there's nothing that says they have to be doing such a good job. They're doing a good job, aren't they?

"I'm thirsty," he says experimentally. Wes and David share a brief look, before Wes closes his book and gets up, picking up the small cup of water next to his bed.

"Sit up," he instructs, and Blaine blearily complies. Wes dutifully lifts the cup to his lips (good, he clearly remembers what happens when Blaine tries to do that while hopped up on Zaru Leaf) and lets him drink until he's done. Not a bad performance, but a little too easy. Maybe he needs to give them something harder. "Done?" Wes asks.

"I need to pee," Blaine says simply.

Wes rolls his eyes. "You are so needy. David! Stop drawing lude pictures, get over here and help me shoulder this burden. Come, Blaine," he says, lifting the semi-delirious Prince up and helping him off the bed, making sure not to jostle his injured arm too badly. The two of them sandwich the boy between them as they walk him down the hall to the bathroom. Their presence is mostly to keep him from wandering off into a side room and getting lost or forgetting why he got up to begin with. Also just in case he suddenly decides he is too tired to walk. Which has happened before, and is, in fact, happening now.

"Whoa, whoa!" Wes shouts, attempting to stand him up as Blaine's legs abruptly fall down on the job. "Come on, Blaine," he says gently. "You're so close! Look, the bathroom is right there!" he points out. Blaine squints in the general direction he is pointing, but all he sees are a bunch of blurry shapes that may or may not be dancing in time with his pulse.

"Don't see it," Blaine says. "You're lying. Liar."

"Keep looking," Wes says, as David joins him in shouldering Blaine down the hall until he can see the door.

"Oh, there it is!" Blaine grins. "It was hiding."

"You would think that as much as he injures himself and gets hopped up on Z-Leaf, he'd have more of a tolerance for it by now," David dryly points out.

Blaine looks over at him and immediately comes up with the perfect counter. "Well, you'd think your face wouldn't be made of spiders, but it is."

"…what?" David asks.

Blaine blearily points at him as he shuffles towards the bathroom. "Your face is made of spiders. That's… not normal. You should… you should get that looked at."

David is left blinking in Blaine's wake as the boy shuts the bathroom door and takes care of
business. When he re-emerges from the latrine, Wes moves to his side to support him again.

This, he decides, is sufficient evidence that they are, in fact, quite good friends, and he does, indeed, love them. So he decides to tell them as much. With his good arm, he immediately lurches forward and hugs Wes for all he’s worth.

Wes freezes, staring down at Blaine with a mixture of confusion and horror.

"You're right," the Prince sighs. "Love you guys."

David starts snickering. Wes continues to flail at low speeds, searching for a place to put his hands. "Ummm… well, Blaine, I suppose the feeling might not be entirely… unrequited." The older boy sighs. "Oh, fine." At this, Wes allows his hands to come down and squeeze the overly-affectionate Prince, patting him on the back, which just makes Blaine cuddle him even harder.

David starts laughing outright.

"What?" Wes says, slightly defensive. "He's delirious. I'm humoring him. And… he happens to be quite soft."

"Why, you sweet-hearted soul!" David chuckles. "I will never let you live this down," he promises.

"Is that so?" Wes says with a sneaky smile. Suddenly, Blaine finds himself detached from his cuddly human pillow and about-faced. "Think fast!" Wes shouts, launching Blaine towards David, who has no choice but to catch the dizzy boy before he hits the ground.

The results are predictable. Having found a new warm thing to squeeze, Blaine summarily latches onto David instead. David, for his part, reacts roughly the way he would to be hugged by a particularly smelly dog, holding his arms out and averting his face. "Ugh," he grunts. "Get it off me!"

"I'll do no such thing. You deserve this," Wes says imperiously.

"What am I supposed to do?" David asks.

"You could try hugging him back. He likes that."

David growls at Wes. "Damn you," he says, before reluctantly closing his arms and gently hugging the drugged Royal Brat who clings to him.

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm almost entirely certain he'll remember none of this," Wes says smugly as they walk back to Blaine's room, the Prince still firmly attached to David and having to be dragged the entire way.

"It doesn't," David sighs. The two of them gently finangle their charge so that he is lying in a comfortable position on the bed. Though Blaine is pliant and still, he isn't quite asleep yet—his body seems to be ahead of his brain in that area. Nevertheless, he can feel himself gently floating out of the world of consciousness on a gentle breeze of opiates. He stays conscious just long enough to hear Wes and David reassume their positions in his room.

"When did I actually start liking him?" David says, disgusted and yet somewhat fond.

"I have no idea," Wes says simply. "But I wouldn't worry too much about it. Really, as far as shrimpy monkey-children go… he's not half-bad."
This time, it's his brain that is ahead of the game, slipping silently into the waking world even as his body lies still in the carriage. The memory is still fresh in his mind, and part of him wants to go back there. But he knows it's a trap. An ambush waiting to happen, lurking in the rafters of his consciousness. A landslide of grief just waiting for him to stand still long enough for it to fall and crush him. He can't let that happen... not here, not yet, not in front of these people. Not in front of Kurt. He can't think about this. Already, he can feel the emotions beginning to bubble and lurch and rise within him like magma on its way to an eruption.

He needs a distraction.

Over the sounds of the road, Blaine can make out Mercedes and Kurt, speaking softly to one another. His entire world becomes a concentrated effort to make out their voices. Eavesdropping is terribly rude...

"...Blaine is not useless," Kurt whispers.

...but so is talking about people behind their back. So, really, he's simply balancing the etiquette books, so to speak.

"I'm not saying it to be mean," Mercedes sighs. "And I did not say he was useless. But even you have to admit that he can't do much right now."

"He's a Firebender," Kurt states simply. "That's a whole other element he adds to our mix. Think of all the things he can help us do! Cooking will be a breeze now. We can start fires even in the soggiest, most miserable environs."

"You're a Firebender, too," Mercedes points out.

"I'm also an Earthbender and a Waterbender, but I still need you and Finn. And Artie, I suppose... besides, I'm not a very good one. I'm still firmly in the ember stage of the learning process. Blaine fans my flames," Kurt says.

"Got that right," the Earthbender adds.

Fantastic. Kurt is depending on Blaine to teach him something that he may or may not even be able to do anymore.

...she's right there in front of him, completely off-guard, and he just loses it. The animal inside of him takes over and he roars as he attempts to reduce her to ashes.

Nothing. Not even a spark.

His fire has abandoned him...

He doesn't exactly envy the Avatar. Defending the presence of a defenseless sack of dead weight can't be terribly easy. But then Kurt makes a fairly decent point.

"...even if he can't do it himself, he can still instruct me."

Kurt's right. Even if Blaine himself is as flammable as a moist log, there's no reason he can't use his knowledge to help Kurt. That's exactly what he'll do. As soon as they get a chance, Blaine will resume Kurt's training. It's a silent promise to himself.

"You don't have to defend him, honey. What'd you think, I was gonna say 'he's dead weight, let's dump him?' I'm just saying—we all have our roles in this little traveling circus. He's the odd one
out, and there's not much we can do about that right now," Mercedes says softly.

"Then we'll just have to help him find his role when he's better. He'll have time," Kurt says lightly.

"Honey, have you even bothered to ask him if he wants to come with us?" Mercedes says.

Kurt seems offended. "He needs us, Mercedes."

"And when he doesn't? When he's all better, do you think he'll want to leave his home behind? His people? Cause you know we can't stay here anymore. Even if the whole damn country wasn't out to kill us…"

"I know," Kurt sighs. "I just… I haven't really had the chance to think about it."

Neither has he, Blaine realizes. Is there… is there even a place for him in the Fire Nation anymore? Can he leave his entire country in the hands of a madwoman? And if he can't… how can he possibly expect to win it back from her if he can't even fight? If he can't even Firebend?

"I guess we can worry about that later," Mercedes sighs. "I'm sorry, boo, I don't mean to throw dirt on your dessert, but I just don't want you to get your hopes up and have to watch you get crushed again when it doesn't work out like you thought."

Kurt's voice is tight when he speaks again. "Finn was…"

But Mercedes is quick to cut him off. "Let's not talk about that right now. We've got enough new mud to shuffle through to worry about the old stuff."

"Okay," Kurt sighs, sounding almost thankful.

"So, what's the latest gossip from the Spirit World?" she asks, and now it sounds like she's smiling. "Avatar Gaga have anything good to say?"

"As usual, yes and no. She managed somehow to be extremely helpful while clarifying absolutely nothing," Kurt says. "I have to learn the Four Elements and the ways of their people before I can fight the plague."

"She said that?" Mercedes asks, plainly not buying it.

Kurt sounds a little embarrassed when he speaks again. "Well, not in so many words…"

The previous Avatar sits on a rounded rock in the twilight haze of the Spirit World, eying him through her glimmering facemask, her strange, feathery, fantastical and impractical outfit sparkling brighter than the world should allow. "The World lays spread before you, Avatar Kurt," she says, her voice low and seductive. She spins around and reclines so that she is laid out on the rock, still facing him. "She waits for you, yearns for you to explore…"

She puts her hands on her hips.

"…her every…"

She runs them down her thighs.

"…inch."

At this, she spreads her legs wide, and Kurt is caught between scandal and sheer horror.
The salacious Avatar greets his expression with a smirk. "With the skills you will acquire from the Four Nations, you will come to understand her more deeply with every passing moment. Your skilled hands will learn to manipulate her form in ways indescribable. Only then, may you cleanse her of the sickness that plagues her so. And she will scream your name in ecstasy."

*Kurt can do nothing in response to this but blink.*

"Or he," she adds with a wink, "if you prefer."

Blaine is glad they aren't looking at him because he's pretty sure he is blushing quite vividly, and sleeping people generally don't suffer from secondhand embarrassment.

"Wow," Mercedes says.

"Tell me about it," Kurt sighs. "I can't help but love it. Even if it is slightly terrifying. So I suppose we're sticking to the plan, for now."

Blaine imagines Mercedes rolling her eyes. "Any help with the Avatar State?"

"The Avatar State is something I must master in my own way, apparently," he says. "She won't tell me how she did it. She 'will not project her life onto mine.' She did say there are people who can help me, but I have to find them on my own. In the meantime," Kurt says, taking a breath, "I'll just have to keep the lid to my proverbial teapot firmly secured, so I don't blow my stack."

"Well, you got it right on the money. Kind of helpful, but clear as swampwater. Oh well," she says, throwing the topic to the wind for the moment. "Talk to any of the other Avatars?"

At this, Kurt's voice becomes positively devious. "Well… I did manage to learn one particularly juicy bit of gossip."

Karmic punishment for eavesdropping in 3… 2… 1…

"Apparently, my dear friend Blaine is a descendent of Avatar—"

And suddenly, there is a chorus of masculine-yet-girlish screams, and the carriage lurches to a stop, dumping the unsuspecting Blaine into an aching pile of useless limbs on the floor.

"Oh my La," Kurt says, clutching his hand to his chest as he leaps down to the floor to attend to the fallen former Prince. "Blaine, are you alright?"

There's a word. Well, it's kind of a word, but not really… more of a sound, or an utterance, that captures his current condition perfectly.

"OW."

That's the one! Who said that?

Oh, wait, that was him.

Finn shields his eyes from the last vestiges of daylight as he scans the world around him. He squints against the setting sun, desperate for something, anything that can act as his trump card. "Okay, I spy, with my little eye, something that is… orange."

"Everything?" Artie asks tiredly.
Finn takes another look around. With the sun going down like this… "Huh. Good point."

"I already told you," Artie says. "'I Spy' is a terrible game to play on the road. Everything we look at is moving. Most of the time, we just wind up passing everything before anybody guesses it right. We need another game."

"Okay, fine," Finn shrugs. "What do you want to play?"

"Twenty questions?" Artie tries.

The taller boy looks uneasy. "Do I have to think of twenty? I usually get stuck around ten or twelve."

Artie turns to stare at Finn. _Months_ he has been traveling with this guy, and it still amazes him sometimes. "Finn, bro, the whole point is to try and get the answer with as few questions as—"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!" someone shrieks. A figure dashes out of the woods, directly into Drizzle's path, who greets this obstruction by grinding to a rather painful halt.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!" Finn shouts, startled by the screaming and the sudden appearance of the whoever.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!" Artie cries, as Drizzle's sudden stop combined with his own lack of attentiveness (and lack of leg strength) sends him soaring gracelessly out of his seat and to the dirt.

"AAAAAAH!" Finn yells, horrified as he watches his best non-Kurt buddy fly like a wingless dragon hawk straight into the ground. He immediately tells Drizzle to halt with the reins and leaps down to help his fallen friend.

"HOLY CRAP!" someone shouts. "I am so sorry, I didn't know…"

"GET BACK, YOU EVIL SCREAMING WOODS-DWELLER!" Finn moves to stand between Artie and the jerk who made him fall, this approaching evil jackhat who looks an awful lot like… "Wait… holy crap. _Sam_!" Finn cries.

"Finn!" Sam cries right back.

Artie plucks his face up out of the dirt, wearing a sly grin. "_Star Man_? Are you for real?"

The three of them stare at each other for a few pregnant moments, before erupting in a joyous, unified chorus. "Dude!"

And that's why when Kurt opens the window to yell at his drivers… "If we have not run over an old lady who is at _least_ 65 years old, there is absolutely no excuse for this flagrant abuse of brakes. We are not a mixed drink! The _last_ thing Blaine needs is you two _brain trusts_ turning his internal organs into even more of a puree than they already—"

…he is greeted by the sight of a veritable testosterone explosion, a detonation of unwittingly homoerotic hugging and back-slapping and chest bumping male friendship rituals that can only mean one thing.

"…Sam," Kurt drolls, finally recognizing the distinctive blonde mop and allowing his head to flop just low enough to smack audibly (but not painfully) into the windowsill. "La, give me patience. This is going to be even more painful than I thought."
Mercedes is nice enough to sit with him and gently rub his aching *everything* while Kurt goes to tear their drivers a couple of new entrance holes and attempt to pour some *sense* into them. He can't exactly make out what is being said, but it sounds angry.

…well, at first. Then, it sounds exasperated. And then it sounds sarcastic, commanding, and ever-so-slightly exhausted. "…*fine*, Finn, you can come inside too. Just, all of you shut up! I'm amazed we haven't summoned the entire Fire Nation military with all this shouting… yes, you can—no, put Artie back in the driver's seat first, then come around to the—there you go. Sam, you can put—no don't use the—you're not gonna fit—"

A side door to the carriage opens and a smiling head of blond hair pops in for just a second before suddenly getting caught on something and pitching backwards with an audible *flop*.

Mercedes and Kurt share a significant glance as the Avatar puts his hand in his sleeve before gently massaging the bridge of his nose. "Give me patience. Give me patience."

A voice comes through the door. "Hey, can I—"

"Put your giant backpack in the front with Artie. It's going to be crowded enough in here without all your… *doohickeys* taking up space," Kurt orders. There is a short pause, and then the carriage suddenly lurches forward like it wants to tip over.

The other door opens, and Finn hops—literally *hops* into the carriage looking like someone just promised him a pet dragon for his birthday.

"What happened?" Blaine asks.

Kurt looks uneasy. "We… ran into an old friend."

"Almost ran *over* one," Finn adds.

The blond from before appears in the other door, managing to make it all the way inside. He's dressed in dirty, travel-worn robes with the sleeves torn off, a small belt of unidentifiable gadgets around his waist. His light blonde hair is held in place by a headband, and he sports a huge grin, made possible by his *huge* mouth. "Oh, man," he says excitedly. "You guys… you guys have no idea! I was like, at the place, and I saw—you were totally—hey, who's this guy?"

Blaine grins. If he knows anything, it's how to introduce himself. "Blaine Anderson, of the Fire Nation," he says, rising to shake the newcomer's hand.

Said newcomer is very enthusiastic with his handshake. "Awesome!" he smiles. "Sam Evans, of the… uhhh… everywhere, kind of."

Blaine tilts his head slightly, not quite sure what to make of that, but returns the greeting none the less. "Nice to meet you," he says, sitting back down. It is then that he notices Mercedes is eying the other boy with a strange mix of exasperation and fondness… and no small amount of amusement at Kurt's obvious frustration.

The carriage starts to move again as Finn and Sam move to sit on the other side of the carriage. Kurt, slightly annoyed, makes Finn sit on the floor, while he and Sam take the seat.

"Sam is a friend of ours," Kurt says diplomatically. "He used to live up at the North Pole with Finn and I."
"Oh, so you're a Water Tribesman?" Blaine asks.

"Well, not exactly," Sam says. "I was mostly up there with my parents to study the Lights."

"Sam's an astron… an astro… astronaut?" Finn says, turning to his friends for help.

"Astronomer," Mercedes clarifies.

"Star Man!" Artie shouts through the still-open window to the driver's seat, giving a little fist-pump.

"Basically," Kurt says, "he stares at the sky a lot. He and his parents come from a long line of… science people."

"Ah," Blaine nods, not quite sure what to think.

"He and Finn were totally BFFs before he moved away a year or two ago, and we just recently met him again in the Earth Kingdom," Kurt continues.

"Yeah," Sam chimes in. "They totally saved my butt. I got mugged by a bunch of weirdoes, and then they beat me up, and locked me in a basement, and there was this one guy who kept telling me that I had a really pretty mouth, so I think he wanted to watch me eat stuff or something—"

"Okay!" Kurt shouts with a clap of his hands and a slightly panicked look in his eyes. "I think we've all heard enough of that story."

"Dude, man, what's up?" Finn asks with a huge grin. "What brings you all the way down here?"

"Yes, Sam, do tell. Why—for the love of La—are you in the Fire Nation? How do you keep finding us?" Kurt asks, half to Sam, half to the universe at large.

Sam holds up his hands. "Hey, don't look at me!" he says. "You guys just happen to show up everywhere I want to be. I'm here studying Sun Farts!" he announces cheerfully.

Five sets of eyes give him a rather incredible unified nonverbal 'what the fuck?'

"What?" he asks. "You guys have never heard of—oh!" He points to Kurt and Finn. "You guys know what I'm talking about. That's what the Sun Warriors call Spirit Lights."

"The Sun has warriors?" Artie asks.

"The Sun has gas?" Finn queries, looking disgusted.

"How do you know about them?" Blaine asks.

"And why would you want to study something that sounds so disgusting?" Mercedes asks.

"Whoa, whoa!" Sam says. "One question at a time."

"Me first!" Kurt jumps in. "Okay—Sun Warriors. Let's get that out of the way first. Who are they?"

Sam opens his mouth to answer, but the ex-Prince beats him to the punch. "The Sun Warriors were the first Firebenders. They're the ones who first learned the art from the Dragons. But they died out thousands of years ago… what do they have to do with anything?" he asks, turning to Sam.

"Dude," Sam shrugs smugly, "my parents freaking love space, okay? And nobody knew more
about space than the Sun Warriors. It's actually kind of freaky how much they knew. Here, I'll show you…" He reaches around behind him, only to discover that his backpack is gone. "Artie! Dude, hand me the thing in the side pocket," he says, sticking his head out the front window.

"No, the other side pocket."

More shuffling.

"No, dude, not the pocket on the other side, the other pocket on this side. Careful! Don't touch that one! That's where I keep the viper-rat traps. You've gotta—it's the one with the—that's it!"

He reaches out and comes back with a large, rolled-up sheet of parchment that looks like it was etched from a carving of some sort. All sorts of strange symbols decorate the surface, surrounding a large, circular chart that appears to be some sort of calendar.

"…wow," Blaine says, moving in so he can get a closer look at the thing. He isn't exactly sure why he feels compelled to do so—it's not like he can make out anything it says. But still, it's amazing to be in the presence of something so ancient, even if it's a secondhand copy. "What is this?"

"It's a slab of a carving from a Sun Warrior ruin. Well, an etching of a slab of a carving from a Sun Warrior ruin. Actually, it's a copy of an etching of a slab of a carving from—"

"We get the idea," Kurt deadpans.

Blaine is still in awe of the thing. "How did you get it?"

"Dude, would you believe someone sent it to my parents?" Sam says, incredulous. "The Fire Nation Historical Preservation Society or something found it and asked us to translate it. This super-awesome carving from a Sun Warrior ruin, and they just, like, mail it to my folks. But yeah… it's like a calendar, or a chart. It talks about lights in the night sky, during times when the Sun is uneasy."

"You can read Sun Warrior?" Blaine asks, growing more incredulous by the second.

"Dude," Sam grins, nudging him a little. "I told you, my parents are space nuts. I could read Sun Warrior before I could read normal writing."

"Yeah," Finn agrees. "He actually kind of sucks at reading normal writing because of it."

Sam frowns and decks Finn in the shoulder. "Dude, not cool! Nobody needed to know that."

"Sorry," Finn winces. "I didn't know you were sensitive about it."

"Anyway… yeah, this thing has all sorts of info on the Sun Farts—"

"Do we have to keep calling them that?" Mercedes asks. "Are you sure you're reading that right?"

"Look," Sam says, turning the chart towards her. "It says right here. This little squiggly circle-dot thing is basically 'of the Sun.' So 'Sun' or 'Solar.' The one before it, wavy-lines, depending on the context is either 'farts,' 'burps,' or 'bad breath.' And 'Solar Burps' just sounds weird."

"Why don't we just go with 'wind?'" Kurt suggests. "It seems a little more elegant."

Sam rolls his eyes. "Well, if you want to be inaccurate… fine. We'll call them 'Solar Winds.'"
Anyway," he says again, pointedly trying to finish. "This thing has all sorts of info on them. It's actually kind of a method of figuring out when and where they're going to happen using a series of equations with variables to account for lunar positioning, time of year, shifts in the Earth's gravitational field, the polarity of—"

"Sam, you're deafening us with science," Kurt says evenly. "Get to the point."

"Sorry," he grins sheepishly. "Anyway, you guys saw the lights last night, right? That's why I'm here. I came to look at them and see if the chart was right. It totally was, so not only did I get all kinds of brownie points for confirming that, but I got all sorts of other cool info, too. Like… okay, uhhh, the thing. The thing that always points this way," he says, pointing outwards. "While the Solar Winds were blowing, it totally pointed this way instead!" At this, he shifts his arm wildly, wobbling it in all directions.

It takes a second for them to decode what he's talking about. Kurt is the first to arrive at a conclusion. "You're talking about a compass, right? It wasn't pointing North while this was happening?"

"Nope," Sam says, excited. "It was pointing, like, every other way. And that's just the beginning. Some of my other instruments were doing weird stuff, too. And I'm pretty sure they have some kind of effect on Firebenders too, judging by how everybody went crazy last night."

"You saw all that?" Finn asks, looking slightly traumatized.

"OH YEAH!" Sam shouts, suddenly remembering something. "That's what I was gonna tell you guys. I totally saw you last night!" he grins. "Through my telescope. I was on this big rocky hill outside of town, and I saw Kurt looking for you, so I decided to try and help."

"…you what?" Mercedes asks, something low and dangerous in her voice. Artie suddenly shifts in the driver's seat so that he is looking at Sam. Finn still looks slightly sick, but now he's looking at blond boy as well.

"Yup," Sam continues to grin, oblivious. "I figured I could help him find you, so I got out my flare gun and shot it. I tried to get as close as I could, but all the smoke made it kind of hard to spot you guys after that. Did it help?"

Finn, Artie, and Mercedes share a significant glance, before Finn sighs and gets up from the floor, walking over to Sam. "So, that was you?"

Sam looks up at the taller boy, oblivious to Mercedes approaching him from the front. "Uhh, yeah. I just said that."

The waterbender grimaces. "I was afraid you'd say that. Sorry about this."

Sam looks confused for only a moment before Finn hauls back and punches him in the shoulder. He stands up in shock, which just makes it easier for Mercedes to slam her open palm right into his gut. The barrage of blows is finished by a sizeable rock flying in from outside and pegging Sam in the back of the head, courtesy of Artie.

"Owwwwww," Sam grimaces. "What… what did I…"

"You almost got us killed, fool!" Artie shouts.

"You seriously fucked us over, dude," Finn agrees, reluctantly.
"Do you ever stop to think?" Mercedes asks with her arms crossed.

Sam, for his part, looks genuinely apologetic. "Gosh… I'm sorry, guys. I didn't mean to—"

"Wait," Kurt says, holding his hand up. "Actually, believe it or not, he did help me find you. I might've run right by you guys if it hadn't been for that flare, so…" He pats the battered astronomer gently on the shoulder, as if to try and make up for the beating. "Good job… sort of."

Meanwhile, the cogs in Blaine's brain have been steadily turning for this entire conversation. The gears are grinding, and Blaine doesn't like where they are taking him. Nevertheless, he has to ask… "What did your family do with the translation after you finished?"

Sam shrugs. "We sent it back with the slab. We had copies of it, and it was technically a Fire Nation Historical Artifact anyway."

"So," Blaine continues, not really looking at the young stargazer. "Theoretically, anyone with these translations could figure out when the Solar Winds were going to happen."

"That's the idea," Sam nods.

Blaine takes a calming breath. "Who sent you those?"

"I already told you. The 'Fire Nation Historical Preservation Society'—"

"Okay, I've never heard of them, and I have lived here my entire life. Was there a name? Were there any names listed?" Blaine continues, growing more frustrated by the second.

"I can't really remem… wait," Sam says. "I think… it might have been… S… something. Ssss… Seb Salamander… Scott Scholastic…"

"Sue Sylvester?" Blaine asks.

The astronomer breaks into a huge smile. "That's it! How'd you guess?"

The ex-Prince responds by calmly rising to his feet, moving over to the wall of the carriage, and casually beating his head against it. Over. And over. And over.

"Blaine," Kurt says, appearing suddenly at his back and gently pulling him away from the wall. "What's wrong?"

Blaine turns instead to Sam. "Did it say anything else?"

"I don't remem—"

"Think!" he shouts, and suddenly everyone in (and out) of the cart is staring at him, a little shocked, and more than a little worried. "I need to know!"

"Dude," Sam says, holding up his hands. "I only translated part of it. There was some other stuff on there, yeah, but I only took care of the chart. Why?"

Blaine swallows, unconsciously moving closer to Kurt, who might need to hold him up in the increasingly likely case he collapse. "Don't take this the wrong way," he says thickly. "But I think you might have just helped a psychopath take over an entire country."

_A/N_: For those of you who might not know, the 'Spirit Lights' are my Avatar!Verse name for the
real-world phenomenon known as the Aurora Borealis. Auroras are commonly seen in far northern and southern latitudes, and are caused by 'solar winds,' a term referring to a stream of charged particles that the sun is constantly exuding. During times of increased solar activity, (such as solar flares, which is what 'Sun Farts' probably really refers to), Auroras sometimes increase in frequency and intensity and can be seen more towards the central latitudes. They have been seen as far south as Texas before, and believe it or not, a recent solar flare might actually cause them to be visible in the continental US again this year. Do a Google Image search on 'Aurora Borealis' for some pretty amazing pictures. So now you know! :P
A Strange Wind

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 22/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: Cursing, innuendo, violence.
Word Count: ~5700
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

Author's Note: For those of you who were expecting Sam to join the group: sorry to disappoint. :P But there is a pretty good reason that Sam hasn't been traveling with them the entire time—Mercedes and Kurt have more information on that. Don't worry, though. Sammy-boy has a part to play and he'll continue to show up from time to time. ;P

Besides, more plot developments should make up for that fact. This chapter marks the introduction of something I know a lot of people have been dying to see. :D Don't forget that reviews/comments are always welcome, if you have any thoughts to share.

CHAPTER 22 – A Strange Wind

Sam looks flabbergasted. "I… wait, what?"

The breath Blaine takes to steady himself somehow ends up in his skull rather than his lungs, and the ensuing light-headedness almost topples him. Kurt winds up steadying him, which is just embarrassing. He shouldn't need steadying. He is… was the Fire Prince, not some delicate flower with a case of the vapors.

The Avatar guides him back over to the seat. "Blaine," he says, kneeling down in front of him. "I know we haven't exactly had a chance to sit down and talk about this, and you don't have to if you don't feel up to it, but… do you know anything about what happened that night?"
Too many eyes are on him now. He feels each pair individually, stabbing right through him. He wants to shrink away and disappear, but he can't. Where's he going to go? "What do you already know?" he asks, hoping to avoid the question for a moment.

"We know they're blaming Kurt for everything that happened," Mercedes starts. "The riot, the destruction of the Palace…"

"The what?" Blaine gasps.

"Oh, yeah," Mercedes says ruefully. "You… didn't know about that, did you?"

He turns back to Kurt, only to find the Avatar is very pointedly not looking at him. "What… how?" he asks.

Kurt clears his throat. "We can talk about that later. Suffice to say there was a battle, and some collateral damage was done."

"You lived at the Palace?" Sam asks.

"He was the Prince, doofus," Mercedes sighs.

"Well, nobody told me," the blond grumbles.

"They're saying Kurt killed the Fire Lord, too," Finn adds.

He sucks in another breath, to the exact same effect. If he keeps doing this, he's either going to float away or just have his head swell up and pop. "That's not… that's not true. Kurt didn't do it. He couldn't have."

The Avatar looks at him cautiously. "What makes you so sure?"

Hazel eyes glance up to crystal blue, and Blaine is drawn in like a whirlpool. He can't look away. No matter how much he wants to. "I was there," he whispers. "I saw who did it."

I watched and did nothing.

The silence that follows threatens to squeeze the life right out of him. Even though his eyes are still locked with Kurt's he can see everyone in his peripheral vision. Mercedes looks like she wants to crush him to her breast and squeeze him for decades. Finn looks miserable and twitchy, wanting to help, but having no idea how. Sam looks more confused than sad, but sad nonetheless. Artie is not looking at him, his eyes fixed on the road, but his head seems to sag slightly.

Kurt is by far the worst. Everything inside of the Avatar seems to rush to his face like a flash flood, and it nearly shatters Blaine's own pent-up dam of grief. He could never ask someone to be this sad on his behalf. Kurt should never look like this, and here he's done it to him twice now. He can't. He can't… "Oh, Blaine," Kurt says, his throat clearly constricting with grief. The other boy reaches towards him to offer… something. Comfort, reassurance, affection. It doesn't matter what, he can't take it. He doesn't deserve it.

"No," Blaine says, flinching away from Kurt's hand, who recoils as if he's been bitten. Oh, lovely. Way to go, Blaine, now you've made him look even worse. "I mean," he tries to clarify. "I'm… I'm okay."

It is by far the most egregious lie he's ever told, but… well, wasn't it Avatar Gaga who was always saying that if you lied to yourself enough, it would become true?

"Wait," Sam says. "So if it wasn't Kurt, who was it?"

Blaine looks at him evenly. "Sue. Sylvester."

Now it finally seems to be registering to the other boy. "Wait… wait… she… last night…"

"Last night," Blaine says, eager to move forward, to leave this quagmire of grief as quickly as possible before he sinks into it and drowns, "the Spirit Lights just happened to appear in the night sky, my father just happened to learn that I was missing and sent every guard at his command to look for me, a massive riot just happened to break out in the Burning City, and Sue Sylvester just happened to be waiting in the wings to take advantage of all of this. That's far too many happenings in one night to be coincidence, he finishes."

Sam looks devastated. "Oh… oh shit… oh crap… I can't even…" He hides his face in his fists, and begins a steady rhythm of blows against his cranium. "Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid," he says, over and over, punctuating each one with a fist to his own head. "You stupid, ugly, FAT…"

Whoa, whoa, whoa, where did that come from?

"Chill, dude," Finn says, patting him gently on the knee. "You didn't know."

Though it takes tremendous effort to acknowledge it, Blaine has to admit that Finn is right. "You can't be blamed for this. There's no way you could've known what would happen. And even if you could, your parents would probably be more in the wrong than you. It sounds like they did most of the translating."

Sam shakes his head. "Still… I am so, so sorry, dude. I had no idea."

Blaine sighs. "It doesn't matter now," he says shakily. "It's… it's already done."

"You're the Prince, though," Mercedes says gently. "If somebody finds out you're alive, surely—"

"—I won't be alive long afterwards," Blaine finishes. "Sue is insane. She'll do anything to get the throne and keep it. I'm weak. I can't even defend myself."

"Yeah," Finn says. "I mean, that's true now, but in a week or two when we get you all healed up enough to fight…"

Oh yeah. They don't know he can't Firebend yet. They're operating on the assumption that he is going to be useful in some way. He hates to disappoint them, but then, they won't be the first people he's disappointed…

"We can worry about that when the time comes," Kurt says suddenly. "There's no sense is getting all worked up about it now. Right now, you're under our protection, and your job is to rest and get better. We'll take care of the rest in the meantime."

As much as he wants to do just that, he knows it's no use. He can't just sit and stew in this, or he'll go crazy. "When's the next one?" he asks Sam.

"The next…" Sam says.

"The Solar Winds. When are they going to happen next?" Blaine clarifies.
"Uhhh," Sam stammers, glancing at the chart and holding up a few fingers as he does some mental calculations. He runs out of fingers relatively quickly and attempts to move onto toes, only to be greatly saddened by the boots he suddenly remembers he is wearing. "Finn," he says urgently, and he doesn't even have to clarify—Finn immediately scoots over towards him and offers all of his own fingers, which he summarily counts. Sadly, he runs out again. "Artie!" he shouts, and another hand pops in through the window.

Mercedes, at this point, has closed her eyes and began to massage her temples. Kurt is largely ignoring them.

"About a month from now," Sam finally calculates. "I mean, that's the next time I think they'll be visible down here."

"Okay," he nods. "I have... a month... to find out what else she's up to, and stop her."

"Blaine, stop it," Kurt whispers urgently.

"I can... I can get some of the Council members to help," Blaine continues. "Everyone's terrified of her, but if I can talk to some of them, I'm sure I can convince..."

"Stop!" Kurt continues.

"Maybe dad has... had... some friends in the military, maybe I could..." He grows more and more breathless as he continues to speak, ideas swirling in his head like an eyeless hurricane. Even as he starts to feel dizzy and spots appear in front of his eyes, he can't seem to stop himself. "What if I have to fight her? What if the country winds up in a civil war? I don't know how to... to..."

"That's enough!" Kurt says, grabbing him by the shoulders. "You're getting all worked up over nothing—"

"It's not nothing!" he shouts, still unable to control himself apparently. "If I can't get worked up about this, then what can I get worked up about?"

Kurt flinches, but does not move away. "That's not what I meant. You're getting all worked up for no good reason. You can't do any of these things right now, and there's no sense in letting them drive you up the wall. You're going to pass out," he finishes softly.

Blaine's rising panic slowly starts to subside in the face of Kurt's calm reassurance. His breathing returns to normal, and the spots recede to reveal the rest of the world again. He simply breathes for a few moments, focusing on the sensation of Kurt's soft fingers on his aching shoulders. "I'm sorry," he says, reaching up and curling his own hands around Kurt's wrists, for no other reason than wanting to touch him. "You're right. I didn't... I didn't mean to snap at you," he says quietly, running his thumb over Kurt's pulse point, feeling his heartbeat. It's amazing how much it grounds him, anchoring him wholly to the present.

They remain in that position for a precious few seconds, before Mercedes gently breaks the moment. "We need to focus on right now. Blaine, baby, you're hurting, and you need to heal before you do anything else. You can't help nobody if you're dead, understood?"

The Prince nods at her as Kurt removes his hands. "Yes, ma'am," he says.

She smiles at him. "Listen at you, all respectful. I could get used to that."

He can't help but smile back. "Well, I can't imagine why you aren't already. You certainly have my respect."
"Dude," Finn groans. "Way to make the rest of us look bad." His expression is annoyed, but his eyes seem to say he's happy for a break in the tension.

"Tch," Mercedes scoffs. "Like you need his help."

"Kissass!" Artie sneezes from the front in the least subtle way imaginable.

"Boy, you better plug that mouth before I put the moose in the driver's seat and make your ass pull this cart!" the lady Earthbender warns.

Artie ducks his head a little, but Blaine can tell he's still smiling.

"Since I am apparently public enemy number one," Kurt says, hand cupping his chin in thought, "and the biggest threat to Blaine's life is in the Capital, and since my predecessors were kind enough to warn me that there are now people trying to track us down… I say priority number one is to get as far away from the Burning City as possible, for the time being. That sound okay to everyone?"

Blaine nods, and various noises of concurrence rise up from around the cart.

"And I'll come with you!" Sam cheerfully announces.

Kurt's eyes flash pure panic for a split second, but Mercedes apparently has him covered. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, HILLS to the NO," she says, rising from her seat and wagging her finger at Sam.

"Why? What's wrong with Sam?" Finn asks, looking shocked.

Blaine finds himself wondering the same thing. "Yeah," he says, seconding Finn. "What's wrong with Star Kid?"

"Star Man," Artie corrects.

"Please?" Sam says, big blue eyes wide with disappointment. "I'd be super-helpful, I promise!"

Mercedes simply crosses her arms, shaking her head imperiously. She gestures to the occupants of the cart. "Do you see this nonsense? I am awash with boys. I'm already outnumbered four-to-one! Now, ya'll know I love you but you're driving me crazy. I needs me some lady time, and I haven't had any for months, and Kurt, honey, I know you try, but it's just not the same. So, no. Absolutely not, 100% vetoed. I ain't putting no more sausage on this breakfast platter until we get some eggs up in here, do you feel me?"

"Yes, Mercedes," Finn sighs.

"Artie?" she presses.

A fist enters through the window. "Power to you, my sister. Get your girlfriend on!"

Sam still isn't convinced. "But… you can't throw me out!" he cries. "There are monsters out there."

Raised eyebrows all around greet that little announcement.

"What?" Sam says. "It's true!"
"He did run out of the woods screaming," Finn points out.

"See?" Sam says. "Finn backs me up."

"Actually, Finn just said you popped up making more racket than a screaming dodo," Mercedes points out. "All that tells me is that you scare easy."

"But… it's true," Sam says, actually looking a little queasy. "I know all sorts of animals, and I've never seen one like this."

Kurt steps in. "Describe it for us," he says simply. "Start from the beginning."

The blond sighs. "Well…"

_The Fire Nation hills and highlands are super-treacherous and hard to traverse. It's a good thing he is so awesome at what he does—Sam Evans and his massive guns fear no cliff or cavern. He's_ headed downwards now, having just reached the lower part of this particular cliff, which levels out near a bunch of huge rocks just before a small section of forest to the East. _He can pretty much see the easiest path down—he'll make much better time if he climbs down on top of the giant rocks and uses them as stepping stones to get to the forest. He is so freaking smart. It's awesome to be this awesome._

_He climbs down onto the first rock no problem. Taking care to balance his enormous pack-o-stuff before he continues, he moves onto the next rock, and then the next, before heading towards the widest rock of all. It's shaped kind of like a crescent, so he's pretty much thinking he can just jump onto it and slide to the ground._

_It isn't until he lands on the surface of the large, white rock, that he discovers, like, definitively, that it's not a rock._

_For one thing, he's pretty sure 'soft and fluffy' is not a descriptor that fits most rocks. Or any rocks._

_Second, rocks don't groan and shake and knock your incredibly-well-defined and muscular ass off of them when you climb on top._

_And thirdly, rocks don't have GIANT HORNS and SIX LEGS and a GIANT BEAVER TAIL and HUGE FLAT TEETH and SCARY BEADY EYES and they don't ROAR AT YOU WITH GREAT LOUDNESS and that's about as far as he gets before he screams and splits because while Sam Evans and his massive guns fear no mountain, monsters are a whole different story._

_He makes it through the trees with more speed than he thought possible, and is just about convinced he is home free when suddenly, somebody else is screaming right along with him…_

"…and that's when I found you guys," Sam finishes.

Silence stretches on for a few more seconds. The creature's description certainly doesn't match anything Blaine can think of at the moment, but somehow, it seems familiar.

"Since we're on the subject," Artie says, breaking the silence. "Just, FYI, we need to install some
kind of strap up here or something. I don't particularly want to kiss the ground every time we come
to a sudden stop. I mean, I love my girl and all, but I prefer tender loving care.

"Noted," Kurt says, and a light seems to spark behind his eyes. "Sam," he asks gently. "Think very hard for me—did this monster happen to have a stripe down its back?"

Sam visibly focuses on the memory. "I... I think so."

The Avatar nods. "And did this stripe end at an arrow that was pointing down at its face?"

The blond boy wades deeper into the pool of concentration. "...yeah, it did!" he says. "It was really freaky! Like a sign that says 'YOU GO HERE, IN MY MOUTH, OM NOM NOM.'"

"Fantastic," Kurt smiles. "Just one more question: how have you managed to go your entire life without having ever seen or even heard of a Flying Bison?"

That's it! Blaine snaps. "I knew that image seemed familiar. My mom told me a story a few times that had a Flying Bison in it. Air Nomads ride them, right?"

"Right," Kurt nods. "See? Blaine is the most sheltered person I've ever met, and Blaine knows how to identify a Flying Bison." The implications of the Avatar's words seem to strike him suddenly. "Errr... no offense."

The ex-Prince waves him off. "None taken. When you're right, you're right."


"I have no idea," Kurt says. "The 'Nomads' part tends to imply that they do get around. Either way, I hardly think they pose an imminent threat to your safety."

Sam looks put out, but he eventually gives in with a sigh. "Okay, fine. Just..." At this, he looks up at Blaine. "Dude, I'm really sorry about helping the crazy lady," he says with a wince. "But I'm gonna be hanging around the Fire Nation for a while. If you need my help with anything, just shoot me a message, okay?"

Blaine nods. "I will. I appreciate that. Thank you, Sam."

Kurt sticks his head out the window. "Alright, bring this wagon to a halt! Everyone, assume your former positions. Finn, out, Sam, out. Oh, and Sam, it was nice to see you... I guess," he says with a slightly painful smile.

The carriage halts, and Sam offers Kurt a fist-bump, which he accepts. "You too, Kurt. Stay awesome!" he grins, before turning to Finn.

"It really sucks that you can't come with us, but... maybe we can get Mercedes a lady friend soon. Either way, we should totally catch up sometime," he says sadly.

"I know, bro," Sam shrugs. "But then's the breaks. I'll see you guys again sometime, though, I'm sure of it." They hug in a manner that looks more than a little painful, with back-slaps that make Blaine flinch at the sound of them.

"Mercedes," he says, offering a hand for her to shake, which she accepts, "I really hope you find a friend that's a girl soon. Or a girlfriend. I mean, I just want you to know, I'm totally cool if you're a lesbi—"
A crunching sound from the general vicinity of Sam's hand heralds the end of that conversation. "Out," she orders, and the young astronomer promptly flees the carriage.


"*Stars in my eyes,*" Artie finishes. What sounds like a fist-bump precedes the entire carriage suddenly bouncing upwards, as though a huge weight was just lifted off of it.

Finn crosses his arms and pouts openly at Mercedes.

"Put that lip away before I bust it," she says, unmoved.

"I'm afraid she's not budging on this one," Kurt sighs, clapping Finn on the shoulder sympathetically. "Tough break, Finn."

The tall boy sulks all the way out of the carriage, closing the door just a *little* harder than necessary as he exits.

"Bye!" Sam shouts as the carriage starts to roll again. A chorus of farewells is the last thing Blaine hears from outside before Kurt shuts the front window and turns to face Blaine. His raised eyebrows silently ask the former Firebender's opinion on the proceedings.

"Well, that was..." he searches in vain for the right word. "...interesting?" he tries. "I hope I don't seem disrespectful or presumptuous, but I have to ask," he says, turning to Mercedes. "Is that *really* the reason you won't let him come along?"

Mercedes gives him a frank stare of assessment before shifting her eyes over to Kurt. "You want to tell him, or should I?"

"I'll do it," Kurt says, adopting the careful tone of a mediator. "Blaine... you see... Sam is... an interesting character. He's got his quirks and his flaws, certainly, but he has a good heart. Finn is much the same way: it may not seem like it at times, but Finn's heart is almost always in the right place, despite his difficulties doing the right things. Individually, they're perfectly fine, if a little accident prone. The *problems* come when they get together."

Blaine raises an eyebrow at this. "Oh?"

Kurt sighs. "How can I say this politely? Sam and Finn... their respective limitations complement each other in interesting ways. The two of them... they're kind of..."

Mercedes steps in. "Sam and Finn are oppositely charged ends of a *living disaster magnet.* Together they form a swirling vortex of chaos and pain where good fortune goes to die." Short, sweet, and to the point.

The ex-Prince blinks. "Wow, *really?* I mean, surely they can't be *that* bad."

The Avatar scoffs. "Oh, you have no idea..."

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_Finn and Sam, clad in thick, fur-lined coats, walk through the gorgeous multi-tiered Frozen City, Capital of the Northern Water Tribe. They're laughing about something or other and shoving each other back and forth. Sam shoves Finn at just the wrong moment, causing him to bang his ankle on an icy street lamp. The taller boy yelps and starts hopping on one foot, rapidly losing his balance, but managing to stay upright just long enough to hop all the way across the street. Sam attempts to chase him down and grab him, and manages to just miss the edge of his coat before he topples over_
Dude!" Sam shouts. "Finn, are you okay?"

"I'm cool," Finn grunts, squirming slightly. "Something broke my fall."

"MY BACK," a voice shouts from beneath him, causing Finn to rocket upright. Turns out 'something' was actually 'someone:' the splayed, agonized figure of the local mail carrier, his brown bag of letters scattered across the walkway...

"He was in recovery for months," Kurt sighs.

The Fireless Prince is a little taken aback. "That's… pretty bad."

Kurt huffs out a laugh. "That's nothing. There was also the time…"

"No, no, dude, like this," Sam says, demonstrating the dance again. There is a lot of heavy foot movement, and Finn is pretty self-conscious about his dancing skills (or lack thereof) so they've decided to practice on a flat rooftop so no one can see them.

Finn gives it his best effort, but his giant body just doesn't lend itself well to coordination, even with Sam beatboxing to help him keep time. He trips over himself one time too many and finally ends up face down, smashing into the roof. "Ugh, that's it. I quit. We've been at this for hours and I still suck."

"Aww, come on, dude," Sam says encouragingly as he picks his friend up. "You're not that bad. I know you'll get it soon."

"You really think so?" Finn asks as they head off the roof.

"I know so," Sam grins, slapping Finn on the back.

Neither of them notices the way the roof subtly rumbles at the impact. They climb down off the roof just as Clarence the Mailman makes it home from another hard day on the job. He's so happy to be back, he closes the door just a little harder than necessary in his enthusiasm, and…

CRRRRRRASH.

Finn and Sam pivot on the spot. "What was that?" Finn asks.

Sam squints at the house, but the two-story square building seems fine. "Dunno. Maybe somebody dropped something." The two of them shrug and wander off into the city…

"Seriously? It was the same guy?" Blaine asks.

"Indeed it was," Kurt nods sadly. "He moved to the Earth Kingdom after that. No one really blamed him."

"Okay, so… it really sucks to be a mailman for the Water Tribe, but I still don't think…"

"Oh, Blaine," Kurt sighs. "We've only just begun…"
Finn tosses the compacted, elongated snowball to Sam. Sam tosses it back. Finn grins. "Go long!"

He then hurls the ball with all his might.

A little over a block away, an elderly Earth Kingdom diplomat sits down for tea at an outdoor cafe with the Northern Water Chief.

"Go long!" she hears, and turns to the sound of exuberant young men playing. A strange whistling noise reaches her ears, and she looks up to see some sort of white object growing steadily larger in the sky...

Finn and Sam leap down from the entrance to the tundra, eyes wide and fearful, looking for all the world like they're being chased by a mammoth-bear.

"RUN FOR YOUR LIIIIVES!" Finn shouts, booking it out of the plaza as an enormous mammoth-bear smashes through the gates with a roar...

"Just a few more drops," Sam says carefully, gently trickling the strange solution into the cauldron he and Finn have assembled. The early morning, pre-dawn light gives them the comfort of knowing that no one is around to be injured in this particular stunt. The solution is the last ingredient before...

"Oh, shit," Finn says. "It's smoking. It's starting! HIT THE DECK!"

The two of them book it over towards their makeshift bomb shelter, peaking out from behind an overturned bench reinforced with ice. They await the inevitable blast... and await... and await... and await...

"Dude, nothing's happening," Finn says, peaking out from behind his bunker.

Sam peers over as well. "Huh. I wonder what went wrong?"

"Are you sure you mixed it right?" Finn asks.

Sam exits from behind the bunker, brazenly going towards the explosive solution that isn't exploding. "This worked perfectly when I did it the other day. I don't know what's up with this thing," he sighs. "Maybe we just need to add some more..."

They experiment for a few minutes, adding tons more solution and various powders to the cauldron. Much smoke is produced, but no blast can be elicited from the mix.

"I don't get it," Sam sighs. "I mimicked the results of Tuesday perfectly. I must be missing an ingredient somewhere."

"Ah, don't worry about it, dude. I believe you. We can try again later," he says with a smile. The two of them head down to get ready for the day just as the morning sun peaks over the horizon. It's a few minutes yet before the light reaches the cauldron, and just a few minutes more before the solution starts bubbling again. A brilliant white light emits from within the solution, and then...

"...and the hole still emits steam to this day," Kurt finishes. "Dad thinks it's steadily melting a hole to the center of the Earth."
Blaine blinks. "I... I... don't even know what to say."

"No one did, really," Kurt says thoughtfully. "I mean, I don't know anything for certain, but I'm eighty-five percent sure that the Tribal Council actually asked the Evans family to move. I hear they even paid them. Not that Sam would know about that, of course."

Mercedes tilts her head to the side. "And those were just Sam and Finn. When you add Artie to the mix..."

---

Kurt and Mercedes are at an utter loss. The three boys stand (well, one sits) facing them just outside the hotel as liquid chocolate pours out of every door, and every window, on every floor.

. Each of them is completely covered in the brown goo, and each of them is attempting their best look of innocence.

"I know what this looks like," Artie says carefully. "But you have to believe me when I say this was not our fault."

"Totally not our fault," Finn agrees.

"We specifically asked the guy for twenty-seven pairs of silk socks. Not cotton!" Artie clarifies.

Sam nods. "You've got to follow the directions to the letter with these things. Believe me, I know."

Kurt opens his mouth to speak a few times, but there are no words adequate to the situation they currently find themselves in. At the end, he just throws his hand up, and walks away.

Mercedes looks past the boys to the hotel just in time to see the front of it bulge outwards as more chocolate seeps through the wood. "It's gonna take me a good, long while to come up with a punishment for this," she sighs, turning to walk away.

"It wasn't our fault!" Artie insists. Mercedes just keeps walking. The paralyzed Earthbender sighs, before experimentally licking his finger. "Huh. Still pretty good, though."

Sam and Finn follow suit. Finn smiles. "I like it."

Sam nods. "Not bad. Needs more ginseng."

The female Earthbender successfully resists the urge to bend them all into holes in the ground and leave them there (primarily because that wouldn't work on Artie) and just continues to walk away, stepping carefully over a stream of flowing chocolate and the brown bag of chocolate-soaked letters steadily floating down it...
"You can go back to sleep," Kurt says with a smile. "We'll probably be ready to camp out for the night by the time you wake up."

Blaine nods. "Thanks, Kurt," he says with a smile. There's more that he wants to say... there always seems to be, lately. So much to say and not enough time or energy to say it... all he can do at the moment is lie down in his seat and stare out the window at the early night sky, a small part of him wondering what sort of ridiculous mess Sam may or may not be approaching at this very moment...

Stupid monster. Stupid... bison monster making him look stupid. He's not stupid! *Flying bison* are stupid. With their stupid giant bodies and giant teeth and scary roars. But whatever. Sam Evans and his *massive guns* ain't afraid of no bison. Monsters, yes, but bison are definitely not on that list, be they airborne or ground-bound. And he is totally going to prove it. He remembers exactly where the stupid mons—*BISON* was, and he is going to find it and face down his fears like a man. His awesome sense of direction guides him without fail to the big white rock...

...which is currently being fed a small shit-ton of blue apples by a figure dressed in rough-looking black clothes. Black Clothed Guy is wearing his hood up, and in Sam's experience, people don't wear hoods unless they have something to hide, and nice people usually don't have anything to hide. He'll just face his fears with some other giant scary flying animal, as this one is clearly occupied. He takes a single step backwards...

...and promptly trips over a rock and lands on his backpack with a resounding crash.

He doesn't even have time to mutter 'crap' before Black Clothed Guy is right in front of him, grabbing his hand and lifting him up, backpack and all, with surprising ease. "Uhhh, thanks," Sam says.

The low light combined with the guy's hood makes it tough to see his face, but he seems relatively friendly. "Think nothing of it," a smooth voice replies. "Are you a local?"

"Nope," Sam shrugs. "Kind of a wanderer, actually."

"Ah," Black Clothes says noncommittally. "Alright, I'm going to ask you an extremely odd question. Please, just... bear with me." He takes a breath. "Have you, or has anyone you know, at any point in the past twenty-four hours witnessed a girl falling out of the sky?"

Sam delivers the answer to that question with a fresh helping of fish-eye. "Uhhhh, no," he says. "Definitely not."

"Have you seen any strange girls wandering around here?" Black Clothes continues, pressing for more information. "Girls who might, for example, begin a conversation with a tree or a rock or wander in a small circle for hours before declaring herself lost and settling down for a nap in the middle of the road?"

"Definitely, *definitely* not," Sam says with certainty, his confusion plain on his face.

"I didn't think so," the guy sighs. "Well... I really must be going. Just... if you see anyone fitting that description..." He seems a little lost for a moment, sighing and placing a hand on Sam's shoulder. "...look after her for me, will you? Tell her I'll be back to pick her up as soon as I finish my business."

"Uhhh, okay, dude, sure," Sam says, shrugging.
"Great," he says, nodding for a second before pointing over Sam's shoulder. "Oh, look! Something shiny!"

"Where?" Sam says, turning quickly and seeing nothing but darkness. "I don't see…"

…but by the time he's turned back around, both guy and bison are nowhere to be found. In their wake, they leave only the night and the sound of the wind gently rustling through the trees…

_A/N_: The Airbenders are in town. ;) But this one seems a bit odd. Who is he, and what is he after? And (much easier question) who could this strange girl he is looking for possibly be? All these questions and more will be answered… eventually. :P In the meantime, leave a review or a comment, won't you? :D
"Bring that over here," Mercedes says. "Hurry up!"

She knows it does little good to remind him that he is supposed to be moving at speeds greater than a koala sloth, but she can't help it. She demands results, and she doesn't demand them on other people's time.

Finn drags himself over with the giant handful of moss and vines she instructed him to gather. It's full-on nighttime now, and while she would prefer to keep going, she has to realize that moose need rest just like the rest of them. So they've pulled off the road and into the wilderness again. Kurt is off practicing on her instruction, Artie is surveying the surroundings to make sure they're
clear of danger and civilization for the moment, and Prince Charming is still snoozing it up in the luxury cart.

Lucky punk. It's not easy managing this carnival.

"Is this enough?" Finn sighs, dropping it at her feet. It's a fairly hefty pile, and the dirt on the front of his clothes is a testament to how hard he worked to get it, but…

"A little more," she says, and Finn groans. "Oh, what," she says, rolling her eyes. "You want to half-ass this? You want us to be spotted from miles away because we didn't hide the carriage properly? This thing is huge, brightly colored, and impossible to miss. I figured you could relate."

He groans again, but he knows better than to talk back, stomping off to gather more green. She smiles to herself. She'll have him trained and housebroken yet.

…is it wrong to think of him in those terms? Probably. Whatever. He's still on her shit list for a number of reasons, and he can keep right on working himself off, for now.

She's just about to pop back in the carriage to wake sleepy-head up when lo and behold, he pops out all by himself. Well, not totally; mostly he just blearily opens the door and then stares at the steps to the ground like they're his mortal enemy.

Mercedes smiles. "I got you, sweetie," she says, digging her feet into the ground and jutting a hand up towards him. A small rock ramp just up from the ground, allowing him a less steep gradient to get from where he is to where he needs to be. He offers her a wan smile.

"Thanks," he says, as he slowly shuffles down the ramp. He sighs as he reaches the bottom. "I feel like such an invalid. I mean, I've been hurt before, but it's never been so bad that I didn't think I could take a staircase without collapsing. I practically need a wheelchair to get around."

In retrospect, she probably should've known that was Artie's cue to appear out of nowhere.

"Hey, Mercedes," the other Earthbender says, sliding up to them from behind Blaine. "Are we gonna bury the—"

Turning around to face the approaching voice, Blaine catches his first glimpse of Artie's unique method of transportation, and reacts about as well as you'd expect…

Which is to say that he shrieks and leaps into Mercedes's arms.

She catches him easily, a little shocked at how light he is (what is he, made of foam?).

"Damn, dude," Artie says, tilting his head to the side. "You act like you've never seen a white person before."

Blaine is still looking at Artie, a little wide-eyed and breathless. "Sorry," he pants. "I uhhh… you startled me. I didn't know what you were."

Artie quirks an eyebrow at him.

"I've never seen a person move like that before. It's… interesting," he continues.

It hits both Earthbenders at about the same time: Blaine has only seen Artie in very brief snatches of time where it was perfectly natural for him to be sitting down.

"Ah," Artie says with a grin. "You must not know 'bout me."
The Prince looks honestly confused, bless his heart. "Know what?" he asks.

Artie, being a smug little bastard, just smiles and looks at Mercedes like she's supposed to answer this question.

Unfortunately, Blaine follows his example. He turns to her. "Know what?" It's at this point that Blaine apparently realizes that Mercedes is still carrying him. "Oh! I'm so sorry," he says, trying to squirm out of her arms. "I completely forgot… I didn't mean… ummm… you have excellent reflexes," he stammers adorably. "Thank you for catching me. I can stand up now."

"You don't have to apologize, sweetie," she says as she sets him down. "We were all kind of weirded out by it at first."

"It's so neat, though," Blaine says. "Is it an Earthbending technique?"

Artie snaps his fingers. "Got it in one!"

"I wonder if there's a Firebending equivalent," Blaine says thoughtfully.

"Unless you can think of a way to shoot fire out of your butt without burning your nads off," Artie says, wincing slightly, "I seriously doubt it."

"Still," Blaine says, cupping his chin. "I…" He pauses here for a split second, for some unknown reason. "…know of a similar technique. It's kind of like Fire Skating, only it's done standing up. Does yours work standing up too?"

Artie shrugs. "Couldn't tell you."

Blaine looks confused. "What do you mean?"

The paraplegic gives him a patient smile. "Can't stand up."

The Fire Prince just continues to look baffled, and Mercedes waits for him to take the hint. It doesn't happen. "He's paralyzed, sweetie."

Blaine's eyes bulge halfway out of his head. "Oh. Ohh. OH!" he says. "Oh my gosh, I am… so sorry…"

Artie gives him a fish-eye. "Why? You didn't do it."

"No, no, not about… that," he says, gesturing to Artie's legs. "I mean… yes, about that, but more about the insensitive comments I was making before… you… got here. You didn't even know I'd said anything, did you? Oh, wow, Blaine. Excellent foot-in-mouth choreography there, well done. I'm just… I'm going to shut up now," he finishes, looking sheepish.

Artie stares at him with a perfectly blank expression just long enough to make Blaine start to squirm. A single uncomfortable movement from the Fire Nation Royal breaks the dam, and Artie cracks up and immediately launches into one of those laughing fits that's so powerful it's almost soundless. He laughs so hard he actually falls over.

And Blaine steps forward and then stops, like he isn't sure whether or not he's supposed to help him up. Oh, this boy is precious.

"Should I…?" he asks Mercedes.
She stifles a laugh of her own and gently shakes her head.

Sure enough, after flopping on the ground for a few seconds, Artie promptly Earthbends his way right back into the sitting position. "Oh, man," he says, smiling at Blaine. "Blaine, bro, I think I like you. You are just five feet of fun." He makes a small spectacle of wiping a tear from his eye. "Priceless."

"Oh," Blaine says, looking uneasy. "So... you're not mad? You're not sensitive about..." he trails off, nodding to Artie's extraneous appendages. "You know."

"What?" he shrugs. "My legs? Of course I'm not sensitive about them." He pulls one leg out from under him with a grin, and taps it with his knuckles a few times. "See? Didn't feel a thing. Not sensitive at all. In fact, that's kind of the point: I could have a family of iguana squirrels making a nest in these babies, and I wouldn't even know about it as long as they kept quiet."

"Ah," Blaine says, still looking a little lost. The guilt is gone, though, so Mercedes counts this as a positive encounter for the time being.

"Don't worry," she reassures the Firebender. "He gets easier."

"You feelin' alright, dude?" Artie asks sincerely. "Kurt wants to talk to you in private, but only if you're up for it. I can take you to him when you're ready."

That perks him up almost instantly. "I'm ready," Blaine says, standing a little taller (but only a little).

"Follow me," Artie says, and immediately starts sliding his way through the trees—slower than he normally goes, obviously, so that Blaine can keep up.

The Prince looks at her, a little uncertain.

"Go on, honey," she says. "He doesn't bite."

"As long as you keep your hands away from my mouth!" Artie calls out.

"Shut up and stop scaring the boy," Mercedes yells back at him.

Blaine takes a moment to breathe deeply, takes one last look at Mercedes, and starts walking after the resident bandit. She partly wants to go with him to make sure he's alright—Artie can be a little much sometimes, and he doesn't always know when to stop. But she decides to have faith in him for now, mostly because Finn chooses this moment to stumble back into the clearing with a stack of uprooted moss and vines so high that he can't actually see past it.

"Is this enough?" he pants.

She eyes it carefully. "It'll do. Drop it there and get started on the campfire."

"What?" Finn says, dropping the load more out of shock than obedience. "I still have to make the campfires? We have a freakin' Firebender now! Make Blaine do it."

She assumes the standard hands-on-hips stance to scold the boy. "First of all, Blaine is about as work-worthy as a table made out of play putty right now. He's hurt, doofus. And second, he just went to talk to Kurt, and I ain't about to interrupt their alone time."

"You couldn't have made him start just a little fire before he left?" Finn asks, frustrated.
The Earthbender shrugs. "Didn't come up. Now get to work."

Blaine follows quietly after Artie as he slides through the woods, still not quite sure what to think.

Artie seems to pick up on his discomfort. "Hey, dude. Seriously, you don't have to worry about offending me or anything."

"Sorry," Blaine apologizes, shortly before being hit with the realization that he should probably stop apologizing before it gets annoying. "I just… I'm not really sure how I'm supposed to act around you. I've never really been friends with… someone like you before."

The Earthbender slides to a halt and spins around to face Blaine. "In that case, I will provide you with instructions. There is one—" He holds up a finger. "—and only one big rule you need to remember."

The ex-Prince nods, an expression of utmost concentration on his face.

Artie shrugs. "Act normal."

Blaine nods, and waits for more. More is not forthcoming, however, and he tilts his head to the side. "…is that it?"

The paralyzed boy grins at him. "Yup. Just act like you would around anyone. If I have a problem with something, like anyone else, I'll tell you about it. Get it?"

The Fireless Prince nods, feeling a little more at ease. "Got it."

"Good," Artie says, turning around to resume their little trip.

They walk—well, he walks for a few more seconds in silence. He still feels a little awkward, but he figures the best way to deal with that is directly. "So, if you don't mind me asking," Blaine starts. "How did it happen?"

Artie glances back at him for a brief moment, before rooting his eyes to the road ahead. "Rockslide."

"Oh," Blaine says. "Wow…" He debates whether or not he should put voice to his thoughts, but Artie seems like someone who would appreciate being direct. Plus, he did say… "That just seems so… ironic. Being paralyzed by the very element you're connected to."

The boy in front of him shrugs, still not looking back at him. "It wasn't her fault," Artie says, holding his hand out to run his fingers along the ground as he moves. "She protected me, too, you know."

The surprise is plain on the Prince's face, though the other boy isn't looking. "How so?"

Artie's voice is a little quieter than his usual boisterous tone when he starts to speak. "When it happened… I was out in the wilderness, pretty far from civilization. Stuck out there for days, weak and injured, with no food or water… it was only a matter of time before something caught wind of me and decided I'd make an easy meal. A pack of armadillo wolves showed up on the second day. I was buried under the rocks, but I could hear them scratching, digging, growling, trying to get to me. I could even catch a glimpse or two through the cracks. I thought for sure I was literally dead meat, but…" At this, he sounds almost wistful. "No matter how hard they tried, no matter how much they scratched and clawed and dug at her… she wouldn't let 'em through. She held them off
until they gave up and went to find something else to eat." He pauses, and it sounds like he's smiling when he speaks again. "She saved me."

Blaine blinks. "That's... incredible."

Artie nods, running both hands along the ground now. "Yeah, she is, isn't she?" The Earthbender has slowed down a little, and Blaine is now more or less walking beside him.

The former Firebender is a little taken aback. "Still," he says. "It's just so weird to me. To think how dangerous the world can be... how much you can lose in the blink of an eye, all because of a freak accident..."

And then, Artie's smile skews sideways. "Who said it was an accident?"

Blaine is shocked into a standstill. "...what?" he asks.

But Artie's odd expression is gone, and he's no longer even paying attention to Blaine. "K-Hum!" he shouts, sliding forward quickly towards the small pond that Kurt is currently spinning around in mid-air. "Your Prince," he says, bowing at the waist, "has arrived."

Kurt turns to the sound of his favorite (and only, to his knowledge) butt-bound bandit. Artie is all smiles, while Blaine is standing a little further back looking like he'd just found out his mother was from the moon. "Blaine!" Kurt calls, trying to get his attention as he puts the water back in the pond.

"Y-yeah," the Prince calls, snapping back to reality. "Coming!"

The Avatar turns to eye the thief. 'What did you do to him?' he mouths threateningly.

Artie shrugs. Blaine steps past the Earthbender at this point, and the sitting boy grins. "You kids have fun!" And then he proceeds to peel out in the direction he came, slamming the ground with his fist as he goes and leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

Kurt emits a longsuffering sigh. "I'm going to go ahead and extend a blanket apology for anything he might have said, done, implied, and/or stolen."

Blaine shakes his head and smiles. "Oh, no. Don't worry, he didn't... wait, stolen?"

By the time Blaine says that, the cloud of dust has settled a bit, and Kurt's eyes practically evict themselves from his skull in mortification. 'GET SOME' is carved into the ground in enormous, prominent letters where Artie left. "Uhhhh," Kurt stammers, before slamming his foot into the ground, causing the ground beneath the letters to flip over and tossing tons of dirt into the air. "Nevermind!" he says, with what he hopes is a big, successfully distracting smile.

"Wait, what was that?" Blaine asks, turning around to see the minor earthsplosion Kurt caused.

"Oh, nothing," he says, still smiling. "Just practicing my Earthbending!" he says cheerfully. "Gotta stay on my toes. Don't want to get rusty." He waves him off. "Enough about me, how are you?"

The Prince assesses him for a moment, but fortunately for Kurt, he decides to play along. "Better. I think I can stand up for a decent period of time without falling over now, so that's certainly an improvement."

"Finn healed you again while you were asleep," Kurt says. "He says in a couple of weeks, you'll be
a hundred percent fixed. Well, except for the…"

"Yeah…" Blaine says, fiddling the scarf that hides his scars.

"Anyway," Kurt claps. "I was hoping… if you feel up to it… that you could keep helping me with my Firebending. I mean, I know you can't do it yourself..."

The Prince's eyes suddenly look frightened. "**What?** How did you find out?"

The Avatar is a little taken aback. "…what, that you're seriously injured, and if you strain yourself, you might fall to pieces right in front of me?" he says cautiously.

There may or may not be a word for an expression that conveys an intense desire to *slap* yourself. If there is, Kurt would love to know it, because it applies perfectly here. "…oh. Of course. Yes, that's… very true. Very true indeed. You are right," Blaine insists, and Kurt thinks the Prince doth protest too much.

"Blaine, is there something you want to tell me?" Kurt says gently, moving the increasingly distressed-looking Prince over to a rock large enough for both of them to sit on.

"Want?" Blaine says purposefully as he sits. "No… I can safely say that I definitely do not want to tell you this."

He tries not to let how much that stings get through to his expression. "You don't trust me? "Well, you don't have to say anything you don't want—"

"I can't," the Prince says suddenly.

Kurt shakes his head. "Blaine, it's okay. You don't have to talk—"

"Firebend," he finishes. "I can't Firebend anymore."

Shocked into silence, Kurt just stares at Blaine's face, passively miserable, so sad, but so unwilling to thrust that upon anyone else. "I don't understand," Kurt softly admits. "Just… since you woke up?" he asks. "You were hurt pretty badly, maybe…"


He takes a breath and weakly thrusts out his hand, to no effect at all. Then, he experimentally snaps his fingers and holds up his thumb. Again, no fire appears. Not even a spark. "It's gone," Blaine says, barely a whisper.

A silent snake of worry and grief wraps around Kurt's ribs and begins to squeeze. "I'm so sorry, Blaine, I..." His hand reaches up to reassure the Prince, but Blaine flinches out from underneath him, standing up and shaking his head. It hurts, and this time, he can't quite disguise it completely.

But Kurt wants to help him so badly. He thinks back to that night, not more than a week ago, yet seeming like it occurred in another lifetime. He thinks about what Blaine told him about fire. "I don't understand fire nearly as well as you do," Kurt says softly. "But I still remember what you told me. What do you want?" he asks.

The look in Blaine's eyes when he turns to Kurt is halfway to *panic*. "I don't know," he says. "I don't... I want to... I want to help the Fire Nation, but I don't know how. I want to get that evil
woman off my father's throne and into prison where she belongs, but she's got everything and I have nothing to fight her with. I want to help you," he says, voice ringing with conviction, "but I have nothing to offer. I can't Firebend, I can't fight, right now I can't even stay awake for longer than an hour or two at a time." He runs his hand over his face. "I'm just... I don't even know why I survived. I shouldn't have."

And then everything stops. Blaine freezes—the shock on his face makes it clear that he didn't mean for that to come out. But there it is. It's there, so large and inescapable that it's practically suffocating them. Kurt can barely breathe.

"I..." Blaine says, still looking positively mortified at himself. "I didn't mean to say that."

"But you did mean it," Kurt asks, whisper-soft, "didn't you?"

His mouth opens and a weak sort of half-sound comes out. "I... I don't know."

"You don't know?" Kurt nearly shouts, standing up himself. "You can't just... say things like that and then expect 'I don't know' to work as an explanation!"

"I didn't mean to say it," Blaine counters. "It just... slipped out!"

"It shouldn't be there to begin with!" the Avatar cries. "What could possibly make you think something like that, Blaine? Why would you ever say that about yourself?"

The Prince makes a visible attempt to calm himself. "I... can't tell you."

"No," Kurt says, stepping towards him. "I'm sorry, but you don't get to drop a bombshell like that and then just expect me to act like it never happened. I can't let this go, Blaine, I can't."

"Please," he says. "Please don't make me do this now. I promise—I promise you, Kurt, from the bottom of my heart, I didn't mean that like you think."

The Avatar shakes his head. "Blaine..."

"Please," Blaine says, pretty much openly begging at this point. "Let it go. Just for now. Let me help you, let me teach you again. Let me do something for you. If you want to help me, let me help you."

What's even more amazing to Kurt is everything Blaine isn't saying. Everything that he is implying without even realizing it. Please don't make me do this. You have that power over me. You could make me do anything. I'm asking you not to.

"Okay," Kurt whispers after a pregnant moment. "For now," he says, making sure that Blaine knows that they will absolutely be continuing this conversation later. "Let's just get started."

It's the closest thing to a smile he will get from Blaine for the rest of the night. The 'training' goes on for about an hour. It's more difficult when Blaine can't show him the moves, but Blaine is patient and explains everything as many times as he needs to. By the end of the session, Kurt has learned to make extended streams of fire, thin, concentrated jets, and forceful fireballs. When Blaine starts instructing him on how squats will improve his breathing, the Prince sits on the ground next to the rock and leans against it. By the time Kurt has done the twenty he was assigned, Blaine is fast asleep.

Walking up to the sleeping Prince, Kurt kneels down beside him. "Blaine?" he tries. No response is forthcoming besides Blaine's soft breathing. He nudges the boy gently, but Blaine is out like a
light.

*Good*, he thinks.

He doesn't know if it's appropriate or not. He doesn't know if Blaine will appreciate it in the morning. He doesn't know who is really supposed to be comforted by the gesture, Blaine or himself.

All he knows is that he *needs* Blaine in his arms. So he takes him. He gathers up the broken boy beside him, gentle as the morning wind, clutches him to his chest and just *holds* him. Strokes his hair, rubs his shoulders, squeezes him and cries, as softly as he always has, for the boy who had everything taken from him in one night. And all because Kurt made the wrong decision. Because Kurt failed him.

*I'm so sorry*, he thinks.

His last thought before he falls asleep himself…

*I won't fail you again.*

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*A/N*: Well, that was wretched and painful. ;-; I'm going to have to bring some major lightness into the proceedings with the next chapter, but for now, I must leave you with creys. Please review/comment if you have any thoughts to share.
"Okay!" a familiar-foreign voice calls out. "I'm on my way in. Fair warning!"

Blaine blearily sniffs and snuggles closer to the soft, warm pillow he happens to have next to him. His back is killing him, his limbs ache, and he is parched beyond belief, but he doesn't want to move. Couldn't tell you why, doesn't want to wake up enough to try. It isn't until he notices his pillow has a heartbeat that he is fully catapulted into the waking world.

Kurt. He is sleeping with Kurt. Guh— sleeping on Kurt. Kurt is beneath him, beside him, all around him and holding him, sleeping peacefully with tear tracks on his face. Tear tracks that Blaine put there. And yet, he doesn't remember going to sleep like this. Kurt must have done this himself.

Kurt did this.

Kurt held him while he slept. Kurt is responsible for what currently feels like the most restful sleep
he has ever experienced. Kurt, in spite of all the pain Blaine has caused him, stayed here and protected him as if he were something worth protecting, something precious.

He sits up, slowly, so as not to wake him, and it hits him.

*Kurt loves you.*

The realization is dagger-sharp and quick, slipping into his ribcage, filleting his heart and lungs and making it very difficult not to keel over and die. He can't believe it. The *Avatar* loves him. The legacy of thousands, the legendary balance-keeper, guardian of the world… so many of his mother's stories featured the amazing Avatar, the cosmic spirit who saves, has saved, will save the world and the people within countless times over. That spirit *loves* him.

*Kurt* loves him.

It is the second realization that really knocks him flat. Kurt. Kurt Hummel, who came from the Northern Water Tribe, who travels with his friends and has a duty to save the world from a terrible sickness. Kurt who cries so easily for someone he barely knows, who holds his head up and keeps a bearing befitting of any royal no matter how much mud the world slings at him, who can hide his pain like a pro or let it shine from him like a lamp. **Kurt.**

It was so easy sometimes just to think of him as *The Avatar*. A figure of legend, an impossible ideal, a power great and magnificent and unreachable. Something to aspire to and admire. It is this moment—this quiet moment in the stillness just before dawn, that the sun breaks over the horizon in Blaine's mind and the ex-Prince truly understands. Avatar though he may be, Kurt is a *person*. He is flesh and blood and tears, he is warm and soft and strong. He is the chest that Blaine is laying on, gently rising and falling, complete with a beating heart and breathing lungs. He is pale skin, pink lips, beautiful blue eyes, voluminous hair. He is real. He is real, and fragile, and **human.**

The Avatar is human. Always, always, always a person, never perfect, never unreachable. To become so would subvert the very purpose the Avatar serves. Behind all the legend and the power, Kurt is just a boy. Kurt, *the boy*, loves him. And somehow, this is infinitely more terrifying than the first realization.

If Kurt is a boy, he can be hurt. He can be damaged, his trust can be shattered, his heart can be broken. And all of this is now officially wrapped up in Blaine. Kurt's heart could be supported or it could be dropped, he could make him happy or miserable, he could lift him up or fumble and break him. All of that now rests on his shoulders, and it is *a lot* of pressure. He's already hurt him so many times. Last night, when he'd said what he'd said… whether he knew it or not, Blaine basically told Kurt that he wasn't worth living for. That he wasn't enough. What a horrible thing to say to someone.

He has no idea what to do with this.

Because when he asks himself the all-important question…

*Do you love Kurt?*

He is no more certain about that than he is about anything lately. He knows he cares about Kurt a great deal. He knows that he would never, *ever* want to hurt him or break his heart. But he also knows his own heart is in turmoil—that he can be irrational, snappish, angry and condescending. Rude, arrogant, indecisive and oblivious to others. Kurt deserves better than that. He deserves someone who can actually help him, who can look out for him and love him with *certainty*. At the very least, he deserves someone who can honestly say that they love him back, and Blaine just
doesn't know. He doesn't know anything anymore.

He needs to think about this. Long and hard… if he can't come up with anything long-term, he might at least be able to come up with a short-term idea of what he needs to do. The next time he is alone, he'll take the time to sit and really think about his feelings for Kurt, and sort them out as best he can.

*What have you done?* He asks the Universe at large. *Why did you let this happen? Why would you trust someone so fickle and flighty with something so important?*

Sadly, the Universe has nothing to say to him.

Artie, however, has plenty. "Last chance to protect your modesty," he calls out, sliding into the clearing with his hand over his eyes. "I'm on my way in, about to open my—oh, you're wearing clothes," he says, sounding a little confused. "Anyway, it's time to go. Mercedes says we need to spend as much time moving as possible…" Something must be showing on Blaine's face, because Artie suddenly tilts his head to the side and says, quite seriously, "Hey, dude… are you okay?"

To Blaine's surprise, Kurt continues to sleep despite Artie. "Yeah," he says, shaking his head. "Sorry. I was just thinking…"

The other boy's eyebrows raise in anticipation.

"…I should probably take a bath," he says, successfully evading for the moment. "I'm sure I smell horrible."

"Nah," Artie says, waving him off. "I wouldn't bother. Finn has to put his hands all over you and make you wet anyway. I *would* use the bathroom while you have the chance. We're gonna be on the road for a while."

The Earthbender nudges Kurt, who weakly lashes out at him with an arm. "Go away," he says.

"No can do," Artie says, dodging the blow easily. "Up and at 'em. Mercedes's orders. Beautify yourself while you can, because we're leaving ASAP."

"Fine," he grumbles. "Just… please, stop making sound."

Artie salutes Kurt, winks at Blaine, and slides off the way he came.

"Hey," Blaine says, gently bumping Kurt with his shoulder. "How'd you sleep?"

Kurt groans and proceeds to stretch himself out in ways that open many paths to many thoughts that Blaine probably should be avoiding if he doesn't want to screw Kurt—screw with Kurt—cause Kurt to think things that aren't true about their relationship. "Considering I had a giant rock digging into my back," he says, his voice low and scratchy from sleep, "not bad. Solid seven out of ten."

"Sorry about that," Blaine says sheepishly. "I didn't mean to fall asleep in *exactly* that position. I'm pretty sure I intended to shift all the way to the ground at some point."

"Oh, don't fret on my account. I'm guilty of the same thing," Kurt says easily.

"I guess we can both be a little thoughtless sometimes," Blaine says with a self-deprecating smile.

"Blaine… listen," Kurt says. "I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to push you…"

"No," Blaine says. "*I'm* sorry. You were right. There's no reason I shouldn't be happy to be alive…"
to be here, with you." He reaches out and rests his hand on top of Kurt's, astounded at how soft it is.

"There's no reason you shouldn't be sad, either," Kurt says. "You've lost so much…"

"But I didn't lose everything. I think… I think I should concentrate on that," Blaine says. "For now, I think I should concentrate on what I have. On what I can do. And what I can do," he continues, subconsciously moving his hand to rest on Kurt's shoulder, "is teach you Firebending, and try to get better."

Kurt smiles, and it warms his soul. "I'm glad you're feeling better," he says, standing up and helping Blaine do the same. "We should probably get ready. Mercedes is not known for her tolerant tardy policy. She is not above making one or both of us run after the carriage to catch up."

On pure, wild whim, he reaches out and pulls Kurt into a hug. "I really care about you, Kurt. You know that, right? I don't… I don't want to screw up what we have." He lets it hang there, hoping the tacit confession is enough. He isn't brave enough to say any more than that.

_**Kurt deserves someone brave.**_

The Avatar is stunned, at first, but he soon returns the hug. "You won't," he says, somewhat cryptically. "And me too. I mean… I care about you. So much."

Something in his chest wiggles at that, starts to…

Wait, no, that's something on his chest. And it's still wiggling.

Blaine breaks free of the hug and, in what he likes to think is a very masculine display of utter panic, pulls open his robe and frantically tries to beat out the squirming whatever that nests within. After a few moments of flailing, a disgruntled-looking squirrelmunk falls out and scurries off into the underbrush, tittering grumpily at him the whole way.

The ex-Prince just stands there for a few moments, attempting to catch his breath and recompose himself. Kurt is looking at him with no small amount of amusement, his face red with barely-contained laughter just begging to bubble over the wall.

"Don't laugh," Blaine says, offended. "That was… it was… there was a thing sleeping in my clothes!" he exclaims.

Kurt is no less amused than before. If anything, Blaine's indignation just makes it harder not to laugh. "And so the young Prince gets his first taste of the Great Outdoors," he narrates, before smiling and turning towards the pond to begin his morning routine. "Get used to it. Because the way things are going, the Great Outdoors will probably be your home for a while."

Blaine has no idea whether or not that was meant to be comforting.

But it definitely wasn't.

Later that morning, as the Prince is off being rubbed down by Finn (and how ridiculously unfair is it that Finn gets to touch him more than Kurt? What is with you, the Universe?), Kurt calls a pow-wow with his main lady and the captain of the sneak squad. The topic of discussion: _Operation Blainewatch._

"Blaine goes nowhere alone," Kurt says simply. "Ever."
Artie quirks an eyebrow at him. "O...kay, Mother Superior."

"Far be it from me to dig out from under you," Mercedes says, "but is there any particular reason you're going all nanny on him all of a sudden?"

Kurt looks appalled. "What, praytell, is wrong with me wanting to protect a very dear, very injured friend from possible threats? What if he is attacked by more assassins? Or gets into a tangle with the local wildlife? Or stumbles on a stray tree root and trips and falls and stabs himself on a rock and bleeds to death?"

Artie is gobsmacked. "I want so badly to make fun of that, but really, there's nowhere to go. I can't possibly make that sound any worse than you just did."

Mercedes puts a hand on his shoulder. "Sweetie... that's a little much. What's wrong? What happened?"

Kurt sighs. "Look, it's just... we already know that Blaine is hurt. The Spirits told me that assassins are coming after him, he's completely inexperienced in the ways of the world, and worst of all, he can't even Firebend."

Mercedes is shocked. "Say what?"

Timebending. Why has he not invented Timebending yet? "...annnnnd I'm pretty sure that's something he would have wanted to tell you himself, so when he gets around to announcing it, try to act surprised?"

Mercedes puts a hand to her chest and adopts a look of utter shock.

Artie's eyes roll back into his skull and he flops over.

"...we'll work on it later." Kurt deadpans.

"I don't get it," Mercedes says. "How do you just lose your bending?"

"It's a Firebender thing," Kurt says.

"So... it's like Firebender E.D.?" Artie says, sitting back up. "Because I hear they have medicine for that now."

Patience thoroughly depleted, Kurt jams a finger at the crippled cretin. "You! No more talking. Your privileges have been revoked for the next 5 minutes."

Artie obediently zips his lips and props his head on his hands to listen to the rest of Kurt's orders.

"Anyway," Kurt grinds out. "I just thought it would be a good idea to make sure Blaine is always being watched out for. He already almost died once, and I don't think I can handle that happening again," he finishes, with a slight shudder.

Mercedes looks at him carefully. "Honey... don't take this the wrong way, but what is this really about?"

The Avatar breathes out through his nose in an effort to calm himself. "This is nothing more than it appears to be. I am concerned for a friend, and I am acting on that concern. All I am asking of you, my friends, is to help me maintain a secret conspiracy to keep watchful eyes on him at all times and to ensure that he doesn't actually know that he is being monitored. You know, so he doesn't feel..."
uncomfortable," Kurt finishes.

Artie sits in awe. "Again, I could not have put that any worse."

"I said no talking!" Kurt whispers intensely, and the paralyzed boy holds his hands up in surrender.

"Kurt, baby, I really don't think this is a good idea and I definitely don't think it needs to be a secret," Mercedes says.

"Well… it is. And it is. Please, I'm asking for your help. Don't make me play the Avatar Card," Kurt pleads.

The female Earthbender emits heaves a sigh heavier than a ten ton boulder. "Fine. But I when this blows up in everybody's face, I reserve 'I told you so' rights. Deal?"

"Deal," Kurt says, putting a fist in his palm and bowing. He then turns to Artie. "What about you? Can I count on your cooperation?"

Artie flashes him a thumbs up sign.

"And you even remembered not to talk!" Kurt says with a bright smile. "I'm impressed. Your newfound willingness to follow directions is both noted and appreciated, you wonderful little convicted felon!" he finishes, ruffling Artie's hair.

With that, he happily saunters off. "I'll handle telling Finn myself. We can leave as soon as I'm done. Thank you guys so much!" he calls back without looking.

Which is why he completely misses the 'cracker, you crazy' look shared between the Earth Kingdom natives as he goes.

"Is this… like… awkward for you, or anything?" Finn asks as he works on healing Blaine's back.

The Fire National rubs his naked arms to try and generate some heat in the comparatively cold dawn air. "No. Why do you ask?" he replies.

"No reason!" Finn responds, sounding overly cheerful. "It's just… you know… I do have to kind of put my hands on you, like, all the time, and I just wanted to make sure…" He trails off.

"Make sure… what?" Blaine prods gently.

"Well, I just… you know… I don't want you to, like, think the wrong things. Like, just because I have to touch your boobs, that doesn't mean—"

"Okay, what?" Blaine exclaims, turning around to see a rather red-faced Finn making a face like he's guiltily holding in gas.

Finn opens his mouth to speak, but fortunately for Blaine, Kurt fulfills his position as the Avatar and saves the freaking day by choosing that moment to prance in. "Hello, boys," he says brightly. "I trust all is going well?"

"Of… course," Blaine says easily.

"Yep!" Finn agrees. "Definitely absolutely nothing awkward whatsoever happening over here, where we are. Nope!"
Kurt tilts his head to the side as the smile drops from his eyes, but strangely, not from his lips. "Fantastic," he says. "Are you just about finished?"

Finn nods. "Yup. All done for now."

"Great!" Kurt says with a clap, before walking past them and bodily dragging Finn along with him. "Let's have a bro-chat." He looks at Blaine as he leaves, giving him a benevolent smile. "You are cleared to enter the carriage. I'll be with you in just a moment." With that, he continues to drag the slightly baffled Finn off into the forest.

Blaine is just slightly weirded out by the scene, but he's been weirded out quite a bit lately, so he figures it's just par for the course right now. Picking himself up off the ground, he walks over towards the carriage, where Mercedes is finishing Earthbending the thing out of the hole she made to hide it last night.

"Well, good morning to you," Mercedes says. "Sleep well?"

"Yes, ma'am," he says. "I slept very well."

"I see you finally got all that gunk out of your hair," she says, and it is then that Blaine realizes he hasn't had a chance to shave or style his hair in days.

"Oh my gosh," he says, running his hand over his chin and finding it all... stubby. His short, curly hair is untamed and slightly manic on top of his head, basking in its newfound freedom. "I must look like such a bum," he moans.

Artie slides up beside Mercedes. "You can borrow my razor if you want," he says.

"Actually," Blaine admits sheepishly, "I don't... really know how to use a razor."

"How do you shave, then?" Mercedes asks.

The ex-Prince sighs. "Firebending trick. With practice, you can make just enough heat to burn the hair off. Unfortunately..." He looks off. "Well, I suppose it's going to come out sooner or later. I... can't Firebend right now."

Mercedes puts a hand to her chest and adopts a look of utter shock.

Artie's eyes roll back into his skull and he flops over.

Blaine's eyes go wide. "Is he okay?"

"Fine," Mercedes says through her teeth. "I'm not worried about him. I'm worried about you. What happened to your bending?" she asks.

Blaine turns away (and thus misses Mercedes grinding her foot along the ground and forcing Artie to sit up again). He starts rubbing the back of his neck through the scarf, the scar itching ever so slightly. "It just... left," he says. "It happens to Firebenders who lose their will, or their driving force."

"You lost your drive?" Artie asks seriously. "Damn, dude."

"How do you get it back?" Mercedes asks.

"I just have to find a new goal to strive for, something that can really push me forward again," he says.
"So… what do you want? Have you thought about it?" Mercedes pushes gently.

"Long-term, I’m… having a little trouble," Blaine admits. "But I have spent the morning thinking about a short-term goal. One that might help all of us, actually," he says with a small smile. "I'll tell you about it when Kurt gets back."

"I'm glad you're thinking," Mercedes says. "I've been trying to put that habit in a few people's heads for as long as I've known them. Never seems to stick," she continues, opening the carriage door. "Want some help getting in?"

"No, thank you," Blaine says. "I think I can tackle it myself this morning." With a slightly embarrassing amount of effort, the ex-Prince takes the few steps to the coach and steps inside. "I never thought I could be so proud of my ability to use a staircase," he says with a slight blush.

"Pffft," Artie scoffs. "Stairs are for squares. Check me out," he says with a grin. He slides off a short distance away from the carriage, turning so that he is lined up with driver's seat. Taking a moment to stretch, he then slides forward, picking up speed gradually until he gets about ten feet away from the carriage, where he makes a 'raise the roof' motion with his hands. A piston of earth springs up from beneath him and launches him in a perfect arc through the air, where he lands in the driver's seat and slides into position.

Blaine raises his eyebrows and gives the boy a round of applause through the carriage window. "Impressive," he says.

"Just one of my many tricks," Artie says with a grin, before reaching down and pulling on his fake beard and straw hat.

At this point, Blaine picks up the distant voice of Finn. "…kay, okay!" he says. "I'm onboard, dude, I promise! Just chill!"

With that, the stepbrothers step into view, Finn heading to the driver's seat with Artie, stopping to give Drizzle the Dragon Moose an apple and a pat on the nose.

Kurt gracefully leaps into the carriage beside Blaine.

"What did you and Finn talk about?" he asks.

"Oh, nothing," Kurt says, waving him off. "Just… you know, Water Tribe stuff. Moonbeams, fishing stories, seal blubber, nothing you would be interested in."

Mercedes steps into the carriage and closes the door. "Blaine has an idea he'd like to share with us," she says, moving to sit on her customary side of the coach.

"Oh?" Kurt says, with a curious quirk of an eyebrow. "Do tell!"

Blaine has a seat himself, the momentary awkwardness forgotten in favor of a chance to actually contribute to the group. "Well… this is element number three for you, right? Air is next in the cycle, so you need to get to an Air Temple."

Kurt nods. "Indeed we do."

"Well," Blaine says. "The closest one is the Western Temple. To get to it, you guys would have to travel by ship. So basically, you need both safe passage out of the Fire Nation, and a ship to take you to the temple."
"You know where we can get those?" Mercedes asks, only slightly skeptical.

"I know who we can get them from," Blaine nods. "Admiral Kaze Keros, Council Member, and head of the Fire Nation Navy."

Kurt nods primly, his face betraying nothing. "What makes you so sure he will help us?"

"Keros and my father were good friends," Blaine says. "I used to sit and spy on council meetings, and they always seemed to have a good rapport. He can actually solve both our problems," he continues, the beginnings of a smile creeping up on his face. "I know the Council in general practically passes out when Sue glares at them, but Keros is a military man. He'll be willing to stand up to Sue, especially once he finds out that I'm alive. All we have to do is get to him."

"Where is he?" Kurt asks.

"Well," Blaine says nervously. "I'm not exactly up-to-date on my Fire Nation geography, but I know he lives in Sho Fa. It's to the east of the capital."

"We're already heading east, actually," Mercedes says, a smile slowly creeping up on her face. "So we wouldn't even need to backtrack to get to him."

"I must admit, I like where this is going," Kurt says. "It would be nice to have a friend in a high place, for once."

"It's a pretty major village," Blaine adds. "We can probably just follow the signs along the roads and get there with no problems."

"Never, ever say that, sweetie," Mercedes admonishes him gently. "We've had to learn pretty quick that saying something will be 'no problem' is considered a challenge by the problems of the world."

"And boy, do they love a challenge," Kurt sighs tiredly.


"Still," Mercedes says. "Right now, I don't see anything wrong with that plan. Kurt?"

The Avatar assesses Blaine carefully. "Are you sure we can trust him?"

Blaine nods.

An honest smile graces Kurt's face, and Blaine is tickled pink. "Well, then, it's settled!" He opens the window. "Artie!" he says. "We're heading for Sho Fa. Follow the signs."

"Got it!" the Earthbender replies.

Kurt turns around and sighs, relaxing his posture slightly. "I'm so happy to have a concrete destination for a change. It's refreshing to be heading towards something nice, as opposed to away from something horrible."

The ex-Prince smiles, more than a little soothed by the fact that he is finally doing something helpful. "I know what you mean. Believe me," he says. "If there is anyone on the Council we can trust, it's Keros."

Chief Attendant to the Fire Lord, Becky Jackson, enters the temporary Throne Tent with an air of utmost purpose. "Fire Lord Sue!" she says. "Councilor Keros is here to see you."
"Ah!" she says with a grin. "Send him in."

The tall, somewhat spindly man enters the tent, looking equal parts passive and annoyed. "Fire Lord," he says, giving her a slightly mocking bow.

"Oh, come now, Kerry," Sue scoffs. "Why the attitude? I thought you and me were pals," she continues. "None of this would even be possible if it wasn't for you."

"I am quite aware," Keros says evenly. "That doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Might as well," Sue says. "This fancy chair and my butt are like heartburn and fire flakes; made for each other."

"I am exceedingly glad you are so comfortable on your stolen throne," Keros deadpans. "But I am merely here to inquire as to the status of my payment."

"Oh yeah," Sue says with a snap. "Mandatory backstabber fees. I forgot you guys are unionized now. So much paperwork… ah well, just part of the job I guess. I assume you still want the same thing?"

"Yes," Keros seethes.

"Well, I'm pretty much done with it, so I suppose it's all yours," she says, waving him off. "As long as everything is going according to plan. Was the Anti-Quarantine rerouted like I asked?"

"Yes," Keros says. "None of the survivors reached the mainland. They are being deposited on the island, as you specified."

"I love a man who can follow directions," Sue says. "And the ships we requested?"

"Will be ready in time for your arrival with your… minions," he sighs.

"Useful, useful, useful!" Sue says, almost admiringly. "Such a fantastic tool. An incredible tool," she continues. "You know what, Admiral, you might just be the biggest, most profoundly toolish tool I have ever encountered in my life."

"Spare me your compliments," Keros grumbles. "The payment?"

"I'll have it sent to your house," she says casually. "It'll be the pride of your collection."

"Splendid," the man says evenly, turning around to walk from the tent. He stops at the exit, turning only his head to look back at Sue. "Are you certain this will work?"

"Well, it's a little late to be asking me that now, don't ya think?" Sue says conspiratorially. "But for the record—yes. Agni as my witness, the sickness will be eradicated on Fire Nation soil, and it will never reach the mainland."

"Good," Keros seethes. "Then maybe all of this death and destruction will be worth something after all." He starts to leave, but can't part without a few final words. "You do understand that this is the only reason I am helping you, right? I am simply concerned for the safety of this country."

Sue winks at him. "Whatever keeps you warm at night, Kerry-O. Now, if you'll excuse me, it's about time for me to limber up. Me and mah Chi-Ryus have some complex choreography to practice."

Without another word, Keros stalks out of the chamber as quickly as he can without seeming
undignified. The curtain doors are left flapping in his wake, the only sound in the otherwise silent room...

...other than the popping of Sue's joints as she stretches.

A/N: Aaaannnd we're off! Good to see the Prince's luck is holding steady at 'soul-crushingly rotten.' :P Anyway, for your reading and anticipatory pleasure, I am including here a (tentative!) outline of the remaining chapters in Act 2.

Bonding Sessions: The Lioness
Bonding Sessions: The Smooth Criminal – Both of these, outside of the bonding, will basically be montages to help us fast-forward through Blaine's recovery and travel time. :P
Blame it on the Alcohol
Avatar Therapy
The Performer

This will lead us to the multi-part, ridiculous centerpiece of Act 2…

Raise Your Glass

And finally, the obligatory action finale (because I love my action scenes)…

Trainwreck Extravaganza

Do please review and/or comment if you have any thoughts. Likes, dislikes, speculation, questions, I appreciate them all. ;)

Day 1

After that, the days begin to pass faster as Blaine heals and establishes a routine. Slowly but surely, he begins to settle into place with this strange group of wanderers. Day One covers his 'official' introductions, in between the multitudes of Z's he finds himself catching. The members of his little gang are as follows.

Finn 'Healing Hands' Hudson of the Northern Water Tribe. Healer, waterbender, extremely tall person. Cannot dance at all. Seriously, do not ever ask him to dance. No, seriously. Step-brother to Kurt, their parents are super in-love and kind of gross about it.

Artie Abrams, aka 'Smooth Criminal,' of the Earth Kingdom City of Ba Sing Se, "Lower Ring represent!" Infamous thief, currently boasting the 3rd highest bounty among living Earth Kingdom
criminals, 5th highest in Earth Kingdom history. Refuses to share the amount of said bounty for fear that Blaine will 'turn him in to finance a small war.'

Mercedes 'Lion Lady' Jones, of the Earth Kingdom Village of Kee Lai. Huntress, chef, warrior, and general Head Bitch in Charge. Prevents the group from starving, teaches Kurt Earthbending, which she herself learned from her grandmother, an acknowledged Master.

And of course…

Kurt Hummel, of the Southern Water Tribe, who moved to the North Pole for reasons undisclosed. Waterbender, earthbender, firebender, singer, dancer, determined advocate of fashion, and… oh yeah, Avatar.

It's quite an assortment, to say the least. He feels more than a little honored to be traveling among them.

And more than a little intimidated.

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Day 2

Mercedes and Kurt are both excellent conversation partners. Blaine is less so, but only because he continues to fall asleep at regular intervals as his body pieces itself back together. His naps are much less numerous and less lengthy than the day before, though, so it's a clear improvement.

When he is awake, Blaine often stares out the window in silent awe of the country he's never really had the chance to see. It is churning ocean of rolling hills and high, rocky flats, nestled between seemingly endless mountains. But for every mountain, there are just as many verdant meadows painted with streams and rivers, just as many gorgeous valleys rich with flora and fauna and grass so green that it practically paints itself on the back of his eyes. Flowers in every color burst out of soil and cracks and crags indiscriminately, as if the earth out there is so full of life that it simply cannot be contained. Water is more than abundant—it flows from springs, melts off the mountains, runs in rivers and streams and creeks and underground lakes. His history tutor once said that Fire Nation had so many waterfalls that no one even really bothered to name them after a while, unless they were something truly special. Even the seemingly rocky and barren places can hide unexpected beauty in the form of a hot spring or hidden glen.

It's beautiful. Unpredictable and wild and full of life.

"I have to admit," Kurt says softly as he joins him at the window, "this is not really what I expected from a country of Fire. I was thinking more… dry. Barren. Dusty. This place has more water than a lot of the Earth Kingdom."

"You're thinking of Fire's immediate aftermath," Blaine says gently. "And it's true. Fire can ravage landscape and leave it charred and lifeless. I'm sure it wouldn't be too hard to find a place like that around here, but that isn't all that Fire does. Did you know that volcanic soil is among the most fertile in the entire world? The Fire Nation has just as many rare flowers and plants as the Earth Kingdom, at barely even a fourth of its size. Fire consumes, but it also recycles and transforms. Fire is life."

"Well, thank you for that lesson, Guru Blaine," Kurt says, poking him in the ribs.

"Hey," Blaine says. "I'm allowed to be a fan of my Nation. I'm sure you have tons of wonderful things to say about the Water Tribes."
The look in Kurt's eyes is misty and distant. "Less than you might think," he whispers, "but it certainly wasn't all bad." He brightens up again before Blaine has a chance to question him. "Either way, I have to admire the view you've got around here. This place isn't half bad. Even if it is hot, and sticky, and impossible to navigate, and the food does its level best to scorch your tongue off."

"It's absolutely amazing, and…" he trails off. "It's the first time I've really got to see it and appreciate it. The view from the Palace is nice, but… it's nothing like this," he says, gesturing to the explosion of life just outside their window.

Kurt just stands beside him and silently admires the view. It isn't until he sits back down from simple exhaustion that he realizes he misspoke.

*It isn't my Nation anymore…*

Evening brings another healing session, followed by a little more training. Kurt progresses quickly, which, Blaine supposes, is to be expected from the Avatar. He's only done this like a thousand times before, after all, so at this point, mastering the elements is almost like recalling long-lost memories as opposed to gaining new knowledge. Sure, he had a bit of a slow start, but so does a boulder on a downhill slope. Neither of them stays slow for long, and now it seems that neither will be stopped.

It's amazing what he can do in such a short period of time.

Really.

Blaine's not jealous.

He's *not*.

And if he is *(which he most certainly is not!)*, he is simply jealous of Kurt's ability to raise his arms above his shoulders and climb hills without gasping for air like a half-drowned turtleduck. His inner monkey itches to take to the trees, to scratch his belly with bark as he shimmies up to the forest canopy and takes in the view from above. He wants to climb things, dang it! He *likes* being up high.

And it has *nothing* to do with being short!

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**Day 3**

The third day since the Riots marks a noteworthy first, at least in Blaine's mind.

Namely, Finn's first misguided attempt to cockblock him.

It's not *Blaine's* fault that Kurt looks… the way he does when he first wakes up.

That way being best described as *thoroughly debauched*. Hair askew in every direction, clothes rumpled and half open, voice coming from someplace deep and rough and *raw* that Blaine didn't even know existed in the willowy countertenor. It's a complete shock to his system—tantamount to waking up to find the Sun dressed in women's underthings or seeing a mountain range painted with hot pink stripes. And that's all there is to it; a simple reaction of surprise! But of course, when Finn catches him staring gape-mouthed and wide-eyed at this side of Kurt he has never seen, he immediately assumes the worst and proceeds to waylay him with all the subtlety of an overprotective mother buffalobear.
"Hey!" he says, overly cheerful and smiling in a way that is probably bad for his teeth. "Blaine, buddy, what's up? How you feelin'? Ready to get all healed up?" At this, Finn wraps one of his massive arms around Blaine and squeezes and OW. SQUISHY GUTS. HIS SPLEEN IS IN HIS LIVER. "Gee, you look kind of pained there, buddy, we should probably get started right away."

With that, Blaine is bodily guided out of the cave they're bunking in and away from Kurt for his healing session.

And while he appreciates the sentiment, and he understands where Finn is coming from… as soon as he gets his bending back, Finn's eyebrows are toast.

Seriously, that shit hurts. He's pretty sure at least two of his internal organs are permanently fused now. He isn't even sure what a spliver does, all he knows is that he has one and he doesn't like it.

Day 3 is also largely uneventful, but Blaine is awake enough through this portion of the trip to actually contribute to the rapport. His primary contribution comes in the form of Fire Nation trivia, which, at Finn's insistence, he delivers with the window open so everyone can hear…

"…that we are the number one exporter of metalwork, fireworks, and exotic flowers?"

"…six of the world's ten most poisonous animals!"

"…number one importer of coal and, oddly enough, aloe vera…

"…invented in 236 AGC by Xiao Feng, when his wife attacked him with a kukri and tried to cut off his…"

"…customary top knot style, which fell out of fashion when my line came into power because… well, you can see my hair, right?"

Interesting stuff, really, but there is only so much he can think of off the top of his head.

Fortunately, his four new friends are more than willing to regale him with tales of their Earth Kingdom adventures. Though he expects some of the stories might be the tiniest bit exaggerated, the narrative threads weave together into the following revelations…

Finn is so bad at dancing that people have actually tried to kill him for it. He also once got lost in the wilderness and wound up hungry enough to eat a sourberry bush. Not just the berries—the entire bush.

Artie is fast enough with his hands to snatch a silver piece from your open palm and replace it with a bronze one before you have a chance to close it. He also possesses a strange affinity for making women want to murder him. The most recent one was only stopped from taking off his head by the fact that the sword she reached for happened to be a wooden training katana.

Never, ever try to keep Kurt from his tea. To do so is to invite your own demise. Another fantastic way to invite a messy, painful beating is to fight a Waterbending Avatar, on the night of a full moon, during a torrential downpour. Waterbenders draw power from the moon, and a full moon gives them a tremendous boost. It was Kurt vs. no less than fifty well-armed raiders. The raiders never stood a chance.

Mercedes once fought off a group of corrupt guards with a platypus bear. The bear wasn't trained or anything—she more or less picked it up and used it as a flail. It was a little miffed afterwards, but it got over it. She also once hid a group of refugees from a band of slavers by bending an entire
hotel underground. She even put it back afterwards, and it was… well, mostly intact.

He knows they aren't trying to make him feel inadequate. The stories really are amazing, and they make the time pass ridiculously quickly. It's really only in the moments afterwards, where the four of them are outside the cart discussing where to camp/how to hide the carriage for the night that he realizes he has absolutely no amazing deeds to contribute. No great stories of his own heroism, no magnificent attributes he can boast besides being a very advanced firebender for his age which… well, fat lot of good that does him now.

Still, that's no reason to get upset. They're just being nice. Sharing and caring is what friendship is all about, and that is what he keeps telling himself as he continues Kurt's firebending lessons. It's what keeps the small, pleased smile on his face every Kurt successfully bends the element that used to be his.

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**Day 4**

The fourth day is when things start to get a little…

Well, he doesn't want to say *exciting*, because exciting sounds like a positive descriptor and getting robbed should never be described in positive terms.

But to be honest, they aren't exactly *robbed*, per se. Not from lack of effort on the robbers' parts, by any means. Blaine has to give them credit—they are real go-getters, swinging in from the trees, knives at the ready, masks in place, screaming and hollering to throw everyone off guard. Within seconds, two of them have Artie and Finn at knifepoint, while the other two storm the coach, brandishing bags and demanding valuables. He doesn't have too much experience with bandits, but these guys seem to really have their stuff together.

It's just… they make a few crucial errors.

Well, several errors, really.

Okay, it's a nonstop clusterfuck from start to finish, but it isn't really their fault.

There is no way for them to know who they are dealing with.

The robber holding Finn makes the crucial mistake of standing close to him when he is flustered. The tall boy loses his balance in an attempt to vacate his seat on command. There is some flailing, some twisting, a bit of windmill-arms, and the next thing anyone knows, the robber is on the ground and Finn is sitting on top of him.

The one holding Artie at knifepoint makes the critical error of looking away to witness this epic flail. It isn't more than a second, but by the time he looks back, he's holding a *riding crop* to Artie's throat, and his knife is securely in the earthbender's grasp. Artie twirls the blade in his nimble fingers with the kind of smirk a cobra-cat might wear just before it takes a bite of you.

The man on the inside make an assumption all-too-common among the ignorant—they take one look at Mercedes and immediately assume she is the most vulnerable in the group. Jerk A points a knife at her face, while Jerk B demands shinies from Kurt and Blaine. An "oh, *dragonshit!*" from one of the outside men distracts Jerk A long enough for Mercedes to put two fingers on his knife blade. When he looks back, he immediately tries to pull the blade away.

It doesn't move.
He angrily tries to push it forward.

Nope. No sell.

This pattern continues for a while. Some people just do not take hints.

Jerk B is the final obstacle, and Kurt wastes no time in dispatching him. He doesn't even have his weapon drawn, so it takes less than a second for Kurt to pop open his waterskin and liquid-lash him sideways. The bright red mark on his face stands out clear as day as the blow almost sends him tumbling into Blaine, who nimbly dodges at the last second (ha! Still got it). He recovers quickly, and goes for the sword on his belt. Kurt, on the other hand, goes for the belt itself. The water whip’s snap is nearly loud enough to echo as a single targeted strike splits the belt at the buckle and leaves his pants at the mercy of gravity (and Blaine can tell you from personal experience that gravity is not merciful).

So that is over relatively quickly. In the end, Kurt agrees to let the men flee with their lives, but not without a little compensation for lost travel time. All their weapons and a few select items of clothing that catch the Avatar's eye are summarily confiscated.

So really, it was kind of like they were reverse-robbed. Which is totally different from being robbed and not at all like robbing someone (since the trouble basically came to them). So… yeah, now that he thinks about it, exciting works just fine.

It still would've been nice to do something other than watch.

It rains that night. On Mercedes's instruction, Kurt bends two large slabs of solid rock up out of the ground and forms them into a tent. He then raises the ground beneath them just slightly, so that the water flows away from them. It's interesting to watch him earthbend—sure, he's seen Mercedes do it a few times but it just looks… different when Kurt does it. Earthbending movements are firmly-rooted and strong, carrying tremendous force. It's as if Kurt's natural flow suddenly freezes, turning him from a rushing river to an implacable glacier in a split second. It's breathtaking.

All four elements in one person… what an amazing gift.

Of course, it also comes with the responsibility of preserving balance and/or saving the world, so that's something to take into account.

That night, in the midst of the pouring rain, Blaine finds a brief moment in the sun. "Hey, guys," he says. "Want to hear a story?"

Four sets of eyes snap to him, and four bodies deposit themselves near the small fire in the middle of the earth-tent.

"Oooh, I love stories," Finn says with a grin.

Artie lies on his stomach, propping his head up on his arms. "Me too! Does it have lots of action?"

"Cool fight scenes?" Finn adds.

"Blood and guts?" Artie continues.

Mercedes rolls her eyes. "Why is it always about violence with you two? Matters of the heart are much more compelling than any old war story."
Kurt simply smiles at Blaine. "Well, I can appreciate both, but for me, the magic of the story is in the telling."

Blaine, whether he wants to admit it or not, basks in their attention like he's getting a tan from their bright shining faces. "This story has a little bit of everything," he says with a conspiratorial grin. "It's about love, the obstacles it faces, and the incredible challenges we conquer in its name. And just for Kurt... I'll be sure to do justice to the telling."

And so Blaine tells them the story of Susano and Kushi, destined lovers who were visited by tragedy when their village was besieged by the evil eight-headed dragon, Orochi. He worries, at first, that he might be overdoing things, but the more he tells the story, the more into it he gets. He gives each character a unique voice, gets up and acts out entire scenes, makes shadow puppets with his arms to represent Orochi's heads... he roars, dances, and fights with shadows, and his new friends positively eat it up. Kurt seems especially enthralled, and Blaine hams it up just a little more every time he notices Kurt's eyes upon him.

"...and made its tail into a sword, said to be matchless among blades. And then he and Kushi linked hands and returned to their village, to live out the rest of their lives in peace, and happiness," he finishes.

They applaud, and Blaine is in the stratosphere, orbiting the earth and chatting with the stars.

"That is so sweet," Mercedes sighs. "I can only hope I meet somebody willing to chop off eight heads to get with me."

"Pffft," Finn scoffs. "I think if Orochi took you, most of the heads would be gone already by the time the guy got there."

Artie gives Blaine an approving smile. "I have to say... getting the dragon drunk before beating its ass? I like Susano's style. Even if his name is one letter away from being Susan..."

"Tch, so what?" Mercedes says. "Your name is one letter away from being 'Fartie,' and you don't hear us saying anything."

This statement is apparently the puzzle piece that completes Finn's life, or something similar, judging by his reaction. "HOLY CRAP!" he says. "You're right, it is! That's awesome."

Artie crosses his arms and pouts. "...was just sayin'..."

Kurt gives him another miniature round of clapping as Blaine sits back down beside him. "That was quite the tale you spun," he says. "I must admit, I was enraptured. You were very... animated. It's such a contrast from how you normally behave... I was slightly shocked. Where did that come from?"

The ex-Prince shrugs, somewhat bashfully. "That was one of my mother's stories. They were a highlight of my day, once upon a time. I think I was the only child in the Fire Nation who actually went to bed early some nights, just because I wanted to hear the rest of an adventure."

"Did she tell them the same way?" Kurt asks gently.

"She might have been a little more reserved about it. They were supposed to be bedtime stories, after all. Not that it stopped me from acting them out in my room for hours after she'd left," he admits. "That was usually what tired me out and helped me sleep."

Kurt giggles. "I can just imagine a tiny whirlwind of bouncing curls springing around a room,
giving a performance like that when no one is even watching. So much practice," he teases, "no wonder you're so good."

"Well," Blaine says, "as with any performance, audience participation is a big part the action. And for an audience, I'd say you were pretty good."

"I strive for excellence in all areas of my life," Kurt sniffs haughtily. "And if you think I'm a good audience member, just wait until you see what I can do on stage," he says with a wink.

That night, he dreams of his mother's voice gently narrating the entire world. He could hear her voice always, though she never spoke in words. Rather, her sounds turned to actions, unfolded in scenes and characters from every part of the Four Nations.

He awakens just as she begins a story about a boy who looks an awful lot like him…

Day 5

The fifth day finds him feeling somewhat strong for the first time in a while. After the customary morning healing, he finds his itchy, twitchy limbs are guiding him towards a nearby tree. The call of the climb beckons him upwards, and today, he feels like maybe, maybe he can answer.

So he starts climbing. It's a little rough, and his arms quickly start to ache, but it's so refreshingly familiar that the nostalgia factor overwhelms the pain. The forest's siren song is intoxicating, the scratching of the bark as he climbs sounding almost like whispers…

"What is he doing?" Kurt whispers frantically.

Mercedes pokes her head out from behind a tree, only to have Kurt jerk her back in.

"Don't let him see you!" he says.

The Earthbender rolls her eyes, a small part of her wondering if you can pull a muscle from doing that too much. Maybe one day those poor, tired old orbs'll just pop out of her head and roll away. "Well," she says conspiratorially. "It looks like he's climbing a tree."

"I know that!" Kurt says. "The question was rhetorical. What I mean is—why is he doing that? He's going to fall and die!"

"You're overreacting," Mercedes says.

"No," Kurt replies. "You're overreacting. As of right now."

The Earthbender gives him a sidelong look, only for him to respond by shoving out of cover and towards monkey boy.

"Stop him!" Kurt whispers intently. "Distract him! Tell a story, sing a song, take him for a jog, I don't care, just get him out of that tree!"

"Why don't you do it?" Mercedes asks with just the teensiest bit of frustration.

"Because…" Kurt stammers. "Because I don't want to ruin his fun. You're much better at that sort of thing. You ruin fun all the time!" He finishes with a smile.
Mercedes is not amused. But the sassy lady loves her boo, even when he's gone all psycho mother hen on her, so in the end, she caves and saunters up to the tree. "Blaine, sweetie!" she calls…

"…how would you like to come down here and help me catch breakfast?" Mercedes calls.

"I'd love to!" Blaine calls down, overjoyed to finally get a chance to be useful. "Just let me climb do—"

He doesn't get to finish, as a sizeable column of stone impacts his bottom at this point, gently knocking him off the tree and carrying him down to the ground below. "No need to climb," Mercedes smiles, "I installed an elevator for ya." She lends him a hand to help him stand.

"Well," Blaine says, accepting the assistance, "if that isn't the mark of a good hostess, I don't know what is."

They walk through the forest in silence, for the most part. Blaine isn't entirely sure why she has brought him along—he isn't really going to be much use on a hunt, and although he would love the opportunity to get to know the strong, commanding Earth Kingdom woman, he's pretty sure the general idea of hunting is to be silent so as not to scare away the prey.

"You can talk if you want, honey," Mercedes says. "I don't mind. I'm not feeling anything yet, so just keep it low, and I'll tell you when to stop, okay?"

"Oh," Blaine says. "Okay. Ummm… what do you mean 'feel'?"

Mercedes pauses in her purposeful stride to raise her bare feet and wiggle her toes. "Earthbending has a lot of use besides just shoving rocks around. I can feel vibrations in the Earth, tell you when something is near, how big it is, whether it's coming or going…"

"That's amazing," the ex-Prince says.

"Oh, that's nothing. I've had to work on listening to the earth for a while to get where I am, but some people are so good, they can practically use the earth to see. 360 degrees, all around 'em, anything that touches the ground, they know all about it. Badgermoles are all completely blind, and that's how they 'see.' And since the original earthbenders learned from badgermoles…"

"…then you should be able to do it, too," Blaine finishes. "Impressive." He takes a look around the forest and wonders what it might be like to try and 'see' with Firebending. Could he feel the heat in the air? Would he be blind to cold things? Or maybe he'd only be able to see things that are a different temperature than their surroundings? Perhaps there is a blind firebender somewhere who can tell him.

He starts to open his mouth again, but Mercedes raises a hand to shush him. Suddenly, her steps go from firm and rooted to light and feather-soft, gently lifting from the ground and just as gently stepping down, barely a sound to be made. Blaine does his level best to follow her example, and it takes a couple of snapped twigs before he realizes the smart thing to do is simply to follow in her footsteps—literally. Carefully stepping in the exact pattern as Mercedes, Blaine is able to follow her without making a sound.

They crest over a hill, and Blaine sees it. The lithe, muscular form of a fox antelope, black horns gleaming in a narrow beam of sunlight breaking through the forest canopy. It bends its powerful neck low, dining on a small bush of thorny leaves that don't seem to bother it in the slightest. Butterflies flutter gently through the air to rest near the mighty creature, its calm, regal, majestic
presence soothing to the flighty creatures, commanding the stillness of the forest with a—

**CRASH.**

Gah. Guh. Guwuuuh, uhhh, whaaaaa… daaaaa… words. Words. He should be using words.

"You… you **killed** it!" Blaine says, pointing out the **extremely** obvious.

"Uhhhh, yeah," Mercedes says, agreeing with the obvious with a bit more self-awareness. "Most people I know like to kill things before they eat them. Seems like the least we can do," she says with the slightest air of amusement as she shuffles over to the unfortunate animal she just smashed with a rock that is roughly the size of two Blaines.

"But… but…" There is a question here, somewhere. He knows it. Something about whether or not it was **really** necessary to turn a large portion of the thing's head into something that vaguely resembles chunky pink toothpaste. "Did you **have** to…"

"What?" she says, pulling out a knife and bending over to—

AHHH. AHHH. WHAT IS SHE DOING.

"**UGH, OH GODS, AGNI HELP ME,**" Blaine whimpers, turning away to avoid the **horror** and possibly so that he doesn't vomit in front of his hostess because that would just be fucking RUDE. Not unlike **KILLING SOMEONE WITH A ROCK WHILE THEY ARE EATING.**

"Oh, come **on,**" Mercedes sighs. "It's not **that** bad. You've been eating my cooking ever since you got here."

Yes, but after today, he might well go vegetarian. "But… I've never… it's not like…" the ex-Prince stammers.

"This is how it's made," Mercedes says simply. "Believe me, there are some things in here you do **not** want to eat."

Shlick. Schlock. Shing! **OH, SWEET MERCIFUL SUNBEAMS.** He can **hear** her… frigging… **carving** the meat. The disgusting, wet **shink** of the knife slipping in and out of…

"I'm going to be sick," he says to the world at large.

He hears Mercedes sigh, and suddenly, the ground in front of him buckles into a small, perfectly placed bowl.

*Thank Agni for small mercies.*

He is sitting against a tree and concentrating all his faculties on the scaling monumental twin mountains of breathing and not passing out when she finishes.

"There we go," she says. "That should last us a few days, at least."

"Probably more," Blaine says, his voice higher and squeakier than he has heard it since he finally finished puberty, "as I will never be eating again."

Mercedes mumbles something that sounds suspiciously like it rhymes with 'llama queen,' and gets up to check on him.
"Are you okay?" she asks seriously. "I know it can be kind of hard to stomach—"

The organ in question groans and flips over. "Please don't talk about stomachs right now," he moans.

"—but it's just part of life. I had to learn to do it too, and I reacted just as bad as you," Mercedes admits.

"Why?" he asks. "Who made you learn… that?"

"Nobody made me," Mercedes says simply, sitting down next to him. "It was just something that had to be done. My village was up in the Northern Earth Kingdom, so almost all the adults were lost in the war. An entire village of war orphans… and my Grandma took 'em all in. Wouldn't let nobody hurt 'em, wouldn't let none of 'em go hungry. She and me were the only earthbenders left in town, so as soon as I was old enough, I picked myself up, marched right up to that old lady, and said 'Grandma, how can I help?'"

"Wow," Blaine says. "And how old were you?"

"Six," Mercedes says simply.

The ex-Prince is stunned. "That's incredible. So it was just you and her?"

"The older kids helped out as much as they could, but me and Grandma had to shoulder more just because we were earthbenders and we could shoulder it. I'll never forget what she told me that day. She sat me down, looked me right in the eye, said 'Mercy, child, are you sure? Caring for others is a heavy burden, and once you pick it up, you can't set it down again.' And I just said the same thing as before. 'Grandma, how can I help?' And I was Grandma's Little Helper from that day on. She needed me to help bend, I learned to bend. She needed me to help fight, I learned to fight. She needed me to help hunt, I learned to hunt. It wasn't easy, but we made it work."

"No wonder you keep everyone in line here," Blaine says. "You've been taking care of other people since you were just a kid."

"And it's a heavy burden, but I wouldn't put it down if I could," she says, giving him a gentle elbow to the side. "Somebody has to keep all y'all under control and on track."

"Well," Blaine says. "Your services are much appreciated. But… please don't be offended if I say I never want to see that again," he adds with a grimace.

"No offense taken," Mercedes says. "Now come on, let's go feed the dogs before they start eating each other."

Blaine is still looking a little peaked when they arrive back at camp, Mercedes hauling her catch in a large bag that he looks very thankful to be moving away from.

"What did you do to him?" Kurt whispers at her after taking one good look at the Fireless Prince.

Mercedes starts to roll her eyes, and then stops halfway. "No. You know what? No! I am not playing this game with you! You told me you didn't care what we did. I distracted him, I did my job, end of story. Now get out my way so I can start cooking this meat."

The Avatar's jaw reaches for the floor. "You took him hunting? You actually subjected him to… to that?" he cries, his face a veritable whirlwind of disgust and sympathy.
"I don't know *what* the big deal is," Mercedes sighs. "They're just guts! We all have them!"

"That doesn't mean anyone wants to *see* them. Oh, La. You've traumatized him. I hope you know that. He will probably never recover from this," Kurt sighs dramatically.

"You don't like the job I'm doing?" she asks with a shit-eating grin. "Then hire yourself another babysitter."

She struts off before he has a chance to reply.

The five of them eat heartily that morning, though for some reason, Blaine barely eats at all, despite Mercedes's comments on how skinny he is getting.

Finn figures he must have caught something, because he more or less spends the rest of the day groaning and occasionally throwing up.

He's just glad it's a problem with Blaine, and not the meat. He doesn't know *what* he'd do if they didn't have Mercedes to cook for them.

He'd probably wind up eating another bush.

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*Coming Up Next:* Artie comes up with a brilliant plan and invites Blaine along to help. He kind of forgets to tell Blaine about the plan in advance. Whoops. ;P Reviews and comments are always appreciated.
Day 6

He caves and shaves on the sixth day. The stubble is driving him crazy and he is pretty sure he would be arrested for vagrancy if he ever set foot back inside civilization. His curls are beyond taming at this point—they have tasted freedom and will probably attack him if he tries to put gel in them again. But his beard, or lack thereof, is something he can control and he damn well intends to.

So Artie and Finn take him to a pond and teach him how to shave. Or rather, Artie teaches him how to shave and Finn is on standby in case he accidentally nicks a major artery and needs emergency healing before he bleeds to death.

All-in-all, things go relatively smoothly (which is kind of the whole point). He only cuts himself eight times and by the end, only two of those are still bleeding. Finn works his mojo and Blaine's face is as smooth and fresh as a baby's belly.
"Not bad for a first try," Artie says, only slightly kidding. "We'll work on it."

Blaine rubs his chin, rejoicing in its ability to breathe again. "I'm just glad to have all that fuzz gone. Can you imagine the jungle on top of my head being on the rest of my face? I shudder to think of it."

"Kurt doesn't even need to shave," Finn says, a note of jealousy creeping into his voice. "He's naturally hairless. Like a seal!"

The aforementioned Kurt apparently has some sort of sixth sense regarding when people speak his name. "Seals have hair, Finn," he says, wandering into their midst.

"Oh," Finn says. "Okay… like a… manatee?"

The Avatar's jaw drops. "…you did not just call me a friggin' sea cow."

"Crap… ummm… like a whale?" Finn tries.

That is even worse. Kurt adopts a menacing look as he begins to advance upon his stepbrother.

"No, I mean… ummm… crap, what doesn't have any hair… ummm… a naked mole rat!" Finn shouts with delight.

And then it becomes a full-on chase scene.

"That's it, tree trunk. You're going down."

"No, no, Kurt, dude, I didn't mean it like that."

"Hold still, and this will hurt less."

"Come on, man, I was just—AAH! AAH! I forgot you're a Firebender now! Not fair!"

"I'll show you smooth and hairless! Today, your scalp is my bitch."

Blaine can't help but laugh as he watches Kurt chase Finn around the clearing. He's fairly sure Kurt doesn't actually intend to hurt Finn and that if he really wanted to catch him, Earthbending would probably be employed.

Artie, on the other hand, is staring at Blaine, oddly enough. His head is tilted just so, and the look in his eyes is anticipatory, almost hungry. Oh, crap. He really hopes Artie isn't falling for him, too. That would just make things awkward.

"What?" Blaine says. "Did I miss something when I was shaving?"

"Nah," Artie shakes his head, smiling. "I was just thinking… with your face all smooth like that, smiling and laughing, you look so… so…"


"…innocent," Artie finishes, which… well, okay, not exactly what he was expecting.

"Okay?" Blaine says, a little wary.

"You are just adorable," Artie continues. "Old ladies probably want to pinch your cheeks every time they see you, don't they?"
"Ummm... no?" Yes. It was kind of a problem for him in the Burning City. Some of the elderly in town don't realize their own strength. Those ladies would leave marks on him. Almost like cheek-pinching hickey, which... okay, bad line of thought. About face, backwards march.

"I thought so," the thief grins. "So, Blaine, since you're the new guy and all, I think we should get to know each other better. Maybe not right now, but... soon," he says with a wink. "I'll let you know."

He's gone in a cloud of dust before Blaine has a chance to reply, leaving him to tilt his head in confusion, as if sloshing his brain juices will stir up an answer to this strange group of people.

It's later that day when they cross the bridge over rushing whitewater rapids.

"Hey," Blaine says, sticking his head out the window. "Are there any signs nearby?"

"Saw one a little while ago that said 'Long River' and pointed this way. So... I assume this is Long River," Artie says.

"I know where we are!" Blaine says, perhaps a bit more excited than he should be.

"Long River?" Kurt asks.

"Well, yes, obviously," Blaine says with a slight flush. "What I mean is... my geography teacher had me memorize a few things about locations in the Fire Nation. The Long River is actually the second shortest major river in the country. It's only called 'Long River' because the guy who found it was named Hao Long. Anyway, there is a town up the river called Fenghuang. It's an important Fire Nation Historical Site, said to be the last place the Phoenix was seen."

"Ooooh!" Kurt says. "I know this one. Legendary shiny bird, ruler over all things feathered, the only creature in history to use fire as a rejuvenator?"

The Fireless Prince considers this. "Long story short... yes."

At this, Artie turns back to speak into the cab. "A town, eh? Alright, everybody. Let's find somewhere to camp. I've got an idea."

Blaine does not miss the skeptical, slightly pained look Mercedes and Kurt shoot each other at this announcement.

"So," Artie says with a too-bright smile and a can-do attitude. "Kurt here is pretty much number one on the Fire Nation's Most Wanted, right?"

"Oh, definitely," Blaine says. "If they think you killed the Fire Lord, all military and law enforcement personnel probably have orders to execute you on sight."

The Avatar turns saucer-eyes to Blaine. "Excuse me? You're sharing this information just now? Don't you think it would be helpful to learn about that before I meet someone who tries to kill me?"

Blaine winces. "I'm sorry. I... wasn't really thinking about it."

"And here I thought you were a thinker," Mercedes says, slightly disappointed.

Finn elbows him. "Welcome to the dumb club," he says with a grin.
As Blaine screws up his face at his unintentional screw-up, Artie re-rails the discussion. "As I was saying," the thief continues, "Kurt here is persona non grata in the Flamin' Nation, Evil Dragon Lady probably has lookouts posted for my man B-Money, and Finn, Mercedes, and yours truly all stick out like a moo-sow at a turducken convention, for various reasons."

"Yes," Kurt says, "all of these things are very true. The sky is also blue, the sea is large, and I am outlandishly gay. What's your point?"

"My point," Artie says sagely, "is that I am impossible not to identify if I just go around as-is. I avoided all the bounty hunters in the Earth Kingdom by fooling their eyes with disguise. And I think it's time for you all to join the party."

"You want us to dress up like you?" Finn asks.

"No, dude. Disguises! Aliases, pseudonyms, alternate identities."

"Oh! Like… when I snuck out of the Palace," Blaine says, "I told everyone my name was Ozark."

"Exactly!" Artie says emphatically. "We already ride around like the Fire Nation Elite, so let's take it further. Let's dress like them, talk like them, walk like them… well, that last one is just for you guys, but nonetheless," he pauses, holding up a hand for emphasis. "There is a time and a place to be ourselves, and this ain't it. So… let's be other people."

There is a moment of silence as everyone soaks in Artie's plan.

Kurt is the first to speak. "So basically," he says, voice deadpan, face expressionless, "what you are proposing is that we wear outlandishly expensive outfits, utilize makeup, hair products, and possibly even dyes in an effort to assume a completely different persona, almost as if we were playing a character on a stage?"

"Pretty much," Artie shrugs.

The Avatar's face goes from zero to squee in a split second flat. "Yay!" he cries, clapping. "When do we start?"

The paralyzed earthbender points at Kurt. "You start…" he says with a smile, before turning one finger to himself and pointing another at… Blaine? "…when me and my main man Blaine get back with the supplies."

"Wait, what?" Blaine says.

"Whoa, whoa!" Finn adds.

"'scuse me?" Mercedes scoffs.

"Haha, no," Kurt snarks.

Artie is unfazed, having clearly expected resistance. "Come now," he says, "what's the issue?"

"Not that I am inherently opposed to the idea, but… why me?" Blaine asks.

"Yeah," Finn says, seeming a little pouty. "I thought I was your go-to guy for zany schemes."

"You still my dawg, Finn," Artie reassures him. "This is not a 'zany scheme,' as you so delicately put it. I'll be doing all the work. All I need Blaine to do is help me carry the stuff."
"Then why not Finn?" Kurt asks.

Artie leans over and wraps an arm around Blaine, squeezing him amicably. "I just want a chance for us to get to know each other better."

"Oh, yeah right. Next you'll be telling us you plan to give stuff back to people when you're done with it," Mercedes scoffs.

Artie looks a little offended. "Hey! Look, I thought I had done enough to earn you guys' trust, okay? Blaine won't be in any danger, we won't get chased out of town, I won't let him get hurt, I promise."

"Why can't we all just go?" Finn whines.

"We'd be way too conspicuous, dude; I just got finished going over that!" Artie sighs.

"And what if something goes wrong?" Kurt asks. "Blaine is still weak and vulnerable…"

"…actually, I'm feeling a lot better," Blaine interjects, to no effect.

"…and he is the one who is going to get screwed, because he can't boot-scoot-boogie along the ground like you can," Kurt finishes.

Artie puts a hand to his heart. "On my honor," he says, "if shit gets real, I will throw down to my last breath to make sure B-Money makes a clean getaway."

He sounds utterly sincere, which is kind of startling to Blaine. He would hardly expect that kind of behavior from a thief. But then, he'd hardly expect a thief who's a paraplegic, so at this point, it's just safe to assume that Artie in general is weird.

"I'll even throw on the gloves, if I have to," Artie adds, after a moment of silence.

At this, Finn's eyes grow wide and he takes a sharp breath, though he doesn't say anything.

Kurt considers this carefully. "I think," he says carefully, "that it should be up to Blaine. And that he should not make the decision right away. And that he and I should have our nightly training session before he decides anything. Come, Blaine!"

And the ex-Prince is hauled away from the clearing before he has a chance to complain. It feels like these incidents are rapidly becoming routine. There is probably a metaphor for his life to be found in there somewhere…

They find a small outcropping near the bottom of a cliff. Blaine rubs his hands together in anticipation. "Alright, so this evening, I thought we would start with—"

"I need you to do something for me," Kurt says, smashing through his lesson plan with a single blow.

"O…kay?" Blaine says. He is starting to feel like a buoy caught in the wake of a passing steamer, just being pulled along by the tides.

"Artie is a person of many mysteries," Kurt says evenly. "Some of them solved, some of them not so much. If you are willing... you could help me unravel one of them."

It feels like he is being recruited for some kind of espionage mission. "I'm… a little confused."
Kurt takes a moment to search for the right words. "I know several things about our paralytic mutual acquaintance. I know that he lived in the poorest part of Ba Sing Se for several years, I know that he stole to get by, I know that most of his bounty comes from extremely expensive and/or priceless things that he stole from very rich, very unforgiving citizens of the aforementioned Impenetrable City, and I know that he and Finn met in prison."

"Finn was in prison?" Blaine asks.

Kurt waves him off. "Long story. Anyway, the point is… I barely know anything about him other than that. I don't know what his parents were like, I don't know where he lived or what he did before he was paralyzed, and, perhaps most worryingly, I don't know what he did to get thrown in prison."

The former firebender shrugs. "I would assume it had something to do with rampant thievery."

Kurt waves a finger at him. "And you would be wrong, good sir! Because I happen to know that's the one thing it isn't."

"Huh," Blaine says. "Curiouser and curiouser…"

"I know, right?" Kurt heaves. "It's driving me crazy! Learning any of those would be a bonus, but," he says, pausing for emphasis, "there is one main thing I want to know."

Blaine, having little choice in the matter, nods at Kurt to go on.

"He won't teach me anything," Kurt says simply. "He knows all kinds of nifty Earthbending tricks, things that not even Mercedes knows how to do, but he won't share them, and more annoyingly, he won't tell me why. Every time I ask, it's a different excuse. 'Beetles laid eggs in my brain,' 'the Earth told me I have the day off,' 'my teaching chakra is blocked and can only be unclogged by sex,' and so on."

"Those are… creative," Blaine comments.

"But they aren't true. At least, I don't think they are. I've completely hit a wall with the guy and… well, if you want to, I'd like you to help me get past it," Kurt says with a nod.

"I don't know," Blaine says, uneasy. "That seems a little… dishonest, and sneaky, and underhanded." The ex-Prince clamps his mouth shut before any more of his verbal diarrhea can escape.

"I know," Kurt says. "I feel like he'd be proud of me for utilizing those strategies, but that's beside the point. You won't have to be dishonest with him. All you will be doing is getting to know him, and possibly communicating some of the things you get to know back to me. Simple, right?"

"What if he has a good reason?" Blaine asks. "Do you not trust him?"

"That's the frustrating thing," Kurt sighs. "I do trust him. I want to know why he doesn't trust me."

It's a strange mission, and somehow, it feels a little morally dubious on both sides. But perhaps it's just because Blaine isn't really accustomed to dealing with… criminal types. Plus, this is an opportunity for him to do something potentially useful, for both the group, and Kurt. It's not an opportunity he's gotten often. "Alright," he says. "If it means that much to you, I'll do it. I should get to know my new friends as well as possible, after all," he adds with a slight smile.
The Avatar is pleased. "Thank you. I really appreciate this."

The ex-Prince gives him a slight bow. "I just hope we manage to get through it without having to see whether or not he'll live up to his promise."

Kurt smiles. "Oh, don't worry. For what it's worth… I'm pretty sure he was sincere. It's one of the main reasons I trust him, actually. I know he'd throw himself in front of a stampeding lionoceros for Finn if he needed to."

"Really?" Blaine asks.

"Absolutely," Kurt nods. "Finn saved his life. It's something you two have in common, actually," he adds with a grin. "Good starting point to a conversation, just FYI. And just to reassure you even more, I'll be sure to have a friendly chat with Artie before you leave to make sure he's appropriately nice to you. Now… let's get started on that training, shall we?"

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**Day 7**

The Smooth Criminal wakes up to find Kurt standing above him. Or at least, a blur roughly in the shape of a Kurt. He puts his glasses on to confirm. Yup, definitely Kurt. "Whoa, dude," he says, blinking blearily and sitting up. "Creep much? I mean, I know there are some people who think watching a person sleep is romantic, but for me—"

He is abruptly cut off when Kurt grabs him by the front of his robe and slams him against a tree trunk. "Now you listen here, Lenny Lazy-Legs. I don't know what you're up to, but I am warning you right now that if Blaine comes back from this and complains of even so much as a stubbed toe, so help me spirits, I will fly into the Avatar State and turn you into a crater, do you hear me? And that's me being merciful when he comes back. You do **not** want to know what I will do to you if you come back without him. Are. We. Clear?"

He **might** be shaking just a little bit when he nods his head 'yes.'

It's amazing how fast a face promising death beyond death can melt into a pleasant smile when the occasion calls for it. "Fabulous," Kurt says, releasing him. "I'm glad we had this chat."

He then happily flounces off to breakfast, leaving a stunned Artie in his wake. He never really forgets, but it's helpful to occasionally have it brought to the forefront of his mind; his man Kurt is a B-A-M-F and not to be trifled with.

After breakfast, Blaine is given some of Artie's clothes to dress in.

"You're actually closer to my size than anyone else," Artie says. "It's hard to tell since I'm always sitting down, but I'm actually pretty short."

Blaine balks just a little. "I'm not **that** short…"

Artie raises himself on a pillar of earth so that he's just high enough to put a friendly hand on Blaine's shoulder. "Denial helps no one, my friend. You must accept who you are. **Own** your tininess! Be stout and proud!"

"I'll work on it," Blaine says neutrally as he slips into the shirt and begins to fasten the buttons. It **is** nice to have clothes that actually fit. Finn is a great guy, but wearing the tarps that passed for clothes on him was starting to make Blaine feel like he was the Incredible Shrinking Prince. After
he finishes fastening the weird, cylindrical buttons, he wraps the scarf around his neck.

"You really need that?" Artie asks. "It's about a million degrees around here."

"It actually breathe surprisingly well," Blaine says. "It's more of a fashion statement than it is to keep warm."

"That statement being 'ladies stay away, for your team, Blaine won't play?'" Artie says casually. 

The ex-Prince chuckles a little in spite of himself. "Not **exactly**. Truthfully, I just like it because Kurt gave it to me." *And because it helps hide the visible part of your nasty scar of cowardice*, his inner antagonist sneers.

"Ahhh," Artie nudges him. "I see how it is."

Mercedes walks over to them. "Alright, we've got everything ready to camp here for the day. Now, what did we go over?"

Artie adopts a serious expression. "No stupid shit, no stealing anything that isn't necessary, no showboating. We book it at the first sign of trouble, and I make sure Blaine gets away no matter what."

"Good job," she says. "You have until sundown. If you're not back by then, we're coming to look for you. Understand?"

The thief nods. "Got it."

The powerful Earthbender turns to Blaine, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You be careful, you hear?"

Blaine nods. "Yes, ma'am."

"Alright, buddy, let's hit the road," Artie says, sliding away for Blaine to follow.

Kurt hugs him on their way out. "Take care of yourself," he says.

The contact fills him with energy, and in his momentary euphoria, he completely misses Kurt glaring at Artie and mouthing *Take care of him!*

Finn is still pouting and sulking when they leave.

It doesn't take them long to find the river again. Blaine questions how Artie intends to navigate the incredibly rocky, often treacherous and steep terrain. The answer to his question is, of course 'Earthbending' and makes him feel like a moron. Honestly, the bigger question, he soon realizes, is how he intends to do it.

"Something wrong?" Artie says from the top of a small rock face.

The ex-Prince looks at the miniature cliff with just the slightest bit of trepidation, before his honed instincts take over and he finds himself tracing a mental path that will lead him to the top. Taking a second to shake his limbs and fingers to loosen them up, he breathes in, and *attacks*. It's a bit more of a struggle than it normally would be, but with a suitable amount of twisting and scrambling and climbing, Blaine makes it to the top.

"Nope!" he says brightly, collapsing into a breathless heap beside Artie. It felt *so good* to do that
again, even if it did pretty much knock the wind out of him.

The other boy gives what is halfway between a wince and a grin. "That was pretty impressive," he admits, "but if that's all you got, this is gonna take a while, 'cause we're not exactly done with the hard part." He points behind him, where Blaine is treated to the leg-jellifying sight of the rest of the river, which appears to be built on a crooked, broken staircase designed to accommodate giants.

"...dragon dong," Blaine sighs, flopping his head back down. "I don't think I can handle that yet. Crap, maybe you really should have brought Finn."

"The reason I asked," Artie says easily, "is because I wanted to know if you wanted help. I can make it a little easier for you."

The former firebender sits up. "Really?"

Artie shrugs. "I am an earthbender; let me bend some earth on your behalf."

With that, he slides over to the next 'step' in the series, holding his hands up for just a moment, thrusts them both forward, points his fingers downwards and then slides them apart. In response, the material of the cliff splits to form a perfect staircase. With claw-like fingers pressing downwards, he smoothes the steps into a perfect ramp, which he slides up with ease, before reversing the motion and putting the stairs back into place.

Blaine hops up and climbs the stairs with ease. He's also pleased to note that Artie is no fool, and he quickly bends the cliff back to a close representation of its former form. A staircase appearing in a cliffside all of a sudden would be a pretty clear sign of an earthbender. "Thanks," Blaine says.

"We're friends now," Artie says simply. "If you need help, or if you just want some, all you have to do is ask, and I've got your back. That's what friendship's all about."

Blaine stares at Artie for a long moment. "...I really appreciate that. Thank you." He coughs, attempting to think of a way to move the conversation forward. "So... ummm... do you need help often?" he tries.

Artie delivers a magnificent side-eye.

*Agni's codpiece*. Why is he so lame? Why is he so awkward? Why can't he talk to this guy? "I mean, not with your legs. Or your not-legs. Your legs that don't work!" he stammers. "I was not referring to that, or those. I was actually referring to your life of crime. I mean... all the things you steal. Your illegal activities!"

Oh, fuck it. He should just turn around and jump back off the cliff.

The earthbender just snickers with delight at his obvious discomfort. "Oh, you poor, sheltered boy. So I'm your first cripple and your first criminal?"

"...yes," Blaine admits sheepishly. "I knew a lot of people in the capital, but I didn't know anyone from those two categories."

"Awww," Artie scoffs. "Sure you did!"

"What do you mean?" Blaine asks.

"You really think most criminals are as open about it as I am?" Artie says simply.
"…oh," Blaine says simply.

The earthbender slides over to the next cliff before abruptly turning sideways and sliding up it like some ridiculous paralytic human spider. "Look, I am all about overcoming the awkwardness, so I'll tell you what—it's sharing time. Ask me anything. Let us get to know each other as brothers in arms." At this, he reaches the top and thrusts his hands out. A small rock block pops out of the bottom of the cliff like a stone pimple, inviting Blaine to step on top.

He does, and is summarily elevated up the next cliff face. "Okay," Blaine says. This is his moment of truth. His golden opportunity to get what Kurt asked him for. He just needs to be subtle about it… "So, why won't you teach Kurt anything?"

…

YOU. GIANT. DOOFUS.

Artie stops the elevator at a position that just happens to have Blaine eye-level with the sitting boy. "Oh-ho-ho," he says with a wry grin. "Now it all becomes clear. Kurt put you up to this, didn't he?"

Blaine sighs, looking down at his feet like a scolded schoolboy. "...maybe," he says.

The other boy's grin grows wider, and he suddenly seems almost wistful. "...he's growing up so fast," Artie sniffs. "Recruiting a spy for an inside job… I couldn't be more proud." He mock-wipes a tear from his eye.

"Please don't tell him I gave him away," Blaine pleads. "I... well, for one thing, I don't want him to know how incredibly stupid I am."

"Your secret's safe with me," Artie promises… purposely pausing before raising a finger and staring Blaine straight in the eye. "If," he adds, "my secrets are safe with you. You don't pass along anything I don't want you to, and I won't spill the beans to Capital K. We clear?"

"We're clear," Blaine says. Artie responds with a smile, and lifts Blaine the rest of the way up.

"So," the bandit says with a sort of half-smile. "Now that you're no longer on a secret mission from the Avatar, is there anything that you, Blaine Anderson, Prince of the Fire Nation, would like to ask a humble Earth Kingdom bandit?"

Blaine thinks about it as Artie slides up the next cliff face and bends out stone ladder rungs for him to climb. As he reaches the top, it hits him. He needs perspective. He isn't sure which perspective he needs more, so he goes for the first one he thinks of. "So why did you start stealing?"

The other boy regards him plainly. "Because begging wasn't feeding me anymore."

"You were a beggar?"

Artie nods. "I was allowed to stay in the hospital just long enough to make sure I wouldn't die. Then, when they realized I didn't have any money, they dumped me on the street and left me there to rot. I... wasn't always as awesome as I am now. I had it rough for a while." He motions to his feet. "Earthbending is big on foot and leg work, so the doctors pretty much assumed that my bending was shot. Fortunately, I eventually discovered this was not the case. My lady wouldn't leave me over something so petty," he adds with a grin.

"That's..." Blaine breathes out, wanting to be polite but unable to find any other word to fit what
he's thinking. "That's awful. Why was no one looking out for you? Where were your parents during all of this?"

The paralyzed boy slides to a halt, turning around to look at Blaine and, for the first time since the ex-Prince has known him, seeming almost vulnerable. "I… I can't talk about my parents," he says, looking everywhere but at Blaine.

The Fireless Prince shakes his head. "It's okay," he says, "you don't have to say anything you don't want—"

"No, I mean…" Artie pauses, visibly collects himself, and continues. "Look, this is getting a little heavy, and I need to know I can trust you before I just… throw everything on the line, alright? Let's just take care of business in the village, first. If we pull this off, then we can talk some more. Deal?"

Blaine nods. "Deal."

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: Crazy chapter, growing beyond my expectations. Grrr. Oh well. More to love, I suppose. NEXT CHAPTER: Artie and Blaine have ridiculous misadventures in Fenghuang. Finn, Mercedes, and Kurt run afoul of some local wildlife. Quicktana show us what they've been doing with their time, and a special guest makes their debut. ;) Reviews and comments make my day, so share your thoughts if you have them!
Eventually, they make it to a small road just outside the village a little before midday.

"Okay," Blaine says, a dash of nerves creeping into his voice. "So… now what do we—"

Artie is gone.

"Artie?"

No reply. Blaine is a bit baffled. He knows the guy has a tendency to pop in and out as he pleases, but he figured that he would at least brief him on what was supposed to happen before he disapp—

"Pssst," a voice calls from a nearby boulder.
Checking to make sure no one is looking, the ex-Prince goes to investigate. A small sliver opens up in the rock, and Artie's eyes peek out at him from within.

"What are you doing in there?" Blaine whispers.

"Hiding, duh. I can't just let people see me," Artie replies. "We're in civilization now, I have to be incognito."

"Good point," Blaine replies. "So... now what?"

"Stay here. I'll be back," Artie replies.

"But what about—" Blaine's reply is heard only by the stones, as the sliver has closed and Artie seems to have left the premises. With little else to do with himself, he waits.

And waits.
And waits.
And waits a little more.
And waits a little more.
And waits a little—
"Think fast!"

Blaine only has time to turn and make a comical 'O' expression before the dirt smacks him right in the face.

"Pffftttt. Pttttha. Sprrrrrrrrrrrrttttttttttt!" he says, attempting to get as much of it as possible out of his mouth and knowing that he will never truly be clean again. "Bleh, ugh. What was that for?" he cries.

Artie responds by conjuring up an even larger wave of dirt and sending it at him.

"What are you—?" The soil smacks into him with just a little less than the required force to knock him over, making sure he is thoroughly filthy. When he finally recovers enough to start dusting himself off, he glares at Artie. "What is wrong with you?" he cries.

Artie shrugs. "It's makeup!" he replies cheerfully. "I get to wear it too, watch."

And just like that, the butt-bound bandit sinks into the ground, only to pop back up a second later, thoroughly filthy.

"Why do we need to be—" Blaine starts, but it seems that Artie has some kind of serious problem with Blaine being able to finish a sentence, like, ever, because he is gone again. "Where did—"

At this point, he doesn't even know why he bothers to ask. Artie slides in beside him carrying a large, straight stick. "This will be perfect!" he says brightly, smacking the wooden object on a nearby rock with a loud...

CLACK!

Blaine winces at the sound, and Artie smiles fiendishly. "Sorry," he says. "Just cleaning the dirt off," he says, before bending the remainder of the sod off the stick.
"What are you even doing?" Blaine asks. "What am I supposed to be—"

"Your part is simple," Artie says, sliding away and beckoning him to follow.

Though he kind of wants to run away at this point, he nevertheless follows the paralyzed boy, moving through a small area of thick underbrush and momentarily losing sight of him before breaking through the last of the growth and finding…

…an old, bearded man in dark glasses and a straw hat, sitting a wheelbarrow.

He is completely gobsmacked. "Artie?" he asks.

The old man grins at him. "Why hello there, young whippersnapper!" Artie says, beaming. "Like the disguise?"

"How… where… what…" Blaine says, shaking his head and attempting to straighten out his thoughts, which seem to be rapidly crashing into each other and piling up due to his inability to get them out anywhere nearly as fast as Artie causes them to appear.

"Don't worry yourself over the details," Artie says. "All you need to worry about is staying in character."

That sounds promising. "Okay," Blaine says, a little wary. "What's my character?"

"You're just an honest, handsome, helpful young peasant lad, taking his poor old crippled grandpa to the market so he can buy granny some nice things for their 69th anniversary."

That doesn't sound so bad. "I think I can handle that," Blaine says, nodding more to himself than Artie.

"I know you can. Here," he says, handing Blaine a small change purse filled with copper and silver pieces. "Hold onto this. Just stay in character, and follow my lead, and we'll both be fine," Artie says with complete confidence, the last of his actual persona Blaine sees before Artie vanishes and a crotchety old man takes his place. "Now get your scrawny ass over here and push me, you lazy, good-for-nothin' lout!"

Blaine grins to himself as he moves into place behind Artie, and starts pushing him along. To be honest, he's actually a little excited at the prospect. He has no idea what to expect from today, and for the first time since that day, it feels like he's finally going to be able to really help out and make a difference for—

CLACK!

Blaine practically leaps out of his skin at the resounding crack of the cane being smacked against the wheelbarrow. "Faster!" Old Man Artie growls. "I ain't gettin' any younger!"

The smile falls off his face and crawls underground to hide like a frightened rockworm, as his excitement slowly turns to dread…

Fenghuang is, to put it simply, situated in a topical paradise. A small vacation town filled with lush greenery and beautiful flowers, it is built at the base of a fairly magnificent waterfall with a river running through the center of town and marking the main shopping districts. The buildings are all expensive and lavishly decorated, and souvenir stands run rampant. It's not a place many people can afford to live, but it's a wonderful place to visit.
It's also famous for the many varieties of exotic birds that can be found there. From the common cat owl to the rainbow-tailed parakeagle, and the elusive cranemeleon, master of camouflage. The centerpiece of all of this is, of course, the myth of the Phoenix. Every year, thousands of people flock to Fenghuang, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mythical king of birds. No one has ever confirmed a sighting, but there are always scattered tales here and there of a cousin's uncle's brother's mother's accountant's wife's pool boy who swears on his life that he spotted it out of the corner of his eye that one time.

It's the town's status as a vacation spot that makes Blaine and Artie's appearance a workable disguise. It's the off-season, so most of the town's denizens are the wealthier, year-round dwellers or middle class. But even with their dirty clothing, you'd expect to see so many varieties of people in Fenghuang that Artie and Blaine don't stand out at all… with the exception of the areas where they choose to stand out.

"Agni's toenail clippings, boy!" Old Man Artie growls. "Can't you push this thing any faster? At this rate, I'll keel over and die by the time we get back to your grandma. If I kick the bucket before I give her the gifts, I'll never heard the end of it!"

"Don't talk back to your elders!" Grandpa Gimp yells at him. "Now hurry up, before I shrivel right off of this mortal coil."

Blaine is seriously starting to worry here. He is confused and a little frightened, and he has absolutely no idea what in the heavens any of this is supposed to be accomplishing. With little choice in the matter, however, he sighs and pushes Artie around, looking for a concession stand of some sort. He can't really find any. As they approach the fire-spewing Phoenix Fountain in the center of town, he hears an unfamiliar, yet friendly voice.

"Oh, you poor boy," it says. "You look so lost. Do you need any help?"

Blaine turns grateful eyes towards a middle-aged woman in a fairly ornate kimono. Judging by the robes and umbrella, she's a little better-off than most in the finance department. "Oh, thank you," he says sincerely, giving her a smile and breaking away from Artie for the moment, "I just need to know where to buy my Grandpa something to eat. He gets cranky when he's hungry."

The woman smiles kindly and points him down a side street. "Most of the good stuff is over there. It's a little pricey, but..." she says, walking up to him, "...this should help." With that, she pulls out
a gold piece and presses it into his palm.

The ex-Prince balks. "Oh, no!" he says, very seriously. "I couldn't. That's far too— I would never want to take advantage of—"

"Oh, nonsense," the woman says simply. "I've got plenty of those to spare. An obedient, helpful boy like you should be rewarded for his behavior."

It hits Blaine at about that point exactly what Artie is doing. His face lights up with shame. "I'm sorry," he says. "I—"

"Don't worry, little one," she says. "I was not offended. You take that and you enjoy it."

Blaine is too flabbergasted to reply before she walks off. The boy turns scornful eyes towards his bandit companion as he pockets the money, and begins to push him down the street the woman directed him towards. "Really?" he whispers. "Taking advantage of people like this... it's just... you can't just..."

"It's better than stealing," Artie says. "She gave it to you, just because you're so sweet!"

"She gave it under false pretenses!" Blaine angrily retorts.

But Artie simply blows him off. "Stop scowling. You're ruining the effect!"

The Fireless Prince just scowls further, but quickly finds that he isn't able to maintain it. It really does take more muscles to frown than it does to smile. His paralytic companion returns to Grumpy Old Coot mode again. "Stop there!" he says, gesturing with his cane to the strangest food stand Blaine has ever seen or even heard of. "I want a waffle!"

"Really, Grandpa?" Blaine asks, even more pointedly. Why are they wasting money on things they don't need? "But... you're so old... such a sweet snack can't be good for you!"

"Bah!" Grandpartie scoffs at him. "I ain't got no real teefs left to rot, and my heart's probably on its last legs anyways. Bring on the calories!" At this, he bangs his cane on the wheelbarrow several times, much less aggressive than usual, but still loud enough to be plenty annoying.

The ex-Prince can only give a helpless gaze to the heavens as he sighs and pushes Artie forward. A dark-skinned man in a tall hat is in charge of the waffle stand. "I'd like one waffle, please," he says. "That'll be three copper pieces," the waffle man replies.

Blaine reaches down to his belt, where he put the change purse. It's gone.

"Oh no," he says, slightly panicked. "The money's gone!" he says to Artie. He checks his pocket for the gold piece, and it's gone as well.

"You lost the money?" Old Man Artie bellows. "What is wrong with you, you incompetent little snot-nosed freeloader? That was my life savings!"

He feels incredibly helpless, running his hand over his face and having no idea what to do. "I'm sorry, I have no idea..."

A group of young women with long, black hair, who up until now have been talking amongst
themselves, suddenly reach a consensus and approach Blaine. "It's okay, sweetie," one of them says. "We will pay for your waffle."

"Oh, no, please, I couldn't..." Blaine insists helplessly.

"Please, let us do this for you," another of the women says. "It will only cost us a copper piece each. You look like you are having an awful day. Let us do you this kindness."

He starts to protest again, but the third woman has already paid, and is handing Artie his waffle (on a stick!). "Well, thank you, young missy!" Artie says. "At least somebody here is competent enough to buy a conflabbed waffle without losing their bank account!"

The woman frowns at Artie and turns towards Blaine, giving him a sad smile as if he is a saint for putting up with this crotchety old coot. He is, but it's so not for the reasons they think.

"Thank you," Blaine says weakly. "I wish I could repay you somehow."

"Just take good care of your grandfather," one of them calls as they leave.

Oh, Blaine thinks, I would love to take care of him. He is momentarily greeted with an image of him casually letting Artie's wheelbarrow go at the top of a very high, very steep hill... no. No, bad idea, bad thoughts, bad Blaine! He should've known what he was getting into here.

"Well, Grandpa," Blaine seethes. "Now what do we do?"

"We sit and knit doilies for each other," Old Man Artie grouses. "Whaddaya think we do, ya numbskull? We get to lookin' fer my dad-blamed money!" He punctuates this by taking a big bite out of his waffle.

"And where do you think I should start looking?" Blaine says, seriously confused. "I have no idea where I lost it."

"Everywhere!" shouts the bearded bandit.

So they look everywhere. Blaine obediently pushes Artie around the city, to pretty much every corner of the shopping district, lamely attempting to find any sign of their change or anyone who knows where it might be. He feels a little more panicked with every passing moment, and to add injury to insult, things keep happening to him. He trips on a stone that he swears wasn't sticking out of the walkway before. A stack of clay pots nearly falls over on top of him. He accidentally falls into a birdcage and releases a small flock of angry sparrowkeets. If he didn't know better, he'd think Artie was messing with him.

Over and over, they walk through the various plazas, Blaine asking if anyone has seen a dropped coin purse. Over and over, he is told no, and over and over, people feel compelled to give to him from their own pockets.

"You poor boy! I'm so sorry, but I haven't seen anything. Can I help you out some other way...?"

"Oh, you dear sweet child, that's awful! I haven't seen any lost money, but... here, let me help you out... it's not much, but..."

"Such exquisite pain on such a young face! I am utterly moved by your plight. I cannot return your lost savings, but I must do what I can to ease your suffering!"

By this point, however, Blaine expects it, and he is one step ahead of them.
"I thank you for your kindness, but I cannot accept your wonderful gift. I must recover what was stolen."

"I can't tell you how touched I am by your kindness, but please, keep your money. I have received far more than my fair share of kindness today."

"Your words and spirit have already eased it, madam. I can take no more from you, for your time alone was invaluable."

Artie glares at him and CLACK's the stick a few times on his initial refusals, but strangely enough, as time goes, on, he seems to mellow out on the subject. After an hour or two of searching, the Earthbender calls him to a halt.

"Some no-good, ill-mannered thief must've made off with it!" Old Man Artie scowls. The irony nearly kills Blaine on the spot.

"Check the alleys!" Gramps commands him. "Look for any seedy-types! We'll get back that money, one way or another…"

Forget a buoy in the tides. Blaine is a leaf caught in the wake of a passing hurricane. All he can do is drift where he is told to, feeling more lost and helpless with every passing second…

The figures wandering the back alleys that make up the less-refined underbelly of Fenghuang seem a great deal rougher and less friendly than the patrons on the street. And where the females of the Phoenix City looked like they wanted to just cuddle him and eat him up, the alley-dwellers look like they would be happy with just eating him alive.

"What are we doing here?" Blaine whispers intensely.

"Looking for money, duh," Artie replies simply. "Stay in character!"

At this, they pass a pudgy, hairy fellow in brown robes. Artie turns to the guy. "'scuse me, fine sir!" he says. "But my idiot grandson here seems to've lost all our damned money! Doofy little twerp can't hold onto a copper piece to save his life. Now I think somebody might've taken it," he whispers conspiratorially. "And you look like a trustworthy soul. Where d'ya think we might find the sort of lowlife who'd steal from an old man and his innocent little grandson?"

Pudgy looks like someone just presented him with a seven course meal cooked by an immortal spirit-chef. "Well, old fella," he says, "I don't know nothing about no stolen money, but…" He leans in close to them, in between Artie and Blaine. "…I do know where you might be able to make it back!"

"Well," Old Man Artie says thoughtfully, stroking his fake grey beard, "that's better'n nothing, I reckon. Lead the way, good sir!"

Pudgy smiles like a shark at Blaine, and heads deeper into the maze of corridors. Blaine seriously does not want to follow him, and is just about to tell—

CLACK!

"What're you waiting for, boy?" the impostorly elderly man grumbles. "Get a move-on!"

Taking a deep breath, Blaine obediently pushes Artie down the alleyway, fantasies of revenge
being pushed out of his head in favor of visions of his own violent death at the hands of criminals. On and on through the narrow spaces they are led, seeing various shady men and women leering as them as they pass. Finally, the man leads them to a shady corner just outside of what looks like it might have once passed for a stable. In a little fenced-in area around the stable, a bunch of seedy-looking, stringy-haired fellows sit in various circles around the area, shouting randomly and throwing their hands up.

"Got a little gaming ring set up here," Pudgy explains with a sneer. "If luck be on your side, you'll leave here richer than you ever imagined. What do you say, young fella?" He leers at Blaine. "Care to try and make back dear old grampy's money?"

Blaine makes a valiant effort to keep himself calm. "I… I… don't have anything to bet with!" he says brightly, unbelievably happy to have an out.

"Sure you do!" Grandpartie says. "What about that gold piece the nice lady gave to ya?"

"It got stolen with the rest of the money," Blaine says. "Remember? I put it right here in my po—"

He reaches into said pocket to illustrate, and feels his fingers brush against cold, familiar metal. They clutch around it, not quite believing what they are feeling, but sure enough, he pulls the gold piece out of his pocket as if it had always been there. "I… huh."

"Go on, sonny!" Pudgy says. "Your rotten luck's gotta change sometime! 'sides, what have ya got to lose?"

With a heavy, heavy sigh, Blaine enters the gaming area with Artie and attempts to find a place in one of the circles. The first thing he spots is a shell game.

"Alright people, step right up, place your bets!" a tall, greasy-looking fellow in the middle calls out.

Blaine steps forward—completely against his will, he might add, as the stupid earth underneath his feet suddenly shifts. Great, now he knows Artie is messing with him.

"Well, young fella, what's your wager?" the Dealer calls to him as the circle titters and snorts at his obvious discomfort.

"Ummm," Blaine stammers. "One gold piece."

The circle's chortling comes to whiplash-inducing halt.

"That's a mighty big wager for such a little fella," the Dealer sneers, and Blaine can practically see the gleaming of the gold in his eyes. "Alright, let's start." He raises the center shell, revealing a small pebble, and then sets it down. What happens next can only be described by Blaine as some kind of break in the space time continuum in which the man suddenly sprouts twenty hands, all moving the shells at once. It is impossible for him to even pretend to follow. The three shells come to a halt. "Choose," the Dealer says.

He wants to glare at Artie, to ask him what to do, how in the world he is supposed to win this, but he can't possibly do that without looking suspicious. So, as he has been doing the rest of the day, he pretty much just takes a deep breath and dives right in. "That one," he says, pointing to the one on the left.

The man raises the shell.
"Holy crap!" Blaine cries, overjoyed. "I won!"

"Congratulations, little man," the Dealer says in a somewhat less-than-congratulatory tone. He pulls out a single gold piece and slides it across the ground to Blaine. "Care to try your luck again, and make it a little more… interesting?"

"Not at all!" Blaine cheerfully replies. "Bye!" He starts to exit the circle, but Artie blocks his path with a stick.

"Get back in there and win me some more money!" he demands.

Blaine glares at Artie, leaning in close to whisper at him through his teeth. "Okay, do you have any idea how much gold pieces are worth? We already have more than we lost!"

Artie just winks at him. "Go on, get! Don't be such a chickenbatshit!"

The ex-Prince stumbles unhappily back into the circle. "Okay, fine," he says. "More interesting, sure, why not? My life is just not interesting enough!" he seethes with just the barest hint of resentment.

"Double or nothing, what do you say?" the Dealer grins.

"Go right the fuck ahead," Blaine says, having thoroughly given up on life at this point.

This time, the shell dealer practically creates a localized hurricane with how fast his scrambling goes. Knowing that he has pretty much the same odds as last time, he shoves a finger at the middle one.

The Dealer starts speaking before he even lifts the shell. "Nope, sorry, you lo—"

The pebble is there.

Blaine jumps into the air and does a fist pump. "Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh! I can't believe—"

"I can't believe it!" the Dealer says, flabbergasted. "I mean… I…" He grinds his teeth. "Congratulations," he says in the same tone that one might say 'I want to fashion your stomach into a handbag.' The Dealer pulls out a gold piece from his pocket, and is dismayed to find that he only has one. He snaps to a slightly sleepy looking man with a bushy mustache over by the stables, and he hurriedly ducks inside, emerging a second later and bringing another piece for the payout.

Blaine now has four gold pieces, which should be enough to buy—

"Double or nothing, one more time, sonny! You're on a roll!" Artie shouts.

"Yes," the Dealer seethes through closed teeth, grabbing Blaine by the front of his shirt and yanking him close enough to feel the guy's breath. "Do play one more time. Your luck seems to be excellent today. It would be such a shame if it were to suddenly run out!"

Well, there aren't very many ways to misinterpret that. "Okay," he says in a slightly squeaky voice. "Double or nothing, one more time. And only one!" he adds with a smile.

This time, the guy raises the middle shell, and sets it down. And… doesn't move any of the shells. "Choose wisely," he seethes.
Blaine can feel his heart doing somersaults and wall-jumps in his ribcage. He's pretty sure this is some kind of trick, or a veiled threat, or something, but he is far too terrified to think straight at the moment. He picks the middle shell.

The Dealer lifts the shell.

Nothing is there.

"You lose!" he says brightly, and with a slightly manic edge. "Good day sir!"

And then Blaine is bodily lifted and tossed out of the ring.

Artie is soon pushed out alongside him. "YOU CONFOUNDED IDGIT!" he yells, and Blaine kind of wants to cry. "I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU—don't worry dude, you did great, just keep walking—STUPID KUMQUAT-BRAINED LOAF OF DOOFUS BREAD! THAT'S IT. GET ME OUT OF HERE THIS INSTANT!"

Blaine, a little lost, but still just barely willing to play along, gets up and starts pushing Artie again.

"Go by the stables," Artie whispers, following it up with. "I can't believe you'd bet four gold pieces on a silly shell game! You only have a one-in-three chance o' winnin' those, don't you know? Can't you do math?"

Blaine complies, still feeling close to tears from sheer emotional overload. As they pass by the stables, Artie takes one look behind them, and suddenly the earth beneath them launches them both sideways (wheelbarrow and all) over the gate and into one of the stables. They land in a small cart of weird-looking green hay against a wall.

Artie pulls the plants over them to hide them from prying eyes, and then turns to Blaine. "Calm down, dude, it's okay! You're doing awesome. You were supposed to lose there," he whispers.

"What?" Blaine asks.

"I was helping you cheat," Artie says simply.

"You were... why didn't you tell me?" Blaine sighs.

"Your reactions needed to be genuine. Method acting! Nothing beats it."

"But... why'd you stop?" Blaine asks.

"Well, for one thing, they were probably about to kill you for cheating. They caught on pretty quick. But honestly, the only reason I was doing it at all was to see where they kept the rest of the money." He nods to the stables around them. "It's right in here! You and I are about to get mega rich."

Blaine's eyes practically bulge out of his skull as Artie sticks his head out of the hay to take a look at his surroundings.

"Stay here," Artie says as he pops back in. "When I get back, we book it to the plaza, okay?"

"Okay," Blaine nods, only mildly reassured.

With that, Artie uses his arms to heave himself out of the hay, and is gone for the moment.
There is no limit to how grateful Blaine is to finally have a chance to rest and recuperate from this extended disastrophe. He sighs to himself, maybe a little louder than he should. It's hard to put a lid on this much relief. As he takes in another breath, something about the smell of this hay strikes him as being very familiar…

Something **sighs back at him**. Something very **large**, with a great deal of lung to sigh with.

With his breath caught in his throat, the Fireless Prince turns to the side. It sounds like the noise came from the stable next to this one, which is completely walled up. There is a small hole in the wood, just large enough for Blaine to see through, and his curiosity will not let him rest until he peeks through it.

He can't make it out exactly, but there is some kind of creature in the stable next door. It's hard to get more descriptive than *big, fluffy, and white*. Suddenly, he hears more voices from within the room.

"…shipment is late! Of course I ain't giving you full pay!" a rough, angry voice seethes.

Two men step into view—Pudgy, Blaine recognizes from before, and some new guy dressed in rough-looking black clothes, with a slightly frayed hood over his head.

"Look, you would not believe the week I have been having, alright?" Hooded Guy replies in a smooth voice. "If I take less than full pay back to my superiors, you **know** they're just going to send people to collect the rest. The shipment is good, and the next one will be on time, you have my word!"

*Shipment of what?* Blaine wonders.

And then it hits him—he recognizes this smell! The 'hay' isn't hay at all! It's *Zaru Leaf!* He buried in an enormous pile of… of… **opiates**!

"Let's go, let's go!" Artie says suddenly, snapping him back to reality. He is sitting in the wheelbarrow, disguise in place, ready for Blaine to push him out. The ex-Prince does his darnedest to eject himself from the cart-o-drugs and get to his fake grandpa so they can leave this wretched hive.

"Hey!" Blaine hears from the stable next door.

"Oh shit," Artie says. "Go, go, go!"

He really only needed to tell Blaine once. The former firebender does his level best to become a human rocket as he opens the gate and bursts out of it with Artie in front.

Unfortunately, Pudgy and his hooded friend seem to have had the same idea, and they pop out right in front of them as Blaine attempts to escape. "Hey!" Pudgy says. "Who the **fuck** do you think you are?"

"Uhhhh," Blaine says.

"Name's Ving," Artie says.

"Ving?" Hooded Guy repeats.

"Yup. First name 'Lee.'" the earthbender says with a smile, "as in 'Lee Ving!'" He then thrusts his hands forward and sweeps them out to his sides. Pudgy is knocked into a wall by a small
earthwave, but Hooded Guy leaps over the attack with ease, landing on the ground so softly as to be almost soundless, before adopting a stance Blaine has never seen before.

"Surrender the drugs you stole, and we might not hurt you," Hooded Guy says.

"We didn't steal no drugs, fool!" Artie denies.

"Oh, really? Because all the greenery on your friend's outfit tells a different story," Hooded Guy retorts.

Artie turns around, and Blaine looks down, and sure enough, he's covered in flecks of Zaru Leaf. "I…" Blaine stammers. "I can explain. I wasn't stealing your drugs, I was just hiding in them—"

That's as far as he gets before Artie is knocked into him by a gust of wind, sending them both sprawling.

Blaine groans and sits up, having never quite missed his firebending so much in his life. Artie is still lying down… did he get knocked out? Oh, shit. Oh, shit. He's more than a little afraid, but also more than a little confused. Did he just get hit by airbending? Aren't airbenders supposed to be pacifists? Why does everything want to kill him?

"Surrender!" Mr. Hood demands again.

"There's nothing to surrender," Blaine insists. "I didn't take your drugs!"

"Liar!" Hooded Guy replies. "I know you've been following me around all week trying to steal this. And now that I've caught you, I have half a mind to take you prisoner and turn you into my—"

That's about as far as he gets before a flying stone fist smacks him right in the head, knocking him clean off his feet. Artie has apparently decided to pay back the guy's surprise mid-sentence attack with one of his own. He quickly pulls his hand back, summoning the stone fist back to him and molding it over his own. He's now wearing two incredibly well-fitted gloves of solid rock, molded so closely to his hand that Blaine can make out his bones beneath the skin.

"Artie!" he says, relieved. "You're okay! I'm so—"

"Stop talking," Artie commands, and there is something odd about his voice. His expression is all business as he earthbends the wheelbarrow back into its upright position and launches himself into it. "Back the way we came, quickly!" he says.

Blaine doesn't really see any reason to do otherwise. Hooded Guy is already recovering, so Blaine grabs his paraplegic companion and begins to book it in the other direction.

"Take the corner, now!" Artie orders, and Blaine turns and makes it past the corner of the building just as another gust of air kicks up a huge cloud of dust behind them. It barely misses taking him with it, though it does have the lovely benefit of removing most of the painkilling plant from his clothes.

He keeps right on running, quickly retracing his own steps back into the gaming pen. Unfortunately, this just seems to add to their problems.

"There they are!" the Dealer spits. "They've gotta be the ones who took it! Get 'em!"

And suddenly, Blaine and Artie are being chased by about eight huge guys with hygiene problems and (likely) anger management issues.
"Take a left here!" Artie says, all traces of joking from his voice having completely vanished, his normal, somewhat careless drawl now refined and utterly precise.

Blaine turns the corner and attempts to pick up as much speed as he can. He doesn't want to get caught, but (in spite of how annoyed Blaine is with him) he doesn't want to dump Artie out or crash with him, either. The alley ahead of them is lined with obstacles on both sides—dumpsters, trashcans, abandoned boxes and half-demolished wooden carts. He has enough trouble steering this stupid thing as it is. With all this crap in his way…

"Stop pushing and start pulling," Artie says suddenly.

"What?" Blaine balks.

"Turn the wheelbarrow into a rickshaw," the earthbender elaborates. "Focus on where we're going, and I'll take care of our pursuers."

"Okay," Blaine nods, quickly shifting around so that he is in front. In the process, he sees the burly bruisers quickly gaining ground. "I hope you know what you're doing," he says.

"You focus on your part, and I will focus on mine," Artie says simply.

So he does. Blaine banks left to avoid a dumpster, and he hears a resounding smack from behind. He banks right to dodge a pile of broken boxes, and is greeted with the sound of the ground rumbling and several loud grunts. He takes to the middle to sail through a pair of trashcans, and hears the distinctive sound of stone smacking into facial flesh. They're almost out!

"Turn around and get into character!" Artie says suddenly.

"What?" Blaine asks.

"Just do it!" the earthbender demands. Blaine slides to a halt and spins Artie around just in time to see him put his hands in his sleeves. When he removes them, the stone gloves are nowhere to be found, and his posture seems to relax.

"Are they gone?" Blaine asks, starting to turn around.

"Not quite," Artie answers, sounding a little more normal. "I've got an idea, just stay in character and follow my lead! Get us out in the open!"

The Fireless Prince pushes the wheelbarrow out into the plaza again, the sight of the Phoenix Fountain (and about a gazillion potential witnesses for any attempted murders) has never been a more welcome sight.

His gratitude lasts all of a second before Artie returns to his own character and starts raving at him again.

"I can't believe you, ya worthless pile of dragonshit!" he spits angrily. Already, heads are turning in their direction. Blaine just keeps his head low and keeps walking. "You ruined your grandmother's birthday! You lost all my money! And on top of that—"

"—you stole from the wrong guy, kid."

And suddenly, he is grabbed from behind and spun around, coming face to face with the Dealer and his friend Pudgy, neither of which look too happy to see him. His heart shivers and shrivels in his chest, and he just wants somebody to hold it and tell him it's gonna be alright.
"Come on," the Dealer sneers. "I think you and me need to have a little chat in private."

He starts trying to pull Blaine away, but the ex-Prince pulls back. "Hey, let me go!" he shouts, officially causing enough of a scene to start a gathering crowd.

"Come on," the Dealer growls, clenching him even harder—just hard enough to hurt—and pulling him along.

And then—Agni be praised—Artie's hairbrained 'idea' actually starts working.

"Hey!" someone from the crowd shouts. "What's wrong with you?"

"Yeah," the three black-haired beauties from earlier concur. "Don't pick on him!"

"He stole from me!" Pudgy shouts. "Twenty gold pieces went missing right after he showed up. Coincidence? I think not!"

"Hand 'em over, runt!" the Dealer growls. The crowd is blocking him from the alley, so he opts to push Blaine against the wheelbarrow and start frisking him right then and there, which—seriously, uncomfortable!

"Oh my gosh!" the umbrella-carrying donor from earlier cries out. "Get your hands off him this instant!"

A rallying cry from the crowd goes up, and in no time at all, several slightly frenzied-looking ladies are advancing on Pudgy and his taller friend.

"You're just a couple of bullies!" one says.

"Look at that face!" another shouts. "How could anyone with a face like that be guilty of stealing?"

"Hey! Back off!" Pudgy warns, but he is drowned out by more voices from the crowd.

"No, you back off!" one says.

"Leave that poor, precious child alone!" another joins in.

"Hasn't he suffered enough?" cries an anguished older lady.

The crowd is rapidly approaching fever pitch when Artie launches the grand finale. Pulling up his cane, he grips it like a samurai sword and swings it around as hard as he can, slamming it into the Dealer's side with a battle cry of "GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF MY GRANDSON!"

CLACK!

The stick smacks into something hard, and Blaine suddenly agrees with Artie on the merits of method acting, because upon seeing what falls out of the man's robe when Artie hits him, Blaine is able to say, with complete, utter honesty and outrage—

"That's my money!"

The lady mob is shocked into silence.

"Thieves!" someone shouts.

"Liars!" another adds.
"High hypocrisy!" a third joins in.

Umbrella Lady approaches the men with utter menace in her eyes. "How dare you?" she seethes. "You accuse this poor boy of the very crime you committed against him? Have you no shame?"

"I swear," the Dealer says. "I have no idea how that got in ther—"

CLACK!

This time, it's not Artie's cane, but umbrella lady's umbrella smacking the guy in the head that makes the wince-inducing noise.

Another lady steps forward and smacks Pudgy with her purse. A pair of sharp-looking heeled sandals slam down onto the Dealer's feet, and soon, the two men are completely swept away in a flood of feminine outrage and violence, leaving a stunned Blaine and a smug Artie in their wake.

Artie looks at him with a wide grin. "I... can't believe that actually worked," he whispers. Then, a little louder, he puts his grandpa persona back on and says "Well, m'boy, we got the money back (plus a little extra). Let's go shopping, shall we?"

Equal parts confused, traumatized, and relieved, Blaine weakly complies, and begins pushing the fake old man through the streets again.

"Wait," Old Man Artie says. "Stop at the waffle stand!"

Dangerously close to a meltdown, the battered boy quietly pushes his felonious friend over to the Waffle Vendor. "One waffle-on-a-stick, please," Blaine says, handing over the three copper pieces and turning to hand the snack to the crazy cripple.


Blaine is shocked. All he can do is smile weakly and take a bite of the waffle, and... oh, wow. It's actually pretty good.

He happily munches on it for the remainder of their shopping trip.

A couple of hours later, they leave Fenghuang with as much expensive make-up and clothing as they can carry (which is a lot). They hide out in a small clearing at the edge of town to sort everything out and dump Artie's wheelbarrow.

"So... you were the one who stole the coin purse?" Blaine asks him.

Artie nods as he removes his beard, still sitting in the wheelbarrow. "Yup. That was me! I also stole the gold piece and put it back on you when you weren't paying attention."

"Why?" Blaine asks.

Artie takes a moment to bend the dirt off of his clothes. "Well... it was kind of like this; you have the kind of open, honest, innocent little face that turns most women into play putty. I figured we could take advantage of that and get a little extra cash from... let's say 'sympathetic donors.' And... well, there's no pain like honest pain, so I figured if you were actually frazzled and confused and panicking and upset, then it would just come across as all the more believable. And it totally did, dude! Those ladies were all over you."
Everything clicks into place in Blaine's head. "So it was you that tripped me."

"Yep."

"And you that knocked me into the birdcage."

"Uh-huh."

"And you that almost got my head smashed by falling pots."

"Indeed it was."

"You lied to me—"

"Not exactly..." —manipulated me and tormented me so that you could use me to take advantage of perfectly nice and sympathetic people. Is that about right?"

Artie nods sagely. "That's pretty much it."

"Well," Blaine says, turning towards the crippled cretin. "I have just one thing to say to that."

"And what might that be?" Artie asks.

Blaine hauls off and decks him. Full-on, right in the face, with enough force to send him toppling over the side of the wheelbarrow, his feet flying comically over his head as he lands. "You are an asshole!" he shouts. "How could you possibly do that to someone? How can you just... take advantage of people like that? What kind of jerk just throws someone into a situation like that and... and doesn't even tell them, and..." Blaine trails off, his frustration at a healthy boil and steaming out of him with every word until he actually looks at the jerk.

Artie lies face down on the ground, positively shaking with laughter, his face red with it (though Blaine is pleased to note that his left eye is already swelling, and the left lens of his glasses is cracked).

"...what are you laughing at?" Blaine cries, exasperated beyond belief.

Artie props his head up on his elbows and grins at him. "You just punched a cripple."

"...oh my gosh," Blaine says, horrified. "I did... I just... I can't believe I would..." He turns to Artie. "Oh, I am so sorry, I have no idea what—"

"No, dude!" Artie says brightly. "Don't apologize! That was perfect! This is a huge breakthrough for you."

"...what," Blaine says flatly, his inflection being tired of questions at this point.

Artie is all-too-happy to elaborate. "You treated me like you would anyone else who did that to you," he says. "It being half-blind with rage, but it still happened! Just now, when I told you all those things I did to you, you looked at me, and you didn't see some poor cripple who needs to be taken care of. All you saw was a dick who desperately needed to be punched, and you punched me," he finishes, winking at Blaine with his good eye. "It was magnificent!"

He does not even. There is no. Why would you.
"Whatever," Blaine says petulantly. "You are a dick that needs to be punched."

"Mostly," Artie nods, with a slight grin. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the plan. If you're ever inclined to do this again, I promise full disclosure from now on. I was going to tell you this time, but I actually kind of hoped it'd help you get over your awkwardness if I did it this way."

"Well," Blaine says. "It definitely did that. I can safely say no longer see you as something fragile in need of protection. I actually kind of still want to kick you."

"A perfectly natural impulse," Artie says casually.

Blaine rolls his eyes. "Yeah, well, we'll see how smug you are when Kurt finds out about—"

A hand latches tightly to his ankle. He looks down to find a wide-eyed Artie actually looking afraid. "No, dude, don't do that."

"Why shouldn't I?" Blaine challenges, crossing his arms.

"Because you don't know the whole story yet," Artie says simply. "The original plan was to get nice ladies to throw money at the sad cute thing, but…" He looks up at Blaine, his face completely sincere. "When I realized that you actually had a serious problem taking advantage of people like that…" he shrugs, "I came up with a new plan so you wouldn't have to."

"…oh," Blaine says, still not entirely convinced.

Artie rolls over onto his back and looks up at Blaine. "Scammers and jerks like those guys in the alleys are usually the first people I like to go after, because they deserve it the most. Plus, they're a pretty good source of plenty of guilt-free money in one place. The problem is that with high reward, comes high risk. I promised Kurt I wouldn't put you in danger, and I intended to keep that promise. But after hanging out with you today and seeing who you are… I took a guess and figured you'd much rather take a risk than take part in deceiving honest people." He folds his hands over his chest. "So… did I guess right?"

Blaine crosses his arms, wrangling his emotions and attempting to think about the question rationally. After a few moments, he has his answer. "…yeah, I guess you did," he says with a small smile.

The paralyzed boy beams back at him. "You're a good guy, B-Money. I'm kind of sad that you're so honest," he sighs, shaking his head. "You really did a great job today. We would make awesome partners in crime."

"After today," Blaine says with a note of trauma, "I think I'm going straight." He pauses for a second, and then adds. "You know, in a 'law-abiding citizen' sense."

Artie sits up and nudges Blaine's knee. "Come on, you know you liked it. You at least have to admit it was kind of exciting there at the end."

Blaine purses his lips. He doesn't really want to admit it, but… "Okay, maybe just a little," he says, his grin growing slightly wider.

The bandit smiles and raises his hands in a little victory dance, before…

"STOP, THIEVES!" a voice shouts in their general direction.
The two of them turn wide-eyed glances to each other.

"That's our cue," Artie says.

"Oh yeah," Blaine agrees. "Right behind you!"

With that, they grab the bags and scram.

Blaine winds up carrying most of the bags on their way back, simply because there's no real way for Artie to do it without either dragging them along the ground or blinding himself. In return, Artie makes sure the path in front of Blaine is as smooth as possible, bending a soft walkway into the soil wherever he goes.

The sun is just starting to set when they stop to take a rest by the river. "Did we really have to get this much stuff?" Blaine asks, sitting down on a small rock off the shore.

"Better to have something and not need it, than to need something and not have it," Artie says, bringing him a bowl of water, which he drinks greedily.

Blaine stares into the setting sun, and remembers something. "Oh yeah," he says, a hint of slyness in his voice. "You promised me we'd continue our talk after we finished in the village."

Artie winces. "Yeah, I did, didn't I?" He sighs, taking a moment to gather himself together. "Alright. Since I was such a jerk to you today, I'm giving you free reign. Ask me anything, and I'll answer with complete honesty."

Blaine takes a second to think of the question he wants to go for. Artie seems like a relatively decent guy, but Blaine doesn't like being deceived or mislead under any circumstance. He wants, maybe even needs to know that he can trust this guy again.

So he goes for broke. "Why won't you teach Kurt anything?"

Artie's head snaps around to look at him, his face hesitant. "Damn, dude," he whispers softly. "You don't play, do you?"

"I want to know your biggest secret," Blaine says calmly. "There's still this little nagging voice in the back of my head that says I should never trust you again."

Artie nods. "Okay. I just... it's kind of hard to explain."

He raises a small plateau and uses it to sit beside Blaine. It's a few moment before he speaks, his voice barely more than a whisper. "Have you ever had something you wished you could forget?"

Blaine doesn't have to think about that for very long.

...takes but a single glance at his son—at the panic in his eyes, at the blood that dries upon his lips, the bruises easing to the surface of his cheeks, his sweat-soaked hair, his tattered clothes—and the decision is made.

Blaine's eyes lock with his father's. It isn't even a split second. It feels like a lifetime...

"Yes," he says, voice a little raw.

Artie nods beside him, looking down at the river. There is another long pause, and then... "What if
I told you that you could?"

The ex-Prince's eyes snap to the ex-convict. "What?"

Artie steadfastly refuses to look at him, but he keeps on speaking. "When I told you that I couldn't talk about my parents… I meant that. Literally. I can't talk about them, because I don't know them. I don't remember them, I don't even remember what they looked like. And they're not the only thing…" he says, shaking his head. "There are… whole sections of my life that are just… blank. I barely remember anything before the… you know, incident."

Blaine shakes his head. "What, you mean, like amnesia?"

Now, Artie looks at him. "No," he says. "It's… different. Not all of the blank spots are together. I don't remember what I did to end up in prison, either. Yet I remember everything in-between. And like I said, it's kind of hard to explain, but… somehow, I know those memories are still in here," he continues, tapping his head. "They're just… blocked off. Stuck behind a big wall. You know?"

The ex-Prince shakes his head.

Artie sighs. "It's kind of like if my life story was written on a scroll, and someone spilled paint on it. The writing is technically still there, it's just covered up. And the weirdest part of all…" He takes a breath before continuing. "Somehow… I know I could get to those memories if I wanted to."

Blaine is taken aback, and makes no attempt to hide it. "So then… why don't you?"

The paralyzed boy stares him right in the eyes. "Because I remember remembering. Not the memories themselves, but… like… the feelings that came with them. There's… there's so much anger and betrayal and… and… guilt. Shame. There is something awful behind that wall and… and I'm afraid of it," he admits softly.

The former firebender barely has any idea what to say. He'd accuse the guy of lying if he wasn't right here in front of him, looking like he's about to break down.

"All that stuff Kurt doesn't know about me," Artie says, "he doesn't know it because I don't know it, and I don't want to." Suddenly, he thrusts both of his arms in front of him, causing the stone gloves Blaine remembers from earlier to fly out into his hands. "I don't know how or when or where I learned to use these, but I know that if I think about it, if I start picking and scratching at that wall, the whole thing could come tumbling down and I just… I don't think I could handle that. I did something very, very bad… I was bad. But I don't want to be that guy anymore," he says vehemently. "That's why I'm following Kurt around. I want to be good, I want to do good, and… and help people. You don't get much better than the Avatar. I'm not there yet—still kind of a jerk, actually—but I just… I know if I follow him around long enough, I can get there." He pauses, and lets out a breath. "So that's why," he finishes weakly.

Blaine can do nothing but sit and attempt to take it all in. He's never heard of anything like that before. He has no idea what could possibly do that to a person. His thoughts are many, and he isn't quite sure what to do with all of them. "It's…" he starts, but clamps his mouth shut. Artie looks at him calmly, silently beckoning him to go on. "It's less like someone spilled paint," he says, "and more like someone just took a brush and crossed things out."

Artie shrugs. "Maybe," he says, looking down. "I guess you think I'm crazy now, too, huh? Finn thinks I'm crazy. I do talk to the ground a lot…"
"No," Blaine says gently. "I don't think you're crazy. I think you're weird, but… not crazy."

The earthbender huffs out a short laugh. "Thanks, I guess."

"I just… I don't know if what you're doing is going to help in the long run," Blaine says. Artie shrugs again, and Blaine realizes he might want to take his own advice. It is at that point, sitting there in the fading afternoon sunlight, that it truly hits him—the two of them are incredibly different, and yet they couldn't be more alike.

Or, to put it more succinctly: he realizes that you don't need legs to run away.

The two of them sit in silent camaraderie, listening to the sound of the river and the bugs starting to come out as the day dies. Despite the earthbender's earlier proclamation… that is the moment that Blaine and Artie become friends.

"Guess we should get going," Blaine says. "If they have to come looking for us, they'll probably be pissed."

"A Mercedes on warpath is a not a Mercedes you want to witness," Artie says with a small smile. They head back.

"This…" Kurt says, digging through the many shopping bags. "This is an embarrassment of riches. I knew there was a reason I liked you," he says brightly to Artie, who smiles and gives him a thumbs up.

"Dude," Finn says, taking a look at Artie's fairly prominent black eye. "What happened to you?" he asks.

Artie looks at Blaine.

Blaine looks at Artie.

And together, they give the answer exactly as they rehearsed it.

"I fell off a cart."

"He fell off a cart."

A/N: Well, that was an ordeal. I always underestimate the length required for action chapters. ~_~;; Oh well. NEXT CHAPTER: While You Were Out – Everything that was supposed to be in this chapter that wasn't, according to the last preview. XP Please review if you have any thoughts, as this was another one of those chapters that required a slightly insane amount of work.
Finn angrily lashes the water at the cliffside, smashing free a few shards of rock and carving a small groove into the granite. The nearby waterfall makes the little oasis perfect for stress relief: it's super-relaxing, 'cause of the waterfall sounds, and it provides a steady supply of bendable water for him to channel his frustration through. With a deep breath, Finn freezes the water and hurls it at the cliff, breaking off more loose stone and making an ultra-satisfying shattering sound.

"Still firmly in 'sulk' mode, I see," Kurt comments idly as he wanders down a hill to join Finn.

"Oh," the tall boy pouts. "Hey. Sorry if I was... you know, being noisy or anything."

"You weren't," Kurt says simply. "Care to have a little lady chat?" he says, and it is only now that Finn notices that he is carrying two cups of steaming liquid. "I've got some Jasmine Tea for you. Freshly brewed, straight from the vine," he says, wafting the steam towards Finn to entice him.

Finn looks a little uneasy. "Does it have to be a lady chat? Why can't it be a bro chat?"

With a still-prominent pout, Finn drags all six-feet-whatever of himself over to sit down with his stepbrother and sip tea like a friggin' old lady. He flops down onto the rock with a little more force than necessary (perfect sitting height for Kurt isn't quite so perfect for Finn), and sulkily takes his tea and begins sipping on it.

The two slurp in silence for a few moments. It doesn't take long for Finn's initial reluctance to melt away as the brew soothes his spirit. It helps that the tea is actually really good. And totally calming.

"So I assume you are still feeling a bit put-out over the Artie/Blaine expedition?" Kurt tries after a few moments.

The scowl returns to Finn's face with a vengeance. "No," Finn replies petulantly. "If stupid Fartie and stupid Blaine want to go off and have stupid adventures, well, they can just ride off into the stupid sunset together for all I care."

"Well," Kurt deadpans. "I'm convinced. Now all we have to do is get you to believe that, and we'll be set."

Finn's slurping is almost aggressive enough to be an attack at this point. "Whatever," he says.

Kurt sighs and sets his tea down. "Finn, this isn't going to be very helpful if you keep denying everything. Why are you so upset? Are you jealous because Artie picked Blaine over you? Because he kind of has a point—you do tend to stick out."

Finn stares into the steaming liquid like he's trying to divine something from the leaves. "It's not just that," he grumbles. "It's like… okay, maybe I'm a little jealous. But it's more like… I don't know. Artie was my only real friend, since you guys won't let Sam come with us. I thought I could always count on him to stick by me, you know?"

Kurt regards him frankly. "Finn, you know that isn't true. Artie isn't your only friend."

"Yes he is!" Finn says, standing up and accidentally sloshing some tea out of his cup. Kurt, ever the quick-draw, bends it back into Finn's cup before it hits the ground.

"You have me and Mercedes," Kurt says.

"You're not the same," Finn says dismissively. To his credit, he recognizes his rudeness pretty quickly. "I mean… I'm sorry. It's not that you're, like, not good enough or anything, it's just… our relationship is… different, you know? I can't talk to you about the same kind of stuff I can with Artie. And Mercedes friggin' hates me," he grumbles.

"She doesn't hate you," Kurt says, slightly exasperated.

"Yes, she does," Finn says.

"She just has… more reasons to dislike you than most people," the Avatar tries diplomatically.

"She hates me, and she'll probably always hate me," Finn sighs. "That kind of stuff isn't something you just… get over."

"But it's not your fault. It wasn't you that did it, and I know she recognizes that. Granted, it did take
"I don't know," Finn sighs. "I just… I know it's selfish, but I kind of thought Artie would stick by me even if no one else would, even if it was just because he felt like he owed me." He looks out towards the waterfall, unable to look at Kurt. "Sometimes… I have this dream where I wake up, and you guys are just… gone. No note, no anything. You just finally decide that… that I'm not worth all the effort and you ditch me. And that scares the crap out of me," he admits, his voice wavering. "Because I know it could happen. It almost did."

Kurt curses his natural ability to sympathize with people, because he can already feel some Finn's anguish, his regret, and his incredibly profound fear sloshing over the edges of the tall boy, spilling onto Kurt whether he wants it or not. "Finn," he says, trying to keep his voice even. "We aren't going to leave you."

"Even if I screw up again?" Finn asks pointedly, turning to Kurt. "Because I probably will. I'm not really good at… you know, life," he says, smiling just a little even as he sniffs.

"You're learning," Kurt says, simply. "I think that's all anyone can ask from a person. We make mistakes, but we learn from them, and we move on. We become better. So yes, Finn, even if you screw up again, as long as you're willing to learn from your screw-ups, we'll stick by you. I'll stick by you," he promises.

Finn draws in a deep breath through his nose. Kurt isn't quite sure if Finn really believes it yet, but for the moment, he seems to have been soothed. "Thanks, Kurt," he says, giving him a small smile. Then he lashes at the waterfall again. "You're… welcome?" Kurt tries. "Are you still mad?"

"Just a little," Finn says. "I'm working on it."

The Avatar finishes the remainder of his tea and rises to stand beside his stepbrother. "Finn, Blaine isn't stealing Artie from you, and Artie isn't taking Blaine as his new BFF. It's just one of those male bonding rituals that I haven't the slightest understanding of. I actually kind of appreciate Artie making an effort to draw him in like this, even if he does have obvious ulterior motives. Besides, you know what happens when Artie gets a scheme in his head," Kurt teases, bumping Finn with his shoulder. "After today, Blaine might never want to hang out with him again."

"Good point," Finn admits, whipping his hand at the waterfall one more time for good measure. "Alright, I think I'm good. Wanna play Snowball?" the tall boy asks with a grin.

Kurt lifts his eyebrows and smiles fiendishly. "You dare challenge me after what happened last time? Foolish boy," he says, with an evil laugh. "Prepare to be schooled!"

Finn just laughs right along with him, freezing a small part of the pond's surface and setting the game into motion…

'Snowball' is a fairly simple game waterbenders play. The rules are simple: with at least two people on a given body of water, one creates a snowball and throws it to the other. Without bending the ball itself, the other player must use waterbending to send the snowball back. If the ball melts, stops completely, or breaks on your turn, you lose. It can be a surprisingly intricate game when played between skilled opponents, requiring finely tuned instincts about momentum and physics to keep the ball moving without damaging it.
Of course, this is Kurt and Finn, so Kurt wins pretty much every game. It's kind of unfair; he IS the Avatar, after all, and had pretty much reached master-level waterbending by his early teens. But Finn still has fun playing, and even now, Kurt can see him slowly improving with each game they play.

The snowball is heading towards him in a fairly gentle arc—Finn really needs to work on his strategy if he ever wants to win this; the steeper the angle, the harder it is to send the ball back without breaking it. Kurt sends a ribbon of water for the ball to roll on, freezing it just as the ball lands and using it as a track to guide it back towards Finn. Finn responds with a crescent moon-shaped ramp of ice, sending it low towards Kurt. Kurt conjures up a wave just high enough for it to roll on, and then makes a thin sheet of ice to keep it going. Just when it seems the ball is about to roll to a stop, Kurt whips the ice from below and sends the ball soaring upwards. Up, up, and up…

Finn has to shield his eyes from the sun as he tries to follow it.

Which mostly means he gets marginally less snow in his eyes when the thing lands right on his head.

"Okay," Finn says, spitting out a small mouthful of snow. "So that's me zero, and you… twenty six?"

"Sounds about right," Kurt nods. "Ready to call it a day?"

Finn purses his lips. "Maybe one more," he says, creating another snowball, which he launches via a spiral of water he quickly bends from the pond. The keyword there is 'quickly'—generally speaking, mid-level waterbenders have to choose between speed and accuracy. Kurt's always been taught to choose accuracy first—practicing accuracy will eventually create speed on its own, so you no longer have to choose.

Either way, Finn hasn't gotten the memo, and as a result, his snowball goes wide, right through and behind the waterfall.

"…whoops," he says, scratching at his neck. "Well… okay, maybe just a little break. I am kind of hungry."

A low, rumbling growl echoes through the pond and the surrounding area, shaking a few stones off the cliff face.

"…please tell me that was your stomach," Kurt says.

Finn's wide eyes and pale face are a louder 'no' than he could ever hope to speak with his mouth.

The sound happens again, sounding equal parts like a roar, a croak, and a snort. This one is even louder, making it all too easy to pinpoint the waterfall as the source. Both Water Tribesmen turn around slowly, both eager and full of dread to find out what they might have just woken up.

It pokes its head through the waterfall, bleary-eyed and blinking. A tremendous frog, easily the size of their carriage, sporting a bulbous, blubbery body underneath a thick hide, surprisingly large lips, and a sort of 'mustache' formed from four whisker-like appendages sticking out just above its mouth.

"…what's that?" Finn whispers, slightly panicked. "Is that a giant frog? Do we like giant frogs? Do giant frogs like us?"

The thing spots them and croaks with enough force to send waves through the pond water.
"I don't think it likes us," Kurt says.

With a single great leap forward, the enormous amphibian crashes into the pond proper right between them, splashing a small water wall towards both boys, which they quickly bend aside. Fully out of the waterfall cave, the monstrous animal's sharp, clawed feet, short tail, and distinctive black stripes can be seen.

"Oh," Kurt says, voice strangely light. "Blaine told us about this. It's a Poison Dragon-Frog."

"Poison?" Finn balks. "Dragon? FROG?"

"Yes, all of those things," the Avatar confirms. "The good news is that its poison isn't that deadly…"

"Oh, thank Tui," Finn breathes.

Kurt winces. Finn really should've let him finish. "…the bad news is that the poison itself isn't supposed to kill you. Just stun you so that it can swallow you whole and digest you over the course of several days."

Finn looks ready to keel over right then and there. "This country sucks!" he shouts petulantly.

PDF takes offense to this, and leaps towards Finn.

"Oh, no, no, no," Kurt says. "Bad froggy! You stay away from him!" He bends a large wave in front of the frog and freezes it into an ice wall. Froggy has no trouble with this, however, and smashes through the barrier with ease using nothing more than its bulk. It's now within jumping distance of Finn, and Kurt isn't sure if he should try and get its attention or just knock Finn out of the way.

"Oh, crap," Finn says. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it! I love the Fire Nation! I just hate giant poison frogs—UHHH, I MEAN…"

PDF jumps again, and Kurt makes the decision; as it flies through the air, Kurt bends a small but forceful wave right behind Finn, knocking him forward into the water. He then forms a board of ice underneath his brother and rapidly skims him along the surface, just barely snatching him out from under the massive body of the offended amphibian before it lands.

"Come on," Kurt says, snatching Finn off the ice board and helping him stand up. "Go get Mercedes," he instructs. "I'll distract Warts-and-All while you make your getaway."

Finn shakily stands on the surface of the water (great, now he can't even walk on the stuff right). "But dude… I can't just leave you here to fight this stupid thing by yours—"

The water underneath Finn bulges suddenly and launches him clean out of the pond. "Yes, you can," Kurt says. "I'll be fine! Just go!"

PDF turns around, lashing its tail in the water and looking torn over which of them it wants to eat first.

"Go!" Kurt repeats. It takes far too much repetition to drill an order into Finn's head.

The lanky waterbender hesitates only a moment longer before bolting. PDF bolts after him, but Kurt is having none of that shit. With a series of rapid hand movements, he bends up a titanic tentacle of water and uses it to smack down Mister Toadsworth mid-hop. That gets its attention.
The thing jumps up and spins around, facing Kurt directly, and growls as best as a giant monster frog can (which turns out to be pretty darn good).

"You get one chance," Kurt says, jutting his chin at the beast. "Back off now, and escape unscathed. Because you ain't touching this. You can keep your warts to yourself, thank you very— wait. Is it frogs that give warts? Oh, no, that's toads! Silly me. Nevermind," he finishes with a laugh.

Froggy does not listen. Instead, it opens its mouth and fires its tongue at the Avatar like a pink, stretchy cannonball. He just barely manages to intercept it with a water-whip before it licks him.

"Eww," Kurt groans. "I don't know what's been in there, and I don't want to find out. Keep it in your mouth. No tongue on the first date!"

The Water Tribesman begins to rapidly spin his arms around, sending a rapid series of razor-sharp water ribbons looping out towards the frog. The stupid thing just tanks the first few hits, before jumping over the rest, aiming to squash Kurt flat. The Avatar is one step ahead of the amphibian, however, and launches himself on a waterspout to land on the rock wall beside the waterfall. Stone quickly crawls its way up from the surface to wrap around his feet, holding him sideways. Firmly fastened to the wall, he takes the opportunity to jam his hands into the stone and heave several square rock blocks about half the size of Kurt himself right at PDF's head.

PDF isn't much for dodging, but apparently, it isn't much for hurting, either. The blocks break against its head and the stupid thing barely blinks.

"Thick skinned," Kurt comments idly. "I can respect that."

Another literal tongue-lashing is Froggy's response to that. Kurt breaks free of the rock footholds and falls just in time to see his spot on the cliff get smacked with the frog's attack. The tongue almost drips on him, which is just not even remotely acceptable.

"Alright, you walking, croaking vat of hallucinogens," the Avatar growls. "It's time to break out the Firebending. Hope you like it hot…"

He leaps up from the water, punching two plus-sized fireballs at the thing's face and finishing with a stream of flame from his foot before landing again.

It's a slight improvement. Froggy has gone from not bothered in the slightest to mildly annoyed. The hide over his face is blackened slightly, but the stupid thing still doesn't seem any worse for wear.

"Oh my La," Kurt sighs, exasperated. "You're thicker than Finn for crying out loud! What does it take to get through to you?"

He expects the tongue this time, but he does not expect the idea that comes along with it. Froggy has unintentionally just answered his question. With lightning-quick reflexes, Kurt jumps up just in time to see the poisoned tongue penetrate the pondwater he was just standing on. With a slightly fiendish smile, Kurt uses the moment to freeze the water, wrapping the PDF's primary poison-delivery system in a thick chunk of ice. When it tries to withdraw it this time, it's shocked to find that it's stuck.

That gets under its skin. Froggy's eyes momentarily go wide with panic.

"Gotcha now!" Kurt says, landing beside the fleshy pink appendage and happily blasting it with a
twin-palmed fireburst.

PDF roars with outrage as it jumps backwards on pure instinct. The sudden movement isn't enough to pull its tongue free of the ice, but it is enough to break off a large chunk of said ice, allowing Froggy to draw its scorched licker back into its mouth. Unfortunately for it, it doesn't seem to be expecting the big frozen block that comes along with it, and quickly finds itself with a mouthful of ice that it doesn't really have the tools (IE, teeth) to deal with.

"I warned you about that tongue," Kurt tuts. "Abuse it and lose it. Maybe now you'll think twice about forcing yourself on people, eh Kafrogsky?"

If only that disgusting oaf could be here to witness that epic ice burn. Oh well.

PDF doesn't take long to realize something is amiss. Unfortunately, it's not really equipped with the mental faculties to come up with any kind of solution to the small igloo plugging up its food-hole, so it settles for leaping around in a blind panic. Well, partially blind—he does seem to be targeting Kurt at least some of the time. The Avatar easily skates out from under the bulk of the bouncing beastie, attempting to come up with a solution to this new problem. Does he just bend the ice out of the PDF's mouth and hope that it is thankful enough to leave on its own, or does he just wait for it to tire itself out and then free it? He doesn't really want to kill the thing. It's just a dumb animal.

Oh, heavens. He should have known better than to even think about dumb animals, because he is apparently just in-tune with the universe enough to summon Finn with his mind. "Kurt," he says loudly, coming downhill towards him. "I got her! She's right behind m—"

"Finn, look out!"

Too late.

The enormous creature lands right on top of Finn, completely encasing him in blubber and flattening the poor Water Tribesman right in front of Kurt's horrified eyes.

Okay, he takes it back. Froggy is going down hard.

The stupid thing leaps up quickly, apparently not entirely aware that it even hit anything, so at least Kurt can see that Finn is in one piece. He launches himself out of the pond with a geyser of water, soaring towards his fallen stepbrother and passing the PDF in mid-air. As a 'fuck-you' present for smooching his only sort-of-sibling, Kurt forms a highly explosive fireball and swings it into the monstrous amphibian's mouth as he passes, blasting the ice block into pieces and hopefully giving that stupid tongue another well-deserved singeing.

The Avatar lands gracefully beside Finn's prone body. "Finn!" he shouts, starting to reach towards the boy, but quickly withdrawing his hand when he notices the slight sheen covering Finn's... everything. Oh, ewww, he's covered in frog slime.

"I'm here, I'm here!" Mercedes says, riding a wave of earth into the clearing. "What'd I mis—uh-oh," she says, spotting the downed Finn.

Kurt stands up and turns to face Froggy. The animal looks angrier than ever, stomping its gigantic feet and growling at Kurt from its slightly bloodied and steaming mouth. Kurt is unfazed. "Mercedes," he says, low. "If you would be so kind, please remove my brother from immediate danger while I wrangle us some frog legs." He then begins a slow, measured stride towards the monster toad, just begging it to try something.

"I'm all over it," the earthbender says. She digs her feet into the earth and makes sweeping motions
with her hand, wrapping Finn in a small, protective casing of rock. She then pulls her hands back, causing Finn to slide right up beside her. "Chill out here with me, tall boy. Let's watch my boo do what he do."

PDF seems slightly afraid of Kurt now, and rightly so. The Hummel son has Froggy in his sights, but he isn't doing anything. Instead, he seems to be waiting for Froggy himself to make the first move. This is a dangerous place to be when facing a waterbender—counterattacks are their specialty. Poor predictable PDF just isn't capable of understanding that, and soon enough, he jumps, aiming to give Kurt the same treatment Finn got. Kurt stomps the ground, thrusting his hands out to the side and forming a large, rectangular slab of stone beneath him. He then thrusts them upwards, causing a spire of rock to lift the slab up from underneath, forming the fulcrum of an enormous stone see-saw. With that taken care of, Kurt leaps to the other side and lowers it, just waiting for gravity to take its course.

As is only natural, Froggy lands on the raised side of the see-saw, launching Kurt high, high, high into the air. High enough to where the monstrous creature has time enough to notice he is nowhere to be seen and become quite confused. But not quite high enough to give it time to leave the teeter-totter—he comes back down with a mighty battle cry, smashing into his side of the see-saw with all the force his earthbending can muster. As it turns out, that amount of force happens to be 'quite a lot': the enormous stone pivot is pretty much flipped off its axis by the blow, and Froggy is sent soaring and croaking into the sky and over the horizon.

"Damn," Mercedes says. "I do not want to be where that big-ass thing comes down."

Kurt doesn't even take a second to revel in his victory, instead rushing straight over to Finn and smashing open his protective covering. "Finn, oh La, please be okay, I… ewww, I forgot, you're still all slimed up," he says. Swift, sure hands summon up plenty of water from the pond, and soon, Finn is thoroughly cleansed of all residues from the monster toad. Kurt gently cups at Finn's face, shaking him just slightly to try and jar him back to the waking world. "Finn? Finn, please say something." The Avatar is immensely relieved to see that his stepbrother is definitely still breathing, and seems largely unharmed other than the fact that he isn't responding to anything. But he still isn't responding to anything.

"Finn, please. Give me something, anything," Kurt begs, seeming on the verge of tears.

Mercedes knows for a fact it's hard to resist Kurt when he gets like that. She smiles to herself when the tall boy proves not even he is immune to it.

The waterbender groans softly and opens his eyes. "k'rerrr?" he slurs.

"Oh, thank La. Oh, thank you so much. Thank you, thank you, thank you," Kurt breathes diving on top of Finn and hugging him for all he's worth. Finn, for his part, blearily reaches up and wraps his giant arms around his stepbrother, smiling that crooked smile of his, which seems just… a little more crooked than normal.

"Hey, big boy," Mercedes says, as Kurt is far too busy being overjoyed to speak at the moment. Finn turns slightly swimmy eyes towards her. "How you feelin'?"

Pretty colors floating all around, singing to his skin through the music of sweet, silky slime. Gentle frosting of happy hands sweeten his face with softness. Sound! Someone is saying stuff.

S is a cool sound. SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS. S!
Light becomes where light was not before. It's a Kurt! A Kurt is in front of top of him. Finn is ecstatic, but his thinky thingy is not communicating that so well to his do-ey stuff. As such, his saying is not so as it should be. But there is now a smiling Kurt, so he has done goodness.

Now there is a Kurt in other places! Kurts are funny like that. They can be lots of places and things and people at once. Finn likes Kurts, so Finn gives a happy hug to the closest one he can find, which is this Kurt.

Life is a happy, happy place.

Sound some more! A giant Mercedes squishes the villagers and destroys the countryside. It's cool, because that's just what she does, man. She talks to him in rainbow butterflies, and her hair is bright, snakey-sunshine flowers. The fish of the sky swim around her head, worshiping her majesty so she doesn't speak a flying lion-goat to eat them. Her words are super awesome like that.

The rainbow butterflies land on his cheeks. They ask him how he is feeling.

ANSWER! AN ANSWER! OH, FINN SO KNOWS THIS ONE! PICK FINN! PICK FINN!

"…what the Hills are you raising your hand for?" Mercedes asks.

Finn ignores her and continues to wave his hand in the air. Almost like he wants her to…

"Finn?" she says, calling on him.

He puts his hand down and smiles. "I feel… awwwwwwesooooommmme."

Ah. Now she gets it. "Kurt, honey," she says as she gently pries him away from the taller boy's chest, "I know you're happy he's alive, but we've got another problem on our hands."

"Hmm?" Kurt says. "What's wrong?"

She points at Finn, who is casually tracing a pattern in the air with his fingers. The pattern loops and spirals all around, growing gradually closer to his face until it ends… in his right eye. Which he pokes his finger into without even flinching.

"Boy is trippin' balls," Mercedes says helpfully.

"Oh," Kurt says, wincing slightly. "Well, I suppose we know what that slime was now… good thing I didn't get any on me," he sighs. "So… now what do we do?"

"I guess we take care of him until it wears off," she says. "Hopefully, it shouldn't be more than a few hours."

Finn takes his finger out of his eye, stares at it for a moment, and puts it in his mouth.

"We can only hope," Kurt sighs, plucking his stepbrother's digits out of the danger zone and calmly attempting to heft him to an upright position. "Okay, up we go, come on, Finn!"

"Don't wanna go up," Finn says seriously, becoming total dead weight. "Sun's up there. It'll eat me!"

"I'll protect you," Kurt says, equally serious (or close enough).

"Kick-ass!" Finn says, finally taking some initiative in the getting up process and making Kurt's
life much easier. "You show it. You show that… that stupid, big, stupid ball of bright. You'll kick it out! It'll be… a total eclipse of the Kurt!" he announces happily.

Kurt finally gets the enormous boy into a position where he can shoulder his weight. Mercedes moves in to keep him on his other side. "Ooooh-wee," she says, slightly impressed. "You are all the way out there."

Finn looks distressed. "No! I'm too far out! I might… I might float away!" He clutches to her tightly. "Quick, pull me down!"

"You are down," Mercedes sighs.

"Don't let me go!" he pleads. "I'm too nice for space. I'll never make it out there."

"Oh, this will just be the longest of afternoons, I can already tell," Kurt sighs.

He isn't wrong.

"Finn, stop it. That's not food."

"No, Finn, there is no such thing as 'rainbowbending.' If there was, I assure you, I'd know about it."

"There is no such thing as 'thoughtbending' either."

"I am not bending your thoughts!"

"Because you're saying everything you think out loud!"

"Finn, do you not understand? Your mouth is moving. I can hear you."

"Stop that! You can't fly! How did you even get up there?"

"No, Finn, I don't speak 'midget.' You'll have to talk to them yourself."

"Well, maybe if you called them something less offensive than 'midgets,' they wouldn't be so hostile!"

"You are not the Last Hairbender. Nor are you the first."
"My hair is not made of snakes."

"Yes, I suppose that is just what the snakes would want me to say. If there were, in fact, snakes."

"Oh, the snakes and the little people are friends now?"

"I warned you about calling them midgets! Now you'll just have to stay up there until they calm down."

"Finn! For the love of La, I already told you, you can't fl—"

"No, you didn't."

"That did not count as flying! You have to go in a direction other than 'down!'"

"FINE! Okay, fine, you flew! For one-and-a-half seconds, straight into the ground! Congratulations, I'm sure the airbenders are on their way to recruit you as we speak."

"Airbenders! Not Hairbenders! We've been over this."

"I told you that you weren't the last one."

"Yes, it's nice not to be alone in the cold, dark universe."

"Yes, it's good to be loved."

"...I love you too, Finn."

"I'm sure Drizzle loves you. He just can't express it like you and I can."
"Finn Hudson, I swear by the moon and the sea, if you try to kiss that moose one more time…"

Later that day, Kurt is draped over a rock, thoroughly spent and nearly boneless with exhaustion.

"No, Mercedes," the earthbender mocks from near the carriage, where she sits and files her nails. "I'll be fine! I can handle Finn myself, you just relax!"

The Avatar groans, turning over to look at Finn, who is seated against a tree and staring at nothing in particular. He's still a little out-of-it, but not nearly as bad as he was before. "Finn?"

"Yeah?" Finn says, not looking at Kurt.

"Are you feeling better now?" Kurt asks.

Finn nods his head. "Yeah, I… I think most of it's worked out of my system or whatever, just… a few weird things left. I mean, I can't taste color anymore, and Mercedes doesn't create a new universe every time she speaks. So I guess that's progress. It's just…" he trails off.

"What is it?" Kurt asks.

"Are… are you singing?" Finn asks back.

"…no," Kurt says.

"Mercedes?" Finn tries.

"Not me," she replies.

"Someone… someone is singing. I can hear them," he smiles, his eyes lighting up. "I've never heard anything like it. It's beautiful…"

Kurt rolls his eyes. "I'm sure it is. Honestly, as loopy as you've been today, sometimes you just seemed so darn happy that I kind of wished I'd gotten slimed."

"Maybe then, you could hear the music too?" Finn asks blithely.

"Sure, Finn," Kurt allows.

Finn just grins brightly.

A moment of silence passes, before Mercedes breaks the silence. "Why don't you share it with us?" she says to Finn.

The tall boy is confused. "Huh?"

Mercedes gives him a patient smile. "The song, honey. Since we can't hear it, why don't you sing it for us?"

A hesitant look flits over Finn's face. "I… dunno. I'm not… a very good singer."

"Oh, poo," Kurt says. "You're no trained expert, but you can carry a tune just fine."

"You think so?" Finn asks, like he's a little awed to be getting a compliment.
"Let's find out," Mercedes says. "Sing for us."

Finn takes a deep breath, steeling his expression. "Okay."

Kurt isn't sure what he expects to hear. Some kind of drug-induced, pitch-challenged nightmare, or possibly the sound of the rocks whispering to the beetles. He doesn't get those. Instead, Finn opens his mouth and... though he doesn't use any actual words, what comes out seems for all intents and purposes to be an actual melody.

An unexpectedly nice one.

"That _is_ pretty," Kurt says, sitting up.

Finn smiles, and keeps on singing.

"Not bad at all, big boy," Mercedes grins.

"I don't get it, though," Kurt says. "I can't hear anything. And this isn't any song I've heard before. This... this has to be some kind of... drug-induced fever tune. Doesn't it?"

Mercedes shrugs. "Who knows?"

Since no answer is forthcoming at the moment, they sit in silence and listen to the song in Finn's head... heart... bloodstream, wherever the frog juice still remains. It's actually a very calming song, the melody gentle and lilting, soothing and sweet with just a hint of sadness and longing. Kurt soon finds himself so caught up in it that he doesn't notice Finn slowly trailing off until he stops singing altogether.

Kurt glances over to his stepbrother to find the tall boy fast asleep against the tree, a small, serene smile on his face.

"Look," Kurt says.

Mercedes glances over to the sleeping giant, and Kurt practically sees her heart melt right in front of him. "Awww," she says, pausing a second, before adding, "You know, I'll never understand how something that big can looks so darn cute."

The Avatar figures now is as good a time as any to broach the subject. "You're not... still mad at him, are you?"

Mercedes gives him a frank look. "Why?"

He shrugs. "Finn thinks you are. He thinks you hate him."

The earthbender rolls her eyes. "I don't _hate_ him. I don't always _like_ him, but... look, I thought we agreed that we all had the right to be as mad as we wanted for as long as we wanted."

"True," Kurt says with a nod. "Which is why I asked. I just want to know."

Mercedes regards him coolly. "...yes," she says, after a moment. Her honesty is appreciated, but it still stings just a little. "But not near as much as before," she adds. "I think I'm getting there. It's just... it's a little harder for me, you know?"

The Avatar gives her a small smile. "I know. But he's trying."

Mercedes returns it. "I'll give him that."
The conversation drifts off, and Kurt spends the rest of the afternoon with Finn's strange melody drifting through the breeze in his head...

"Honey, you keep pacing like that, you're gonna dig a ditch right to the middle of the earth," Mercedes says.

"It's almost sunset!" Kurt says, pointing to the sky. "And they aren't back yet! I have a right to be nervous, okay? Oh, La, this was such a terrible idea. I never should have let him out of my sight. I never should have let him go anywhere with Artie." He resumes his steady march back and forth.

"Dude, chill," Finn says, following the Avatar with his eyes. "Please. I think I'm pretty much better now, but you're like… hypnotizing me."

"Oh, really?" Kurt rolls his eyes and turns to Finn. "You're getting smaaarrrtt!" he says in his best 'hypnotic' voice. The Avatar stares at him expectantly. "Well?"

Finn shrugs uneasily. "Uhh… don't think it worked."

"Well, clearly you aren't hypnotized enough," Kurt says, resuming his pacing. "Ugh. How much more time do we have to wait before we go looking for them?" And then, he screeches to a halt. "Wait, I know the answer to that question. And the answer is none."

He launches off in the direction of the river, but Mercedes moves to intercept him. "We said we'd wait."

"So?" Kurt says. "We say lots of things we don't mean. Yesterday morning, I said your hair looked fine."

The earthbender's glare goes stone-cold. "I know you're feeling a little distraught, so I'm gonna let that slide," she says, her voice low. "What I mean is—if we go off and start looking for them early, we might miss them getting back."

"This isn't early!" Kurt says, pointing to the sky again. "You said sunset! Sun?" He points to the sun. "Set!" He gestures to the horizon. They aren't too far apart. "Seems to me like there's no time like the present!"

"Did someone ask for presents?" a familiar voice calls out.

"Blaine!" Kurt says, all but knocking Mercedes over in his haste to get to the boy. He's overjoyed to see him again after only a few hours of separation… at least, until he actually sees him. His jaw drops.

Blaine grins at him merrily from beneath the brim of an enormous red hat. The odd pair of pink glasses he is wearing hangs low on his nose, revealing a casual squint of amusement in his eyes. The gigantic overcoat hanging off of his shoulders, the pink feather boa wrapped around his neck, and the larger feather in his cap essentially make him look like some sort of freakish, shady bird salesman. The flamingo cane just puts the whole ensemble over the top.

"What… how… you… you look like what would happen if a high-end clothing store swallowed a flock of migrating ostrich horses and vomited on someone," Kurt says, horrified.

"What?" Blaine says. "You don't like it?"

"He's just jealous," Artie says, sliding into view. "Not everyone can pull off the Pink Pimp with
such aplomb." Artie and Blaine give each other a high-low five (high for Artie, low for Blaine).

Kurt's jaw drops further, because Artie is even worse. "Okay, have you recently become magnetic? Because if you haven't, there is no excuse for wearing that much metal."

Artie scoffs at Kurt from beneath the large, flame-patterned cloth holding back his hair. The motion causes the ridiculous number of necklaces, bracelets, and other assorted shiny things he is wearing to clink against each other. He pulls down the dark glasses he is wearing over his normal ones to look at the Avatar directly. "Don't hate..." he says.

"...demonstrate!" Blaine finishes, tossing him a bag of goodies with a bright grin.

Kurt needs only to take a glance inside, and suddenly, his voracious appetite for fashion reawakens with a tremendous roar. He practically starts salivating on the spot.

"And there's plenty more where that came from," Blaine says, stepping aside to reveal an assortment of shopping bags. The Avatar immediately sets upon them with what could almost be called frenzy. "This..." he says, digging through the many shopping bags. "This is an embarrassment of riches. I knew there was a reason I liked you," he says brightly to Artie, who smiles and gives him a thumbs up.

Finn chooses that moment to join them, starting a conversation that Kurt tunes out utterly in favor of surveying the bounteous fashion feast before him. Color, texture, pattern, fabric, stitching, all of it is clearly top of the line, done by skilled hands with only the utmost care. He almost feels like crying. It's like presenting a painter with a hundred colors never before seen by man.

"Kurt?" Blaine asks, seeing his expression and assuming the worst. "Are you okay?"

"I'm wonderful," he sighs. "And so are you. And you, I guess," he says towards Artie.

"Wow," Mercedes says. "So I take it your little shopping trip went well?"

Blaine and Artie share a brief look. "Better than expected, actually," Blaine says evenly. "As is to be expected from the Master," Artie says with a cocky grin.

"Well, congratulations," Kurt says. "Now get out of those ridiculous outfits so we can work on your actual disguises."

"Ridiculous?" Artie scoffs. "Ain't nothing ridiculous about my bling."

"You can't be serious," Kurt says.

Blaine steps over beside the paralyzed boy. "Now, Kurt," he says diplomatically. "I believe we have already discussed our stance on 'hating.' Artie is looking quite 'fly' at the moment. As am I, if I do say so myself." He pulls at his shirt, causing a ripple to run down the fabric.

"We ballin'," Artie nods, crossing his arms.

Oh, heavens. Kurt sighs. Mercedes looks like she's fighting off laughter, and Finn is back in his place of petulance again. "Oh, dear La. He's turned you. I should have known this was a bad idea."

"Is something the matter, Kurt?" Blaine asks with a sly grin. "Artie is just helping me get in touch with my inner gangster. I'm 'thug!'" he says with an absolutely ridiculous expression.

The Avatar huffs a breath out through his nose. "You," he says, pointing at Artie, "are a corrupting
influence."

"Blaine, honey," Mercedes says gently, as she pulls him over closer to camp. "You are about the furthest thing from gangster I think I've ever seen. Now, let me tell you why…"

Kurt grabs a few bags, having to fight very hard to resist the urge to stick his head inside of them as he walks. "You two grab the rest."

Finn sulkily moves over to the bags and snatches a few of them up. The anger in the motion is not lost on Artie. "Okay, who put buzzard bees in your breakfast?" the earthbender asks.

"Nobody," Finn sneers. "So how'd your super-awesome day with your new best friend go?"

Artie quirks an eyebrow at Finn, lowering his shades again. "Uhhh, Finn? You know this is like the second or third time Blaine and I have been alone with each other, like, ever, right?"

"Yeah, well," Finn continues. "I guess some people just hit it off."

Artie rolls his eyes. "Come on, dude. Are you really gonna act like this? You know you're still my dawg."

Finn puts the bags down and crosses his arms. "Well, right now I kind of feel like I've been put outside because I peed on the rug too many times."

The earthbender looks at Finn plainly. "I can't believe you really think I'm that shallow. That I'd just dump you because something shiny and new came along after everything we've been through."

The put-out look on Finn's face eases just a bit.

"Have a seat," Artie says.

Finn doesn't move.

So the earthbender bends the dirt from beneath his feet with a sweep, landing him on his butt.

"Ow, dude!" Finn says.

"I said 'have a seat.' We're gonna iron this out right now," he says calmly. "Now, you look at me. Look at who I am right now, and think about the guy you met when you got locked up."

Finn looks down. "…pretty big difference…"

"You damn straight!" Artie says. "The only reason that busted, pathetic, sorry-ass fool is even still breathing is because of you. I don't forget shit like that, okay?"

"But…" Finn shakes his head. "When you guys got—"

Artie silences him with a hand. "I know. And I was pissed. But after a while, things got a little clearer, and… the way I see it, you fucked up. There's no denying that. But I know what fucking up is like, okay? And to be honest, if they had decided to leave you, I probably would've gone with them. But here's the big difference—I would've come back."

The taller boy's eyes go wide. "You would've left Kurt?"

The paralyzed boy shrugs. "Kurt's a big boy, he can take care of himself."
"But he's the freaking Avatar, dude," Finn says.

"Yeah, I know. But that doesn't matter," Artie says without hesitating. "All that matters is that after you healed me up, I looked you right in the eye and said 'for life.' I don't know how it might work at the North Pole, but in the Lower Ring, you don't say that unless you mean it."

Finn is slightly gob smacked. "Are you actually serious? Like, you really mean—"

"For life," Artie repeats.

The waterbender sits stunned for a few moments. "I'm... holy crap, dude," Finn says, thickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, like, insult you or anything."

The earthbender shrugs. "It's cool. We cool?"

"Yeah," Finn says, "we're cool."

Artie smiles. "Good," he says as he starts gathering a few of the bags himself. "Blaine's a pretty cool guy. We relate, y'know? But me getting another friend doesn't mean you ain't my dawg. Besides, he can be your friend too, you know."

The lanky waterbender nods, and starts picking up the day's loot himself. "Thanks, man," Finn says. "I... really needed to hear that."

"Enough of this emotional bull," Artie scoffs as they start to head towards the others. "So what'd you guys get up to while we were out?"

Finn goes temporarily bug-eyed. "...not much. Just... you know, hung out. Did some stuff. Talked," he says, smiling casually. "Nothing too interesting."

"Oh, my La, it was disastrous," Kurt says to Blaine later that night. "I spent the entire day babysitting him to keep him from eating pillows or jumping off of the carriage or trying to hug a boarcupine," he sighs. "I'm already exhausted."

"That certainly sounds tiring," Blaine says. "I'm a little bushed myself, actually."

"Ah, yes," Kurt says with a sly smile. "Do tell me about your day. And any interesting bits of gossip you managed to gather, of course."

The ex-Prince's ease suddenly makes an exit, and he looks distinctly awkward. "Well..." he says. "Oh, no," Kurt groans. "Don't tell me he managed to convert you, too."

Blaine scratches at his neck uneasily. "Kurt, I really don't think it's my place to tell you his story."

"I know it's not your place!" he says. "It's Artie's place! But Artie won't do it!"

Blaine dodges a fleeing group of disturbed gophermice as they sprout from the ground like daisies and try to escape the quake. "If it makes you feel better," Blaine says cautiously, "I think I can tell you why he hasn't told you."

Kurt crosses his arms. "Go ahead. Let's hear the next in Artie's long list of fascinating lies."
The former firebender moves closer to his friend, hoping his presence is a calming one. "I think," he says carefully, "that he is a little bit afraid of you."

The Avatar regards him coolly. "You... say that like it's a bad thing."

The ex-Prince grins. "Well, perhaps I misspoke. Not necessarily 'afraid' in a physical sense, but more... intimidated."

"Still not seeing the problem. Shouldn't that make him more willing to share his deep dark secrets, for fear of Avatar fury?" Kurt asks simply.

Blaine sighs. There is probably a word that perfectly captures what he is looking for, but he has no idea what it is. "I'm not saying this right... he's..." The former firebender takes a moment to stop and think. It is this moment that makes him realize, again, that he has a lot in common with his paralyzed friend. "...I think he feels inadequate next to you," Blaine says softly. "Like he isn't good enough, like he might never be good enough."

That catches Kurt off-guard. "I... oh," he says softly. "But... that doesn't make sense. Artie is one of the most persistently cocky people I know."

"All that means is that he puts up a good front," Blaine says. "Think about it. You're the symbol of... of ultimate good and balance in the universe."

"I'm just a person," Kurt says easily.

"Yes, you are," Blaine agrees. "You're a wonderful, amazing person, who also happens to be the Avatar. Meanwhile, someone like Artie..." Someone like me... "...nothing but a common criminal..." ...nothing but a disgraced Prince... "...he could never measure up to you." I could never be good enough for you.

"But I'm just a person," Kurt insists. "I make mistakes just like anyone else. The heavens know I've made some pretty huge ones. I'm not going to... to condemn him or disavow his friendship because he's done a few bad things."

"Have you tried telling him that?" Blaine asks gently.

At this, the Avatar winces. "I don't think so. I just... it never really crossed my mind. Now that I think about it, Artie and I have rarely had conversations where it's just the two of us... he actually does seem to avoid them. And when we do speak one-on-one, I'm usually trying to wheedle information out of him, or...", Kurt coughs. He recovers quickly. "I've always been slightly caustic towards him because... well, that's just been how we've operated, and... oh my La, how have I been traveling with him for this long and managed to miss this? He really is afraid of me," the Avatar says, slightly distraught.

"Not of you," Blaine assures him. "Just... what you represent. What you might think of him. That you might just tell him that he isn't good enough, that he never will be." If you knew what I did... what I didn't do...

"See, this is one of those 'human' moments," Kurt says, looking Blaine directly in the eye. "Please don't ever tell him this, but... when he first joined the group, I basically thought of him as Finn's Pet Earthbender. It was at least a few weeks before I even started thinking of him as a person. How awful is that?"

"I think... maybe you should just talk to him," Blaine says. "Communication is important." Says the non-communicator.
"Maybe you're right," Kurt says. "It's just... I'm a little awestruck. That a miscommunication like this can carry on for so long, with neither party realizing that the whole thing could be solved if either of them would just open their big, fat mouths and talk." He finishes with a sigh, and a star-oriented stare.

Is that an opening? It feels like an opening to Blaine. He starts to open his big, fat mouth, but his voice gets caught in his throat. He just... can't.

Kurt gets up. "Well, that was certainly enlightening. But we still have Firebending training to take care of."

Blaine clamps his traitorous trap shut and stands up with a slightly forced smile. "Good idea," he says. "You employed Firebending against the Dragon Frog, didn't you?" he asks as they move into position.

"With varying degrees of success," Kurt says. "The Earthbending thing I told you about was what finally got rid of it."

"Hmmm," Blaine says neutrally, a thought crossing his mind. "I wonder where it landed…"

Several hours earlier…

"We're close," Quinn says, lashing the reigns to her komodo rhino and driving it onwards down the rocky road. "I can feel it. We can't be more than an hour or two away."

"'bout fuckin' time," Puck says, cracking his neck from his own rhino beside her. "I'm all for riding awesome kickass lizard rhinos around the country or whatever, but I'm not getting any from anyone here. You're a super frosty bitch—no offense—the other Chi-Ryus barely look at me, and Santana... fuck, I don't even know what's up with Santana."

"I personally find the change refreshing," Quinn says pointedly, glancing over at the black-clad assassin on her other side. "Though I do have my questions as to the exact nature of what brought it about."

Santana smiles casually. "I don't understand why everyone is so suspicious. You'd think that when a bitch stops barking at you and biting your balls, you'd be thankful."

"We are thankful," Quinn says. "Just... curious."

The female assassin smirks. "You aren't the only one..." she says.

Suddenly, the world seems to darken slightly.

"Santana, look!" A head of blonde hair pops out from behind Santana, revealing a girl dressed in worn, faded yellow robes. "It's raining shadows!" She sticks her tongue out, and holds her mouth up to the sky.

"What are you doing?" Santana asks, looking back at her.

"Tasting them," the girl replies casually.

"...how do they taste?" Santana asks.
The girl closes her mouth, looking thoughtful. "...like air, only darker," she says after a moment. "I like it," she adds with a smile, and opens her mouth again.

"The fuck? Where'd the sun go?" Puck says, looking up at the sky.

Quinn suddenly goes wide-eyed as she stares up at a dark shape in the sky... one that is growing rapidly larger by the second, almost as if it's coming... towards... them... "It's not the sun I'm worried about. It's what's blocking it. **INCOMING!**"

And then...

...well, maybe we should back up a bit first.

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**A/N:** Jeez Louise. I swear... the only time chapters get this long is when there is action involved. Or when I announce some kind of plan as to what's supposed to be in them. And now that I've said that... please have short previews of the next three chapters! :P

**Bad Reputation** – What have Quicktana been doing with their time this week? Who is this strange new girl who is riding with them, and where did she come from?

**Little Lion Man** – Another unexpectedly intimate training session forces Kurt to acknowledge how much things have changed between him and his would-be mentor. Meanwhile, many of the things that Blaine has been running from finally catch up to him, and the result isn't pretty.

**Blame It On the Alcohol** – Blaine's lack of coping skills pushes him to unexpected places and strange people. Kurt is the one who must retrieve him when he bolts, and the conversation that results leaves both of them reeling. (Don't worry, though. It's not a bisexuality kerfuffle. :P)

The last two are what I am referring to as **THE DOUBLE-BARRELED KLAINEGUN BLAST.** It's pretty much all Kurt/Blaine development. :D As always, please leave a review or comment if you have any thoughts!
Bad Reputation, Part 1

Chapter Notes

**Media:** Fic  
**Title:** Solar Winds *(Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 29/?)*  
**Rating:** PG-13 for innuendo, some swearing.  
**Spoilers:** None for either series that I am aware of.  
**Warnings:** Cursing, innuendo, violence.  
**Word Count:** ~7000  
**Summary:** Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

**Author's Note:** And now, the ultimate test of patience—a segment of what is ostensibly a Klaine fic without either Kurt *or* Blaine. D: What is **wrong** with me? All I can do is assure you that these two chapters have a pretty epic payoff later and try to make them as enjoyable as possible. So, without further ado, I present… our bad guys! ^_^  

ALSO: Please note that the days are numbered here to correspond with the days of the timeline in previous chapters.

**CHAPTER 29 – Bad Reputation, Part 1**

**Day 0**

It is late evening when Quinn enters the military base like a meteor enters the atmosphere—quickly, forcefully, and with a great deal of friction. The door flies open like it's afraid of her (and rightfully so) and she stares down the room of grey-haired men with her head bitch smirk secured firmly in place.

"Hello," she says, smiling that cruel little smile of hers. "I'm Quinn Fabray, and as of today, *I own you.*" 

One man with a mildly impressive grey mustache steps forward, shocked at this outrage. "Now, see here..." he says.
"I see perfectly, thank you. Now, let's test your eyesight. What does this," she asks, holding up an ornate scroll, "look like?"

"That's… that's the seal of the Fire Lord! How… why…" he sputters.

Quinn brushes him off casually. "'Why' doesn't matter. All that matters is that this official, signed document puts me in charge of you. And I have orders for you." She snaps her fingers, and a girl in a tight-fitting, yet flexible suit of armor marches into the room, presenting her with a stack of posters. "This," she says, holding one of them up, "is the Avatar."

"The Avatar is a dinosaur?" the man says, scratching his chin.

"There may have been a small degree of artistic license taken. The face is what's important. As of now, he is officially priority capture number one in the Fire Nation, so I want these," she says, thrusting the posters into the confused man's arms with almost enough force to knock him over, "distributed to every corner of the Fire Nation by sundown. Every base, every harbor, every train station, everywhere that might present him with a means to escape the country. If any of those places do not feature round-the-clock military patrols, see to it that they are instated immediately. The Avatar must not leave the Fire Nation alive."

"Ummmm," the man stammers slightly, still reeling from the shock of being so suddenly superseded by this shrew. "What are we to do if we find the Avatar?"

"Capture him," she says. "Him, and anyone with him. And anyone seen assisting, speaking to, or even looking at him for longer than two seconds. Once you've done that, you are to notify me immediately via messenger hawk and you are to make damn sure that none of the prisoners are able to even consider an escape plan before I arrive. Are we clear?"

The man is annoyed and flustered, his cheeks starting to look like polished apples with how red and shiny they are. Nonetheless, he is powerless, and he knows it. The Fire Lord's pretty much sealed his fate. "Yes," he says, gritting his teeth.

"What was that?" Quinn asks pointedly.

He sighs. "Yes… ma'am."

"Much better. Now, I have things to take care of. I assume you can handle this relatively simple task without my help. Don't prove me wrong." With that, she turns and marches primly out of the room, with every soldier staring daggers into her back.

Quinn feels the animosity pretty clearly. They're angry at her. That simply will not do—anger is useless unless properly directed. "Oh," she says, stopping at the door without turning around. "And one more thing. As of today, facial hair is against Fire Nation military regulation. All soldiers are required to be clean shaven at all times. Like this…"

Again, without even glancing at them, she raises her hand, points two delicate-looking fingers, and proceeds to fire off a rapid series of bite-sized flame bullets at various points in the room. There are a few gasps and sputters of shock, and at least one actual squeal. All in the span of about two seconds.

Having finished, she turns around to survey her handiwork. In place of a room with angry grey-haired men, she has quickly and easily created a room of gobsmacked bald ones. In place of an unhealthy atmosphere of anger, she has created a lovely air of fear. "There," she says. "Much better, don't you think?"
She leaves without waiting for their answer.
After all, it's not like she actually cares what they think.

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**Day 1**

"Holy motherfuck," Puck says, gaping at the magnificent creature in front of him. "Where have you been all my life?"

"I'm guessing 'in a stable,,'" Santana snarks from behind him. It lacks the usual bite, however.

"Are you not seeing this?" Puck says, gesturing to the beast. It has the muscular body, head, and hide of a rhino, with the tail, legs, claws and teeth of a giant lizard. Not to mention a rhino's horn (plus two bonus horns from below its ears). "This is the most badass creature I've ever seen. It's like someone just took everything that makes animals awesome and giftwrapped it for me. The only way this thing could possibly be more epic is if it breathed fire. **HOLY SHIT,**" Puck says, turning to the stable attendant. "Do these breathe fire?"

The attendant regards him like he might regard a recently stepped in pile of rhino droppings. "No," he says flatly, looking at him from just over his clipboard.

"Damn it," Puck says. "Still. Fucking **awesome.** How much for one?"

"Not for sale," the attendant deadpans.

"Come on, dude! I will pay out the ass for one of these."

"**No,**" the man says with a bit more force. "They are bred for Fire Nation Military use only."

Puck kicks miserably at the ground. "Damn it!" he says, turning his eyes toward the stables. He looks almost tearful. "Can't I just have one of the little sickly ones? I'll raise it into an ultra-badass, I promise."

"Puck!" Santana says, exasperated. "Give it up, already! It's not happening."

"Thank you," the annoyed attendant sighs, resuming his clipboard-related duties.

The mohawked man just stares longingly at the rhino pen. "…**fuck that noise,**" he mutters. "**I'm having me a damn lizard rhino.**"

"They're called 'Komodo Rhinos,'" Quinn sneers as she walks towards them, "and I assure you, you aren't."

"Ah," the attendant says. "Captain Fabray, I'm glad you're here. The mounts the Fire Lord requested are ready and waiting for you." He gestures to the stables. "These are bred from the finest stock. Strong, fast, enduring, and shockingly low-maintenance."

Quinn surveys the rhinos with a cool air. "Excellent," she says with a small, but strangely honest smile. "Thank you, stableman."

The stableman bows, and marches off to attend to the other animals. Meanwhile, Puck leans over and stage-whispers to Santana. "Holy shit. Did she just act… like… **not-bitchy** to that guy?"

Quinn rolls her eyes. "Not that you'll ever learn firsthand," she says casually, "but in the rare
occasion I find someone who is capable of doing their job well without whining or bitching about it, I actually appreciate it." At this, she puts two fingers in her mouth and whistles.

The Chi-Ryu Elites are next to her in like one second flat. There are six of them, dressed in light, flexible armor in a primarily red and white color scheme. They walk in and stand in perfect formation, practically breathing in unison. Quinn gestures to them with a smile. "This is my squad," she says casually. "Hand-picked for their efficiency, skill, and cohesiveness. They know how to get the job done. Maybe you'll learn a little something from them." She claps. "CHI-RYUS," she says. "PACK THE RHINOS AND PREPARE TO LEAVE IMMEDIATELY."

Even as they set off in different directions, the girls seem to walk in unison, almost as if marching to an unseen drummer.

"I wonder how they'd be in a threesome," Puck says aloud.

Santana sighs. "Puck doesn't really do learning," she says to no one in particular.

To her surprise, Quinn actually huffs out a little laugh. "I had a hunch you were the brains of the duo," she says casually, before steeling back into bitch mode, almost like she suddenly remembered 'oh yeah, I fucking hate these people.' "Not that this is saying much," she adds.

Santana remembers too. "Whatever," she says. "So how exactly do you plan on tracking down the Avatar?" she asks, voice soaked through with false friendliness.

"Don't you worry about that," Quinn says 'reassuringly.' "You just worry about following orders. I'll take care of the rest."

The lady assassin rolls her eyes. She doesn't know for sure, but she has a decent guess as to what the 'plan' is, and if she's right… well, then they'll see who the brains of the outfit is.

Puck misses the entire exchange, having gone back to staring longingly at the beautiful animals he can have but not keep. Sometimes, the universe is a cruel, cruel place.

Santana fucking loves being right. It's the only thing in the world she could ever love enough to settle down with. You know, if it were like a person or something.

They stumble upon the giant rock boat early the next morning.

And then they proceed to waste a shit-ton poking around the area like dipshits.

"They aren't here," Santana says casually, still relaxing in the saddle.

"And how would you know that?" Quinn asks from nearby.

"Because I'm the brains," she says casually.

The Chi-Ryu Captain scoffs at her and goes back to scouring the area.

Santana goes back to filing her nails.

(Puck mainly forages for shit to feed his rhino. He has to get it to like him before they run away and have epic adventures together.)

"I found something!" one of the Chi-Ryus announces after a few hours.
Quinn immediately rushes over to the scene. "What is it?" she asks.

"Look!" she says, pointing to the ground nearby. It's a little wetter than the surrounding area. There are even a few puddles nearby.

Quinn cups her chin thoughtfully. "Hmmm… good find," she says. "It hasn't rained recently, so there should be no reason for this much water unless someone brought it here."

"Good job!" Santana coos from the saddle. "I'm impressed it only took you this long to figure it out. I had that three hours ago."

"And why didn't you tell us this?" Quinn asks.

Santana shrugs. "Why give something as priceless as my opinion to someone who won't even appreciate it?"

The Chi-Ryu rolls her eyes. "I brought you along so you could help. If you don't intend to do that, then I'll be happy to dump you out at the nearest guard tower."

"Oh," Santana says, putting a hand to her heart. "I'd love to help. Just apologize to me for being such a bitch and admit that I'm better than you, and I'll get right on it."

Quinn is extremely not amused. "Alright, that's it. Girls? Roast her."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Puck says, dropping the small bushel of berries he's gathered for Killgore the Destructinator (his rhino's new name), and rushing over to step between them. "If you kill her, we'll probably never find the Avatar. Seriously, she's an awesome tracker. Just… let her do her thing."

"I'm not stopping her!" Quinn says. "She's the one who is withholding information!"

"If you want my expertise," Santana says haughtily, "all you have to do is apologize."

Puck gives Quinn a questioning look.

"What do I have to apologize for?" Quinn asks. "She is the one who is being a stuck-up, self-righteous bitch about the whole thing."

"Oh, right, this coming from the Junior Princess Wannabe of the Fire Nation. Now that you've got a cushy new position, you think you can just push everyone around and have your way all the time? Not with this chica. You push me, I push back."

"Look, why don't you both just apologize?" Puck suggests. "It's the perfect solution. You're both bitches!"

It takes one look at the identical glares from Santana and Quinn for him to realize he pretty much said the exact wrong thing.

Fortunately, the ensuing tongue lashing doesn't last more than thirty minutes at the most. And he only has to dodge like four or five fireballs.

"Oh, for Agni's sake. How much time have we wasted here?" Quinn finally says. "Alright, fine. Look," she says to Santana. "I apologize. There. Are you happy?"

Santana smirks, the evil bitch within purring like a cat at her minor victory. "Happy? No.
Satisfied? Yes, for the moment."

"I propose a truce," Quinn says. "I'll muzzle my bitch if you muzzle yours."

The dark-clothed assassin is a little worried by this. She needs to vent every once in a while, to prevent her from going into a full-blown volcanic rage. Still, she supposes… there's always Puck.

"Fine," Santana says. "First and foremost, we've already learned everything we're going to from this place. The water," she says, gesturing to the moist area of the woods, "ends at the big rock boat. They *came* from that direction. Which means they probably just kept going."

Quinn regards her carefully. "Where do you think they went?"

The assassin looks around the area for a few moments. "Over there," she says after a minute or two. "Those plants over there look like someone was dragged over them. See if you and your minions can't spot any footprints."

The Captain whistles and relays Santana's instructions. It doesn't take too long at all.

"Here!" one of the girls says.

Santana nudges her mount over to the area, her damaged leg making it a little impractical to get off the thing if she doesn't have to.

"Damn," she says, slightly impressed. "Those are some giant-ass feet. Did they have a gorilla-goat with them?"

"Uhhhh, no," Quinn says.

"Alright, then I'm guessing they went this way. They were probably in a hurry, too, judging by the fact that they didn't even *try* to cover their tracks," Santana says.

The blone girl crosses her arms, staring up at the assassin with a cool expression. "Well," she says, "it looks like you really *are* useful."

"See?" Puck says with a small smile. "I told you she was good. That's like the number two reason I work with her."

"I'm just going to go ahead and assume I don't want to know the number one reason," Quinn says.

"Oh," Puck replies. "Believe me. You *do.*"


They arrive at a small rock face a short trip later. This time, Santana steps off her mount (with a little help) and participates herself.

"Well?" Quinn says.

"Alright, I'm not a hundred percent certain, but I'mma take a wild guess and say the giant rock boat means they got at least one earthbender on their side. Which is just fan-freaking tastic, because I," she says with a smirk, "just happen to be an expert in tracking them."

"Fascinating," Quinn says. "I assume you have a point."
"Hey!" Santana says with a snap. "Don't rush! Anyway… somewhere like this? Earthbender paradise. They could make a cave here and seal up the entrance and most people would never know the difference. But I ain't most people."

She hobbles over to the rock wall, and then turns to limp alongside it, running her fingers along the stone. Every-so-often, she'll stop to knock on the rock.

After a bit more of this, she smiles. "This here," she says, pointing to a section of cliff that, to everyone but her, basically looks like the rest, "was recently made. There's nothing growing on this rock, and hardly any dirt has settled on the surface. Puck!" she shouts. "Get your fist over here and penetrate."

The armored assassin moseys on over to the spot Santana indicates. Taking a second to loosen up his hand, he delivers a devastating blow to the cliff. If it had been standard rock, that blow would have probably triggered a rockslide. But it wasn't—the rock Santana had pointed out was nothing more than a thin façade cooked up by an earthbender, just as Santana had suggested.

"Chi-Ryus!" Quinn shouts. "Search the cave."

The femme firebending fatales move in formation to the cave's entrance. They remain in combat stances, ready for any kind of attack, until they are able to confirm the cave is clear of potential threats.

"They were definitely here," Santana says. "Now let's see if we can figure out where they went."

Within the cave, they find evidence of a small fire, a few torn scraps of clothing, a few stone bowls that Santana identifies as being bender-made, and some jackelope bones. (Puck also finds a few elephant-rats to feed Killgore, but that's neither here nor there).

"Oh," Santana says, surveying the gathered items. "These people have no idea who they are dealing with." She turns to Quinn. "We keep all of this. We might be able to use it later."

"But that still leaves the matter of where they went from here," Quinn says.

"Oh, fucknasty," Puck says from outside.

Leaving the Chi-Ryus to pack up the items, Quinn and Santana run (well, Quinn runs, Santana crutches quickly) outside to witness the sight of Puck, hopping around on one foot and banging his other against a tree.

"I stepped in rhino shit," he explains with a disgusted look as he continues to kick.

Quinn, for her part, looks at the droppings with a careful eye. "…this is going to sound strange," she says, "but I don't think that little gift is rhino-made."

"How the Hills would you know?" Puck asks. "Oh, sick. You're not into super-nasty stuff like that, are you? 'cause I heard that story about those two Fire Nation girls and the cup…"

"Oh, fucking gross, Puckerman," Santana says, cringing. "Fuck, way to bring that stupid story back to the forefront of my head."

"I don't know what you're talking about, and as usual, I don't want to," Quinn says. "But I've spent some time around certain animals and… well, to put it bluntly, that looks much more like dragon-moose droppings."
"No offense or anything, but why exactly do we care about the kind of shit on my boot?" Puck asks.

"I'm getting an idea... there are no more footprints around here, right? At least, no more human ones?" Quinn asks.

"I don't see any," Santana replies.

"Hmmm," she says. "If that's... dragon-moose dung, then I have a theory. It's not unheard-of to find a dragon-moose in the wild, but they're not exactly common out here anymore. They're mostly domesticated for use in pulling carts and carriages. Perhaps we should try looking for wheel marks?"

"Wheel marks in soil would be even more obvious than footprints," Santana points out.

"Could they have covered their tracks with earthbending?" Quinn asks.

That seems to put the right idea into Santana's head. She scans the area again, her eyes raking over things with slightly more care. "There we go," she says, spotting something on a nearby tree. It's a broken branch, too high off the ground to be broken by someone simply walking into it. "Looks like we have the trail again. And look," Santana says with a very light sneer, "you even helped this time! Don't you feel proud?"

"I aim to please," Quinn sneers right back.

Their snark is worse than their bite. In fact, it's altogether lacking. Compared to what they are normally like, that exchange was almost friendly.

Puck is horrified.

There isn't much daylight left, but they push well on into the night before setting up camp. There are three tents—one for the Chi-Ryus, one for Puck and Santana, and one for Quinn. Puck is off getting rejected by every single Chi-Ryu in turn, so Santana is sleeping alone the first time she notices it. A giggle, and some featherlight footsteps just outside her tent. She's not exactly friends with these people, but she's been around them long enough to know that giggle probably isn't on their pre-approved list of expressions they're allowed to have on their face or whatever, so it kind of weirds her right the fuck out.

"Hey!" she calls out. "Who's out there?"

"I am!" a cheerful, yet somewhat blank voice replies.

The assassin is on her crutches in a second, ready to clobber any bitch stupid enough to come close to her stuff without asking.

She exits the tent to the sight of no one. No one anywhere.

**Day 2**

"I heard something last night," Santana says the next morning.

"Moaning?" Puck asks.

"No, dillweed," she says. "I mean like someone prowling around our tent."
"Someone besides them?" Puck says, gesturing to the Chi-Ryus as they quickly dismantle the campsite.

"Oh yeah," Santana says. "Definitely none of those bitches."

"They take anything?" Puck asks.

"The Hills if I know," Santana says. "Whoever it was, they were gone when I got out there."

"Hey!" Puck yells towards the Chi-Ryu. "Check our shit to see if anything's missing!"

The Chi-Ryu glare at him for just a second before resuming their previous tasks as if they'd never stopped.

"Hey," Puck says, offended. "That's, like, rude and shit."

"Thus sayeth the very portrait of charm and manners," Quinn says as she approaches them. "What are you shouting about?"

"I heard somebody prowling around the campsite last night," Santana says. "I think they might have stolen some stuff."

Quinn raises an eyebrow at this proclamation, but hesitates only a moment before calling out: "Chi-Ryus! Inventory!"

The Chi-Ryus immediately abandon what they are doing and begin to take stock of all their supplies.

"The fuck?" Puck huffs. "Why do they listen to you and not me?"

"…because I'm their boss, and you're some Earth Kingdom pervert trying to get into all of their pants?" Quinn asks helpfully.

Puck shrugs. "What's wrong with that?" he asks. "Aim high, I always say."

"Captain Quinn!" a brunette Chi-Ryu shouts. "Our rations are lower than they should be. Someone's stolen some of our food."

"…oh, uhhh," Puck says, somewhat sheepishly. "I might have… uhhh, taken a few extra. Last night. You know. To eat."

Actually, he fed them to Killgore, but there's no reason anyone needs to know about that.

"Well, there you have it," Quinn says. "Thief identified."

Santana takes the presented opportunity to glare at Puck, but something still isn't quite right. "I don't know…" she starts.

But she is quickly distracted by the sight of Quinn burning what is left of Puck's Mohawk off. The armored assassin gapes at her. "You… you did… my badass… awesome hair… no more… you… why?"

"Maybe that will teach you to take things that aren't yours," Quinn says. "Remember that you work for me. This is not a pleasure cruise. We have no idea how long we might need to be out here and our rations should be used carefully. So the next time you think about having a little midnight snack, you remember this. Because next time, the fire will be aimed at your other head," she
promises, her voice leaving no room for questions. "Got it?"

Puck definitely doesn't get it. "But... why though?"

Santana rolls her eyes and hobbles away, the sheer force of Puck's idiocy having momentarily pushed the incident clear out of her mind.

"If they're in a carriage," Quinn reasons as they ride out that morning, "they're probably sticking to the main roads."

"So how the fuck do we know which roads they take?" Puck asks. "They could be anywhere."

"Taking the main road was actually fairly smart," Santana says. "Not that they know that, of course, but I could've tracked them down easy if they had stayed in the woods. A heavily traveled road like this just makes it harder."

"We need to figure out what we know about them," Quinn says.

"Not much," Puck says. "Uhhh... there's the gay one. And the super-gay one."

"The Prince and the Avatar, respectively," Quinn clarifies.

"What about the other people?" Santana says. "I mean, we didn't really get too good of a look at them, but there were others. Like... the... black one?"

"The tall one," Quinn adds. "He seemed to be doing... something... to the Prince. I wasn't paying too much heed to him. The Avatar was commanding much of my attention at the time."

"Oh, and the one that was... like... sitting down. Which is kind of weird. I mean, what the fuck, man? It's one thing to just stand there, but just sitting there? Whole new level of weird," Puck comments.

"Okay, so tall, black, sitting, gay, and supergay. What a diverse bunch," Quinn says, rolling her eyes. "Do we know anything else about them?"

"If they're traveling with Prince Curly, he's got to be fucked up like whoa," Puck says.

Santana looks thoughtful for a second, then nods. "Good point. Explains the carriage—boy ain't walking nowhere any time soon."

"Okay, so where might someone who is injured go to recuperate in peace?" Quinn wonders aloud. "Somewhere nice and quiet... isolated, yet well-supplied. There are a few small farming villages around here that would be perfect. No military, no major trading hubs... just a nice, quiet place for fugitives to hide out. I bet they're still there."

Puck shrugs. "Assuming they don't know we're coming after them," he says.

Santana scoffs at him. "How would they know that?"

The armored assassin shrugs.

"Alright," Quinn says as they come to a fork in the road. "Here is the plan. There are a couple of small settlements we can reach from here today. My girls will go to Cho Qing, on the northern road. You two will come with me to visit Hefei on the southern road. We'll put up posters for the Avatar, take the locals to task, and meet back here by sundown."
"Uhhh, not that I'm complaining, but why do we have to go with you?" Puck says.

"Yeah," Santana agrees. "I think we can handle slapping up some posters and roughing up some yokels on our own."

"Them," Quinn says, pointing to her Chi-Ryus, "I can trust to do their jobs. You two, on the other hand, I don't even trust enough to let out of my sight. That's why."

"Oh?" Santana scoffs. "But you trust us enough to follow us into some strange village all by yourself?"

Quinn gives her a flat stare for a second or two before taking a deep breath and breathing a plume of flame easily as large as their rhinos into the air.

Raised eyebrows all around greet this little display. For those who still have them, anyway.

"I'm a big girl," Quinn says. "I can take care of myself."

Puck shrugs. Hard to argue with that logic…

Hefei isn't much more than a few ramschackle buildings and a small farm that mostly grows feed for animals. It'd seem like a dive if it weren't so damn… quaint. The people, quite simply, seem too dumb to carry out any kind of real crime. At least, that's what it seems like to Quinn.

To Puck's pleasure, they decided to take Killgore as their ride and left the other two rhinos to the six Chi-Ryus. As they ride into town, the few slack-jawed, snaggletooth hill-dwellers they can see know to treat them as the badass ubergods that they totally are. Killgore is the kind of monster rhino that demands respect (like, even more than normal monster rhinos).

They stop by the tavern.

"Hey, you seen this guy?" Puck asks, holding up the poster.

The barman shakes his head. "Not since that time I did twelve shots of Dragon Piss in fifteen minutes. I have to be at least that drunk before I start seeing dinosaur people."

They stop by the local aviary/post office.

"Spotted anybody who looks like this lately?" Santana asks. "Just pay attention to the face," she adds.

"No," the lady at the front says. "But I did see a man who had three eyes once!"

Building by building they search, but no one has seen anyone matching any of the descriptions they give out.

Finally, they come to the actual farm itself. The buildings are somewhat run-down—their barn has a fairly large hole in the roof—but the farm itself actually seems pretty well-kept. A tired-looking old ostrich horse bays at them casually from a pen as they enter.

"Careful," Quinn says as they approach the house from the long walkway. "Fire Nation farmers are famous for their… shall we say… territorial instincts."

Almost on cue, a large, cheap-looking vase suddenly smashes into the ground right next to them.
"Hey," Puck says. "What the fuck? Who threw that?"

At this, a rather ornery-looking old woman bursts out onto the front porch, waving—no shit—a stick with a broom on one end and a spear tip on the other. "Get offa my property!" she shouts. "Rabble like you bring nothin' but trouble."

"Trouble?" Santana snorts. "Y'all the ones who just be throwin' shit at people unannounced! Jeez, give a bitch a warning, why don't you?"

"Calm down," Quinn says reasonably. "Ma'am, we're here on official Fire Nation Business. We need to know if you have seen the Avatar."

"Avatar?" the woman says, her interest suddenly piqued. "What do they look like?"

Quinn pulls out the poster and unfolds it before the woman.

The old bird gasps like she's just been doused with ice water. "That's him!" she shouts.

Quinn raises her eyebrows in surprise. "You mean you have—"

"OTIS," she yells into the house. "GET OUT HERE!"

A feeble-looking old man clutching a bottle sways his way from the doorway. "Sun's sake, Aggy," he grumbles. "Whut're yew hollerin' fer now?"

The woman thrusts the poster in his face. He squints at it for a few seconds before his eyes suddenly bug out and he practically falls over backwards. "AGNI'S UNDERPANTS," he shouts. "THAT'S HIM!"

The Chi-Ryu captain smirks triumphantly. This has to be a sign. The universe is definitely on their side.

"He stole my bathwater!" Agatha announces as she brings the tea into the living room. Well, Quinn thinks it's supposed to be tea. Her nose and her eyes are telling her different stories here, so for the moment, she does as she was taught and pretends to sip at the brew without letting it past her lips.

Santana isn't quite so refined, though she does have the good sense to make sure Agatha's back is turned before spitting her mouthful into a nearby plant.

Puck just bugs his eyes out in horror and sprays it all over the place.

"What?" Agatha says, turning to look at him menacingly. "You got a problem with my tea?"

"No ma'am!" Puck says, trying his best to look innocent. "Just… uhh… thought I saw a bug in mine."

"Quit bellyachin' about yer water, Aggy," Otis grumbles. "Wispy little thing damn near gave me a heart attack! Conjured up a… a… giant smoke monster clean outta thin air!" he says, waving his hands around to illustrate… something.

"Interesting," Quinn says. "All of this happened on the night of the riots, correct?"

"Ayup," Agatha says. "Me and Otis were in town for my birthday—I just turned forty, can you believe it?" she grins, prominently displaying several missing teeth.
"I... can't believe it," Quinn says with complete and utter honesty. No way is this lady a day under sixty.

"Anyway, I was relaxin' in one o' them fancy pamperin' places when that there Avatar popped in and took all my water. Didn't even ask!" she says, outraged. "Beats all I ever seen."

"Well, you ain't seen much!" Otis snorts. "Lemme tell ye 'bout what I seen. I's wanderin' through the town, lookin' fer a nice boo-kay o' flowers for the missus here, aimin' to top the evenin' off with a little romantic am-bee-yance, if'n you know what I mean," he says, winking at the end and triggering Quinn's gag reflex.

"Anyways," he continues. "Once everythin' started goin' all fire-shaped and smokey, I started to head back when what should my old ears pick up, but the cry of a wounded child!" The old man seems moved, his eyes suddenly moist and his voice suddenly wobbly. "I 'member it clear as day! A waterbender used his foul, wicked powers to strike that innocent little boy a terrible blow in plain view o' public! It's a dang miracle he even survived," Otis spits angrily. "The boy managed te 'scape from their wicked clutches, and we had 'em cornered. The tall one was beggin' and pleadin' and—"

"Tall one?" Quinn asks.

"Oh yeh," Otis nods. "Real tall. He was the piss-bender, and, as we all later learned, the Avatar!"

"The tall one was the Avatar?" Santana asks with a quirked eyebrow.

"Quit interruptin'!" Agatha scolds.

"I'm gettin' there," Otis nods. "But yeh, there was three of 'em. A tall, goofy-looking boy, a dark-skinned lady sized on the healthy side, and a boy in... whaddaya call 'em... one o' them chairs, what has the wheels on it..."

"A wheelchair?" Quinn suggests.

"That's it! One o' them!" Otis says.

The three Avatar-trackers share a significant look. That's one mystery solved.

"Anyways, they was beggin' and pleadin' against us, but Fire Nation justice is best served hot, and we was a'burnin to fill their order! Then the tall one exploded somethin', and the whole place just erupted into crazy-land. A firebender and a piss-bender!" Otis says passionately. "Can't none but one o' them Avatars pull that off!"

"Huh," Quinn says neutrally. "What happened after that?"

"Another'n came in! I bet they travel in packs," Otis whispers conspiratorially, "like wolfbats! Anyway, he did some o' his fancy bendin' and made a big ol' smoke monster to scare the blazes right out o' us, and Agni scorch my nuts off if it didn't work! Everybody just screamed and skedaddled, leavin' this poor old fellow to fend against an Avatar all by his lonesome! Well, I told him what fer and sent him packin', I tell you what. He'll think twice afore he messes with Otis again!"

Quinn politely refrains from rolling her eyes. "But you haven't seen the Avatar—either of them—since then?"

"Nope," Otis says. "I reckon they high-tailed it outta there."
"Well," the Chi-Ryu Captain says with a smile. "I'm sure you'll let us know if you do. Just send a messenger hawk to the nearest military outpost if you spot him or any of his companions, and we'll be along to help you in no time."

She primly sets the tea down on the table as she rises. "Thank you so much for all your help. We will be sure to put this information to good use."

"You sure you don't want to stay for dinner?" Agatha asks nicely. "We're having chicken-possum!"

Boy, her gag reflex is getting a workout today. "No thank you, miss, it's almost sundown, we really must be going. I'm very sorry about your spa trip being ruined. I certainly hope the management sees fit to give you another one," Quinn says easily.

"Oh, me too, dearie," Agatha says. "I'm telling you, that last one took years off my face!"

The blonde raises trimmed eyebrows and smiles tightly. "I can't even imagine," she says. *How old you must have looked before,* she adds in her head. "I thank you on behalf of a grateful Nation," she says with finality. "Puck? Santana?"

"Ready," Santana says, dumping the rest of her tea in the houseplant (which seems to have shriveled slightly since they arrived), and rising.

"Puck?" Quinn says turning to the newly-bald boy, who is looking at Agatha and… wiggling his eyebrows, and… oh, *what the fuck.* "PUCK!" she shouts, startling him out of his reverie.

"What? I mean, yeah, sure, fine, okay, whatever!" he says, standing up. Agatha is giving him a mildly horrified, mildly intrigued glare as they exit.

On their way off of the farm, Quinn elbows him in the ribs. "What is wrong with you?" she asks. "Will you seriously just sleep with *anything* that moves?"

"I'm sorry, okay? I'm getting a little desperate here! I mean… do you know what happens to a guy when he is deprived of his sexual needs for too long? There is like… a *monster* chi-blockage thing that goes down. It's seriously bad. I might *die,*" Puck says seriously. "You could save a man's *life,* Quinn. And believe me; I'd *love* to show you my *gratitude.*"

In a sick way, she can almost admire his creativity. "*How* do you deal with this all the time?" she asks Santana.

The dark-haired assassin shrugs. "Every now and then, I fuck him."

"And that shuts him up?"

"For a little while," Santana shrugs.

Yeah, uhhh, **no.** She is definitely not going there. No matter how cute he may or may not be… seriously, it's gross. She has no idea where that thing has been.

"I was almost in, too," Puck grumbles. "You had to go and ruin it."

And then, *another* vase smashes into the ground just inches away from Puck.

"Oh yeah," Quinn deadpans. "She's definitely into you."
"So, that wasn't entirely useless," Santana comments on the way back. "We know they have a waterbender too."

"Technically," Quinn points out, "they have an earthbender, firebender, airbender, and waterbender all rolled into one."


"But still," Puck says. "Besides him, they have a waterbender and an earthbender. The tall guy is the waterbender, so the earthbender has to be either the dark chick, or the cripple."

"And a firebender," Santana says. "Can't forget the dear Prince."

"Actually, I'm not so sure," Quinn says. "He seemed to have a little trouble lighting up when I encountered him. Plus he's injured. He's probably not much help."

"Wait a second," Puck says suddenly. "The cripple..." He looks towards Santana. "You remember back in the Earth Kingdom, when everybody was going crazy over that one bounty?"

"Oh yeah," Santana says. "That one guy... the 'something' bandit, or something... an earthbending thief who just happened to be..."

"...a cripple," Puck finishes with a smirk. "You think it's the same guy?"

"Could be," Santana says. "I didn't really get a good look at him."

"Oh, man," Puck says. "If we catch him, we are so rich..."

"Focus!" Quinn snaps. "We're after the Avatar and the Fire Prince! Crippled earthbenders are not on the priority list!"

"Jeez," Puck says, holding his hands up in surrender. "Sorry."

"We can send this information to the Fire Lord," Quinn says. "If nothing else, we can update the Wanted Posters."

As they arrive back at the fork where they split, Quinn spots the Chi-Ryus already standing there waiting for them.

"Captain Quinn!" a red-haired Chi-Ryu says as they approach. "We have something you may be interested in."

"Oh?" Quinn says as she dismounts. "This excursion has already been shockingly productive. Can this day possibly get any better?"

"I believe so," the Chi-Ryu says as she leads the three of them over towards one of the other rhinos. "We spent the day putting up posters. After realizing we were treading the same ground over and over again, we eventually found this guy coming in behind us and taking them all down."

They step around the beast to find a slightly singed, roughed-up guy with a black sack over his head tied up and leaning against a tree. "He wouldn't tell us about the Avatar, but he wouldn't shut up about everything else, so we had to tape his mouth shut," the Chi-Ryu says as she moves to stand beside him. "It took... a lot of tape."

She pulls the bag off to reveal a shaggy mop of light blonde hair. Then, she rips the tape off to reveal—
"OW!"

"Whoa," Puck says. "I see what you mean about the tape."

The guy turns uneasy green eyes up towards them, his surprisingly large lips turned up in a slightly queasy smile. "Uhhh… hi?"

Quinn graces him with a predatory smirk. "Hi indeed," she says. "And who might you be?"

"Me?" Large-Lips asks. "Uhhh… my name is… ahhh… Norman…"

"Sam Evans," the Chi-Ryu sneers, "according to the notes we found in his backpack. At least, I think that's what they said. It was a little hard to read."

"Hey!" Sam says. "Those are private!"

"Not anymore," Santana says, smiling with approval at the feast she has been presented.

"So, Sam," Quinn says, her voice a purr. "Do you know the Avatar?"

"Uhhhh," Sam stammers. "Pffft, no," he says as though the very prospect is ridiculous.

"Then what were you doing with our posters?" the Chi-Ryu Captain asks.

"I'm… an… art collector?" he tries. "Yeah. I love art. Freakin' awesome. Can't get enough of it!"

"That still doesn't explain why you needed all the posters," Quinn points out.

"I like having plenty of spares?" Sam says with questioning eyes.

Quinn just shakes her head. "Oh, Sam," she says, her words dripping with mock-sadness. "You could have made this so easy. Now… we have to do it the hard way," she says with a small frown. "I'm so sorry."

His smile melts like a snowman on a tropical vacation. Sam gulps. "Uh-oh…"

And Quinn snaps into bitch mode like a striking rat-viper. "Chi-Ryus! We're setting up camp! Get everything ready and let's move out!" At this, she turns to Sam. "Oh," she adds, "and bag Sam up. He's coming with us."

Her wicked little grin is the last thing Sam sees before the bag comes back down over his head. He feels two fingers reach around towards the back of his neck, and suddenly, it's like all his nerve endings are exploding.

Passing out has never felt quite so welcome.

**TO BE CONTINUED…**

_A/N:_ I'm finding that I like this villainous trio the more I write them. What will these nefarious characters get up to next? Who is this mysterious person who seems to be stealing from them? And what will become of poor Sam? Stay tuned to find out. Reviews and comments are always welcome. ;)
Screwed.

So screwed.

Sam Evans is so screwed. He's all tied up and helpless in the wicked clutches of a bunch of evil chicks (plus the one dude). Well, not totally helpless. He could, like, bite them or something if they put their fingers close enough. Since they're going to keep making fun of his giant mouth, he might as well put it to good use. Except… it'd feel weird biting a girl. Although some girls apparently like that. It's… whatever. The point is, he's screwed. Not even his massive guns are capable of breaking out of this rope, which… really. If he can't even do cool shit like hulk out and beast his way out of captivity, then what was the point of all that working out?

They've still got the bag over his head, which is kind of unnecessary. What's he gonna do, glare
them to death? He can hear them eating dinner or something, having some kind of discussion by what is either a fire or someone stepping on a large pile of twigs and making crackling noises.

So they probably want him to give them info on Kurt or something, which brings him back to being screwed. Because if he tells them, he's betraying several awesome friends and at least one guy he had an active hand in screwing over, so there's that. But if he doesn't tell them, they'll probably do some kind of crazy super-painful fire torture on him. He really doesn't want that. The warrior-chicks already beat the crap out of him when they caught him in Cho Qing. He doesn't need to get burned as well as bruised. He has awesome skin. It doesn't scar well!

Well, okay, no one really scars well, but still.

He's trying to come up with some kind of escape plan that doesn't involve bursting free from his chains (and possibly his shirt) through nothing more than sheer manpower when the bag suddenly comes off.

"Well, look who's awake," the blonde girl from before says, holding some kind of weird food-looking thing. "Ready to eat?"

To be honest, the food doesn't look that appetizing. He has to kind of squint at it to even really convince himself that it's food. But then again, this could be his chance to put his master plan into action. "Sure," he replies.

"Open wide," the girl says. "Well, not too wide."

Sam nods. But apparently, his pai sho face sucks because the girl is onto him in like a second flat.

"And get that thought out of your head right now. If you try to bite me, we skip the appetizers and go straight for the after dinner snack of boiled nuts, do I make myself clear?" she seethes in kind of a weird, sweet-ish way.

Sam nods again, wide-eyed. He likes his nuts. He wants to keep them, raw and uncooked as nature intended. Opening his mouth, the girl pops the food-thing inside and... huh. Not half as horrible as it looked. "Mmm," he says.

"Enjoy that?" the girl asks.

Sam shrugs. "I've definitely had worse."

She smiles. "Well, savor it. Because it's the last food you will be getting until I get some information out of you."

The blond boy gapes. "Hey! No fair! You can't just... starve a guy. That's really mean."

"I don't know if you've noticed," Quinn says, squinting at him slightly, "but you're not exactly in the company of nice people."

"I don't know if you've noticed," Quinn says, squinting at him slightly, "but you're not exactly in the company of nice people."

"Give it time," the girl smirks.

She turns around to walk away. Sam gropes uselessly around for something to say, but apparently his brain-arms are just as tied up and useless as his normal arms. He needs to do something... maybe... what were those girls saying... "Quinn!" he says.
The girl stops and pivots gracefully, giving him a cautious glare.

"You're Quinn, right?" Sam asks.

She regards him coolly. "Yes. How did you know?"

"I heard the other girls talking to you," Sam says. "Anyway, I'm Sam. Sam Evans."

She quirs an eyebrow at him. "I know that already," she says evenly.

Sam shrugs. "I know, I just... figured we could... you know, introduce ourselves."

The girl looks at him like he's growing an elephant foot, before shaking her head and walking off.

"Bye!" Sam says. "See you later!"

Maybe he can rely on his own awesomeness to get him through this. It's probably a lot harder to torture someone if you like them.

---

Puck is asleep in the tent with Santana (on the absolute furthest end, of course) the next time it happens. Unbelievably light footsteps on the ground, barely noticeable to someone who doesn't have a trained ear. This time, Santana is a little more ready. He gets to her feet with comparatively little help from her crutches and hobbles outside without giving any warnings.

Upon opening the tent, she spots them—a figure, almost indistinguishable in the darkness, seemingly dancing over the ground around the doused campfire. She seems to head straight for the saddlebags on the sleeping rhinos. Normally, Santana would be stealthin' it up all over this bitch, but her leg is still a little wobbly, and she steps on a twig hard enough to snap it. She fully expects the other person to bolt.

They don't. Instead, they turn around. "Hi." It's the same voice from before.

"Don't move!" Santana orders, reaching for one of her whips. "Identify yourself!"

The figure doesn't answer.

"Answer me!" Santana demands.

"Wait, which one was I supposed to do?" the figure asks. "I can't do both of those. They smash into each other. Like boy birdy goats when one of them wants to give the girl birdy goat a back hug. My mouth has to move to talk. Unless I talk through my teeth. I'll do that!" The next sound she makes, sure enough, sounds like it's coming from between clenched teeth. "I'rrri'ay!" she says.

Santana is a bit dumbfounded. "Ummm... okay, how about this; you can move, but not leave. Just tell me why you're here. And who you are. And what you're doing."

There is silence for a few seconds. "...that's a lot of questions. I'm not sure I can answer them all. Can I have a hint?" The voice is probably female, but it's just so strange. It's calm, light, strangely flat and yet kind of bright.

Santana strikes a match and throws it on the fire. "Okay, let's take this slowly." The fire grows quickly, illuminating a pretty blonde girl with slightly frazzled hair, wearing faded, somewhat frayed yellow robes. "What's your name?"

"I know this one!" the girl says. "It's Brittany."
"Very good," Santana says encouragingly. "Now, why are you here—"

A sudden and cacophonous crashing noise from nearby draws Santana's attention away for a second. A gentle brush of wind against her cheek is the only sign she gets before Brittany is suddenly gone, vanished again into the night. "What the... where did she... why... argh," she grunts, angrily walking over to the source of the noise, where she is treated to the sight of a tied-up Sam making a hilariously misguided attempt to hop away from captivity.

She can already hear the rest of the camp quickly moving in to intercept, and she knows it'll be at least a second or two before they get there. Perfect. She enough time to take out her frustrations on the hapless hopalong.

With a casual grace, she takes one of her crutches and sweeps Sam's bound legs right out from under him.

"Whoooa—" THUD.

And then she proceeds to jam the end of her crutch right into his back.

"Wh-OWW," he grunts. "You—ack! You caught me! You can get off now," he says, a lovely little hint of pain in his voice.

"I can," she agrees sweetly, before turning sour, "but I'm not gonna. You scared her off, trout mouth!"

"Scared who off?" Sam asks with a wince.

"What's going on out here—oh," Quinn says, spotting the two of them and heading over. To Santana's surprise, she actually smiles at her. "Nice catch, Santana," she says.

"Well, it's not like he's really up for much of a chase," Santana shrugs. "But he's not why I'm out here. There is someone following us around. I just spotted them."

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "Oh? Where are they?"

"Gone," Santana says sadly, digging her crutch into Sam's back. "Scared off by the world's largest spingworm over here."

"Owwwwww! Why do you keep doing that?" Sam grunts.

"It's therapeutic!" Santana snaps.

"Hmmm..." Quinn says. "Well, did you manage to learn anything useful before they fled?"

"It's a girl. Blonde, kind of pretty, old yellow robes... might be an Air Nomad," Santana reasons. "She definitely left fast enough to pass for one."

Sam suddenly turns his head to look at them. "Wait. Did she fall out of the sky?"

Both girls snap sharp eyes towards him, and Sam gulps. "You know something about this?"

"Uhhh, no?" Sam says uneasily, "I mean, I..."

"Don't lie," Santana says, simmering with condescension. "It's insulting. You're awful at it."

"Why would an Air Nomad be following us around?" Quinn wonders. "Are you sure about this?"
You wouldn't lie to me would you?"

Santana feels slightly offended at first, and opens her mouth to vehemently deny it before she realizes who she is talking to. "Umm, duh, of course I would," she says honestly. "But only if I have something to gain. What would I gain by making up stories about a sneaky airbender pilfering our stuff?"

The Chi-Ryu Captain considers this. "You have a point," she concedes. "Alright. From now on, we have at least one person on guard duty at all times. And as for you," she says, summoning her squad to pick Sam up off the ground. "You and I are going to have lots to talk about in the morning."

"Oh, man..." Sam says, voice thick with dread.

She isn't entirely sure what makes her say it. She isn't entirely sure why she even thinks it, but as Quinn walks away, Santana finds her mouth opening and the following words pouring out. "I think we should look for her."

The blonde stops and turns to look at Santana. "You think she might be working with the Avatar?"

"No way to know for sure. All I know is that we have someone trailing us everywhere, and that is never a good sign," the tracker says, drawing from firsthand knowledge.

"The Air Nomads are supposed to be pretty harmless as a whole, but I've never personally met one..." Quinn says thoughtfully. Then she smirks. "I think I have an idea..."

---

**Day 3**

"Alright, Chi-Ryus, listen up!" Quinn instructs. "Today, the plan is a little different. Santana is in charge."

The girls turn to look at Santana, who is standing next to Quinn without the aid of crutches.

"We," Santana says, "have a follower. About yea height, blonde, tattered clothes, answers to 'Brittany.'"

Quinn delivers a mild side-eye at this announcement. Santana didn't mention a name last night.

"We don't know who she is or what she wants, and I say it's time we found out. So today, we're going hunting. The priority is capture, not kill. We want information, and it's hard to get it from a crispy corpse, so try to keep the fire under control," Santana says sweetly.

"As for me," Quinn says, "I will be spending the day with our prisoner. I think we will be getting to know each other quite well before the day is—PUCK," she shouts suddenly. "Stop playing with the prisoner!"

"Awww... do I have to?" Puck looks over from near the rhinos, where Sam (still tied up) and Killgore are positioned side-by-side. Before she spotted him, Puck was tossing bits of food through the air at them and seeing who could catch them in their mouth before they hit the ground. Sam actually had a pretty respectable score. You know, for a human.

"Yes," Quinn seethes. "Get over here and... you know what?" she sighs. "Just... go with Santana. I don't feel like dealing with you right now."
The armored assassin shrugs. "Fine," he says, tossing the last bit of food over at them. Sam lurches over and snatches it right out from in front of Killgore. The rhino gives Sam a mild glare. Sam responds with a smug grin. The beast comes out on top, however, when a single snort of air from its nose causes Sam to topple over.

"Alright!" Quinn says. "Girls, put the prisoner in my tent and move out!"

Crap, crap, craaaaap. This sucks. This really really sucks. What the fuck? Why is he always getting kidnapped? Aren't guys supposed to save girls from being held captive? That's how it works in all the stories! What the fuck is wrong with him? Why is his life so backwards?

He was totally right about the fire torture thing, but he wasn't really expecting them to get all kinky about it. Before they left, the Chi-Ryus took his shirt and bound his arms and legs to heavy-assed stakes in the ground inside Quinn's tent. He walked in on his parents like this once. Fucking mental scars forever. While he normally relishes any opportunity to bowl the world over with his ab-ulous body, right now he's just feeling a little naked, and a little scared. Fuck. He was just trying to help his friends! Why they gotta hate on him like this?

Quinn comes in after a few minutes. The rest of the camp is silent except for generic nature noises, so he's pretty sure they're the only ones here. The girl looks at him with something that's kind of hard to place. She may or may not be thinking about his bangin' awesome body, but she definitely looks kind of uneasy. "Now Sam," she says. "We don't have to make this hard. I don't want to hurt you."

"That's good," Sam says, "cause I don't want you to hurt me either."

"But I have to," Quinn continues. "Because apparently, that's the only way to get useful information out of you."

"Nuh-uh," Sam denies. "I have tons of useful information. Like… uhhh… how to tell White Jade flowers from White Dragon flowers! 'cause, you know, one is good for making tea, and the other is good for making you… like… dead. White Jade is the tea one. I mean… no, White Dragon is… shit, I can't remember! I'm really nervous, okay?"

Quinn shakes her head at him. "Useful information on the Avatar," she elaborates. "All you have to do is tell me where he is. Or where he went. And we can skip this whole painful process."

And that's when it hits him. According to her, he doesn't actually know any useful information! He's got no clue where Kurt is or how to find him. Kurt never told him. Probably just in case something like this ever happened. Kurt is so freaking smart!

"What are you smiling about?" Quinn asks.

Sam turns his grin towards her. "Because I just realized that I totally wasn't even lying to you—I don't know anything. I'm as dumb as a wet sack of wool!"

The girl scoffs at him. "Right. Like I'm going to believe you now, after everything else you've told me." She moves over to kneel next to his torso.

Sam's grin falters. "But… I'm telling the truth," he says.

"We'll see one way or another, won't we?" Quinn says. She doesn't sound too sure of herself, but then… then her face darkens, and she reaches two fingers over to Sam's shoulder and… "Ow, ow,
"Fan out!" Santana orders. "Look for any sign of human presence. Footprints, clothing fragments, uneaten food, anything. If you find something, call me right then and there, got it?" she asks.

The Chi-Ryus nod in unison and set out searching. It's kind of a rush for Santana, a nice little trill of power traveling up her spine and nesting warm and cozy in her brain. Having people obey her like this is something she could definitely get used to. No wonder Quinn just expects everyone to follow her orders. It's fucking awesome being in charge.

The things they find aren't much. There's a little set of footprints that mostly just goes around in a circle. A bit of yellow cloth on a vine. A silver bead or two on the ground. Rocks arranged in the shape of a stick figure. Sticks arranged in the shape of a rock.

"I don't get it," Santana says. "All signs point to her being around here somewhere, but none of them point to her leaving."

Puck shrugs. "Maybe she can fly? Can't Air Nomads fly?"

"Don't think so," Santana says. "Not without help. Not unless they're really good."

But that does give her an idea. That Sam guy did say something about falling out of the sky. "Hey!" she says with a snap, calling everyone's attention back to her. "New plan! Check the trees. I want every branch combed from bottom to top, got it?"

The Chi-Ryus nod, and begin climbing at her command. Oh, fuck yes, she could definitely get used to that. Puck wants a rhino? Santana wants her some good quality minions. Maybe she can steal these from Quinn.

After all, Quinn is 'a big girl.' She can fucking take care of herself.

"AA-AA-aahhhhh," Sam gasps, breathing heavily as Quinn finally lets go. "I… you…" he says, wide-eyed and red faced. His arm feels like it was just set on fire from the inside out, in about a billion different places at once. "What was that? How'd you… how'd you do…"

Quinn's face is a stone mask of indifference. "This," she says, pointing to where her fingerprints are still visible in his skin, "is a special place. Energy runs back and forth in your body through innumerable paths, but there are places where many paths converge. This is one of them," she says simply.

"But…" Sam says unsteadily, still feeling a little tingly and sore. "I know about those places. I block them off all the time when I sit on my foot for too long. That was way different. That… really fucking hurt," he says seriously.

Quinn blinks at him, her indifference holding steady. "Firebending involves energy," she says simply. "So a firebender can affect the energy through these places in ways others can't. It's an old family secret," she says, getting up and moving around to his other side. "Nervebending."

"Huh," Sam says. "That's… kind of cool, actually."

That puts a crack in the stone mask Quinn is wearing. She looks at him like he's speaking fish. "Are you kidding me?"
"What?" Sam shrugs. "It is. I've never even heard of that before."

The girl shakes her head, her thoughts building up rapidly and needing to be swept aside for the moment. "Well, now that you've felt it," she says evenly, "I'm sure you don't particularly want to experience it again. So come on. Talk. Just one little tidbit of information. That's all I ask."

Sam shakes his head again. "But I already told you, I don't know anything."

Quinn glares at him. "Fine," she says, her voice a little rough. "We'll keep going."

"But I—GAAAAA—"

"Found anything yet?" Santana calls out.

"Nothing yet!" a Chi-Ryu responds from the trees. It's kind of strange how only one of them seems to speak at a time. They never talk over each other. It's almost like they pick out a designated spokesperson at the beginning of the day and just let her do all the communicating. What kind of freaky-ass training did these people have to go through to start thinking like that?

"This is a totally waste of time," Puck grunts. "Why do you even care? Even if she is around here—she's a fucking puffbender. She's about as dangerous as a baby sealephant."

"She's an unknown," Santana says simply. "I hate unknowns. Mysteries do not do it for this chica. I demand gossip. I want to know everything about everyone, and I want to know it yesterday. This girl could be anyone. She could be working for anyone. We don't know who she is, or…" She pauses, a thought gliding into her head. "…or do we?"

A smirk slides onto her lips as she looks up to the trees. "Ladies!" she says. "Start calling her!"

"Start calling her what?" one of them asks.

"Her name!" Santana elaborates. "Just start calling it out! Trust me!"

"What was her name again?" the Chi-Ryu asks.

"BRITTANY!" Santana yells.

"I'm coming!" a familiar voice calls out.

Eight sets of eyes snap to the girl as she falls out of the freaking canopy, the very tip top of the trees, and lands gracefully right next to Santana. The assassin gapes at her.

"Did you call me?" Brittany asks. "Sometimes I hear my name and it's just a cat. Or a rock. But sometimes it's a person."

Santana is momentarily at a loss for words. Believe her when she says that does not happen often. "Uhhh…"

"OOOOOOWWWWWW," Sam groans, clenching his teeth.

Quinn stops the punishment for a moment, ignoring the way his breath hitches when he inhales, ignoring the way her own breath hitches while she is watching him.

"We can stop this," Quinn says, sincere. "Right here and now. All you have to do is tell me!"
"But there's seriously nothing to tell!" Sam insists. "I'm not lying, I swear. I have no idea where they are. They didn't tell me where they were going, probably for something like this exact reason!"

"You are lying," Quinn insists loudly. "You lied before and you're lying now! And it's not even a good lie!"

"But I would've come up with a better lie if I was lying! I mean… I think…" Sam pauses to consider this for a second.

And Quinn's patience snaps. "Fine. Since you're not going to cooperate, we'll go straight for the grand finale." She reaches around to the back of his neck.

He only has a second to drink in the implications of what she just said. And then, from head to toe, Sam Evans (figuratively) bursts into flames. "AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH—"

"STOP!" the Chi-Ryu shouts as she leaps out of the tree. The loud noise and overt aggression are, as Santana now knows to expect, just enough to frighten the slightly skittish Brittany, who immediately takes off running. "Wait!" Santana says, taking off after her.

"HALT!" the Chi-Ryus shout, tossing fire at the fleeing blonde as they give chase.

"Hey! None of that," Santana warns. "You already scared her off; now she's probably just gonna run faster!" Sure enough, Brittany seems to have picked up the pace. Santana's leg isn't 100%, but it's fine for a little light running. With the way Brittany moves, however, Santana quickly begins to suspect that she couldn't keep up with the fleet-footed girl if her legs were 200%.

"Hold up!" Puck shouts, punching a tree into splinters that quickly fly towards the girl. She takes a stunning leap into the air, diving forward and spinning herself like a drill. Currents of air quickly follow the movements, and the projectiles are gently redirected so they fly harmlessly past her.

"Puckerman, you dumbass! We're not trying to kill her!" Santana spits as she runs.

"Fucking sorry," Puck says. "I wasn't trying to kill her, I just… look, this thing isn't really good for much else, okay?" He holds up his fist for emphasis.

The dark-clothes assassin just groans as she realizes her quarry is quickly getting away. This on-foot business is not cutting it. She needs more motion in her ocean.

So she takes out two whips, lashing one of them onto a tree limb and using the leverage to pull herself forward. If she can't run fast enough, maybe she can swing. She quickly lashes onto another limb, and soon finds herself slowly catching up to the fleeing blonde.

"Wait!" Santana says. "We're not gonna hurt you, I promise!" She doesn't know why she promises that—it's not like it's one she can keep for other people, or even herself sometimes.

Brittany looks back at her, and instead of stopping, she goes from ground level to tree level in a single bound, and puts herself right in Santana's path. The assassin is worried she's about to slam into the girl, when suddenly, a gentle-yet-firm cushion of wind suddenly halts her progress. Brittany is moving her hands in a fast circle, almost as if she is shaping a tube out of the air, and the resulting current is just enough to slow Santana to a stop just in time for her to land on the same tree branch as Brittany.
"Whew," she says. "Thanks."

"It was easy," Brittany says. "All I did was tell the sky to give you a hug. We talk a lot. He likes me. We're totally tight," she adds with a smile.

Definitely an Air Nomad then. "I didn't mean for them to scare you. We're not gonna hurt you," Santana says.

Brittany frowns. "Are you sure? Because I didn't think that before, but then I was flying, and crazy fire people knocked me down, and now I don't know where I am." She plays with her hair as she talks. It's strangely cute, in a weird way.

"So you're lost?" Santana asks.

The other girl nods. "I need to find my friend. Mr. Duck can take me home."

"So why are you following us around?" Santana asks gently.

"Because you look really intense, and my friends get that look sometimes when they need to go somewhere, so I thought you would know where you're going, so if I followed you, I wouldn't be lost!" Brittany says simply. "Plus you have super-tasty food. I ate dirt once. The monks told me not to, because it doesn't have enough vitamins to support a healthy lifestyle."

Lost and hungry, then. She supposes that makes sense. At least she isn't malicious. "Where is your friend?"

"He's in a lot of places," Brittany nods. "Any way the wind blows. But if I can go where he was, I'm pretty sure I can find where he is. The sky probably knows, but we have trouble communicating sometimes. I use my body. He uses clouds. Sometimes I see the future. Other times, I just see a cute bunny. And sometimes the future has cute bunnies."

Santana nods. "Well..." Now that she knows this, what, exactly, the fuck is she supposed to do with it? She can't really stop this girl from following them around, but she doesn't really want to kill her or hurt her. She's just lost. It's not like Santana is a total heartless bitch.

Just mostly.

"Maybe you could come with us," Santana says.

"Really?" Brittany asks with a smile. "That would be great! You have lots of cool stuff. Plus all your friends are super-hot."

Uhhhh, what now? Santana gives the girl a slight fish-eye at that.


Santana blushes slightly. Not that she isn't used to compliments... she just isn't used to getting them without ulterior motives. "Thanks, I guess," Santana says.

Brittany smiles. They climb down out of the tree (well, Santana climbs, Brittany just kind of glides down on air). Once they reach the ground, Santana realizes that she hasn't even really introduced herself yet.

"I'm Santana," the assassin says.
"I'm Brittany!" Brittany announces.

"I know," Santana says as they start walking back. "You told me already, remember?"

Brittany nods. "The monks say I should say it a lot so I don't forget."

"Have you ever forgotten it before?" Santana asks.

Brittany looks thoughtful for several seconds. "...I don't remember."

Words of reply are difficult for Santana to come up with. After a short struggle, she finally settles on a noise. "Ah."

"—AAAAAAAAAAAAAH. STOP. STOP IT! PLEASE STOP!" Sam begs, his eyes clenched shut. His back is arched and his face red from exertion. Something is rolling down his cheeks—either sweat, or tears. Quinn doesn't know which.

No. No. She doesn't care.

And yet she removes her fingers anyway.

"I stopped," Quinn says, her voice coming out with more difficulty than ever, and no. She has to keep it together. He doesn't matter, none of this matters, nothing matters except finding the Avatar and the Fire Prince who travels with him. "Now, are you ready to tell me what I want to know?"

"I can't!" Sam says passionately. "Please, please believe me, I don't know anything!"

"You know something!" Quinn says, rising to her feet as her frustration starts to boil over. "You have to! Why else would you do what you did?"

"Kurt's my friend," Sam says, and oh, Agni. He's whimpering. He really is crying. "But even if I wanted to tell you where he was, I couldn't, because I don't know."

No. No, no, no! She can't accept that. She can't accept that she might have been doing... this for no reason at all. "Tell me something. Anything," she says, her voice laced with desperation, almost pleading.

"But I don't—"

"Names!" Quinn says suddenly. "You can tell me their names. Tell me that, and I'll stop."

Sam turns red, blotchy eyes towards her. He takes several deep breaths, and it looks like he's going to deny it again, when suddenly, his lip wobbles and it all just spills out. "Mercedes," he says. "Mercedes Jones, Artie Abrams, Kurt Hummel and F..." He stops, shaking his head, and struggling valiantly with the last one. "...F-Finn Hudson," he says at last.

And then he starts crying in earnest.

She can't handle it. She's never done anything like this before—she has always known she could do it in theory, but facing the cold reality of it is something entirely different, and it is shaking her to the core. She is beside him on her knees again before she even realizes what she is doing.

He notices the movement, and flinches violently away from her. "Please, I told you..."
"Shhh," she says. "Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you this time."

He doesn't look like he believes her, but there's nowhere for him to go, struggle as he might. He still flinches when she reaches around to the back of his neck, but his struggles cease when she finds her mark. "I—ohhhhhhh," he sighs. His eyes widen and his body goes slack for entirely different reasons. Every tingling, pricking, lingering bit of pain is washed away as a river of pure relief floods through his entire body. It's an amazing sensation, pleasant and cool and relaxing, like a dip in an oasis after a long track through the desert. It's a deep tissue massage, pain medicine, and sleeping medicine all rolled into one. "...that's nice," he says blearily.

"I told you," Quinn says, her voice still not doing what she wants. "I told you if you'd just tell me, everything would be alright. You wouldn't have to cry, you wouldn't have to hurt. Everything would be okay if you just did what you were told," she says, her own words striking a chord in her mind, echoing in ways she didn't expect. "Just rest here," she says. "No more pain, no more crying. You'll be fine."

She covers him with a blanket before she leaves Sam alone with his thoughts.

He's tired. He's still a little achey, though the lingering pain from the nervebending is pretty much gone. And yet… he's still crying. Just a little. She didn't fix that. She couldn't. He isn't crying because it hurts. He's crying because he failed. He… fuck. He probably would've told her exactly where they were if he'd known. He cracked like a freaking ember nut. He's a loser. A weak, doughy loser. What good are all his muscles if he can't even take a little pain to protect the people he cares about?

Meanwhile, Quinn walks away from the tent. Her face has returned to its expressionless mask. Her steps and her breathing are both completely even, and remain so as she walks, and walks, and walks… further and further away from the campsite, until she finds a nice, large tree trunk, more than big enough to hide her completely from view. Satisfied with her find, she calmly strides behind it, checks to make sure no one is watching…

…and proceeds to empty the entire contents of her stomach onto the ground.

She continues to retch, even after there is nothing left. A few drops of saltwater roll down her cheeks to join the revolting mixture and Quinn has never, in her entire life, been more disgusted with herself. She doesn't know whether it's because of what she did, or because of the weakness she displayed while she did it.

Maybe both.

---

"I'm Brittany!" Brittany announces as she and Santana find the group again.

The Chi-Ryus move forward to apprehend her, but Santana stops them. "Hey! She's fine. She's just lost."

"She's an Air Nomad," the Chi-Ryu says.

"So?" Santana scoffs. "I'm from the Earth Kingdom. Ain't nothing wrong with me. She's coming back with us."

Puck practically tears her clothes off with nothing more than his eyes. "'sup?" he asks. "I'm Puck."

"I'm Brittany!" Brittany repeats. "And you're really hot."
The armored assassin's eyebrows rise approvingly. "Wanna make out?" he asks.

"Sure," Brittany says. Santana watches in horror as they immediately lock lips with slightly mortifying enthusiasm.

"Hey! Cut it out!" she says, pulling the two of them apart. "You can't make out with him," Santana says, pointing at Puck.

"Why not?" Brittany asks.

"Yeah, why not?" Puck agrees.

"Because... he's filthy, and filled with disease," Santana says, nodding sagely.

"I am not!" Puck shouts, offended.

Brittany looks at him, tilting her head slightly. "...I don't see any Z's. Maybe if you open your mouth, some will spill out?"

The lady assassin shakes her head. "No, Brittany, not 'the Z's.' Disease. Like sickness."

"Oh," Brittany nods, before suddenly becoming distraught. "Oh no! Is he like super-sick, or just normal sick?"

"Just normal sick," Santana clarifies.

"Neither!" Puck insists.

"Oh, that's good. You should go home and go to bed, and drink lots of water, and then pee it out. The sickness will ride out with the pee," Brittany says seriously.

"Why is she coming with us?" a Chi-Ryu asks.

Santana shrugs. "Because she's lost. We'll take her to the next town so somebody can look after her. There's no sense in leaving her out here. Besides, otherwise she'd just keep stealing our food."

"It's really yummy," Brittany nods in agreement. "I totally want some like right now."

"You'll never clear this with Captain Quinn," the Chi-Ryu says. "We already have enough mouths to feed with you two and the prisoner. There's no way she can stay."

"She can stay," Quinn says tiredly.

Santana smirks at the Chi-Ryu with no small amount of satisfaction. Brittany copies her smirk perfectly, but forgets to add the necessary element of malice.

"But Captain!" the Chi-Ryu says. "This makes no sense! She'll just drag us down even further."

"She's an Air Nomad. I don't think she's capable of dragging us down," Quinn deadpans.

"We've already wasted an entire day going after her," the Chi-Ryu points out. "It's already sunset!"

"The day wasn't wasted," Quinn says. "We no longer have a mysterious follower disrupting our operations."
"Did you manage to get any useful information from the prisoner?" the Chi-Ryu asks.

Quinn's wince is barely noticeable. "Yes," she says. "We can act on it tomorrow. Now please, leave me alone. Today was... very draining."

With that, the Chi-Ryu Captain enters her tent and closes the flap decisively, leaving no room for argument.

"Damn," Puck says. "Just when I didn't think she could get any bitchier..."

Suddenly, Brittany looks up, as if she notices something in the air. Her eyes turn suddenly towards Quinn's tent. "Mr. Duck!" she says excitedly, blowing past Santana and into the tent before anyone has a chance to stop her.

The dark-clad girl runs behind her just in time to see her regard a sleeping Sam with a look of heavy disappointment. "Oh," she says sadly. "You're not Mr. Duck."

"What are you doing?" Quinn says, annoyed. "Get out!"

"I'm sorry," Brittany says.

"Hey!" Santana steps in. "Don't yell at her. She's just a little confused."

"Well, I'm just a little tired and annoyed!" Quinn counters. "It happens. Now get out!"

Santana ushers a sad Brittany out the door. "Come on," she says. "Let's go do something. Have you ever braided hair before?"

Brittany nods. "I did it to Mr. Duck once. He didn't like it very much."

The assassin just smiles and nods as she leaves, sparing only a second to glance back. Her smile turns into a smirk as she makes careful note of the fact that Sam is asleep on Quinn's bed and files it away for future use.

You never know what little bits of gossip might come in handy...

Sam Evans is totally not asleep.

He just wants everyone to think he is.

Okay, he was definitely asleep when Quinn put his shirt back on and moved him from the ground to her bed. Which was really kind of nice of her, though he isn't sure where that puts her on the niceness scale after she spent the afternoon opening up a universe of pain and dragging him through it by his nipples. Whatever, he doesn't need to think about that. He needs to think about other things.

Things like his escape plan, and how he is totally going to redeem himself from being such a pathetic piece of fail. He might not know exactly where they are going, but he knows the direction they were headed in. And he just figured that out, so it will sound totally honest when he confesses as much.

He opens his eyes to find Quinn staring at him sadly from across the room. It's really freaking unexpected, so when he flinches, it's totally realistic. Artie taught him all about method acting back in the Earth Kingdom. It was epic.
"Please don't hurt me," he says. It's at this point that he notices that he is no longer completely tied up. Only his hands are bound together.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Quinn says.

"Please, I just remember—wait, you're not?" Sam asks.

The blonde shakes her head. "No. What were you going to say?"

This throws him off a little bit. "I just remembered… nevermind."

She looks a little annoyed, but quickly brushes it off. "Fine. Are you still sore?"

The astronomer thinks about the question for a bit. "…a little," he says honestly.

Quinn nods and strides over to the small, comfortable mat where he is laying, and applies her fingers (which he is embarrassed to say he flinched at, again) to the same spot as before, sending soothing waves of glorious goodness all up and down his body. It's awesome. Like, super duper amazingtastic. "Ohhhhh," he sighs. "You're really good at that."

"Thank you," Quinn says evenly.

It's the most relaxingest thing ever. He kind of wants to fall asleep again. It's… it's… it's the perfect set-up! "South," Sam says sleepily.

Quinn stares at him oddly. "What did you say?"

Sam smiles at her almost drunkenly. "…went south," he says again. "D'nonce what place, but that's where they were going last I saw," he finishes.

"Why didn't you say that before?" Quinn asks, sounding a little distraught.

"You wanted 'where.' D'nonce where. J's know what way," Sam says, blinking tiredly as he feels himself easing back to sleep.

"Well, thank you," Quinn says, and he smiles a little wider as he feels himself drifting off.

There's no way he can take all these people out by himself, not even with his massive guns. But he can use his amazing brain to point them in the wrong direction (because he is pretty sure they definitely went east). It'll probably cost him a lot when the evil warrior chicks figure it out. Maybe even… like… his life. Which would suck, but… he's made up his mind. Finn and Kurt and Artie and Mercedes and even Blaine… they're his friends and whether they know it or not, he totally sold them out. One way or another, he's gonna make it up to them.

No matter what.

He's not quite asleep when Quinn removes her fingers, but he's so close that it doesn't really make much of a difference. He's already starting slip away from reality and into sleepy-dream-land. He's pretty sure, anyway.

Because he's pretty sure he just heard Quinn whisper "I'm sorry," before she left. And there's no way she would say that in the real world.

…right?
TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: Brittany has arrived! Only one more part with this chapter to go. Damn me and my determination to develop all these characters. Why does this take so many words? Argh… either way, next chapter will cover days 4, 5, 6, and 7. I hope Brit-Brit is significantly entertaining to get you to review/comment and not yell at me for banking away from the main characters. =D
Bad Reputation, Part 3

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 31/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: Nothing severe. Possible dub-con.
Word Count: ~9500
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will circumstances conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

Author's Note: The final part of Bad Reputation at last! This part is pretty frickin' huge, both in terms of wordcount and importance to the story. As usual, there's a little exposition, and a little information teasing. Oh, and a fairly massive bombshell towards the chapter's end. ;) I hope you have enjoyed our little side adventure with the trio, and I hope you enjoy its conclusion!

CHAPTER 31 – Bad Reputation, Part 3

Day 4

So, Sam Evans is kind of confused.

Quinn can't stand to be around him.

But she also can't seem to take her eyes off of him.

It probably has something to do with him opening his big stupid mouth that morning…

"Why are you doing this?" he asks, unbidden. He's just woken up to find Quinn staring at him again. He really hopes she wasn't doing that all night. It's a little creepy.

"I'm just making sure that you're alright," Quinn says. "That you aren't going to keel over and die unexpectedly. In case we need more—"
"No," Sam says. "Not that. I mean… why are you doing…" He does his best to gesture to their surroundings with his face. "…all this."

"To protect the Fire Nation," Quinn says flatly. "To honor my family and my country."

"That's it?" Sam asks.

"Do I need another reason?" Quinn counters.

Sam averts his eyes. "I guess not. I mean... it's just... you don't seem to... you know... like it very much," he stammers.

Quinn squints at him. "Alright then... why do you do what you do?" she asks.

He shrugs. "Because I like it. It's fun, it's interesting, it makes me happy."

"And what does your family think of this?" Quinn presses.

Sam shrugs. "They love it, too. We're pretty much peas in a pod."

"Well, aren't you the lucky one?" Quinn says.

He grins. "Lucky describes me pretty well, I'd say."

"If only we could all be so lucky," Quinn says, a tiny measure of sadness in her voice.

"Your family..." Sam starts, but Quinn is gone before he can get it out. She avoids him for the rest of the morning.

...which is how he ends up riding Killgore with Puck.

It's a little awkward. Quinn keeps staring at Sam, Puck thinks she is staring at him and winks or smacks his lips, and Quinn looks away disgusted. And then Puck keeps right on staring at her, looking kind of sad. Then he looks forward, and Sam looks at Quinn and wonders about her.

"So," Puck says after a while. "Nice guns."

Sam grins. "Thanks. I work out."

"Me too," Puck says. "Have to, if you want guns like that."

"Dang straight," Sam agrees. "Ain't no shortcut to sexy."

There's a little silence.

"I like to punch stuff," Puck says simply. "What do you do with yours?"

"I lift a lot of super-heavy crap," Sam nods. "Move around a lot, you know."

Puck nods. "Yeah. My job takes me lots of places."

"What do you do?" Sam asks.

The armored assassin shrugs. "Whatever I'm paid to do."

"Mercenary?" Sam says.
Puck shrugs again. "I guess. I gotta make money somehow."

The astronomer nods. "What do you do with it?"

The badass bald turns around to look at him. "What?"

"With all the money you make," Sam asks. "What do you do with it?"

Puck's face darkens a couple shades. "Whatever I want," he says evasively. "Dude, don't be such a freakin' gossip queen."

And that's the end of that conversation.

Santana and Brittany ride together, of course.

"Where are we going?" Brittany asks.

"Weren't you listening to Quinn this morning?" Santana asks back.

"I was," Brittany says, "but then my head started singing, and I couldn't hear her over the song."

"Oh," Santana says. Well, that explains it. "Well, we're going to Chenling. It's a shitty little harbor town on the southern shore of the Fire Nation. Lot of creepers and shady assholes like to hang around there, so it's a great place for someone with secrets to hide."

"Oh," Brittany nods, smiling. "Maybe my friend is there! He has lots of secrets. I think he keeps them in his hair. That's what makes it so full and bodied."

"Maybe we'll find him there," Santana says thoughtfully.

"Maybe," Brittany agrees. "There are lots of maybes in the world. I like them. They make life fun and interesting."

Santana meditates on that for a bit. "You've got a point," she concedes.

"How are we supposed to find the Avatar in a city full of cretins like Chenling?" one of her Chi-Ryus asks.

"If he's there, we'll find him," Quinn promises. "I know exactly how to get cretins to cooperate."

REWARD!

1,000 Gold Pieces

For the capture of
THE AVATAR
And his friends.

"Whoa!" Puck says. "Where are we supposed to get that kind of money?"

"Right here," Quinn says, reaching into her saddlebag and pulling out a small chest.
"What? Have we had that the whole time?" Puck asks.

"Mmmm-hmmm. For authorized expenditures only, of course, but I had this authorized via messenger hawk last night," Quinn says simply. "This is taken out of the money previously set aside to pay you," she smiles.

The armored assassin is at a loss. "But… what… you can't just…"


She shoves the stack of posters into his arms and leaves him to put them up.

Chenling was a city built with high hopes. And, as anyone who has had high hopes can tell you, disappointment followed as a natural consequence. The harbor largely fell into disuse because of a current shift out at sea, so most of the people who dock there now are doing so at great personal risk, which generally means they have something to hide. The town is dingy and shady, and no matter how many corners you turn, you never quite get over the feeling that you're being followed.

They set up shop in one of the nicer inns at the city's northern edge, being sure to give very specific directions on the posters (along with their current best portrait of the Avatar and slightly more basic sketches [stick figures] of the others' major features).

Having been the only ones who have really seen the group (besides Sam), Puck, Santana, and Quinn commandeer the front desk to act as judges, with a few Chi-Ryu guards on standby in case anyone tries anything funny.

Quinn expects results.

Oh boy, does she ever get them. It isn't long before the line to give them 'the Avatar and friends' extends all the way outside the building and far down the street. It's just a shame that they aren't the results she wants.

"Uhhh, no," she says to the first participants.

"What? Come on," the rough-looking guy in green says. "Look at him! That's clearly the guy."

Quinn looks over at the strange, rail-thin character with obviously gelled hair, wearing lipstick, eyeliner, mascara, and… is that body glitter?

"I assure you," Quinn says. "It's not. NEXT!"

This pretty much proves to be the pattern for the rest of the day.

"Pretty sure the black one and the tall one were different. And the black one was a girl," Puck says. "Sorry."

"Crippled. Crippled," Santana enunciates. "Not an amputee! They're not the same thing. You lose!"

"Why did you draw arrows all over him? That wasn't even in the picture!" Quinn sighs. "NEXT!"

On and on they go, until soon they come to realize…

"This blows. None of these people have him. None of them have ever even seen him!" Puck insists.

"Maybe we should try going for information," Santana suggests. She turns to the crowd gathered in the room. "Hey! Since it's pretty clear that none of you assholes have the Avatar, we're offering a
reward for anyone who has information leading to his capture. Now, who has something to say?"

*Every single fucking hand* rises.

"Oh, **fuck me,**" Quinn sighs.

---

*Meanwhile, Sam and Brittany, who are apparently not to be trusted with these matters, sit in one of the upper rooms, their door under Chi-Ryu guard.*

"So," Sam says, his voice low. "Did you... umm... by any chance... fall out of the sky recently?"

"Oh my gosh!" Brittany gasps. "I totally did that!"

"Awesome!" Sam says. "I think I've met a friend of yours."

"You totally have," Brittany nods. "I can tell. I thought you were him, at first. But he's not as shiny as you."

Sam smirks and flips his hair, just 'cause. "Well, not many people are as shiny as me, but anyway... I have a message for you from him. He said... he said... aw, crap. What did he say?"

"I don't know," Brittany says. "I wish I could help you."

"Oh!" Sam says. "I think he said something like 'he'll be back when he's done with his business.'"

"That sounds like him," Brittany nods. "He has a lot of business."

"What kind of business?" Sam asks.

"The badass kind," Brittany says with a smile.

---

*And on the other side of town, Clarence DeWalt, a thirty five year old man with the wispy mustache of a fifteen year old, stands not-so-patiently waiting within an old warehouse for an 'associate' of his to make his overdue appearance...*

Clarence has his greeting at the ready when Mister Dark-Hood-I'm-So-Mysterious finally shows the shadows where his face should be. "You're a day late."

"But not a single leaf short," he replies amicably. "I must apologize for my untimely arrival. 'Shit happens,' you know, and apparently, this week much of it happens to **me.** You would not believe the—"

"Oh, boo-hoo," Clarence says mockingly. He's had enough of this guy, on account of he hasn't had any of this when he was actually needed. "Cry me a fucking river. Look, Shady McNoFace, I've got customers here that are threatening to slit my throat if they don't get their fix soon, and the way these loonies are strung out? I fucking believe them. A day late is one day too many!"

"Well, I am just so sorry for your distress," the jerk counters sarcastically. "Would you like to sing about it? We could make it a duet. I'd be happy to provide counterpoint."

"Ha-ha," Clarence says with a sneer. He scratches his thigh—the signal for his buddies to get into place. "We'll see who's laughing soon enough. You got the stuff?"

"Of course," he says, pulling a mid-sized bag from inside of his cloak and dangling it in front of
him. "The very acme of analgesics, as always. You have my payment?"

"Well, see..." Clarence says with a grin. "The thing about that is... given the circumstances of your late arrival, I'm thinking it's time we renegotiated our terms..."

"What do you mean 'the badass kind?'" Sam asks.

"Well," Brittany says. "My friend told me it was like this; once upon a time, all Air Nomads were super-nice and fluffy and peaceful and sweet. They were pretty much all the same."

"Sounds about right," Sam says.

Brittany leans forward. "But then, Avatar Gaga came, and everything changed..."

All around the room, Clarence's hired helpers move swiftly and silently into place. "Reliable partners are valuable in this business," he says as they move. "You just got less reliable, ergo, you just got less valuable."

"Now, Clarence," Mr. Hood says calmly. "You know that's not how this works. We agreed on this transaction ahead of time. If you want to haggle price, you can take it up with my bosses, but I am not leaving here without my full payment."

"Oh yeah?" Clarence says with a shrug. "'cause I got about ten friends here who beg to differ."

And right on cue, he hears the telltale twang of bowstrings being drawn back...

"Avatar Gaga said that the same thing all the time was boring," Brittany continues. "She said that we should embrace our differences and try new stuff. A lot of the monks didn't like her for saying that... but some did. The ones who did and the ones who didn't even fought over it sometimes..."

"You're making a huge mistake here, Clarence," Mr. Hood sighs, like he's sad or something. "I can see where this is going, and believe me, it doesn't end well for you."

"Fucking airbenders," Clarence spits. "You think you know everything? Well, let me tell you what I know. I know that I have ten buddies here, all crack shots, just waiting for a chance ventilate your windbag ass. I know that the man with the weapons calls the shots. And I know that man happens to be me. So the way I see it, you have two options: you leave with half the pay, or you don't leave at all. Now, which one is it gonna be?"

Mr. Hood's voice comes out smooth and unaffected as ever. "You're wrong..."

Sam waits for her to finish the story. She doesn't. This lasts for a short while. "Is that it?" he finally asks.

"Oh," Brittany says. "Well... I forgot the next part. It has a lot of names and stuff I can't remember. But I'm pretty sure the ending is 'and now there are two kinds of Air Nomads.'"

The young astronomer looks thoughtful. "Okay, so, we have the super-sweet peaceful nice kind, and...?"
"Oh, really?" Clarence asks. The guy is seriously starting to scratch at Clarence's scabs. He can already feel that old vein of his popping out of his neck. "What am I wrong about?"

The cloaked man shakes his head, calmly setting aside the bag of product. "I've never claimed to know everything," he says easily. "Honestly, I don't know much at all. But I have plenty of thoughts. And do you want to know what I think?"

It looks like bait. It smells like bait. It probably tastes like bait. And yet... he's the one with all the archers. What's the worst that could happen? He bites. "What do you think?"

Mr. Hood spreads his arms out wide in invitation. "I think your friends' aim blows."

Clarence's lip twitches in annoyance. That's it. He's officially out of patience. "Alright, then. Boys? Show this airhole your aim. FIRE!"

As the sound of flying arrows fills the room, Mr. Hood starts his winds-a-blowin'. The gust blasts back his hood, letting Clarence see the full-view of the guy's face just beforeRRRRRK—

"…and the other kind," Brittany finishes simply.

Sam tilts his head. "Well, that's... interesting. I guess." He looks over at Brittany, who seems a little lost, but also like she might always be a little lost. "Either way, I hope you find your friend."

"Me too," Brittany smiles. "I hope he's okay..."

He gives the girl a little smile, which gets to spend all of a second on his face before it drops. "I hear voices," Sam says. They aren't happy voices. He braces himself for what he suspects is next. "Someone's coming..."

"Well, that was a total fucking waste of time," Santana spits as they dismiss the last of the losers trying to get their paws on the prize money. "And to think, you actually expected a shit-ton of money to bring honesty out in these low-lifes. Oh, Quinn. We should all be so sheltered."

Quinn just smirks mirthlessly. "You really think I'm naïve?" she asks. "I thought we knew each other better than that."

Puck turns slightly weary eyes towards Quinn as they head upstairs. "So, wait. If that wasn't supposed to get the Avatar, then..."

"It was," Quinn says. "And it would have at least given us a viable lead if the Avatar were here, or had been seen in this area. The fact that it didn't proves only one thing..." she continues as she bursts through the door to the room. Her eyes immediately latch onto Sam. "You lied to me."

Sam stands up, his face a stoic mask. He was expecting this. "Maybe," he says flatly.

The challenge echoes throughout the room, and it is answered quickly.

"Idiota!" Santana barks. "You cost us this fucking mission and I swear I will cut you open from cheek to cheek. Your entire face will be a mouth."

"I'm fixing to paint this town chunky-guts red," Puck promises, his voice low and threatening.

The Chi-Ryu don't even bother with words. One of them steps forward and immediately thrusts two fingers towards him.
Only a timely intervention from Quinn is able to send the fire-shot wide, where it blasts out a small chunk of wall. "None of you are going to lay a hand on him," she says flatly, releasing the Chi-Ryu's hand. Sam experiences a short surge of hope before she mercilessly crushes it beneath her evil bitch boots. "He has committed a capital crime against the Fire Nation by willingly and knowingly lying to aid the Avatar. The penalty for this crime is death. And since I am the one who obtained the faulty information, I will carry out his sentence myself."

Sam gulps. Oh man… oh man. He really is going to die. This is it. Fucking shit…

"There's no need to saddle the innkeeper with a body to dispose of," Quinn says. "I'll take care of the deed somewhere nice and secluded. The rest of you, stay here. We will discuss where to pick up the trail from here when I return."

"There is no more fucking trail!" Santana spits. "This loser just pulled us away from it. It's probably ice cold by now."

"We will discuss it," Quinn seethes, "when I return."

With that, she grabs Sam and drags him from the room.

Brittany looks after her in awe. "She carries a lot of sentences," the girls says. "And now she wants to carry someone else's too? She must be really strong. All those words must be super-heavy."

Santana sighs and quietly beats her head against the wall.

He's going to die. He's going to die.

They're walking deeper and deeper into the woods. Oh, shit. No one is ever gonna find him out here. His awesome body is just going to lie here and turn into soggy, gross mush, melting away until there's nothing but bones. He isn't even going to get a funeral. No one…

…holy shit.

No one he loves is even going to know he's dead. They might never even find out. All that his parents… all that his friends will know is that he went on a journey one day and just… never came back. And he was never seen or heard from again. That's how his story ends.

Fuck.

Fuck.

FUCK.

Well, you know… whatever. He chose this himself. He knew this would probably happen, so all he can do now is at least try to be somewhat of a badass in his final moments. "I'm not sorry," he says, and shit. That didn't sound convincing at all. He sounds like he's about to fall apart.

Quinn is marching behind him. Not close enough for him to strike, but more than close enough to nail him with pretty much any Firebending technique she pleases. But she doesn't. She doesn't hit him, she doesn't even say anything.

So Sam just keeps on walking. Looking up at the sky, he's pretty sure the sun is almost set, but it's hard to tell from all the clouds. It's not a pretty day. It's not even a stormy day. It's just gloomy, and gray, and sucky, like this whole fucking situation. The forest seems to sense what's on the horizon
—whether it's the rain, or his impending doom, none of the animals seem interested in sticking around to see it go down.

Forest… animals… oh, fuck. His body is totally going to get eaten by a platypus bear, isn't it?

"I don't care," he says, forcing a bit more force into his voice. "Kurt and Finn are my friends. Artie and Mercedes, too. And… that Blaine guy…" Shit. Now he's getting all choked up. "…and I won't help you hurt them. No matter what you do to me. I don't care!" He takes a few breaths to try and calm the fuck down, and finally voices a challenge to Quinn. "You'd do the same for your friends."

And suddenly, he is on the ground, his feet swept out from under him by Quinn's leg. He lands with a thud and barely even has time to blink before the girl grabs him by his hair and yanks him to his knees. He feels a slight rush of heated air at the back of his neck.

And just like that, he knows. His journey is over. He stops, forever, right here.

"You'd do the same," Sam repeats.

He can feel her breath, wet and warm against his ear, when she whispers her reply. "I don't have friends."

Well, so much for that. He closes his eyes. He's as ready as he'll ever be.

There is a flash of white behind his eyes.

And Sam Evans falls.

"Fuckin' idiot," Puck says. "What the fuck is wrong with that guy?" He bangs his non-super fist against the wall in frustration (not wanting to blow half the fucking building off by accident).

"Probably thought he was being brave or something," Santana snits. "Stupid is more like it."

"Where did Sam and Quinn go?" Brittany asks.

Reactions are instantaneous.

Puck's face says 'you serious?'

Santana's says 'oh shit.'

They both open their mouths to speak but Santana gets there first. "Out," Santana says. "They're, uhhh… they're breaking up. The relationship just wasn't working."

"Oh," Brittany says. "I know about break-ups. I have lots of them. I broke up with a really cute boy I was dating before I came on this trip. He totally cried. He was seven. Quinn will probably be sad, too. We should totally hug her when she comes back."

Puck's 'you serious' is now directed at Santana. Santana's 'oh shit' has intensified. And wouldn't you know it—before ANY of them has a chance to speak, the door opens and a dead-faced Quinn walks in.

"We retr—" That's all she manages to get out before she suddenly finds herself with an armful of sad, comforting Brittany wrapping around her.

"I'm sorry about Sam," she says.
Quinn is completely stunned. It takes more than a few seconds for her to figure out how to respond, wrapping her arms around Brittany and whispering, "Me too."

"So what's the plan?" Santana asks, after a moment.

Quinn breaks free of Brittany and moves to sit on the bed. "We retrace our steps tomorrow. Brittany will stay here under the care of the innkeeper, who will be provided enough money to house her for the foreseeable future. Tonight… we rest." She turns her emotionless eyes towards the other occupants of the room. "You three will rest elsewhere. I need… to be alone for a while."

Puck regards her carefully, his face giving nothing away. But he puts a hand on her shoulder as he passes her on the way out. Brittany gives her another little hug, and leaves quickly.

Santana looks at her for a few moments as she walks across the room, sitting down on the bed and staring silently out the window at the dark, black night. When Quinn finally notices her staring and turns to look at her, Santana just tries to convey what sympathy she can on her face as she leaves. He was probably her first kill. It isn't easy.

As the door closes behind her, Quinn goes right back to staring out the window, and silently wondering if she just made the worst mistake of her life…

Sam Evans wakes up.

Wait, what?

Back the fuck up.

He's…

Okay, ewww. There's like something flicking against his face. He's pretty sure it's a tongue. It's not licking him, it's just kind of poking at him, but still… ewww. He can't really see kind of animal it belongs to. Actually, he can't really see anything, because holy fuck is it dark out here. But there is definitely something flicking at his face.

HOLY SHIT.

*He has a face.* A working face! And a working… *other parts!* He's not dead! At least, not completely. It's entirely possible that it's not dark outside at all and that he has gone blind or some shit, but he's pretty sure that's not the case.

He's too freakin' ecstatic over being alive to care right now. He's *alive.* And that's fucking awesome. That means…

That means she decided not to kill him.

Huh.

...why?

*(It will be at least a day before he discovers the note tucked into his shirt.)*

Run far away, as fast as you can.
If we meet again, you won't survive.
For some reason, he feels like they're definitely going to meet again. And he's not sure how he feels about that…

**Day 5**

That morning, Brittany follows her outside to see them off. "I wish you didn't have to go," she says, looking at Santana with big, sad eyes.

"Me too," Santana says. It comes out all weepy and self-pitying, though, which is totally not what she meant. She fucking hates these people. She'd rather be anywhere than on a happy fun road trip with them. That's it. "Maybe I can come back and visit you when all this is over?" she says, hoping the little bit of hope will at least make Brittany feel better.

But the poor girl just shakes her head. "I won't be here," Brittany sighs. "Mr. Duck is here. I can tell. I'm going to leave with him."

Santana's face lets her confusion display openly. "He's here?"

"Well, not like, here here, but… here! He's somewhere, and I think that somewhere is close. I can find him," Brittany says.

Santana looks around. Puck is up a tree, dangling food from a limb at his rhino and trying to get it to jump for it. The rhino is clearly having none of that shit. Quinn still looks all forlorn, like she belongs on the cover of some trashy-ass romance novel, standing on a cliff over the sea with her long hair and fancy dress blowing in the wind. And finally, the Chi-Ryus are still packing… so they have time.

"Why don't we go find him?" Santana asks. "Come on. I'll see you off."

"That'd be great!" Brittany smiles.

As they walk off, Killgore finally gets fed up with Puck's antics and casually rams the tree, knocking his ass right out of it.

"So fucking smart," Puck grunts with equal parts pain and pride. "That's my boy!"

"I think he's right around here," Brittany says, leading them through a small crowd gathered around an old warehouse near the docks. The place seems to be off-limits, however; guards are present in force, keeping the crowd at bay and randomly coming in and out of the building.

"The fuck happened here?" Santana asks one of them.

"None of your fucking business," he replies.

"Oh really?" Santana asks with a smirk. "Well, I suppose I could take my business elsewhere," she smirks, flashing a silver piece at the guard as she turns.

"Wait, wait," he says, eying the money greedily. "Make it two, and you got a deal."

She's feeling generous. "Done," she says, slipping the coins into his palm. "Spill."

"Not much to say, really," the guard shrugs. "Eleven bodies, total, arrows still in 'em. Looks like they all shot each other."
"What happened?" Santana asks.

The guard shrugs. "Bunch of armed guys in a dingy old place like this… my guess is some kind of shady deal gone south. Guess nobody'll ever know for sure, though," he says casually.

"Damn," Santana winces. She hopes none of those are the guy Brittany knows.

"One thing that gets me, though..." the guard continues. "This one guy, Clarence something, local asshole… he must have pissed 'em off something fierce. Guy had ten arrows in him, all from the front, and he was the only one without a weapon. It was almost like an execution... but if they were just there to kill the guy, why'd they turn on each other after he was down? Makes no fuckin' sense," he spits. "Oh well. Bunch of lowlifes bite the dirt... who gives a shit, am I right?"

Santana rolls her eyes. This guy has no business calling anyone else a lowlife. "Of course," Santana says with a smile. "Thanks a ton."

She turns back towards Brittany, who is again looking lost. "I don't think he's here anymore. He already left," she says sadly.

Santana puts a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure you'll find him... eventually..." she trails off, a thought suddenly shoving its way into her head. "Brittany?" she asks. "How do you know where he's been?"

The blonde girl brightens fairly quickly. "I taste the air," she says simply. "I taste it with my nose. There are lots of different flavors, but I can pick them out and see where they come from. It's fun!"

Santana can do nothing but gape. "Wait," she says. "Are you telling me you can track scents?"

"Maybe," Brittany says. "I think so. Wait..." She looks up, her lips moving as if she is counting in her head. "Yes."

Santana grabs her by the hand and drags her back up the road.

"...I didn't steal it!" Puck insists.

"Why should I believe you?" Quinn asks hotly. "All you seem to care about it money, and sex, and that stupid rhino—"

"Hey! Don't insult him," Puck growls. "And you should believe me because I'm being honest with you. I fucking wanted to steal that money, okay? I planned on it, actually, and now that it's gone, I'm just as pissed as you."

Quinn growls and throws her hands up. Of course, at this point, Santana waltzes in, dragging the air-bimbo behind her. "Oh, Santana, just in time. It appears that our prize money has been—"

"Whatever you're about to say," Santana interjects, "fuck it. It's not important. Because I have just discovered the solution to all our problems."

"Oh?" Quinn asks. "And what might that be?"

She responds by picking up a small stone and rubbing it between her hands. "Remember this rock," Santana instructs, holding it up for Quinn to take a good look at it.

Then she tosses it as hard as she can into the woods.
"What exactly are you—"

"Brittany?" Santana asks.

"Yeah?" Brittany responds.

"Bring that back for me, will you?" she says, holding out her hands. The airbender sniffs at them. "Tastes like danger and sadness," Brittany comments.

Santana gives her a weird look. "Uhhh, yeah, whatever. Bring me that rock, okay?"

Brittany nods, and prances off into the woods.

Puck waltzes over to join Quinn and Santana while they wait. "What's up?"

"I am a golden goddess, and you should fall down on your knees and worship me, that's what," Santana coos happily.

"...the fuck?" Puck asks.

Quinn side-eyes her as well, but says nothing.

It isn't long before Brittany comes prancing out of the woods. "Found it!" she says, handing the rock to Santana.

The assassin holds it up for Quinn to behold. "Look familiar?" she asks.

Quinn is astounded. "That's the same one. That's... amazing."

Santana ropes an arm around Brittany and squeezes her in close. "My girl Brit-Brit happens to be a human shirshu. She can track scents like nobody's bizz."

Puck goes wide-eyed. "...holy shit. She can track down the dude! Without even bothering with any of that super smart girl tracking shit that you do! That's awesome!"

Quinn looks right at the girl in question. "Brittany," she says gently. "How would you like to stay with us and help us hunt down some bad people?"

"Can I ride with Santana?" Brittany asks.

Quinn smiles. "Sure!"

"Okay!" Brittany says brightly. "I'd love to!"

Santana brings her some of the things they found in the cave. The tattered bits of clothing seem to have the strongest effect.

"Tastes like fear and hair gel. That way!" Brittany points down the road they came from. Obviously, it's retracing their steps, but still... it's a start.

They saddle up, and the chase begins anew...

That night, the four of them plus the Chi-Ryu stare down at the strange message carved into the dirt.

"What is that supposed to be?" Quinn asks.
"Sound advice," Puck replies.

Santana tilts her head to read it a little better. "GET SOME," she reads aloud. Of fucking course Puck would think that. "Well, whatever it is, it pretty much proves that they were here."

"I have some!" Brittany announces.

"Wanna share?" Puck asks with a wink.

Santana grabs Brittany and leads her away before she can reply.

"Why are we stopping?" Puck asks Quinn as they head back. "They've already got a five day head start!"

Quinn regards him coolly. "You forget that they are walking wounded. They're traveling in an immensely slow carriage, probably at a very casual pace so as not to draw attention. Whereas we are free to ride full-tilt for hours on massive beasts that barely know what tired feels like. We'll close the gap in no time," she says, smiling to herself a bit. "They can run, but they can no longer hide. We've got them."

Puck considers that for a second. "Yeah... I guess we do." He smiles. "Hot damn. 'bout time our luck changed for the better. What do you say we celebrate?" he asks lasciviously.

"No, Puck," Quinn says, but she smiles even as she denies him. She's just in such a fantastic mood. "Face it. It's not happening."

"Sorry," Puck says, wiggling his eyebrows, "but I don't give up that easy."

"No matter how the wind howls," Quinn quotes, "the mountain cannot bow to it." Sometimes, it pays to know when to quit," she says, rolling her eyes as she enters the tent for a night. Honestly, he's fucking impossible.

"You win again!" Brittany announces happily. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Santana says, mock-bowing graciously. She'd feel bad about clobbering Brittany in all these games they are playing if it wasn't for the fact that she really doesn't seem to care who wins. The blonde honestly seems to be perfectly happy either way. Santana kind of envies that. Like, a lot.

Because Santana is only happy when she is winning.

"You're so good at tic-tac-toe," Brittany says with a smile. "I always forget which one I'm supposed to be. I think it's 'toe,' because I have lots of those, but no tic-tac's."

"Well," Santana says, erasing the board and drawing another one. "If you keep practicing, maybe it'll help you remember."

"I want to play a different game," Brittany says.

"Okay," Santana replies. "What game do you want to play?"

And then, like a damned lightning bolt out of the clear fucking blue sky, Brittany leans over and kisses her.
It's…
Uh hh…
What…
Wait a minute…
She should…

Hold up!

"Brittany," she says, breaking away after only a few seconds (she was shocked, okay?). "What are you doing?" she asks, kind of stupidly, because… duh. Obvious, much?

"I'm kissing you," Brittany replies, looking a little lost. "I thought you'd like it. Kissing is what you do to someone when you really like them, isn't it?" She looks down. "I really like you. I thought you liked me too…" she says sadly.

And then it hits Santana that a sad Brittany is, like, the worst fucking thing ever to come out of the universe. It's like cancer and herpes and syphilis, rolled up in a stale-ass tortilla and sprinkled with hair and toenail clippings. This absolutely cannot stand.

"I do like you," Santana says. "I just… I wasn't ready. Can we try again?"

Brittany brightens instantly. "Sure!" She grins. "I think I finally found a game I'm good at."

And as Santana tastes Brittany soft, sweet lips for the second time that night, she can't help but agree.

But Santana is totally the one who's winning though. Just sayin'.

---

**Day 6**

"Sleep with me."

"No."

"Have sex with me."

"No!"

"Make love to me."

"You have got to be joking."

"Hey, apparently some chicks get off on that kind of shit, so you never know… hey, where you going? Quinn? Hey! This chi-blockage is getting pretty dire! I'm feeling all swollen and stiff! I think I need a massage… come back!"

"…and all the other little bison told him that his tail was too round, and he couldn't play in all of their bison games."

"That's so sad."
"I know, right? But it's totally okay though. Because it turns out he had fire breath, and he totally rained destruction down on all the mean little bison, and burned them to fluffy clouds of smoke."

"That's… I… wow. Are you sure that's how the story went?"

"Mmmmmmmm. It's one of my favorites."

"Well, it does have a certain charm… I think I can relate."

---

They spend pretty much the entire next day riding full tilt. Eventually, they teach Brittany to ignore the spots where they veered off into the woods if they clearly came back to the main road afterwards. They make *astounding* time, not even stopping for lunch (the Chi-Ryu's acrobatic skill enables them to serve lunch on-the-go, hopping between rhinos to retrieve the necessary supplies).

Every trot of their rhinos brings Quinn closer to catching her prey and restoring her honor.

She can't wait.

Except that she kind of had no choice.

So in the meantime, there is plenty of talking to be had…

"Brittany?"

"Yeah, Quinn?"

"What's it like to be an Air Nomad?"

"It's… normal."

"…okay, not quite the answer that I was looking for, but I think it makes sense."

"What's being a firebender like?"

"…I'm going to go with 'intense.'"

"That's a really good word."

"Thank you."

"What does it mean?"

"…ummm… well…"

---

"What are you smiling about?"

"Nonya."

"Nonya? The fuck does that mean?"

"Nonya *business*, dillweed."

"Jeez, I'm just asking. *'scuse me* for trying to be all nice and shit."
"You're not trying to be nice. You're trying to get laid."

"That's not all that I'm about."

"Uh-huh, suuurrre."

"It's not!"

"Mmmm-hmmm."

"...I also want to get paid. Laid and paid, and I'm set for the day."

"What simple needs. We should all be so lucky."

That night, Quinn dreams of the Fire Prince. They face each other in the public arena, a massive crowd gathered to watch their Agni Kai. She feels the eyes of her family upon her, and she smirks at the Fire Prince, on his knees before her, defeated and begging for mercy. This time, she does not hesitate, raising her hand and delivering a devastating fiery slice across his chest to finish him off. It is only as the blow connects that curly black hair becomes shaggy, straight blond, and frightened hazel eyes become sad green ones. "Why are you doing this?" he asks as he falls.

She wakes up before she can answer.

Puck dreams of two gorgeous blondes on either side of him, working every inch of his badass body while he works them right back, mouth, hands, legs, tongues, nipples, sweet, sweet skin. It's a fucking symphony for the senses, the sight of naked flesh, the sound of breaths and moans, the smell of sweat and sex, the taste of salty skin, the touch of red hot bodies and pressure, heat rising and rising until they can no longer take it and they just explode, bursting into brilliant colors and streams of light. They erupt into human fireworks. It's beautiful.

It's almost enough to make him forget the bottomless fucking pit in the floor that's growing with every passing second, promising to swallow him whole one day no matter what he does to avoid it.

Santana dreams of the endless sky with no earth beneath it. Just a hundred thousand clouds and her, falling forever with nothing to land on. Until some of the clouds suddenly start changing colors and moving to catch her. She weaves between them, not entirely sure she wants to stop falling. She's good at falling. But the clouds say she can stop. Does she want to? Is there something to do besides fall in this groundless world?

Her dream ends when she looks up instead of down, thinking about the sky she is missing rather than the fall.

Brittany dreams of a thousand purple parakeet ponies prancing through pink posies. They move with grace and style, and all is happy, until one of them leaps too high into the air and hits his head on the sun and breaks it. Then the pirates descend from the moon and start taking prisoners to feed to Fontleroy, the Mouse with a Thousand Mouths. The parakeet ponies cry out for a savior, but none will heed their call. So Fontleroy bakes them into a sad soufflé that will not rise, and gets so frustrated that he throws them out, where they are eaten by lion mountains (which are not the same as mountain lions).

The end.

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Day 7
Which finally brings us right back around to…

"INCOMING!" Quinn shouts.

The rhinos all try to bank out of the thing's shadow, the road is on the side of a cliff, not too terribly wide, and there aren't too many places for them to go. The shadow gets darker and darker, until…

"Oh no!" Brittany says, performing an immaculate flip over Santana's head and landing right smack-dab in the middle of the shadow. Once there, she starts dancing around in a circle, spinning herself in circles as she goes. Her movements become faster and faster as she dances, the air around her naturally moving to support her motions until suddenly, she has conjured a small whirlwind out of nowhere. The rhinos balk slightly at the sudden uptake in windspeeds, while the resident humans shield their eyes from the massive amounts of dust being kicked up. This spinning cushion of air reaches into the sky and slows the giant thing's fall until it is essentially suspended in mid-air just above Brittany.

"Is that a giant frog?" Puck asks. "The fuck? Do they seriously jump that high?"

"I don't think so," Quinn says, tilting her head slightly. "And I'm pretty sure this is poisonous. Brittany! Toss it over the—"

She trails off as she sees Brittany guiding the cyclone to set the very obviously angry giant frog on the ground right in front of them. When it swipes its claws at her in gratitude for her save, the airbender simply flips back over to Santana.

"What did you do that for?" Quinn asks.

"I didn't want the froggy to get hurt," Brittany says. "He would have made a mess if I hadn't told the sky to catch him."

The Dragon-Frog roars at them. The rhinos hold steady for the most part, but they do seem slightly uneasy at the sight of the enormous creature before them.

"Maybe if we don't provoke it, it won't attack," Quinn says hopefully.

The Dragon-Frog opens its mouth and lashes at her with what appears to be a slightly scorched tongue. She just barely manages to dodge by flipping sideways off her rhino.

"...fine, fuck it. CHI-RYUS! CONCENTRATED CONTINUOUS FIRE ON THE FROG!" Quinn directs. The Chi-Ryu captain uses two fingers to slice through the air, sending crescent blades of flame at the frog. The blades hit home easily, but the creature's flesh seems quite resistant to damage.

Meanwhile, the Chi-Ryus abandon Puck and Santana's rhinos with quick, agile leaps, all joining together on Quinn's former mount. From there, one of them drives, while the other five send a constant barrage of fireballs at the frog. Individually, they don't do much, but their combined effect starts to make the beast's flesh look a little charred. The creature roars at them angrily and begins lashing out wildly with its tongue in response. Quinn just barely avoids getting swept off her feet by it. Puck pulls at his mount's reins and gets it to rear back, avoiding a similar fate. The Chi-Ryu, however, are too focused on attacking to worry about their mount, and the frog's tongue smacks the beast right in the face.

The effect is almost immediate. The rhino bucks wildly, sending Chi-Ryu warriors flying in every direction, before drunkenly charging down the road away from them and vanishing over the cliffside. The Chi-Ryus' expert training has them somersaulting through the air and landing
flawlessly on their feet, of course, but still, it breaks the fire stream long enough for the Dragon Frog to regain its senses. It leaps towards Santana and Brittany.

"Look out!" Santana shouts as she grabs Brittany and dives off the side. Brittany immediately realizes they aren't jumping quite far enough, and uses her hands to whip up a sphere of concentrated air to glide them along the ground. They make it just far enough to avoid getting smooshed, but the shockwave from the frog's landing sends them both flying. Brittany, of course, does her airbending thing and lands flawlessly. Santana only slightly less so.

Their mount isn't nearly as lucky, and Froggy's bulk winds up smacking the poor creature right off the cliff. Puck rhino is the only one left standing, and Puck sits proudly on top of it.

"This thing is just begging for a fist," Puck says, priming his punching hand.

"No, you idiot!" Quinn says. "If you do that, the thing will explode and drench you in poison. A small amount on your skin is enough to cause hallucinations. That much of it will probably kill you."

"Probably?" Puck asks, before smirking. "I like those odds. KILLGORE! HYAH!"

The rhino, seeming strangely calm about all this, charges the Dragon Frog at Puck's command. The armored assassin raises his fist and prepares to meet pay dirt, when suddenly, the frog turns around faster than he thought possible and tries to tongue him. His reflexes take over, and his fist comes down immediately, effectively punching the stupid thing's tongue right back into its mouth, where it seems to choke on it just a little bit (hey, he hits hard).

Wide-eyed from shock, Froggy jumps clear over Puck and Killgore, who slide to a halt at the very edge of the cliff… which then proceeds to crumble out from underneath them. Killgore's claws just manage to dig into the edge enough to keep them both from tumbling to their doom.

The Dragon Frog lands in the middle of all of them. Its tongue seems to have been disabled for the moment, so it resorts to its clawed feet and tries to swipe at Quinn. The Captain leaps artfully over the swipe and counterattacks with a powerful double-footed fireball towards the creature's face. It flinches, and the explosive attack barely misses its mark.

It flinches. That gives Quinn an idea.

"CHI-RYU!" she shouts. "Concentrate all fire on the face!"

The Chi-Ryu prime themselves for attack.

Almost as if it senses what is to come, Froggy turns its back on them and starts using its hindlegs to kick up huge clumps of dirt and rock. The girls manage to dive out of danger for the most part, but Froggy refuses to stop long enough for them to counterattack, keeping up a constant stream of dirty and dangerous debris

Santana looks up at the cliff above them. "Brittany!" she says. "Get me as high as you can on that wall!"

"Okay!" Brittany replies, grabbing Santana and taking a massive skyward leap. Santana pulls out one of her chains and jams it into the rock wall, swinging the two of them over to the cliff, where Brittany clings to Santana's back. They wind up way above the cloud of debris being kicked up, able to see the Chi-Ryu's caught in the attack perfectly. "Hey! Chi-Ryu chicks!" she shouts, pulling out her longest whip. "Grab on!"
With that, she lets the whip fall into the dust cloud. It isn't long before she feels the distinct tug that lets her know her line has a bite. Then, she starts reeling them in. Or tries to, anyway. They're a little heavier than they look, especially when all clumped together. She gets them a few meters off the ground.

"Brit!" she grunts. "Blow them so they swing up to the cliff, okay?"

Brittany smiles and flips off of Santana, her hands skillfully forming a sphere of air as she falls. When she reaches optimal height, she blasts the gathered gust at the dangling girls, sending them to the side, swinging them well above the Dragon-Frog's dirt-fest. The six girls detach from the whip and cling agilely to the cliffside. From there, they have the perfect vantage point to attack the creature's face in unison.

A hailstorm of fireballs descends onto Froggy's damaged mug, and the creature finally decides it has had enough. With a mighty roar that sounds like the animal equivalent of 'FUCK THIS NOISE,' the thing hops away from them, bouncing with mighty leaps up the road where they were headed.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Quinn quickly runs over to where Puck and his rhino nearly fell, just in time to see the mighty beast struggle its way back onto solid ground. "Oh, fuck yes," Puck says. "Who is the best rhino ever? Who is the best motherfucking rhino on the planet? FUCKING KILLGORE. You rule, buddy!"

"Are you alright?" Quinn asks.

"I'm cool," Puck says. "You?"

"Fine," Quinn nods. "Ladies?"

The Chi-Ryu detach themselves from the cliffside and land on the ground with practiced grace. Santana follows shortly after, and Brittany floats down on a gentle breeze last of all.

The Chi-Ryu are a little dirtied, but overall... "We're fine, Captain."

"We good," Santana says.

"I think Mr. Green is going to take a bath," Brittany says thoughtfully. "All that fire probably dried out his skin."

"I'd like to do more than just dry him out," Quinn growls. "We've lost two of our three mounts, and most of our supplies. This is an insane setback."

"Hey, come on," Puck says. "I bet Killgore can carry everybody."

"You cannot fit ten people on one Komodo Rhino!" Quinn says. And suddenly, a thought occurs to her. "Unless..."

…and that's how they end up riding down the road with the Chi-Ryu in an upside-down human pyramid. Any time it seems like the pyramid is leaning too far to one side or another, Brittany will airbend them so that they return to a more stable position. Quinn is almost ecstatic. A lesser warrior would have probably surrendered to such conditions and given up until they could replace their mounts, but not her. She is within smelling distance of her prize, so close she can practically track him herself, and she will allow no giant frog or runaway rhino to keep her from it...

…a broken bridge, however, is another story. Puck parks Killgore and the lot of them dismount,
the Chi-Ryus looking *quite* happy to be out of the pyramid formation.

"Damn it!" Quinn shouts, running over to the shattered remnants of the frame that used to form the bridge over Long River. "**They** destroyed it," she growls. "They must have, to cover their tracks."

"Or maybe Mr. Green tried to cross and he was too fat," Brittany says thoughtfully.

"Whatever," Quinn growls. "It doesn't matter. None of this matters except finding the Avatar. We'll build a *new* bridge, right here and now!" she says, sounding slightly manic.

Santana looks at the old bridge. It was pretty fucking long. And the river looks pretty fucking deep and more than willing to drown a bitch with extreme prejudice. "I think maybe we should call this one a day," she says gently.

"Yeah," Puck agrees. "It's not like they're about to leave the country or anything. We can take a day to get our shit back in order and charge after them again, no problem."

"No!" Quinn shouts, tossing an impressive fireball at the remains of the bridge and knocking a large portion into the river. "It's not *fair!* We were so *close.*"

Puck looks at Quinn sadly. "Hey, come on," he says gently. "Look, it'll be alright. You don't *have* to catch them today."

"I *know* that!" Quinn says. "But I *could* have! If I had kept the animals from getting poisoned, or if I had trained them better, or just let you *kill* the stupid frog first thing, then we could be closing in on the Avatar and the Prince *right now.* If I had just been a *little* better, we would not be *stuck* here."

The armored assassin looks at her strangely. "Quinn," he says, trying to keep his tone calm and soothing. "Are you okay?"

"No!" she roars in frustration, kicking another burst of flame at the bridge and demolishing almost everything left. "I am not okay. I am not *allowed* to be okay. I have to be perfect. I have to be the *best,* or I am no good to *anyone,*" she seethes, her voice suddenly becoming so much quieter.

"That's not true," Puck says moving towards her. "You're awesome. You don't have to be perfect." He gently wraps his arm around her. "Look," he says, placing a hand on her shoulder, "this is no big deal, okay? Everything will… be… oh… shit." His expression takes a turn for the queasy, and it doesn't take long for Quinn to realize why.

Turning her head to the side, she finds herself greeted with the sight of Puck's gauntleted punching hand, still covered in tongue-slime from the frog. The slime that is now all over her and soaking into her skin even as she speaks. Or thinks. Or… whatever.

"I hate you," Quinn sighs. "so fucking much." She can already feel herself starting to get dizzy. "Alright, listen up. There's a town up the river called Fenghuang. We go there, regroup, restock, try to get some new mounts and… do… other stuff… tomorrow."

With that proclamation, Quinn promptly collapses. After taking a moment to rinse his glove off in the river, Puck gently picks her up and starts carrying her towards Killgore. "Well, you heard her," he says to the group at large. "We're going to Fenghuang."

---

Puck rides with Quinn draped across his lap, while the Chi-Ryu take turns riding Killgore to rest
their tired arms and legs. Brittana casually walk beside them the whole way.

Quinn grumbles constantly, and Puck has to fight the urge to roll his eyes. Even when she's drugged out of her mind on frog slime, she bitches about *everything*.

"…stupid Frannie…" she grumbles. "…lousy perfect pretty pretentious princess…"

"Who the fuck is Frannie?" Puck asks.

Quinn lazily swipes at him. "Don't talk about my sister like that."

"I wasn't… I didn't…" he sighs. "Nevermind."

Her grumbling descends into the unintelligible, so Puck picks up the conversation. "I have a sister, too," he says quietly. "Little."

Quinn's swimmy eyes turn to gaze drunkenly at him.

"She's pretty cool," he says. "You know. For a girl."

Quinn just keeps right on staring.

"I uhh…" he sighs quietly. "I send a lot of my money to her. And my mom. I don't know if they appreciate it, but… hey, it's there if they need it," he finishes with a shrug.

And she keeps right on staring.

"*What*?" Puck says, feeling super-uncomfortable. Which is *seriously* weird. Normally he is all about the chicks staring at him.

"…you look… different…" Quinn slurs, after a moment.

"Uhhh, thanks?" Puck tries.

They're silent the rest of the way.

It takes them a few hours to reach Fenghuang. By the time they get to an inn and get everyone set up, Quinn seems to be recovering from her fantastic frog voyage. She's still a little loopy, though. The Chi-Ryus seem really weird about seeing their captain all out-of-it like this, and Brittany and Santana are too wrapped up in each other to notice much of anything else, so Puck decides to be a fucking gentleman for once in his life and lead Quinn up to her room.

"Thanks," Quinn says tiredly as she detaches herself from him and carefully walks over towards the bed.

"No prob," Puck shrugs, putting his hands in his pockets. "Look… I'm sure everything'll be better in the morning, okay? So… you know… goodnight," he finishes.

Great, now she's staring at him again.

He turns around and closes the door quietly, before starting to walk towards his own room.

A sudden sound behind him makes him turn around, and there he sees Quinn standing in her doorway, her arms draped on the frame, breathing a little heavily and looking like she might be a little crazy.
His 'little crazy' theory is pretty much proven a hundred percent correct when she suddenly launches herself at him and starts sucking on his mouth like it's a popsicle made of frozen sex. Puck reciprocates because… seriously. Hands fly everywhere, bits and pieces of armor and clothes fly off and it isn't until Puck is half-naked that he takes a second to stop and think.

"Hey," he says, momentarily breaking their breathless lip-lock so his thinking brain can get a rare word in. "You sure—"

Quinn's hand clamps over his mouth. "I'm sure enough," she purrs, and picks right back up where they left off.

Hey, if it's good enough for her, it's good enough for him.

The rest of their clothes come off as they make their way back into Quinn's room, and all he can think of as he kicks the door closed and lays her down on the bed is…

*Fucking finally.*

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A/N: Oh, yes. I am **absolutely** going there. ;) That turned out to be boatloads of fun. Please do read and review if you have any thoughts. Much love, and I hope you guys are ready, because the **DOUBLE-BARRELED KLAINEGUN BLAST** is dead ahead. ^_^
"It looks like a bird," Finn says, out of nowhere.

"What?" Blaine asks. Per their usual routine, Blaine is shirtless in a nice, secluded area away from camp so that Finn can work his magic in private. They've gone over his front, so now Finn is working on his nasty back scar.

"Your nasty back scar," Finn elaborates, echoing Blaine's thoughts.

"Really?" Blaine asks. It occurs to him then that he hasn't… well, he's never actually looked at it before. It's kind of hard. His head doesn't turn like that by default, and he hasn't exactly had access
to multiple mirrors lately.

That, and he doesn't particularly like thinking about it. Even when he washes it, he tends to go over it as quickly as he can.

"Yeah," Finn says. "I mean, it's not like a painting or anything, you kind of have to squint and tilt your head but... yeah. It's kind of bird-shaped. You're like... bird man! Or the prince of birds. Or something."

He huffs out a humorless laugh. "Yeah," he says. "Something."

His voice trails off, and... great. Now he's thinking of Pavarotti, his very own ill-mannered, foul-tempered, completely lovable dragon hawk. One that he picked to be his own personal messenger bird when it was just a chick because he thought biting meant it liked you. He was wrong, of course, but still... over the years, Pavarotti grew to be one of his closest friends. When he didn't feel like he could talk to Wes or David about something, he'd sneak into the aviary and talk to Pav.

How sad is that? He was so lonely growing up, he talked to a freaking bird. Considered him a friend.

...

Still does. Misses him like crazy. Doesn't even know if he's still alive...

No. Fuck, no. Absolutely not. Of all the things that he could possibly lose it over, he will not let Pavarotti be the thing that finally pushes him over the edge. He sniffs a little too loudly and a little too long, like his emotions are dangling from his nose on a fishing line and he's trying to reel them back in.

"Dude," Finn says. "What's wrong?"

Everything.

"Nothing," Blaine smiles. "You about done?"

"Just a little more," Finn says. He hears the water sloshing around, feels the odd tingle that he has slowly been getting accustomed to over the past week, and then... "Done!"

Blaine gets to his feet and puts his robe back on. "Alright. Let's go fish Kurt out of the clothing pile before he drowns in there."

A rumpled head of wild Kurt hair pokes out from the clothes pile.

"No!" it says petulantly, and promptly dives back in.

"Come on," Finn says.

"Uh-uh!" Kurt's voice says from within the pile.

"Dude, seriously," Finn says as Mercedes loses control of her giggles a little further away. "We have to go."

"I will stay in this wonderful place forever," Kurt says. "I won't leave. You can't make me!"

"Is it just me," Artie says with a slight smirk, "or did that sound like a challenge?"
"I think it was," Blaine agrees. "Finn? I think Kurt is calling you out."

Finn straightens his shoulders a bit. "Alright. Fine. We'll do this the hard way!"

With that, he steps up to the pile, bends over and thrusts his arms in, rustling around until he hears a yelp. "Gotcha!" he cries, elated, as he rises with a kicking, flailing Kurt clutched in his hands, half the pile wrapped around him.

"Put me down!" Kurt demands.

"Dude, no way!" Finn replies. "We have to go! You can… like… soak in your fashion blob from inside the carr—OOOPH." The last part is grunted because Kurt's foot finally finds Finn's stomach, and he is forced to drop the squirming Avatar-fish back into its natural habitat.

"I will not be tamed!" Kurt cries proudly as he falls onto the pile, spreading himself out and starting to make a clothes-angel. "Ahhhhhh," he sighs.

"Wow. You… really like those clothes," Blaine comments.

Kurt rolls over to look at him. "If you were to chop these clothes into a fine powder, I would snort them. If you were to put them in a bong, I would smoke them. If you were to make tea with them, I would drink it morning, noon, and night. I don't like these clothes," he insists. "I love them." With that announcement finished, he promptly re-covers himself in high-quality cloth.

"Alright, I give up," Finn says, rubbing his sore stomach. "One of you guys can try."

Artie holds up his hands. "My hands won't be going near that. I already lost my legs—I ain't looking to lose any fingers."

Mercedes considers the pile thoughtfully. "Maybe if we just stuff the whole thing in the carriage at once…"

Blaine is the one who gets the bright idea, though. "I have another plan," he says, wiggling his fingers. Making a show of sneaking on his tip-toes over to the pile, he carefully leans over to the last place he saw Kurt… and snatches as many clothing articles as he can find from the pile.

"Hey!" Kurt says. "Put that back!" He tries to snatch the items back from Blaine, but the ex-Prince just grins at him and jumps out of range.

"Nope. I like these. I think I'll wear them right now," he grins, slapping on the hat, wrapping the scarf around his neck and, just for show, putting the pants on his arms.

"While I admire your creativity, those colors clash like… like… oh, fuck me, I can't think of anything that clashes worse than those colors. Get over here and let me dress you!" Kurt demands.

Meanwhile, Finn seems to be the first to catch onto Blaine's master plan. While Kurt is distracted with Blaine's horrific color-blindness, the taller boy sneaks over behind him and snatches a few more items off the pile.

Kurt's fashion sense tingles like crazy at this intrusion, and Finn just barely manages to avoid the Avatar's nimble fingers as he flees. "Stop! You are not going to wear that, Finn. I know you won't, because that is a girl's top."

Finn shrugs. "Watch me," he says, looking at the strange item, realizing he has no idea how to actually put it on or what is mean to go in what holes… and promptly puts it on his leg.
The Avatar's eyes grow to approximately the size of the moon. "How dare you!" he cries.

As he does this, Artie's head pops up from the ground behind Kurt, and his quick hands manage to snatch several more articles. Kurt dives for him, but Artie simply slips through his fingers and sinks back beneath the surface. The dive gives Mercedes time to run over and pull a couple things out from under him, giggling the whole time. As he lamely grasps at her, Blaine snatches a few more items for himself, and the cycle continues until Kurt no longer has a pant-leg to stand on.

"Alright, now you've gone and ticked me off," he growls. "Prepare to pay!"

And thus begins the most ridiculous chase scene in the history of chase scenes. Blaine, Finn, Artie, and Mercedes all running around the camp, cackling like hyena monkeys, wearing pants as coats and shirts as belts and hats as codpieces and committing pretty much any other fashion crime they can to further incense the angry Avatar. Even Drizzle gets in on the action (albeit somewhat passively) when Finn starts hanging hats and dresses from his antlers. Kurt seems honestly outraged at first, but soon starts smiling himself as the chase continues.

Finally, Blaine runs and divests himself of all his excess clothing, tossing the pile into the carriage. The others follow suit, and Kurt takes a flying leap into the coach to reclaim his prize, allowing them to slam the doors shut and trap him.

"We caught him!" Finn smiles. "Now what?"

"He's a wild one," Mercedes says seriously. "We might have to put a muzzle on him."

"And a collar. And a leash," Artie adds. "Sounds kind of kinky—Blaine, I assume you're onboard?"

The ex-Prince nearly collapses into a laughing fit. "Well," he chuckles, "I suppose I could take one for the team."

"You're a braver man than I," Artie salutes, sliding off to take his place at the driver's seat.

Blaine hops into the carriage to find Kurt making an honest attempt to don every single item of clothing at once. He looks like the end result of taking a human-sized ball of congealed syrup and rolling it through every high-end clothing store in the Fire Nation. "You'll never take them from me again!" he promises.

Blaine falls over, laughing far too hard to worry about anything else.

The others have a similar reaction. It's quite a few minutes before they manage to get over their collective giggle fit and get back on the road again.

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After finally realizing that he will not, in fact, be able to spend the rest of his life in a soft, colorful cocoon of cloth, Kurt spends most of the ride fastidiously folding and sorting the clothes and accessories into various piles, sorted first by what body part it was meant to cover, then by color, then size, shape, comparative quality, casual, evening, formal wear, amount of sparkle, etc.

As Mercedes decides to settle down for a little nap, Blaine foolishly attempts to pick up her slack.

"Ow!" Blaine winces, withdrawing his hand. "What was that for?"

"This," Kurt says, gesturing to the spread before him, "is my domain. I am somewhat territorial. It's
an instinct. I can't be held responsible for what happens when you infringe."

"Noted," Blaine says with a slight chuckle. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

The Avatar grins. "That depends. Are you willing to trust me, as you have never trusted me before? Are you ready to venture into brave new worlds never before explored by man or woman? Can you stand on the cutting edge of fashion without being split in twain, my dear Blaine?"

The ex-Prince gives Kurt a bright grin. "Nice ending," he laughs. "And I am going to go with... yes. I must show courage in the face of the unknown."

"Fantastic," Kurt replies. "Try I just need you to try a few things on..."

His only explanation for what happens next is that the Water Tribes have a different definition of 'a few' than the rest of the world.

They start with hats. Large, small, wide brim, not-so-wide brim, straw, bamboo, cloth, silk, with and without tails, with and without... err... the little tails that come out of the tops. With each hat, Kurt directs him to try a few expressions in order to see what looks right.

"Try 'snobby,'" the Avatar instructs.

Blaine turns his nose up and purses his lips just slightly, his eyes half-lidded as if the entire world bores him.

"Fabulous," Kurt says. "Now try... 'eager."

Blaine turns on his brightest grin and lets his eyes grow wide with awe and wonder.

"Oh, wow," Kurt says. "For a second, I thought you'd actually grown a tail and started wagging it. Very convincing," he says with a small round of applause.

"I do try," Blaine says with a slight bow.

"Now give me... sultry," Kurt instructs.

The former firebender finds himself at a loss. He... well... he isn't exactly sure what that would look like. He tries licking his lips and pouting them slightly, furrowing his brow and looking off into the distance as if he is overflowing with profound thoughts.

Kurt promptly snorts out a laugh and nearly falls over on one of his piles. "Oh, sweet La," he says. "You look like Finn trying to do complex fractions."

Blaine laughs in spite of himself. "Alright then," he says. "You show me how it's done."

"Very well," he says. "Watch, and be amazed."

And then Kurt proceeds to furrow one brow, raise the other, twist his lips into a sneer and bite at him.

The ex-Prince is all-too-happy to return Kurt's laughter. "You look like a baby tigerdillo," he says, "trying to eat a cricket."

Kurt tries to look offended, but his incessant giggling ruins the effect. "Okay, fine. So we both need a little work in the sexy department."
They spend a few more minutes attempting to perfect their smolders, until both their faces hurt from constantly grinning and from being contorted into odd, unnatural shapes. Towards the end, Blaine is pretty sure they just toss all pretense of 'sexy' out the window and just start making the most ridiculous expressions they can in an effort to suffocate each other with laughter.

Neither of them quite catches the little grin Mercedes sprouts as she watches them and pretends to sleep. *May the mountains have mercy on us all if these boys aren't meant for each other,* she thinks as she finally drifts off.

"Well, now that our faces are thoroughly exhausted," Kurt says, "perhaps we should move on to neckwear. Not that I don't love that scarf on you," he continues as he tosses Blaine a few more, "but it never hurts to try and branch out a little. Well, okay, sometimes it does, but… totally worth it. Sometimes, we all have to suffer for our passions."

It isn't until he unwinds the striped scarf from around his neck that Blaine realizes how attached to it he's grown. He feels just a little naked without it. But alas, as Kurt would say, fashion without a little suffering isn't fashion at all.

So Blaine proceeds to wrap pretty much every ridiculous thing Kurt throws at him around his neck. The colors vary wildly—the various tropical plumages of the Fenghuang fowl lend themselves to all sorts of wild and vibrant feather boas. It's an interesting experiment, if only because of the strange effect they have on Blaine as he dons them. They make him feel… almost… *sassy.*

"My, my," Kurt says, "someone seems to have discovered their inner diva."

"Henceforth," Blaine says haughtily, "I will be referred to as 'the Artist formerly known as Blaine.' All communiqués shall be sent through my agent."

"And who is your agent," Kurt asks, semi-serious.

"Hmmm," Blaine says. "I think I'll go with Mercedes. If I have to hide behind anyone, it's going to be her. She's like…" He thinks for a second, attempting to come up with a good metaphor. "…a mountain, with a huge vein of gold hidden beneath the surface. She's priceless."

The Avatar turns fond eyes towards his slumbering BFF. "She is, isn't she?" he says, as he turns back to look at Blaine with a gentle sort of curiosity. "Well, now I'm wondering: what are your thoughts on the rest of my little group?"

The ex-Prince sits back and considers this for a moment. "Well," he says, "Finn is incredibly loyal, and gentle, and playful… kind of like a lion-dog. He's not at all what you'd expect just from looking at him. I'm sure he's an amazing brother."

Kurt gives him a wistful sort of smile. "When the occasion calls for it, he can certainly come through with flying colors," he says softly. "And Artie?"

Blaine crosses his arms and thinks a bit more. "Artie's brilliant. He thinks quickly, reads people incredibly well, and makes awesome plans," he says with a smile, before adding under his breath, "*even if he doesn't tell people about them.*" A few more moments' consideration lends him his answer. "The way he watches and listens and plans his strikes… he's like a cheetah fox. I'm glad he's on our side."

"He certainly is crafty," Kurt agrees, "*even if he occasionally overestimates his abilities.*" At this, he leans forward. "And… what do you think of me?"

Blaine's eyebrows shoot up. Wow, that a *beast* of a question. No, a *dragon* of a question, one that
will eat him alive if he makes one false step. He wants so badly to get this right—to find a proper way to put his thoughts into words, because his thoughts are nothing but good, and Kurt couldn't possibly be offended by them. It's his words that are the problem.

"You're…" Blaine says, trailing off for a second. "You're a whole new world," he says softly, "impossibly deep and intricate. Every time I think I've figured something out about you, you just pull out something new and wonderful for me to marvel at. You're amazing," he finishes.

The Avatar flushes just a bit, looking down for a second. He opens his mouth and closes it a few times, smiling all the while, like he doesn't quite know how to respond. Then, abruptly, he comes up with the perfect reply. "...did you just call me a planet?" he says, looking shocked. "You think I'm fat!"

The ex-Prince feels like giving himself a facepalm with enough force to pop his eyes out. "No, no," he says urgently, "that's not what I meant at all, I promise!"

"Blaine," Kurt says with a light laugh, "I was kidding. That was… lovely," he continues, his voice growing slightly wistful. "I don't think I've ever been complimented like that before."

"I can't imagine why," Blaine says honestly. They sit in a comfortable silence for a few seconds, softly smiling at each other, before Blaine's traitor brain turns against him and makes him open his idiot mouth. "What do you think of me?" he asks.

Kurt looks a little shocked, and Blaine immediately wishes his words were on a fishing line or something similar, because he doesn't seem to know when to reel himself in until he is already way too far out there to stop.

"Nevermind," Blaine says, scratching at the small traces of the scar on his neck. "You don't have to say anything, I shouldn't have…"

"I think you're one of the bravest people I've ever met," Kurt says softly.

The shock of the blow practically liquefies him. It's like being hit with that iron door all over again. "That's," he stammers, shaking his head. "I'm not…"

"You are," Kurt says seriously. "You've lost so much… your entire world crumbled around you and you still manage to get up and smile every day. You still find it in you to be sweet, and kind, and charming, and friendly to everyone you come across. I couldn't do that," he says, shaking his head.

Blaine looks at him, confused. "Of course you could," he says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

Kurt just smiles at him and shakes his head. "Of course you could," he says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

Kurt just smiles at him and shakes his head. "You see?" he says. "You're just so… bright. It takes courage to burn as brightly as you do when the world seems so determined to snuff you out. I've lost a lot as well, and for so long I let it make me cold, and bitter, and harsh. It's taken a lot for me to get past that, and so much of it has to do with you."

The ex-Prince shakes his head. "I haven't done anything special," he says.

"Yes, you have," Kurt says forcefully. "No matter what happens to you, no matter what kind of awful, miserable, dark circumstances that you have to go through, you still burn bright. I don't care if you can't firebend right now—I know there's still fire in you somewhere. Whether it's as big as the sun, or as small as a candle… I'm glad to have you near me," he says softly. "You keep me warm."
Blaine looks at Kurt for a long time. He sounds so sincere, and the way his eyes are glistening... he looks like he's about to cry. He wishes, so hard, that he could believe the things that Kurt is saying about him. But his heart just seems determined to close itself off, to shun whatever light and warmth that Kurt himself has to offer. He needs to say something back. He can't just let such wonderful words go unanswered, even if he can't believe in them himself.

"I think..." Blaine starts. "Maybe, right now, I can't really see by my own light. But you... Kurt, you've never been harsh, or cold, or bitter to me. You're the light that I'm following. I... I don't think I have a world if you aren't there to illuminate it."

And now Kurt shakes his head. "I... I can't be a very good light," he says. "I certainly don't feel very bright or shiny, most of the time."

"You're bright enough to me," Blaine says. "Any light is better than none. I'll take whatever I can get right now," he continues, adding with a soft smile, "whether it's the sun or a candle."

Kurt huffs out a laugh. "Well, there you have it. What a pair we are... Just a couple of candles, trying to make it in a dark, cold world," he says, mock-poetic.

Blaine smiles a bit wider. "You know, there is an old Fire Nation saying: 'two candles are better than one. If the wind takes one flame, the other can light it back.' Maybe that's what we should do."

The Avatar sits up a little straighter. "That sounds like a wonderful idea," he says. "How about this: if it ever seems like you're about to go dark, I'll do all I can to light you up again. And you'll do the same for me. Deal?"

And now, Blaine is full-on grinning. "Deal."

They seal the deal with a clasp of hands, lingering for just a moment longer than necessary, taking in the feel of Kurt's silky, soft palm against his own, like a soothing balm on a fresh burn.

And Kurt promptly gets them back down to business. "Now, we're down to the body wear," he says with a grin.

Blaine blushes slightly. "Ah, can we skip those?" he asks. "Just for now. I'm a little uncomfortable stripping in front of people."

"Well," Kurt says with a smirk, "we'll just have to work on that, won't we?"

That, Blaine decides, upon seeing the devious little smirk Kurt dons when he is hatching a plan or teasing at something, is the perfect sexy face for Kurt. It's positively electrifying.

It is on that day that Blaine begins to suspect something might be a little... off.

It starts when he has to go to the bathroom during the carriage ride. No matter how far he walks, he always feels like there's someone watching him. It's eerie. He has to duck between two trees before he is comfortable taking a leak, and even then, he feels like there is some kind of presence around that shouldn't be there.

When he returns to the carriage, he voices his concern. "I feel like someone is following me," he says, voice low as he approaches the carriage.

"What?" Finn asks from beside Artie, looking shocked. "What, why—why would you feel that? Why would you feel... in that way... about things? That's clearly not true. Of life. That's crazy.
"You're crazy!" he says with a slightly panicked laugh.

Blaine can only scratch his head at this odd display. "I was just voicing a concern," he says, looking at Finn sideways and completely missing the dual facepalm shared by Kurt and Mercedes.

The incident is compounded that evening, when they go to set up camp. Lately, he has been thinking more and more about his Firebending and his desire to reconnect with it. At the moment, what he really wants to do is to find somewhere nice and quiet where he can focus, and just start from the very beginning. Unfortunately, all his attempts to get himself alone are somewhat suspiciously foiled.

The first time he tries to wander off, Finn calls him over for another healing session.

The second time, Artie wants Blaine to help put together some truly terrifying sideburns for a possible disguise.

The third time, Mercedes calls him over for a fireside chat and teaches him a surprisingly complex Earth Kingdom game that involves stones, parchment, and cutting implements.

It feels just a little odd that all of these incidents seem to pop up just as he is attempting to plot out some 'Blaine' time, but soon, it's time for Kurt's session, so he does his best to push the thought from his mind.

Sadly, this particular evening seems determined to replace one frustration with another. Blaine is attempting to teach Kurt how to perform a pinwheel attack; creating a whirling disc of flame. It's a good move to learn for a number of reasons—it's powerful, relatively quick, and it holds together longer and travels farther than a lot of other ranged Firebending techniques. Unfortunately, things are not going as planned.


"As far as I can tell, that's what I'm doing," Kurt sighs. The night is hot and humid; the kind of stifling heat that feels like it's actively trying to squish you with its oppressive weight. Kurt has already divested himself of his upper garment, and Blaine is sweating and wishing he could do the same.

"Who knows?" he finally cries, tossing his arms up, frustrated beyond caring. "It may well be. You might be mimicking me perfectly. Maybe I'm the one doing it wrong. How are we supposed to tell if I can't Firebend?" he growls, kicking at a small rock. 'At' being the keyword there; he mostly just manages to scrape his foot along the top, barely budging the stone and scratching the crap out of his skin. "Shit!" he growls as he hops on one foot.

"Blaine," Kurt says gently, trying to be a calming presence, but the ex-Prince has simply had enough of calm.

"Forget it," he says. "This is pointless. I might as well be trying to teach you how to speak badgermole. I can't even figure out if what I'm doing is right anymore. Nothing feels right. What if I'm starting to forget how to do this myself? As if everything else," he cries, exasperated, "just isn't enough. Not only can I not firebend, I can't even teach it effectively."

"You're just frustrated," Kurt says, making another attempt to smooth Blaine's ruffles. "Maybe we should take a break."
"Maybe," Blaine replies petulantly, preferring to preserve his annoyance, "you should just find a better teacher. Someone who can actually practice what he preaches."

Now Blaine is just trying to spread the frustration around. The Avatar takes a breath to calm himself, and regards his Firebending teacher with a cool stare. "Alright," he says, "that's it. You're relieved from teaching duty for the evening."

That hits the mark. Blaine almost flinches, as if Kurt actually struck him. He didn't realize he would be so quickly and easily dismissed. And he has absolutely no room to complain, because he literally asked for it. "I'm sorry," he says, turning away. "I'll… leave you alone—"

"I didn't say you could leave," Kurt interjects, stepping in front of him. "You need a night off, and you need to calm down, so… tonight, I'm going to teach you."

The ex-Prince is a bit taken back. "What do you mean?" he asks. "I can't really…"

"Just trust me," Kurt says simply, moving over towards him. He gets pretty close before something stops him and causes his face to scrunch. "Okay, ew. Why are you still wearing that? You're drenched. I'm pretty sure your shirt could be considered a livable environment for fish by now."

Blaine blushes a bit. "I just… I'm not really comfortable… with people seeing it."

"Seeing what?" Kurt asks, his own exasperation starting to take hold. "Your bellybutton?"

Blaine rolls his eyes. "My scar," he says flatly.

At this, Kurt's exasperation evaporates, and just like that, the atmosphere between them changes, the rising anger cooling into guilt and soft sorrow. "Oh," he says gently. "I'd… well, I hadn't forgotten, I'd just… sort of pushed it out of my mind."

"I wish I could forget," Blaine says, echoing Artie's words from before.

With his rediscovered calm, Kurt assesses his Firebending teacher evenly. "Well," he says, "I did say we'd have to work on your discomfort with disrobing. This isn't exactly what I had in mind, of course, but if you're willing… I'd like to see it," he says, quickly adding, "but only if you're willing."

Blaine takes several deep breaths, trying to prepare himself. He doesn't really want to, but… well, to be quite frank; he's just not very good at saying 'no' to Kurt. Not when he's being such an annoying bastion of gentleness and understanding when all Blaine wants to do is throw a pity party and have a bitch fit. So with slightly unsteady hands, he unwraps his scarf from his neck, unties the belt holding his robes together, shrugs his shoulders out of the garment, and lets it fall to the ground, leaving him bare from the waist up. It's another couple of seconds before he collects himself enough to turn and actually display it.

Blaine knows when Kurt's eyes finally meet it from the small, pained gasp he just barely hears behind him. There is silence for a couple of seconds, before Kurt speaks. "I've never really… looked at it before," he says, his voice thick. "Oh, Blaine."

He is so sick of that tone coming out of Kurt's mouth, if only because he is the one that keeps putting it there. So he tries to lighten the mood a bit. "Finn says it looks like a bird," he tries lamely.

Oddly enough, it sort of works. Kurt seems to consider this for a bit. "…I don't see it."
Blaine shrugs. "He did say you have to kind of squint and tilt your head a bit."

"I don't understand how that's supposed help—oh, there it is." He sounds slightly amazed.

Blaine almost laughs. "So he was actually right?"

"A little," Kurt allows. "It's certainly an interesting shape… there are worse things it could look like, I suppose." He chuckles a little bit. "I wonder what kind of bird it is… I bet it's a dragon hawk. Pavarotti would be proud."

There's that stupid bird again, pecking away at the flimsy wooden boards keeping his heart in one piece. "Or a chicken," he says, his face turning red.

He hears footsteps, and starts to turn around before he feels Kurt's hand on his bare shoulder. "Blaine, this is nothing to be ashamed of," Kurt says.

Blaine sighs, turning around. "Do you honestly not get it?" he asks, looking Kurt in the eyes. "What it means that it's on my back?"

"You… were… attacked from behind?" Kurt says reasonably.

"I was running, Kurt," he says emphatically. "I have this scar because I was scared out of my mind and running away from everything. This isn't a battle scar, Kurt; this is a coward's mark."

The Avatar shakes his head, looking a little pained himself. "Blaine, there's no shame in running away when you're outnumbered or outmatched, both of which you clearly were. It doesn't make any sense to pointlessly get into a fight you can't win."

"At least there's some honor in that," Blaine counters.

But Kurt shakes his head again. "No, Blaine, there isn't. Dying for no reason is not honorable. It's just… stupid," he says honestly.

Blaine glares at him. "Well, thanks for your assessment, I guess," he says just a bit testily. "It's good to know you think so highly of Fire Nation values."

Kurt takes another calming breath. "That's not what I meant, and you know it," he says evenly, refusing to add fuel to Blaine's anger. "Blaine, you've taught me a lot about your element, and I am so grateful for that. Now, it's time for me to return the favor. And I've just realized the perfect lesson for you."

Blaine just shakes his head. Why is he doing this? "Kurt, not everyone is the Avatar, okay? I can't bend anything right now. I don't see how learning about another element is going to help."

But Kurt has that smirk—the small, secret one that lets you know that yes, he has the perfect plan and no, you aren't allowed to know what it is beforehand. "Avatar Gaga once told me that even if they don't realize it, all the elements are connected and intertwined. There is something to be learned from all of them. And I'm going to show you," he says, with a small smile. "Now, turn around."

Blaine is still a bit unsure, but that smile and the reassurance in Kurt's eyes is enough to quell his unrest for the time being. He turns around, and soon feels the Avatar stepping in close behind him.

"Water," Kurt breathes against the back of Blaine's neck, "is the most versatile element."
His bare back is suddenly pressed flush against Kurt's chest. He can feel almost every muscle against his skin. He can feel them flexing and moving beneath the skin as Kurt's hands slide down his arm to wrap around the outside of his own. He can feel his hips twist as his feet and legs move so that they are even with Blaine's. They are touching almost everywhere it is possible to touch. The boy behind him seems to be making an honest effort to merge them into a single being. He can already feel his pulse quickening, his breath hitching, but what's more, he can feel Kurt's pulse, Kurt's breath doing the same.

"Do exactly as I do," Kurt says, barely a whisper in his ear. He feels the words more than hears them, feels the vibrations in Kurt's chest as he speaks.

"I don't understand," Blaine replies, the words leaping out of him unbidden, untainted by thought. He sounds scared. He is scared, but not of Kurt.

"Do you trust me?" Kurt asks, his breath tickling the naked skin of Blaine's neck.

Their closeness makes lying impossible. Unthinkable. Blaine speaks the truth without hesitation. "Yes."

"Then do exactly as I do," Kurt says, and Blaine can tell he is smiling. And even though he still feels a bit exposed, a bit unsure, a bit unsteady, he levels his breathing and does his best to relax his body into Kurt's. As Kurt begins to move, Blaine moves with him as best he can, the two of them in a smooth, gentle dance. Long, skillful fingers guide his own, strong, sinewy arms brace him, smooth, powerful legs foretell his steps.

It's almost too much. The sensations overcome him, and his brain begins to sound alarms as his steps falter slightly. "Kurt, I really don't—"

"Shhhh," Kurt says. "Don't think. Just move. The number one most important principle in waterbending is flow," he says, putting extra emphasis on the final word so that Blaine feels the force of it running through them both. "Go with it."

So he does. With great effort, he shuts down his mental alarms and chases every thought from his mind, letting his world become Kurt and Kurt alone. His entire life is boiled down to the sensation of the boy against his back, his unbearably soft skin, his deep, calm breaths, his tangible heat, his beating heart. As Kurt moves, Blaine moves. As Kurt breathes, Blaine breathes. As Kurt's heart pounds within his chest, Blaine's pulse alters to match it.

He has just enough time to become lost in the dance. Then, suddenly, something else is moving right along with them. Gathered from the very air, thousands of tiny water droplets merge into a ribbon of liquid in front of them, flowing gently through the air and matching their every step. In some distant part of the brain Blaine is no longer using, he knows that Kurt is the one doing the bending but... it feels like him. It feels like he is connected to this water, to this boy. They move as one. They are one.

"Water," Kurt says quietly as he continues to lead, "is the element of change. Whatever is around it, water absorbs and changes accordingly. This makes it versatile and unique, and capable of sharing traits with many elements."

Kurt's fingers guide Blaine's into a rounding motion, and the ribbon spins into an orb. "Earth is strong and resilient, unyielding and durable. So is ice." Their fingers seem to tighten as if pulling invisible strings, and the orb freezes, expanding just slightly as it turns to solid ice. Kurt's hands guide his own into orbiting the frozen sphere, and his flesh prickles from the chill.
"Air is light and quick, evasive and tricky," he continues, hastening the orbit. "So also is steam." Their hands clench into fists and come together before bursting open, and the ice immediately evaporates into water vapor, the smoke-like substance filling the air around them. Kurt bends it into a helix around them, and Blaine smiles as he watches the pattern weave itself through the night, the gentle light of the waxing crescent moon painting it a beautiful blue-white that reminds him of Kurt's eyes.

"Fire," he says finally, "is explosive and forceful, powerful and overwhelming." At this, the Avatar launches them into strong sweeps, gathering the steam and bending it back into a water ball. This time, however, they begin to spin around the ball as they press inwards, and the sphere grows smaller and smaller, even though Blaine knows the amount of water it contains hasn't changed. "So also is water," Kurt says, and Blaine briefly feels smiling lips against the back of his neck before they thrust their hands forward, and the tiny water ball explodes into a wave of liquid force, the intense pressure being released all at once into a powerful spray that bursts with enough force to blow the leaves off of trees and snap branches.

It's amazing. Even as they continue to move, gathering a bit of water back to them, Blaine can't help but wonder at this strange substance. He's never thought so deeply about another element before, but it's astounding to him how it is every bit as intricate and detailed as his own, but in a completely different way.

His eyes are held captive by the liquid dancing before him, his body by the boy dancing behind. His mind is held captive by the words of the Avatar, and his spirit by their truth. All life is made of all four elements. Even if we can only bend one, all of them exist within us. To learn of the elements is to learn of ourselves. So even though you are a firebender, there is no reason you can't have water-like traits. The Water Tribes survive in the harshest environments in the world because we respond to our environment and adapt as needed. If we need to move, we move, if we need to stand firm, we stand firm. There is no loss of identity, no surrender of values, because we know that no matter what form water takes, it's still water. There is no shame in adapting, Blaine. There is no shame in change. There is no shame," he says forcefully enough to push the air out of Blaine's lungs, "in surviving. If water runs, then so can you," he says with a grin. "For you are a being of water, as well as earth, as well as air… as well as fire."

With a final flourish, Kurt uses their hands to spin the liquid into a gentle mist, which weaves its way around them before closing in and kissing their skin like a breeze, cooling the crushing heat of the night (but doing nothing to relieve the heat between them). It is at this point that Kurt finally steps away from him, and Blaine is already so used to moving in time with him that he starts to follow, as if he himself is just another element to be bent. Instantly, he feels bereft without Kurt beside him, all around him, enclosing him.

There is silence in the wake of their lesson. Blaine is so overcome with emotion that he can barely breathe, let alone think or speak.

"I hope…" Kurt stammers, almost shyly, "I hope that helped, at least a little bit. I don't know if you really care to learn about—"

That's about all the uncertainty from him that Blaine can stand to hear. He wants so much to get his flailing heart under control, but he isn't entirely sure that's even possible right now, so instead, he just steps forward and wraps his arms around Kurt and hugs him as hard as he can without hurting him, trying to communicate through physical action how he feels, how much he feels. "Thank you," he says thickly, "thank you so much. That was… amazing."

He can't even describe the thrill he feels when Kurt hugs him back. "It was my pleasure," he
replies, his voice a little wobbly even as he smiles. "And thank you."

They stay like that for who knows how long, just holding each other, taking in the other's presence, scent, touch, warmth.

That wasn't what he wanted to say. Not at all. But the words *I love you* kept choking him every time they tried to come up. Because doubt and shame have claws long and sharp, and even in the flood of feelings that Kurt has unleashed within him, they proved too deeply ground into the soft walls of his heart to be swept away. Kurt cannot slay those monsters. They are not his to slay. Blaine alone must face them, must tear into his own heart and dig them out. And he still doesn't know how or if he can ever do that.

Still. He knows now. One thing he can be absolutely certain of. 'Even if I can't love you right now... I want to. More than anything.'

It's a start.

"I know what it is now," Kurt says on the way back to camp.

"What?" Blaine asks.

"Your scar," he says simply, and there's that smirk again. "I know what kind of bird it is."

The bait is irresistible. Curse his inability to deny this impossible boy… "Alright," he says evenly. "What is it?"

They arrive at the very edge of camp, and Kurt turns to look directly at him. "It's a phoenix," he says simply, "lying in the ashes, waiting for its moment to arise."

He turns and walks away before Blaine can reply, leaving the stunned Prince to wonder when that moment will come.

He dreams that night…

"Once," begins his mother's voice, as a tiny little boy with wild, curly hair appears from nowhere, "there was a little boy who loved fire." A small flame appears in the air next to him, and the little boy smiles at it.

"He had his very own flame, which he cherished and took with him everywhere." The little boy begins to walk, and as he steps forward, a world seems to sprout in time with his footsteps. Beautiful gardens, stone walkways, countless buildings and carvings and plants and people grow around him. And everywhere the boy goes, the flame follows behind him.

"He loved it, and fed it every day, and so every day, it grew brighter and stronger right along with him." And grow they do. With every step, the boy seems to get a little taller, a little broader, and the flame gets a little brighter, burns a little higher. Right before his eyes, the little boy grows into a confident young man who looks strangely familiar.

"His flame helped him see the world around him, and he grew to love that world, and its people, and so he always kept it close to his heart." As he continues to walk, various figures join him. Two of them seem to be wearing a uniform of some sort, while others simply flock in from around the city. One of them is dressed in a cool, calming blue.
"He was happy," his mother narrates, "until one day... everything changed."

And suddenly, the figures scatter, and the sky turns red. All around the boy, the world begins to burn, and he looks lost and helpless and powerless to stop it. He huddles close to his flame, his eyes wide and fearful...

…and it is that fear that stays with Blaine, even as he wakes up that morning.

A/N: So uhh… yeah. Huge moment. Maybe not exactly what people were hoping for, but hugely important nonetheless. Please tell me what you thought of this. :)
Day 9

When they hit the road the next day, they do so… in costume!

After sorting through the clothes the previous day, Blaine and Kurt ironed out everyone’s cover identities, announcing them at camp that night.

The Avatar steps forth in a form-fitting, incredibly ornate robe, brilliant, shining dragons stitched all along the outfit, primarily stitched in red and gold, but featuring small amounts of nearly every color of the rainbow. The collar is flared so high that it practically encloses his head. His hair is slicked back, his lip is locked into a constant sneer, and a wispy little fake moustache is carefully laid into place on top of it, along with a few touches of make-up to make him look older (but not too old!). Criminally tight pants, magnificent knee-high boots, a high-quality monocle and a folding fan with a phoenix emblazoned on it complete the look.

"Kurt will travel under the guise of Councilor Archebald Ganterson," Blaine says, his voice
halfway into 'storytelling mode.' "An eccentric council member who hasn't been seen in years. He's been secluded in his island home for longer than I've been alive, actually. This works in our favor, as very few people have any idea what he looks like, and he's well-known for his... shall we say... 'quirks.' So using him as a cover is basically license to dress however you want."

"Have I mentioned today how wonderful you are?" Kurt says happily.

Blaine shrugs. "Maybe once or twice. Who's counting?"

Mercedes follows after him in crimson qipao that highlights her luscious curves and puts proper emphasis on her crush-your-head-like-a-watermelon arms. Her stitching is a deep black, and laid out to look like tree branches. Her hair is done up in a traditional top-knot style that looks like more of a bun than a knot. She tops her outfit with some outrageously expensive rings and bracelets, and a superior smirk.

"Now, the Councilor has been known to rotate through wives like he's sampling wines, so Mercedes can be his newest wife, Desiree. Council gossip says he's dated just about everything under the sun, so your appearance should come as no surprise to anyone," Blaine says. "You get to be sexy."

"Pfffft," Mercedes says. "I'm always sexy, sweetie. You're playing for the other team though, so I can forgive you for that little slip-up," she finishes, pinching his cheek.

Artie slides out having done far more with make-up than costuming. His face is lined with 'scars' and fake stitches, his hair looks like it's covered in either ash or dust and hasn't been washed in years. His skin looks pale and ashen and slightly wrinkly, giving him the overall appearance of someone a little old, and more than a little crazy. His outfit is based on an old design for Official Fire Nation Wilderness Rangers, and has been dusted and scorched a little bit for added effect. Oh, and the eyepatch. Can't forget the eyepatch.

"Artie, naturally, is our coachman, a grizzled old ranger with a sour temper who goes by the name of Kozu. I imagine him as the kind of guy who would just as soon bite you as look at you, but fiercely loyal to the councilor, and very protective of his coach. Probably drives like a maniac. Always feels like he's trying to outrun a hungry platypus bear or an angry gorilla goat," Blaine says to Artie.

Artie scowls experimentally and puts a rough growl into his voice. "I've SEEN things," he says, sounding quite convincingly loony. "Things that'd make you crap out your lungs and run home asking mama to sew 'em back in ya so's ya can scream!" As a final bit of emphasis, he bends a small spittoon out of the earth and spits into it with perfect accuracy.

And finally, Blaine and Finn step forth in matching servant's uniforms, dark red buttoned shirts with small, flat-topped caps with no brim. Their pants are perfectly pressed, their shoes immaculately polished. Their posture is perfectly erect, and their faces bear the stoic masks of servitude.

"Last but not least... well, actually, yes, also least," Blaine says with a grin at Finn, "are the
humble manservants, Chief Attendants to the Lady and the Councilor, Ozark," he says, gesturing to himself, "and Zarko," he says, gesturing towards Finn.

"Dude, those are the same name with, like, one letter different," Finn says with surprising insight.

"Indeed they are," Blaine admits. "If anyone asks, we're brothers. Twins, actually!" he adds with a smile.

Everyone gives him various degrees of fish-eye.

"...fraternal, of course," he clarifies. "And I seriously doubt people will ask. No one really cares about the help."

This new procession rides forth into the morning, dressed to kill, and practically bouncing at the prospect of hamming it up for potential passersby.

"The closer we get to Sho Fa," Blaine says, "the more people we're likely to meet on the road, so we'd better get good at keeping in character."

"And what, exactly, should we expect to find within this city?" Kurt asks.

"Sho Fa," Blaine explains, "is a pretty big deal. It's a cultural hub within the Fire Nation, home to all sorts of theatres, playhouses, opera houses…"

"Opera?" Kurt asks. "That thing where everyone sings all the time?"

"Yes, indeed," Blaine says. "Avatar Groban allegedly learned of the form from some kind of hidden library, and was so captivated by the possibilities that he brought the knowledge back to his hometown and made it his mission to establish it as a Fire Nation institution. He pretty much singlehandedly popularized the form, and became one of its most famous singers. And since he mainly worked out of Sho Fa, it has become the operatic and theatrical center of the Fire Nation."

"Actors," Kurt says almost wistfully, nearly salivating at the prospect. "Singers, dancers, fashionistas…” He looks urgently at Mercedes. "Can we stay there for a few weeks? Or years? Oh pretty, pretty please?"

"No," Mercedes says. "You have to save the world. After that, then you can come back and dress up and play pretend with all the other fabulous people."

The Avatar crosses his arms petulantly. "Oh, you are just… no fun at all." He sticks his tongue out at her.

She responds in kind.

He retaliates. This continues for a while.


"So immature," Blaine agrees. They high-five from across the car.

Their first test comes up that very day. A Fire Nation Military brigade approaches them on the road, made up of a few soldiers and an armored rhino. Artie spots them immediately and subtly knocks on the window to let everyone know they are about to be accosted.

"Hail, good sir!" one soldier says as they are stopped.
"Hail yourself," Artie grunts, spitting to the side for good measure.

The soldier approaches, pulling out a poster. "We have reason to believe there are wanted fugitives in this area. We'd like to know if you've seen any of these suspicious-looking characters…"

He hands the poster to Artie, who peruses it for a bit. It's the fire-breathing Kurtasaurus from before, with a few addendums towards the bottom in the form of names and crude sketches of the rest of the gang.

And when Artie says 'crude,' he means very crude. Like… there is a stick figure sitting down. That's him. A stick figure about twice as tall as the others; Finn, obviously. A stick figure drawn in brown with a slightly thicker brush, Mercedes. And a stick figure with curly hair, listed as 'unknown,' and pretty plainly Blaine. His own name, he can understand them knowing, but Artie has no clue how they got the rest of them.

"Nope," Artie growls, tossing the poster back at him.

"Are you sure you haven't seen—"

And here, Artie makes a controversial acting decision. He reaches out and grabs the guy, pulling him close enough to smell his breath. "You want to know what I seen, son?" he grunts. "I seen a platypus bear tear a man's spine out by his tailbone. I seen fishing boat turn over in a river full of piranha snakes and every last man onboard stripped to bones in thirty seconds flat. I seen skull beetles dig through a man's skull, making a hole so big his brains dribbled out of it like oatmeal. And that's just the fluffy fun stuff. Now you want to ask me again if I'm sure exactly of what I seen?"

The poor soldier is properly terrified, stuck in a place between swallowing out of fear and trying not to puke from sheer disgust. "N-n-no sir!" he stammers. "I'm sorry I asked!" he adds with utmost sincerity, and Artie releases him.

"Me too, son," he says, staring off into the distance. "Me too…"

Meanwhile, the other soldiers approach the carriage from the side, aiming to question the inhabitants. One of them is just reaching for the door, when suddenly, it flies open (smacking his hand with a fairly painful sounding crunch) and Kurt strides out.

"What," Kurt sneers, using some kind of ridiculous upper-class accent, "is the meaning of this? Why are we not moving?"

"Ask them," Artie grunts, gesturing to the soldiers.

"Well?" Kurt says, crossing his arms and glaring at the group. "Explain yourselves!"

A few of them actually jump at Kurt's outburst. They're clearly not used to being spoken to like that.

An ambassador steps forth from the group. "Terribly sorry to bother you, Mister…"

At this point, Blaine makes his entrance. "Councilor Ganterson!" he says. "Is everything alright?"

There is an audible gasp from the soldiers. "Councilor?" the ambassador stammers.

"You are surprised at something?" Kurt says with a glare. "Are you not recognizing such a prestigious and important participant in this country's history?"
"Of course," the ambassador stammers. "Of course we recognize you, sir!" The other soldiers nod.

Blaine steps out of the carriage, approaching Kurt with gentle arms. "Please, Councilor, you must calm down. Remember your heart…"

"My heart is beating just fine, thank you very much!" Kurt snits, and Blaine steps back.

"Of course, Councilor, my apologies," Blaine says.

It is at this point that Mercedes makes her appearance, posing lasciviously in the doorway.

"Honeybear," she coos, "what's the matter? What do all these big, strong, rough-looking men want with little old us?"

Several soldiers immediately find their eyes glued to the dark-skinned woman in the very flattering dress. A few jaws fall into the open position.

"These imbeciles," Kurt growls, turning his nose up and beginning to fan himself with his fan, "see fit to intercept my personal traveling entourage, and yet they have not even gotten around to explaining why. And stop that!" he spits, smacking one of the gaping soldiers with his fan. "That is my wife you are producing drool while staring at. Show some respect!"

"Yes, Councilor, sorry Councilor!" the soldier replies, stepping back.

"We were just wondering," the ambassador finally says, "if you've seen any suspicious characters in the area during your travels."

He hands Kurt the poster, who glances at it for precisely one second before wadding it up and tossing it back into the guard's face. "Phooey!" he says. "I am not looking for such strange people! That is not what my eyes are seeking! In the midst of this glorious bounty of nature, you look for humans? Have you no respect for your Nation?"

"Uhhh, I… that is, ahh," the ambassador stammers.

At this point, Blaine attempts to offer some helpful advice to the young Captain, waving his arms and mouthing 'Just do what he says! Don't upset him!' from behind Kurt. The poor guy seems to get the message just in time.

Kurt steps beside him and grabs his face, turning it to look towards a nearby valley. "Look at this! Look at the boundless splendor of our Nation," he demands. "Look upon her beauty and weep!"

The guard looks. "She's very—"

"I said weep!" Kurt demands.

"I said weep!" Kurt demands.

The poor fellow does his level best to start sobbing. "She's just so beautiful!" he says.

Meanwhile, Mercedes has seen fit to slink her way out of the carriage and begin strutting towards the other guards. "Well," she says, regarding them coolly. "As long as we're stuck here, and my husband is otherwise… occupied…" She smirks. "How would you boys like to help me pass the time?"

Neck-apples are bobbing, jaws are falling, sweat is pooling, eyes are bulging all around. "We'd love to," one of them says.
Finn finally makes his long-awaited debut, stumbling out of the coach to reign in the 'missus.' "Miss Desiree," he says gently, "you know how the Councilor feels about you talking to strangers…"

"Oh, psssh," Mercedes scoffs. "Ain't nothing strange about these fine young men. Isn't that right, boys?"

The poor soldiers look more confused and terrified than ever. Before them stands a delicious chocolate fruit of temptation. Behind them stands its wrathful, tempestuous and moody husband. "We… uhh… strange… that is to say… we're not exactly…"

"We have not seen these people," Kurt finishes, satisfied with the ambassador's shed tears over the wonder of nature. "And we will soon not be seeing you. Good day!" he says, striding back into the carriage, with Blaine following obediently behind.

Mercedes licks her lips and shakes a hip towards the soldiers. It knocks them backwards without even making contact.

"Desiree!" Kurt shouts. "Come! We go!"

With a final smirk, and a blown kiss, Mercedes saunters back over to the carriage, and Finn helps her inside.

"Thank you for your time, Councilor," the poor ambassador says, clearly still somewhat frightened. "We're sorry to have bothered you."

"As you should be," Kurt snorts. "Begone! Ozark! Slam the door in their faces."

"Right away, sir," Blaine says, standing up. "Clear the doorway, please!" he says, waiting just a second before slamming it.

"HYAH!" Artie says, lashing the reins and driving them onward, leaving the poor, confused soldiers to recover.

"That black chick was totally into me," one of them says after a few moments.

"Psh," another one says. "As if. She was totally staring at me like the whole time."

"Was not," the first one says in a cutting rejoinder.

Meanwhile, another soldier is staring after the cart with a thoughtful expression on his face. He looks down at the poster. Then back up. Then down again. Then back up. "Uhh… is it just me, or was there… like… a black one, a tall one, a sitting one, and two kinda gay ones in that group?"

"Are you an idiot?" the guy beside him scoffs. "How can the Councilor be gay? He has a wife, stupid."

The inquisitive soldier tilts his head slightly. "Good point, I suppose… still, what do you think, Captain?" he asks, turning around to look at the head of his squad…

…only to find him on his knees, sobbing as he stares at the beautiful flowered valley. "What have I been doing with my life?" he weeps. "It's just… it's all so wonderful… look at the world we live in!" And then he promptly collapses into an incoherent mess of tears. The young soldier drops the poster and goes to help his emotionally distraught Captain, the Councilor and friends completely pushed from his mind.
It's a very good thing that they didn't meet anyone else on the road or have any of the soldiers follow after them right away, because it is *quite* a few minutes before any of them can stop laughing long enough to breathe.

There are no more incidents on the road that day. At least, none involving other humans. There *is* one event that takes them all by surprise.

"I'm amazed at how resilient this *fan* is," Kurt says, fanning himself with it. "I mean it! Such a high quality product. I full-on slapped that guy with it, and there's not even a scuff—"

**CRACK!**

**BOOM.**

A peal of thunder rattles the car with enough force to shift everyone slightly in their seats. Blaine sticks his head over towards the window, looking up at the sky. "Oh, wow," he says. "Those clouds look very… aggressive."

They literally seemed to pop up almost out of nowhere. Massive, dark stormclouds, hovering ominously over them, releasing no rain, but kicking up tons of wind and flashing with barely-contained energy and leaping bolts of lightning.

"Yikes," Finn says, upon seeing them. "Think we should take shelter?"

"We're already *in* shelter," Kurt points out.

"Artie's not," Finn points out. "And neither is Drizzle."

"Hmmm," Mercedes says carefully. "It's not raining or anything yet, maybe—"

And then, it starts raining. Well, 'raining' is kind of a light word for it… but Blaine can't exactly remember the correct term for when the sky tries to kill you with violently thrown water. The rain comes down hard, fast, and plentiful.

"Super-yikes," Finn says. "We need to get out of this."

"We *need* to get to Sho Fa," Mercedes says. "There's no telling how long this will last. It might be over in a few minutes. Harsh storms like this hardly ever last long."

"But what about Artie?" Blaine asks.

"And Drizzle!" Finn adds.

Kurt considers this for a second. "Drizzle is an animal. I'm sure he's used to… you know… *weather*. And as for Artie… let's just ask him," he says neutrally, opening the window to the sound of WSSSSSSSSSSSHHHHHHHHHHHHHH. "ARTIE!" Kurt yells. "DO YOU THINK WE SHOULD STOP? ARE YOU OKAY?"

"I'M FINE!" Artie shouts back. "WE CAN TOTALLY RIDE THIS OUT!"

"ALRIGHT!" Kurt hollers back. "LET US KNOW IF ANYTHING CHANGES!"

With that, he slams the window shut, bends the shockingly large amount of rain that blew into the
cart into his water skin, and smiles. "There, see? No problems. We'll just ride this out."

Blaine shrugs, and goes back to admiring the storm for a few minutes. The fury of it is incredible, and the lightning...

The carriage stops. Artie knocks on the window. Kurt opens it.

"OKAY," Artie shouts. "I'M NOT FINE ANYMORE. LET ME IN!"

With a bit of teamwork, the four of them manage to pull the soaking-wet earthbender into the carriage. He alone is holding enough water to practically soak all of them.

"Holy crap, dude!" Finn says, when they finally get him inside. "You're freezing!"

"I'm not freezing," Artie says, shivering. "This water, however, is cold as shit."

Taking the hint, Finn and Kurt step into action in unison, bending the water out of the soggy boy's clothes and hair, and casting it out the door.

"Much better," Artie grins as Mercedes wraps a blanket around him. "Thanks."

"Alright, so we need to take shelter until this storm blows over," Mercedes says. "Finn, you get out there and drive. We can't stay here on the road, and you're a waterbender, so you shouldn't mind getting a little wet."

"Okay." Finn says with a nod, before opening the door and leaving the carriage as quickly as possible so as not to let anymore cold air in.

Finn guides them a short distance off the main road, where Mercedes and Kurt hop out to bend up another earth tent, this one large enough to shelter them, the carriage, and the dragon moose from the storm. Kurt then dries everyone off, while Finn heads out into the storm to gather firewood. After he gets a decent amount, he brings it back and works together with Kurt to bend enough water out of the wood to make it burnable. And then Kurt starts the fire, which a still-shivering Artie happily slides up to.

And throughout this entire sequence, it has never been quite so clear to Blaine just how useless he is in the grand scheme of things. He is literally capable of doing nothing but watching. His one lame attempt at contributing is shut down by Mercedes; he isn't allowed to go look for firewood with Finn because getting as wet and cold as Artie would probably be even worse on Blaine, since he's a firebender.

Except he isn't a firebender. But there's no use in telling them that.

The storm does not blow over quickly or quietly. It rages on well into the night, though it does slacken off somewhat in severity.

The other four sit around the campfire, while Blaine stands at the edge of the tent and continues to watch the furious thundercloud blasting the world with its fury.

"Something on your mind?" Kurt says, approaching him from behind.

Blaine shakes his head. "I'm useless to you guys," he says, turning towards Kurt.

Kurt sighs. "Blaine, I thought we'd gotten past this."
The former firebender turns again to face the storm. "I know you don't think I'm useless," Blaine says, "but we need to face the facts. My knowledge is limited pretty much exclusively to Fire Nation topics, and ones you read about in books, not the kind that are actually out there. It's helpful in some cases, but not as helpful as it could be. And even though you're a great student, and very patient with me… you can only learn so much firebending from someone who can't demonstrate. I'm really starting to think you should find someone else. There is a better teacher for you out there."

"I don't want a better teacher," Kurt says softly. "I want you."

"Well, this isn't about what you want!" Blaine replies, a little more forcefully than he'd like. "This is about the entire world you're supposed to be saving. If you're going to learn firebending, you need to learn it from a firebender."

"You are a firebender!" Kurt says.

"No I'm not!" Blaine finally shouts. It echoes through the tent, and though they try to play it off, he knows the others heard him. "I'm not a firebender. I'm not a prince. I'm nothing now. And… and even if we're friends, I don't want to drag you down. I don't want to be another mouth to feed who can't contribute anything. I just… I want what's best for you."

"Blaine," Kurt says, quietly but firmly. "Listen to me. You are a firebender. And you are THE Prince of the Fire Nation. You are both of those things, and you can't change them, anymore than I can change the fact that I'm the Avatar. So please, just calm down, and come over here and join us. We're all friends. We all care about you and want you here."

Blaine sighs, and starts a weak attempt to counter, but Kurt cuts him off.

"And…" the Avatar says, pausing for a second to collect himself. "…and please don't presume you know what's 'best' for me. I'm capable of figuring that out for myself, thank you."

Thoroughly chastised, Blaine slinks over to plop himself down by the campfire. He still feels out-of-place and frustrated, but then Finn puts a hand on his shoulder and gives him a soft squeeze, and Mercedes rubs circles on his back. Artie smiles at him from across the fire. "Dude. It's raining, we're all bundled up by the fire… looks to me like it's story time again," he says.

Blaine can't help but grin just a little. "Well… I suppose since we aren't doing anything else…"

And so, with Kurt's eyes on him the entire time acting as his encouragement, Blaine tells them the story of the Fisherman and his Wife. It more or less goes like this…

---

A Fisherman was fishing one day when he caught a mermaid by mistake. Mermaid scales are incredibly valuable and have magical properties, so any time a mermaid is caught, they are almost always forced to give up their scales to be freed. But the Fisherman did not do this. Instead, he simply freed her without question and apologized profusely for hurting her. She was so moved by his unexpected kindness that she offered to show him her enchanted home beneath the waves. Not realizing what he was getting into, the Fisherman accepted her offer and went with her to the beautiful world under the sea. He stayed there only a few days, or so he thought, but when he went back to the land, he was shocked to discover that a hundred years had passed! He was heartbroken at how different was the world around him. Nothing was familiar. Everything had changed, and each strange new sight broke his heart anew.

A part of him wanted to go home. And yet, he was sure that his wife had given up on him long ago,
and to go to a place he once called home and see it empty, or full of strangers, would only break his heart beyond repair. And so another part of him wanted to turn away and leave, to forget that old life and try to build a new one. He stood at the crossroads that led to his village for a long time, weighing the decision, wondering if he could even survive seeing what a hundred years had done to his beloved fishing village. In the end, however, he could not bring himself to give up on his home or his wife. And so he ventured home.

It was terrible. The village had very few inhabitants now, the houses having fallen into disrepair. His own once-beautiful house was old and run-down, seeming almost abandoned, and it was with thickest dread that he opened the door and stepped inside. The only sight that greeted him was that of an unfamiliar old woman, and he nearly fell to his knees and perished from heartbreak right then and there.

Imagine his shock when this strange lady saw him, and suddenly began weeping and hugging him. It was his wife! She had looked for him for years, never finding him, but never truly being able to convince herself that he was gone. So she took up fishing herself, stayed in the house they shared, and waited for him for a hundred years. The man was overjoyed, and thanked the heavens for sending him such a strong, patient, and wise woman to love him, but he was saddened as well. Time had taken its toll upon her while he remained young, and he could tell even then that she could not remain with him for much longer. So he told her his story, told her of the mermaid and her gratitude, and his terror and sadness and hopelessness at this strange new world, and how he almost walked away from her, but for the fact that he could not give up on her either. She was moved to tears, and told him that all the hundred years of waiting was worth that single moment. With all of his love, he embraced her, only to feel something odd poking him from within his coat. Reaching into his pocket, he discovered that the mermaid had slipped one of her scales to him anyway without him knowing! Thinking it the perfect gift, he gives the scale to his wife as a symbol of his love and appreciation for her.

Now, imagine his joy when right before his eyes, the years seemed to melt off of her until she was as young as he! With a tearful embrace, they thanked the mermaid, whose true gift—the knowledge that neither of them would ever give up on the other—would remain with them all through the rest of their long, happy lives.

Mercedes and Finn look thoughtful as he finishes.

"Anybody else think the Wife got the raw end of that deal?" Mercedes asks. "I mean, damn. Sure, it's gotta be hard get tossed a hundred years into the future and not recognize anything, but I think living those hundred years, all lonely and pining after somebody… that's a whole other game."

"I dunno," Finn says. "I mean, yeah, that sucks a lot, but she at least had all her friends and family to help her through it. That guy just came back into a world where, like, everyone he knew besides his wife was probably already dead. That has to suck, even if the story doesn't mention it."

"Good point," Mercedes allows. "I think they both kind of got screwed. That mermaid was a bitch."

Blaine snorts. "Well, I think it's safe to say she probably wasn't doing it on purpose. Maybe she didn't quite realize that mortal time and magical mermaid time worked differently?"

"Why are you all trying so hard to suck the romance out of the story?" Kurt says. "I mean, sure, if you think about it too much, yes, they are in kind of a sucky situation. But they have each other! She waited a hundred years for him! He… braved a hostile, and unfamiliar world for her!"

"Oh yeah!" Finn snaps. "That reminds me; the Wife totally put in more work than the guy, too. I
mean, she could hold that over him forever. Any time they get into an argument, she could just be like ‘I waited a hundred years for you, you jerk!’ and he'd be all ‘yes, dear, I know’ and just do whatever she said. That is definitely not grounds for a healthy relationship."

"Oh, and you're the expert on healthy relationships now?" Kurt asks pointedly.

Finn shrugs. "Come on, you know I'm right. Artie totally backs me up on this, don't you Art…ie?"

As Finn turns to his friend, he is surprised to find that Artie is thoroughly on the other side of the dream fence. "He's asleep," Finn says, highlighting the obvious.

"Wow," Blaine says, scratching his head. "I don't know if I should be offended or not. I mean, that's far from my most exciting story, but I didn't think it would actually bore him to sleep."

Mercedes huffs out a short laugh, before looking at Artie strangely. "I don't think it was you," she says softly, staring at him for a few moments more before abruptly getting up and wandering over towards their supplies.

"Well," Finn says, stretching his massive frame and yawning, "whatever it was, I'd say Artie has the right idea. I'm going to sleep. Night guys."

"Night," they chorus back at him as Finn heads to his sleeping bag.

"Feel any better now?" Kurt asks.

Blaine smiles softly at him. "A little. I suppose I could always become a wandering minstrel, or a bard. If you ever need someone to sing your praises or tell of your epic adventures, I'm your man."

"Well," Kurt says thoughtfully, "I suppose I could use a publicist. Good publicity is valuable commodity. And strangely hard to come by, for the Avatar."

Blaine gives a little laugh. "It's so strange. You're the spirit of the world, and yet the world seems like it's out to get you."

The Avatar snorts. "Tell me about it," he says. "Honestly, I try not to think about it most of the time. I do like the world, even if it doesn't always like me back."

"Well, good," Blaine says. "I sincerely hope that one day it will be inspired to return the favor."

A thunderbolt illuminates the world for a moment, and Blaine flinches.

Kurt smiles at him. "Afraid of lightning?"

The ex-Prince shakes his head. "No. It just… reminds me of something."


"Something I'd rather not think about right now," Blaine says simply, shaking his head and sighing. "I'm tired. I think I'm going to turn in as well."

He gets up and heads to his sleeping bag without another word. It's at this point that he notices that Artie didn't even bother to take his glasses off before he fell asleep. And that he's still wrapped up in blankets, even though he normally sleeps with as little between himself and the ground as possible.

Mercedes comes back with a cup of water, sitting down next to Artie.
"Is he okay?" Blaine asks.

Kurt turns his head to look over as well.

"I don't know," Mercedes says honestly. "I'm checking right now." With gentle, precise movements, she takes off Artie's glasses, folds them up, and lays them aside. Then, she sweeps aside his bangs and puts a hand on his forehead. Her face remains neutral for a few seconds… and then, she frowns.

"Boys?" she says. "I don't want to raise too many alarms too early, but… we might have a problem here."

Day 10

"Okay," Kurt says, "we definitely have a problem here."

When they awaken the next day, Artie has, at some point during the night, decided to try his hand at being a caterpillar. He is wrapped in a thick cocoon of earth from head to neck, and looks intensely miserable. His face is pale, his hair is limp and sticking to his head, and his cheeks are flushed. He looks like a porcelain doll or, somewhat alarmingly, like Kurt on a normal day.

"Oh, honey," Mercedes says, crouching down next to him. "Artie?" she says gently.

He flinches. "Huh?" he says, blinking up at her with hazy eyes.

"Hey, sweetie," Mercedes says gently. "You feeling okay?"

The paralyzed boy squints and screws up his face. "Uhhhh… yeah," he says after a moment.

Mercedes gives him a skeptical glance, before abruptly shattering his earth-sack and scattering the pieces, leaving him with only blankets to cover him. "You sure?"

Almost instantly, he starts shivering like crazy. "I'm f-f-f-fine!" he stutters.

Kurt rolls his eyes. "Nice try," he says evenly. "Try again when you remember how many F's are in the word 'fine.'"

He responds to that with a groan, reaching down and forming another cocoon, this one over his entire body, head included. "Go away," he moans from inside.

"What's wrong with him?" Finn says as he walks up.

"I think our boy's a little sick," Mercedes says pointedly.

"Am not!" Artie shouts from his shell. "I'm just cold. Y'all are trying to freeze me to death!"

"Dude, it's like, a billion degrees out here. As usual. It's the freaking Fire Nation," Finn says. "You're not cold."

"Well, thank you, Captain Thermometer. I think I can figure out my own temperature, thanks," Artie counters sourly.

"Oh really?" Mercedes says, cracking his shell again and bending a small, stone table underneath him. Exposed to the elements again, Artie immediately resumes shivering and even tries to curl up into a ball. It's a couple of seconds before he remembers his legs don't work, and reaches down to
pull them in as well. Mercedes puts a hand on his forehead. "Damn!" she says. "Boy, you are burning up."

"I'm p-p-practically a p-p-popsicle!" Artie shudders.

Mercedes rolls her eyes. "Y'all come over here and see if you don't back me up on this."

Kurt puts a finger on Artie's head. "Yikes," he says. "You, my friend, are hot stuff."

"T-tell me something I d-d-don't know," Artie grins in reply.

Finn comes up to try his hand at fever-measuring, but Artie keeps dodging him.

"G-g-get your g-g-gorilla p-paws off me," he says.

If anything proves he's sick, it's how pathetically quickly he gets too tired to keep resisting. Finn eventually pins him down, and that's all the evidence he needs. "Dude," he says. "You are totally sick."

Blaine nods. "He's right. I'm a bit more sensitive to heat than most. I don't even need to touch you to know that you're feverish."

Artie groans and just folds further into himself.

Mercedes sighs and retrieves a few more blankets for him. After she covers him again, she starts rubbing his back, which seems to soothe him just a little.

"Well… crap," Kurt sighs. "Now what do we do? Our 'driver' is down. This throws off our whole character scheme."

"Not really," Finn says. "We could just go with that story and let me drive. The driver is sick, so we switched places."

"Except that chances are, any actual upper-crust Fire Nation people will recognize that as a sign of fraud. The vast majority of them would probably just force him to do his job anyway," Blaine says sadly.

"Well, we're not going to do that," Mercedes says, "so I guess we just need to think of another plan."

"Hey," Artie says, sticking his head out a bit. "Look, even if I am sick… which is still up in the air, I might add… I'm fine to drive. All I do is sit there."

Mercedes nods, but not in agreement. "Oh yeah. Outside, in the hot sun, with a fever, in the Fire Nation. I'm sure that'll work out great."

"It's not that bad," Artie says weakly.

"Honey, you damn near burned my hand with your fever-having self. You ain't doing nothing but resting and drinking water and getting better, you hear me?" Mercedes says, laying down the law.

The sick boy looks up at her, slightly bleary-eyed. "What, are you my mother now?"

Mercedes rolls her eyes. "Might as well be," she grumbles.

Strangely enough, Artie smiles at this. "…heh… cool. Always wanted one of those…" he says,
rolling his head over to the side.

"Uh-oh," Finn says. "I think he's… ummm… delinear?"

"Delirious," Kurt corrects automatically. "And I think you might be right. Even if he isn't, he might well become delirious during the day and blow our cover. We can't have him in the driver's seat. I don't think we have any choice at all besides hiding him in the cart, and hoping nobody looks too hard."

Blaine doesn't want to seem insensitive, but he really has to know. "He's not… you don't think he's… sick-sick, do you?" he asks gently.

Finn shakes his head. "Nah. I'm pretty sure it hasn't reached the Fire Nation mainland yet, and he hasn't been exposed to any sick people lately."

Kurt's eyes grow wide. "But Blaine does have a point," he says, a tiny hint of fear in his voice. "There's so much fear and suspicion about the plague to begin with… if anyone sees him like this, there's a chance they might assume the worst and try to quarantine him. Or even kill him. Argh," he grunts. "Damn it, Artie. Why did you have to go and sit in the freezing rain for so long like a moron?"

"Because you wanted me to," Artie says honestly, not seeming entirely awake.

"You wanted to keep going," Artie continues, almost like he doesn't even realize Kurt was speaking. "I could tell."

Kurt shakes his head, seeming a bit taken aback. "How did you…"

Mercedes steps between them for the moment. "Look, we can talk about this later. Right now, we need to get down to business. Kurt, bend me some good, clean water for this boy to drink. Finn, there are some crushed herbs in my knapsack. Bring 'em here for me, would you?"

"What can I do?" Blaine asks.

Mercedes seems to stare at him for a moment, before sighing. "Just… be on standby for now. And don't get too close. We don't need you catching whatever he has."

The ex-Prince sighs. He almost complains, but he knows they have slightly more pressing things to worry about at the moment. So, as per his usual routine, he casually heads over to slink against the wall and feel powerless while his friend is sick and he can do nothing to help.

It's just a short while later that they're finally (mostly) ready to hit the road. They do run into a small difficulty in the form of… well, the same form as all their other difficulties that morning.

"Finn, you carry Artie to the coach. I'll be there in a minute," Mercedes says.

Artie, who has recovered from his momentary bout of delirium, balks fairly violently at this. "I'm not a damn baby," he says, annoyed. "I can get myself into the stupid carriage."

To prove his point, he sits up and slams his fists on the stone table, breaking it and falling to the ground. Then he slides (somewhat crookedly) over to the carriage, ready to launch himself into it until he realizes the door is closed. "Somebody open the door!" he demands, annoyed. Having little
else to do with himself, Blaine obliges, happy to finally be able to do something to help.

Only... well, it doesn't really 'help' in the way he intends.

Backing up the way he usually does, Artie then slides forward, bounces on an earthen piston, and flies... right smack into the carriage wall just beside the door. Blaine has a minor panic moment as he flops to the ground. "Oh... dragonshit," Blaine says. "Artie, are you okay?"

Artie doesn't reply, as Artie has been knocked clear the fuck out.

"Well," Finn says with a slightly pained smile as he scoops up his friend, "look on the bright side. He's a little easier to carry this way."

"Honey," Mercedes says, not unkindly, but still firmly, "you might want to leave the caretaking to us for right now."

Blaine just sighs and beats his head against the carriage, his frustration mounting by the second.

A little while later, they are on the road again. Finn is in the driver's seat this time, giving occasional anxious, worried looks into the cart. Kurt and Blaine sit on one side, Artie lays on the other (having recovered from his run-in with the transportation), and Mercedes sits on the floor beside him, acting as his nanny/nurse. Artie as a patient would try anyone's patience, but Mercedes is surprisingly adept at dealing with him.

"Here you go, honey," she says, holding up a bowl of green goop she made from the crushed herbs.

Artie takes one look at it and very nearly changes color to match it. "I ain't touching that. It looks like tree diarrhea. Like... dia-tree-a," he says with a small laugh.

"Artie, this is going inside of you one way or another. You can put it in your mouth, or I can pick one of your other openings to shove it in. Now what's it gonna be?" Mercedes asks simply.

Artie groans, gulps, and takes the bowl. Blaine winces sympathetically as he downs it all as quickly as he can and winds up choking himself. Fortunately, Mercedes is there to brace him and pat him on the back.

"That tasted like foot-shavings," he rasps when he finally catches his breath.

"It'll help," Mercedes replies. "Trust me."

"Oh, yeah," Artie snorts. "Trust the woman who threatened to shove medicine up my ass."

"If I have to beat you up for your own good, you better believe I'll do it," Mercedes says simply. "I'm taking care of you whether you like it or not. Now sit up and drink this," she says, retrieving a bowl of water.

Artie groans and throws his arm over his head. "This isn't taking care of someone. This is bullying! Why you gotta pick on the handicapped?"

"Boy, you don't sit up and drink this water, you fixin' to get handi-slapped, you feel me?" Mercedes promises, her voice leaving no room for argument.

Artie rises and sips—much more slowly—at the water she offers him. After a few moments, he
finishes it. "...thanks," he says softly as he lies back down.

"You're welcome, sweetie," Mercedes says, smiling a little and running fingers through his hair. It's amazing how quickly she can go from unyielding and overwhelming to gentle and sweet and soothing, like going from a rockslide to a warm mud bath. It isn't long at all before Artie is softly snoring, Mercedes's mixture having soothed him into a pleasant sleep.

Blaine leans over to whisper to Kurt. "Is it strange that I'm almost glad to see someone else being weak and sickly for a change? I don't want to sound like I'm enjoying this or anything, but it's nice not to be the one in need or the fragile one for a change."

Kurt looks at him strangely. "Well... you're not exactly a hundred percent better," he says. "You... should probably take it easy for a least a little while longer."

Blaine squints at him. "I'm feeling much, much better now. I think I'm almost as good as I'm going to get, physically. As a matter of fact, I should probably start doing a little physical training if I don't want to waste away to nothing." He's already lost weight because of this whole thing, and he wasn't exactly on the hefty side to begin with.

"But you should still be careful," Kurt says. "You never know what might be lurking out there, waiting for you, in the darkness."

Blaine gapes at the Avatar just slightly, giving him a bit of a side-eye. "Are you feeling alright, Kurt? You're not catching it too, are you?"

"I'm fine!" Kurt says brightly. "Just... wonderful. And so are you. And we should stay this way, don't you think?"

Blaine opens his mouth to say something, but Artie interrupts him with a violent sneezing fit (and Blaine does mean violent. Artie sneezes like he is trying to kill something). The annoyance in his stomach continues to churn and build, and Blaine has no idea what he is supposed to do with it.

They manage to avoid any more trouble on the road that day, and soon it's time to set up camp again. This time, they find another cave. Although Artie insists on helping at first...

Artie sits up, miserable, annoyed, and indignant. "I can put up a freaking... a freaking..." He shakes his head, steadying his breaths through his nose as he tries to avert a sneeze. "I can put up a freaking AHHHHH-CHOOOOO!"

The force of the sneeze literally knocks him right back onto his back. He only tries to get up a couple more times, before finally sighing. "Fine. I'll just... rest here."

...he eventually gives up and rests. With a man down, Blaine is almost certain that they will find something for him to do. But no—Mercedes sends him to sit with Artie and just winds up giving extra work to Finn.

Blaine would love to bitch about this to someone who might understand, but to his frustration (and slight horror), Artie seems to have slipped back into delirium again and is currently lying on a mat, dressed only in thin under-robes, unconscious and mumbling in his sleep. Seeing him like this makes Blaine realize that the only time he's actually felt like he was worth something to the group was when Artie took him to Fenghuang.
Leave it to the invalid to be the only one who doesn't treat him like an invalid.

Fortunately… or perhaps, unfortunately, Blaine's sour mood slowly melts into worry as he continues to sit with the infirmed earthbender.

"…has…" he mumbles, breathing heavily. "…the Earth…"

"How is he?" Kurt asks, wandering over after he has finished the mountain of tasks Mercedes has given him.

"Not good," Blaine says. "He's even hotter than before, and he's just… talking, nonstop. None of it makes any sense."

"…to the lake…" Artie says softly.

Kurt looks horrified, sinking down to sit beside Blaine and stare at Artie. "What if he's really sick?" he says. "Not like… plague-sick, but… there are so many other illnesses out there that could be really bad for him. What if he gets pneumonia? What if he dies? All because I made him sit out in that stupid storm…"

"Kurt," Blaine says gently. "You didn't make him do it. You even asked him how he was, what he thought. He should have said something."

"But I wanted to keep going. I wanted him out there in the freaking freezing cold rain," Kurt insists.

Blaine shakes his head. "Look, just because Artie says you wanted him to keep going doesn't mean it's true. And even if it is—you still put power in his hands. It was his decision to make. This isn't your fault."

Kurt looks at him for a few moments. "I just hope he's okay," he says finally.

At this point, Mercedes and Finn enter the cave. Mercedes immediately gets down next to Artie and feels for his temperature again. She frowns, similar to before, but this time, it's tinged with something Blaine doesn't ever remember seeing from the sassy earthbender…

She looks almost… afraid.

"We've got to get that fever down," she says, her voice low and serious, "or he's gonna be in serious trouble."

Kurt's breathing turns shuddery. Finn looks equal parts determined and scared out of his mind. Blaine just looks, and feels, lost.

"There's a flower that grows around here," Mercedes says, "called a Salamandelion. It's got little puffy red and orange seeds, and contrary to its appearance, it can help fight off a fever if I mix it right. I need one of y'all to go look for it, but I need a waterbender here to help me keep him cool."

"Why can't Finn just heal him?" Blaine asks.

Finn shakes his head. "It's... his own body is doing this. It's trying too hard to fight off the sickness. I can't make it stop," he says, sounding helpless.

Kurt looks torn for a few moments, before abruptly deciding: "I'll stay with him," he says.
Finn nods. "I'll find that flower," he promises, his voice resolute.

"I'll go with Finn," Blaine says, standing up.

Three voices rise in protest.

"Wait!" Kurt says. "You shouldn't be… ummm… wandering off so late."

Blaine gives him a fish-eye. "Umm… the sun hasn't even gone down yet. I think I'll be alright."

"But… ahhhh," Mercedes stammers. "What if we need you here?"

"You mean like you've needed me before?" Blaine asks, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice and not being entirely successful. "I'm not doing anyone any good here," he says.

Finn is the last to protest. "You'll… ummm… hurt yourself?"

The former firebender massages his forehead. "For the love of… I'm not going to hurt myself looking for a flower! Besides, two sets of eyes are better than one. Come on, Finn."

As Blaine hurriedly leaves the tent, he misses the strange look that Kurt shoots at Finn, and Finn's conflicted expression as he leaves.

It takes them a little longer than anyone would like to find the Salamandelion. By the end of the search, Finn is all but freaking out. Blaine, by contrast, is the picture of calm and collected.

"Fuck!" Finn shouts, tossing his hands up and kicking at a tree for no apparent reason. "Why does this stupid flower have to be so fucking hard to find?" he growls.


Finn does his level best to comply, but his breathing is a little shoddy. "Sorry, I just…"

"Breathe," Blaine instructs, putting a hand on his chest. "Slow, and steady. Panicking will just make you worse at finding flowers. Artie needs us to stay calm, and we don't want to let him down, do we?"

The taller boy's breathing levels out a little more. He shakes his head solemnly.

"Good," Blaine says. "Let's keep going."

The sun is starting to set when Finn finally spots it. "Dude, look!" he says, pointing to a small outcropping on a cliff above them. Blaine tilts his head back and stands on his tippy-toes and just barely manages to make it out from an angle.

It's an interesting twist of fate. Blaine never would have spotted it on his own.

"Awesome job, Finn!" he says, clapping the waterbender on the shoulder. "I'll be back in just a second."

"W-wait," Finn says as Blaine approaches the cliff. "Where are you going?"

"To get the flower," Blaine says obviously, starting to climb.
"Stop!" Finn says urgently.

Blaine drops from the cliff and turns around to look at him. "Ummm… why?"

"Because…" Finn says. "Because I can get it with waterbending!" he announces with a grin, popping the cap of his water skin and drawing the liquid out.

The ex-Prince is seriously starting to get fed up with all of this nonsense. "Finn," he sighs, "we don't know if Mercedes needs this dry or not. Plus, if you hit it wrong, we might knock the seeds off and lose them. I'll get it myself, it'll be fine," Blaine says, turning to climb without waiting for Finn's approval. Maybe if he shows someone that he isn't useless, it'll start sinking in.

"Wait!" Finn says.

Blaine ignores him. Hand-over-hand, foot-over-foot, he makes his way up. "I'll be done in just a second." He's almost there…

"Dude, stop!" Finn shouts.

"Just a little further," Blaine says.

His fingers crest the ledge where the flower sits, and he wraps his hands around it…

Only to have his other hand suddenly frozen to the wall in a cluster of ice.

Blaine turns to stare at Finn in shock.

Finn, for his part, looks just as shocked, and more than a little afraid. "Oh, shit. I, uhh… I did not mean to do… that."

His eyes try to state as plainly as possible how much he believes that bullshit. "And what did you mean to do, exactly?" Blaine says, doing his best to keep his voice calm.

"I just wanted to stop you from doing your crazy climbing stuff!" Finn insists.

"Why?" Blaine asks, his annoyance beginning to peak. "Why is everyone so concerned with me not doing things? I'm not a fucking baby! I can do shockingly complex tasks when I put my mind to them!"

"I just…" Finn stammers.

But Blaine railroads right over him. "I am so sick of everyone here treating me like I'm some precious porcelain bird…"

"I couldn't…" Finn tries again.

But Blaine is on a roll. "...that can't be dropped or scratched lest it shatter into a million pieces…"

"I had to…" Finn makes another attempt.

"...I can take care of myself! I can know what I'm capable of, and what I'm—"

"Kurt said we're not allowed to let you do it!" Finn finally erupts.

The forest itself almost seems to recognize the weight of what was just said. Things seem to grow very quiet all of a sudden. Blaine stares at Finn, the unbelievable proclamation's full implications
just starting to set in.

It's like a cold wind smacking him against the cliff. It knocks the breath out of him, leaves him reeling and chilled to the bone. It makes him sad… at first.

Then, it just makes him **angry**.

The proverbial dam bursts, and the feeling floods throughout his being like Blaine's heart has become a volcano. **All** the frustration, **all** the sadness, **all** the helplessness and misery that he has been working so hard to suppress just **explodes** within him. His blood is replaced with magma. The air in his lungs becomes natural gas. He is a human powder keg and he **longs** to detonate. He's never felt angrier in his life.

And yet, he doesn't explode. Not right away.

"…oh," he says after a few moments, his voice strangely, frighteningly even. "Is that so?"

The waterbender is completely horrified. "Oh shit. Oh, **shit**. I didn't say that. You didn't hear—"

"Unfreeze me, Finn," Blaine commands, his voice still deadly calm.

Finn looks a little conflicted. "I… uhhh…"

"Unfreeze me," Blaine repeats, "right this second."

With a great deal of reluctance, Finn finally does the deed, and Blaine climbs up to stand fully on the ledge.

"So," Blaine says. "Kurt decided that I shouldn't be allowed to climb. Tell me, Finn," Blaine says, staring down at the other boy. "What other **fascinating** decisions has Kurt made about my life that I apparently don't need to know about?"

"Dude," Finn pleads. "Please, don't be mad, he was just…"

"Tell me," Blaine demands, letting a little more anger into his voice.

Finn's breathing is shot again. The poor boy doesn't know what to do with himself. "He just… he said… we're not allowed to let you do anything dangerous. And we're not allowed to let you go anywhere alone. And… no strenuous activity… cause you might… hurt yourself."

Blaine grinds his teeth, and starts to clench his fist before he remembers the stupid damn mother-fucking flower that they came all the way out here to find. Putting the flower into his shirt, and schooling his face into an expressionless mask, Blaine looks at Finn pointedly for just long enough to bait his attention… and then he **jumps off the cliff.**

"BLAINE!" Finn shouts, running towards him uselessly.

Blaine is fairly certain Finn expects him to shatter upon impact with the ground, so he relishes the shock on the boy's face when he lands in a perfect roll that his body could never forget how to do. He springs up completely uninjured.

With steel in his eyes, Blaine walks right up to the gaping Finn, pulls the flower out of his shirt, and presses it into his palm. "You make **good**," he says, his voice barely above a growl, "and **damn** sure that this gets to Artie. Seeing as he is apparently the only one who **respects** me enough to think about what **I** want, I would **hate** if anything happened to him on my account."
Finn just looks devastated. "Wh-why can't you bring it yourself?"

"Because," Blaine says simply. "I'm leaving."

And now, Finn looks full-on terrified. "Dude… dude, no."

The ex-Prince just turns his back to the boy and begins walking away.

To his annoyance, Finn walks after him.

"Stop following me," Blaine warns, his voice deadpan.

Finn counters deadpan with desperation. "Blaine, please, dude. Don't you at least want to talk to Kurt about this first?"

"Oh," Blaine says, smiling mirthlessly as he turns to look at Finn (and never stops moving, now walking backwards). "You mean the way Kurt talked to me before instigating a secret conspiracy to control my life and keep me from doing anything he didn't want?"

"It wasn't like that, I promise," Finn tries, close to tears, but Blaine is unmoved.

"That's what it sounds like to me," Blaine snits, shrugging and turning to walk faster.

Finn keeps following him. "Dude, please. You can't just leave."

Blaine tosses his hands up, speaking without turning around. "Actually, Finn, I can. That's the beauty of it, really! I'm not a fucking child. I can do as I damn well please! Now stop following me!"

The ex-Prince increases his pace to just short of a run, and he practically chips a tooth in frustration when he hears enormous, clodding footsteps stomping up the woods behind him. "Finn," he warns, "I swear by the fucking sun, if you don't leave right now…"

"He just wants what's best for you!" Finn cries.

And then it happens.

Blaine pivots on his heel and starts it without even realizing what he is doing, guided by pure instinct. He throws a fist towards Finn's head, and at the very edge of the motion, where the force is greatest, vivid, scarlet fire bursts from the air and soars towards his target. Finn jerks himself backwards and barely stumbles out of the way, and the fire soars harmlessly past him, slamming into a tree branch and blasting it to splinters.

Finn stares at him, looking, more or less, like he is on the verge of passing out.

Blaine stands there, teeth bared in a hateful sneer, breathing heavily with his fist still outstretched.

Neither can bring themselves to speak for a few moments. Finn no longer has any idea what to say.

The firebender, however, eventually comes up with the perfect statement. "You tell Kurt," he breathes, "not to presume he knows what's 'best' for me. I'm capable of figuring that out for myself, thank you."

He lowers his fist and turns towards the cliff, starting to climb. "Now, please," he adds, without looking back, "take that flower to your friend before he dies, if you don't mind."
He digs his hands and feet into the cliff, so blinded with anger that he can barely relish the feel of the rock on his skin again. He takes no joy in the climb. All he can think about is Kurt, standing there and telling him he isn't useless while doing absolutely everything in his power to make him useless. Smiling at him with that stupid, self-satisfied smirk while lying to his face.

He gets to the top and turns around, looking down at the ground below.

Finn is gone.

Good. Maybe now he can finally get a fucking second's worth of peace to himself.

"...the Earth King... has..." Artie slurs, seeming to slip further away by the second.

"Where are they?" Kurt says, bending another batch of water over Artie's forehead.

"I don't know," Mercedes says. "Just have faith, sweetie. They'll come through..." she trails off, putting a soaked cloth on Artie's chest. "They have to," she whispers.

It is at this point that a blank-faced Finn stumbles into the cave, seeming almost in a trance as he hands Mercedes the flower.

"Here," he says, his voice flat and featureless as an Earth Kingdom plateau.

"Thank the Hills," Mercedes exhales, retrieving her mortar and pestle and immediately beginning to mash the seeds with a few other leaves.

Kurt watches eagerly, putting the water back into the bowl to cool it again.

"...invited me... to the lake..." Artie mumbles.

"Don't go," Kurt says thickly, without even thinking about it. "Wherever they tell you to go, do not go there. You don't belong there. You belong right here with us, do you understand?"

Artie doesn't get a chance to reply, as Mercedes raises him up and promptly pours the mixture down his throat, taking care so that he doesn't choke on it, but still having him down it as fast as she can make it go.

"Now what?" Kurt asks.

"Now, we wait," Mercedes says.

And they all sit there with him, one on each side of him, holding his hands, feeling his forehead, and waiting for something, anything to happen.

And then Kurt notices.

"Finn," he says. "Where is Blaine?"

And that's all it takes for Finn to break.

"I'm sorry," he says thickly, taking a shuddering breath. "I... I told you, I would screw up again. I told you."

Kurt's heart nearly folds in upon itself and vanishes right there. "Finn," he repeats, a little louder than necessary. "Where is Blaine?"
"I'm so sorry," he sniffs. "I… I blew it. I told him. The whole thing. Ab-about you, and us, and not wanting him… to do stuff… He was… he was so mad… he threw fire at me…"

At the words of his sobbing stepbrother, the Avatar's bones seem to melt within his flesh. His muscles refuse to support him, and he collapses against the cave wall, staring into space, not quite able to believe what he is hearing.

And then, Finn finishes.

"H-he's gone."

The words echo in his mind, bouncing around with perfect clarity, never growing quieter, never growing indistinct, a never-ending condemnation.

He's gone.

As he walks through the woods, Blaine stops next to a small pond, and finally takes a second to think about everything that just happened. Staring into the water somehow helps him calm down enough to think semi-rationally for a moment.

He just firebent. For the first time since that night. And yet…

"That is not the way," he says, echoing a lesson from his father long ago.

Emotional firebending is considered the 'dark' path of firebending. Instead of relying on pure drive or clear goals, it uses mere emotions as fuel, and none burn more intensely than anger and hatred. He knows what he did, just now. He firebent out of anger.

"That is not the way," he repeats, staring into the water, willing the anger to leave him. But it stays, nonetheless. It seems to have found a home in him.

Reliance on emotion to firebend makes the fire difficult to control. It can burn incredibly hot, and even give you more intense fire than might otherwise be possible, but the fire is unstable, liable to grow wild and out of control, consuming the bender just as surely as anything else. Even worse, reliance on emotion to firebend corrupts the spirit, soaking it constantly in rage and hate until it can feel almost nothing but. 'That is not the way, my son,' his father had said.

And Blaine absolutely believes him. He doesn't want his fire. Not like this. He almost hurt someone today. Someone who had been nothing but nice to him; someone who had saved his life.

Rationally, he knows this, but his rational mind is lost in the roaring inferno of anger that fills him now. He needs to reject it. He doesn't want this anger. He doesn't want this rage.

And so he sits at the edge of the pond and breathes. Breath controls the emotion, breath gives power to the flame. He has to start from the beginning; from the very first lesson of firebending he ever received. He has to remember…

And suddenly, his eyes grow wide. His heart stutters, and time seems to stop.

Suddenly, he can't breathe at all.

"In, and out," instructs the Fire Lord.

A tiny, wild-haired Blaine stands in the training room with him, his stance wide and just a little off,
his face screwed up in concentration as he tries to breathe the way daddy is teaching.

Daddy isn't even looking at him.

He doesn't look at him very much since mommy went away. It makes him sad. Everything makes him sad.

Blaine doesn't want to make daddy sad. He wants to make him proud.

So he takes a deep breath, in through his nose, and out through his mouth, just like daddy showed him. He stops looking at daddy and waiting for him to pay attention and just breathes. He needs to get it right. When he gets it right, then he can show daddy.

In, and out.

In, and out.

"Watch your stomach," the Fire Lord says.

Blaine isn't quite sure what he means.

In, and out.

In, and out.

"Blaine, your stomach."

What's he even talking about?

In, and out.

In, and out.

"Son, your tummy is poking out. Like this," he says.

And suddenly, Blaine feels something poke him right in his ticklish spot. He giggles. "Daddy!" he says, opening his eyes. "You messed up my breaths!"

"I most certainly did not," the Fire Lord says, sounding almost offended. "Perish the thought. Your tummy was poking out too far and got tickled by itself. Keep it in, and poke out your chest instead, and maybe that won't happen."

Blaine stares at him for a little bit, and closes his eyes and starts breathing again.

In, and out—

He giggles again. "Daddy!" he says. "Can't you see I'm trying to firebend?"

The Fire Lord is the picture of innocence. "I can see that perfectly. I also see your tummy poking out and getting tickled. You should work on that."

Blaine smiles, and closes his eyes. He takes a deep breath, purposely pokes out his stomach—

And opens his eyes just in time to catch his father's finger on its way to poke him. "HA!" he announces. "Got you!"
The Fire Lord looks at him for a few seconds. "Who has who, now?" he asks. And before Blaine can even react, he is being tickled to high heavens and back, laughing like a lunatic, laughing so hard he can't even breathe.

It's awesome.

But not just because Blaine is laughing.

But because Daddy is smiling. It might be the very first time since mommy went away that Blaine has seen him smile.

That's when he decides for real. He has all the proof right in front of him—firebending makes his daddy smile, so that's what Blaine will do for him. He will be the best firebender ever…

No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

He doesn't want this. He doesn't want to do this here, not here, not now, not like this.

It hurts.

Like huge chunks of lung being torn out of his chest by hooks, like being melted and drowned at the same time from the inside out. It hurts so fucking much.

But he can't stop it. He is so stupid. For so long, he was able to avoid it all, running away from everything, every thought, every memory… and then he had to go ruin it by stopping. He stopped like an idiot and now it's all catching up to him, the grief crushing him like he always knew it would. The other dam has broken, and the flood is going to carry itself out to completion.

There is nothing left for Blaine to do but drown.

He falls to his hands, and a sob tears out of his throat.

The two strange new boys look at him funny. So he looks at them funny. They look at him funny some more. So he looks at them funny some more.

This goes on for a while.

Finally, one of them stops staring at Blaine like he's some kind of freaky science project and talks. "Hello," he says, in kind of a weird voice that makes Blaine think he talks way too much and way too precisely. "My name is Wesley Montgomery," he says, bowing slightly.

"And I am David Thompson," the darker boy says, also bowing.

"Okay," Blaine says. "I'm Blaine Anderson. Nice to meet you, I guess?"

"You guess?" Wesley says. "Well, that's not very polite."

"Sorry?" Blaine shrugs. "It's just... ummm... I don't really know who you are or why you're here."

"We're your new friends," David says, frustrated. "I think."

"Oh," Blaine says, smiling. Well, that explains it then.

Actually, it explains nothing, but... hey, new friends! He'll take it anyway.
"Cool!" he says. "Nice to meet you. Really! Now come on, I have something I want to show you!" He runs off with a bright grin.

Wes and David give each other a questioning look for a few seconds, before shrugging to each other and following after him. He's just a spoiled prince. What's the worst he could get up to?

Several more sobs break loose, and his muscles seem to rebel against him. He falls on his side, unable to even crawl as a few drops of water finally escape from his eyes…

"I like this one! I think he likes me too!" Blaine says, pulling his finger out of the chick pen to reveal one rather grumpy-looking chick, firmly attached to the Prince via beak. "Can I keep him?"

He can't stop them, he can't stop them, he can't stop them, no matter how much he wants to, no matter how much it hurts. More and more they come, faster and faster, until Blaine can't even pretend to hold it in anymore…

"Once, there was a brave soldier…"

"Once, there was a mighty Avatar…"

"Once, there was a young fisherman…"

"Once, there was a handsome Fire Prince…"

"Once, there was a beautiful singer…"

And so he cries…

"Good, Blaine," the Fire Lord says, with an approving smile. "Flawless form. You've been practicing, haven't you?"

Blaine just grins and does the move again.

And cries…

"Hold still!" Wes grumbles.

"You keep poking it!" Blaine protests.

"He has to poke it!" David sighs. "That's what stitching is."

"Do I really need stitches?" Blaine asks.

"Well, we could always just skip the stitches and risk you falling apart, but I'd rather keep you in one piece, thanks," Wes sighs as he continues to sew Blaine's wound shut.

The Prince thinks about this for a bit. "Good point. You guys are really thoughtful. Thanks!" he grins.
Wes rolls his eyes, but he is smiling just a bit when he says, "You're welcome."

And cries. Every awakened memory from his old life tears another piece of him away as it passes through his mind; every rare smile from his father, every moment of solidarity from Wes and David, every tale his mother told him, the exact way she told it, they all rush through him unbidden in a chaotic stream that he can't control and it fucking hurts.

They're gone.

They're all really, really gone. They are dead. He's never going to see them again.

And that hurts like nothing he has ever felt before, like nothing he can describe, worse than every broken leg, worse than every cut, every scrape, every burn.

And there is nothing he can do about it.

So he lies there and cries, shredded, raw, and bleeding as his own life tears him apart from within. He cries until his body can stand no more, and then he sleeps. One final thought echoes through his mind as he falls into the dreamless void…

He left.

He attacked Finn, and left.

There's no going back from here.

This time, he's really done it.

This time, he really has lost everything.

And he has no one left to blame but himself.

A/N: :( So, uhhh, yeah. Sharp departure from the previous chapter, but I've been trying to build towards this for a while. Poor Blaine just had all that pent-up emotion with nowhere to go, and the second he actually found something to get upset about, he just… blew up. The next chapter is almost entirely Kurt POV, and centers on his quest to track down the errant Blaine.
The story continues exactly where it left off. The boy cowers as his beloved world is burned, his flame hovering protectively near him, as Blaine's mother picks up the narration.

"Other fire came forth on that day, hungry and wild, and set to everything the boy loved. His world was thrown into chaos." Suddenly, from all parts of the scene, people begin to flood in, moving randomly around in surges and streams and clumps, gathering together and thrashing about and destroying just as much, if not more, than the fire.

The boy tries to escape the sea of people by climbing up, but when he reaches the top, he sees all the people he loves down below, caught in the crowds. As fires grow stronger and wilder, the boy leaps down and attempts to catch his loved ones as they move. But each time, he misses them just
as they enter a burning building. When he tries to follow after them, the building collapses into flaming rubble, cutting him off. One by one, each of them vanishes into flames, until the boy is alone.

"Try as he might, he could not save his loved ones, or his beloved world, from the fire that was so much greater than he. His world was burned, and he was left with nothing but ash."

The boy falls to his knees as everything around him turns to dust, crying softly.

"And he wept for all he had lost."

All the while, the boy's fire hovers anxiously nearby. As he cries softly, his fire attempts to move forward, flaring up to warm him. But when the boy feels the heat from the flame, he flinches and scrambles away from it, wide-eyed and fearful. When it attempts to come towards him again, he gets up and runs.

"And he loved the fire no longer…"

When Blaine awakens the next day, the first thing he notices is that he is sleeping in dirt, a large quantity of which is firmly encrusted to his face. The second thing he notices is the strange, hollow chill he feels in place of last night's anger. His fire's gone out again, and this time, he's almost thankful.

The third thing he notices is the rather large, intimidating boot that is directly in front of his face. The boot attached to a rather large, intimidating person.

He starts to try and get up, but there is an unmistakable shing, and soon, the tip of a sword is pointed at his face.

He gulps.

Lovely way to start the day…

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Day 11

Mercedes totally cries a little bit when Artie's fever finally breaks during the night.

Okay, so maybe Finn does too, but… you know… Finn probably cries more than he should anyway. Mercedes, on the other hand, is totally rock-solid and barely lets herself get emotional over anything, so it's kind of satisfying (not in like a sadistic way or anything) to finally see her shed a few tears.

It also helps drive home how fucking serious this whole thing became in, like, no time at all. How Artie (his best friend) could totally have died from, like, nothing.

Fuck. The universe is super dangerous. Why are there so many things that can kill you?

And that just makes Finn think of Blaine, all alone out there, with no one to look out for him. How many things could be trying to kill him, like, right this second? Fuck. He's really fucked up this time. Even besides how much he means to Kurt (a whole fucking lot), Blaine was Finn's friend too. He shouldn't have let him go. Except… he didn't really have much of a choice.

Kind of hard to talk reason to someone who is pissed enough to punch fire at your face.
Kurt barely reacts to Artie's fever breaking.

It isn't that he isn't happy. He is. Overjoyed, in fact. Artie plays an important role in the group dynamic, as a natural buffer between Finn and Mercedes (a role that Kurt plays occasionally, but would probably go insane if he had to do it full time by himself). Plus... you know... Kurt is somewhat fond of the little cretin. It's one of those old clichés that you don't quite understand how important something is until you are facing the prospect of life without it. He really does love Artie as a friend. His sly humor, his unshakable (if sometimes misplaced) confidence, his complete and total devotion to their little makeshift family... Kurt's immensely relieved that he isn't losing him.

It's just...

He has lost something else. Something valuable to him in a completely different way. And the loss has left him feeling so drained that he just barely has it in him to smile when he hears, "oh, thank the mountains. He's sweating like a waterbender in the desert. He's cooling off."

He just barely has it in him to offer a few words of comfort to Finn, who seems honestly afraid that this particular botch will be the straw that breaks the proverbial camelephant's back. "This isn't your fault, Finn," he says tiredly. "All you did was expose my own stupidity. Don't beat yourself up over this."

Finn turns disbelieving eyes towards him and seems watchful for any sign of deception. But there are none. Kurt doesn't have it in him to lie to anyone right now. Not after what his last lie has cost them.

"I think we should all try to get some sleep now," Mercedes says. "It's been a long-ass night, and ain't none of us going to be any good tomorrow unless we get some rest."

Finn sighs. "So, we're sure he's gonna be okay?"

Mercedes looks at him plainly. "We're not sure about anything," she says simply. She doesn't think there is any bite to it, but from the way Finn flinches, he takes it personally. She sighs. "But I don't think he's leaving us. Not tonight," she says, giving him a little smile.

Big boy takes a second to compose himself, and gives her a nod. "Okay," he says. "Thanks."

He then moseys over to his sleeping bag, and she can practically tell the second he falls asleep from the way he just sort of melts into it. Hours of worrying over somebody will give you that kind of exhaustion. She knows from firsthand experience, but it helps her, a little, to see that Finn can go through that kind of thing, too. He really does care about Artie. Probably cares about all of them.

Of course, all the caring in the world doesn't mean jack if all you do is hurt the ones you love...

"Kurt, honey?" Mercedes says, turning to look at him, still slumped against the wall and almost catatonic. "You hearing me?"

He blinks a couple of times and finally looks up at her. "I don't think I can sleep right now," he says honestly.

She shakes her head. "It'll help. I promise it will. Right now, you can barely even think straight enough to walk, let alone figure out how to handle this, and I'm no better. Let's just rest. It'll be clearer in the morning, sweetie."
He breathes out like he's trying to push all the misery out of his chest in one breath. "Alright," he says finally. "I'll try."

And he heads over to his sleeping bag, lying down gingerly like he's half afraid he'll bust open if he falls too hard.

With everybody else counting koala sheep, Mercedes figures she should probably take her own advice. And yet, for some damn reason, she finds herself watching Artie just lie there and breathe for a few minutes, thankful for the sight. Taking care not to wake anyone up, she gets a thin blanket and goes to drape it over him.

She's shocked, to say the least, when she gets up to find Artie's eyes are open and he's staring straight at her.

"Oh," she breathes. "Don't be creeping on a girl like that. You gotta warn somebody before you… start…"

She trails off, because Artie isn't responding to her. He's looking right at her, but there's something in his eyes… it's like he doesn't even know who she is.

"Hey, you okay?" she asks.

He just keeps staring.

"Are you even awake?" she tries.

No response.

Creeeeeep-y, she thinks. Oh well. Fever makes your head go funny sometimes. She smiles at him, just in case he is paying attention. "Get some rest, honey. The more you rest, the faster you'll get back on your feet. Your butt. You know what I mean."

She starts to walk away and damn near jumps out of her own skin when his hand lashes out and wraps around her ankle, almost hard enough to bruise.

"What?" she says, a little irate, and having to restrain herself from kicking him off in his weakened state.

"I don't want to go," he says, still staring at her with those unsettling, not-quite-all-there eyes.

She's a little thrown. "Don't want to go where?" she asks. "Prison?"

"I don't want to go," he repeats, like he's waiting for some kind of specific response.

She'd be lying if she said she wasn't just a little freaked. The fever must've really scrambled the boy's eggs. This better not be a permanent thing. "Artie, what are you talking abo—"

"I don't want to go," he says a third time.

She's at a loss, and he's squeezing the circulation right out of her foot, so she finally just decides to humor him. "Then don't," she says simply. "Don't go. Stay here."

He blinks. Which suddenly makes her realize he hasn't been blinking until now. "…can I?"

She rolls her eyes. "Of course you…" she says, trailing off. Apparently, the time it takes for her to roll her eyes is all the time Artie needs to fall right back asleep. His eyes are closed and his hand is
slack, his breathing soft and regular.

With little else for her to do, she walks over to her own sleeping bag and tries to settle down for the night. It's quite a while before she gets to sleep, though. Something inside her is telling her that there was something… **wrong** about what just happened. Something more than just the fever talking. Something that really worries her.

Name a mountain after her if she can tell you what it is, though.

Kurt dreams that night.

It's difficult, at times, being the Avatar. That's no surprise, but what is somewhat shocking is just how many different **levels** it is difficult on, how many different, seemingly small things about his life are vastly different from normal people.

Like dreams, for example.

He never knows whether he is simply dreaming, or having some kind of spiritual vision. His usual method of distinction goes like this—the less sense it makes, the more likely it is that it is a dream. Blaine riding on a fire-breathing winged hippo-cow is probably a dream, since Kurt is fairly sure those don't exist in real life.

Blaine feeding him breadsticks full of worms… still probably a dream, because that just doesn't seem like something Blaine would do, and Breadstix was a relatively clean restaurant.

It's towards the middle where the line gets blurry and things get difficult.

That night, Kurt watches Blaine die.

He's seen that sort of thing before, of course. He's had nightmares since that night of Blaine, crushed and bleeding and beaten, smiling up at him from the ground, with Kurt doing everything in his power to keep him there and just…not being good enough. Not being strong enough. Fast enough. Smart enough. No matter what Kurt does in the dream, Blaine slips away and dies right in front of him. It's tremendously upsetting, dream or not, and even though he *knows* it already happened, he's still terrified for Blaine every time he wakes up from one of those.

So he's no stranger to painful dreams. But it *is* a dream, Kurt is relatively sure, because it already happened, it happened differently, and Blaine survived. So even though it makes sense when he is dreaming it, in the larger scheme of reality, it's ridiculous.

But that night is different.

That night, Kurt sees Blaine die in a strange place, with a strange person. The dream is somewhat blurry—more shapes and colors than actual, distinct objects, but he immediately knows where Blaine is. He immediately knows that the growing circle of dark red on the white ground around him is blood, that the wound is fatal, and that the old man in white, standing with his back turned to him, is the one who delivered the blow.

It doesn't feel like the dream. The dream is a vivid replay and reimagining of events that already took place… but this is vague, fuzzy, and difficult to make out. Everything seems muted, as if passing through a filter, or distorted, as if reflected in a misshapen mirror. And perhaps most importantly of all, it hasn't happened.

Yet.
Or has it? Could this be what Blaine is doing at this very moment? Bleeding to death with no one but his killer to keep him company?

The thought should be horrifying. It should have Kurt waking up in a screaming, kicking fit. And yet, even that sensation is muted, dull, as if it is far away and belonging to someone else, only reaching him remotely.

The dream is short. Barely a snapshot, but it is enough. Enough to stay with him long past awakening, long past the morning, long into the next day and for the rest of his life. During the dream, his horror is muted.

Not so when he awakens the next morning.

The first thing she hears when she awakens next morning is the pitter patter of graceful footsteps. She opens her blurry eyes to the sight of a Kurt on a mission. He's stomping around the cave, gathering supplies here and there and stuffing them into a knapsack he's got slung over his shoulder. His eyes are red and blotchy, like he's been crying, but the look on his face at the moment is anything but sad. He looks… determined. Fierce. A little scary.

Not always a good sign.

"Well, good morning to you too," she says by way of greeting.

He starts. "Oh, Mercedes," he says. "I was… just… preparing for the day's journey."

She gives him a skeptical look. "Which one?" she asks. "The one we're all taking together, or the one you're about to take by yourself?"

The Avatar crosses his arms. "I am shocked and appalled that you would suggest such a thing, Mercedes. That I would just… up and leave without even telling anyone. The scandal!"

Her stare is as deadpan as her voice. "I couldn't help but notice there was no actual denial in there."

"I absolutely, positively… intended to leave you a note." Kurt rushes, blushing just a bit.

"Kurt!" Mercedes says, annoyed. "What is wrong with you, boy? Have you lost your mind?"

He swishes his head to the side. "I have lost my Blaine, and I intend to find him. Traveling alone is simply a matter of expedience, and nothing more. I can find him faster by myself."

Mercedes shakes her head. "Oh? So what's the plan?" she asks.

"Who's got a plan?" Finn says blearily as he pries himself from his mat.

"No one," Kurt says brightly. "Go back to bed!"

"Why are you already awake?" Finn asks, squinting at him. "And why are you already dressed? And why do you have that—"

"Oh, now you decide to be observant," Kurt cries, tossing his arms up in exasperation.

"What's the plan?" Mercedes repeats.

"It's quite simple, really," Kurt says imperiously. "I am going to track Blaine to the ends of the earth if necessary and then I am going to bend some sense into him and drag him right back here
whether he likes it or not. And then he will be safe, and we will be happy, and everything will be just dandy."

There is just no responding to that. She shakes her head for a few seconds, completely at a loss. "Unbelievable. I cannot even… you know what?" she says. "Go right ahead. You go get him, you swaddle him in wool and you carry him back here in chains if you have to. I'm sure that'll go over real well considering that you deciding what's best for him is the damn reason he flounced himself on out of here to begin with!"

The Avatar's nostrils flare as he quietly takes offense, but makes no attempts to counter her.

"Hills, let's not even count what's happened since he's been with us. Let's just think about the last person who decided that boy was too precious to lose and tried to fence him in. I'm a little fuzzy on the specific details of that whole messy chain of events, but I'm fairly sure the ending is something along the lines of 'and then Kurt blew up the damn Palace,'" she continues.

He winces a bit, but keeps his nose held high.

"Have you not learned anything?" she asks.

"Mercedes," Finn says.

"Are you that blind to what the boy wants?" she presses.

"Mercedes," Finn tries again.

"Do you even care about what he wants?" she says, getting a little louder.

"Mercedes, shut the fuck up!" Finn shouts.

Her head snaps around so fast that it practically spins right off her neck. "Excuse me, Finn Hudson?" she says dangerously. "I know you did not just—"

"Will you look at him?" Finn says, pointing to Kurt.

She turns back around. "…oh, baby," she says softly.

Kurt is standing there, quietly sniffling, completely stone-faced except for the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to get you all upset…"

"It's not you," he sniffs. "I… I know that I shouldn't treat Blaine like that, but I just… I can't lose him."

"Sweetie," Mercedes says, feeling like crap for going off on him like that. "I know you're worried about him—"

"I saw him die," Kurt says suddenly.

Finn gapes at him, turning white. "What?"

Mercedes puts a hand to her chest to calm her fluttering heart. "What do you mean?" she asks

"Last night… I had some kind of… dream, or vision, or something, I… he died right in front of me," Kurt says in a heartbreaking monotone. "A complete stranger just… killed him. And I don't
know if that's already happened, or if it's going to happen, or if it's just some crazy dream my mind cooked up because it's upset, but I can't let that happen to him," he finishes thickly.

Mercedes takes a few breathes to get her pulse back down to normal. "Be that as it may," she says calmly, but firmly. "You need to understand that Blaine is not yours to lose, baby. He's not a pet, or a piece of property, he's a person."

"I know that," Kurt insists.

"Then why don't you act like it?" Mercedes asks. "Honey, if you go out there and try to make him come back, he'll just pull against you even harder. You can't make decisions for him, Kurt. No matter how much you might want to."

Kurt leans against the wall and slinks down. "I can't just let him go, though. I can't.

"Nobody's saying you have to," Mercedes says. "I'm just saying you can't force him into anything."

The Avatar looks thoughtful for a second. "...okay. You're right," he sniffs. "New plan; I track Blaine to the ends of the earth, if necessary... and then I apologize for what I've done, swear not to do it again, and ask him to come back with me." He smiles. It's genuine, if a little wobbly. "That sound better?"

Mercedes smiles right back. "Much better."

"A little better," a tired, somewhat weak voice rasps from the other side of the cave. Mercedes looks up to see Artie leaning on his elbow, looking a little sickly, and a little shaky, but still coherent.

"Artie!" Finn shouts, instantly springing all six-foot-whatever of his giant self over to his friend and wrapping the boy in a bear hug. "Dude, you're awake! You're okay!"

"Yeah," Artie grunts, "and if you let me go so that I can breathe again, I might even stay that way!"

"Sorry," Finn apologizes, setting him back down. "I'm just... I'm glad you're alright."

"Me too," Artie says, offering a fist, which Finn is happy to pound.

Mercedes gives her fellow earthbender a smile. "Welcome back to the land of the living. Glad we didn't have to give you over to your lady on a more permanent basis."

"I'm not quite ready for that level of commitment yet," Artie says with a grin, reaching over from his mat to run his fingers through the dirt. "We play it casual. Just friends for now."

Kurt, however, is giving him a narrow squint. "How long have you been awake?" he asks.

Artie gives him a sly smile. "Long enough."

He huffs in reply. "Alright, fine. So, what's your take on the situation?"

"Well, from what I understand, B-Money found you out and bounced. So I support apologizing, but as far as plans go, yours needs more planning," Artie says simply.

"How so?" Kurt says, offended.

"Well, first of all, do you even know where he went?" Artie asks.
Kurt raises a finger, opens his mouth, and seems to get a little hung up. "Ahh, no."

Artie nods. "Thought so. What are your plans for tracking him down? What do you intend to do if you run into anyone while you're looking for him? You're not going dressed like that are you?"

The Avatar's jaw drops. "Artie, you just got done with a near-death experience. I know you're not tempting fate by insulting my outfit."

But the sitting boy just grins at him. "I'm not giving you fashion tips, Capital K. But I happen to know that the soldiers sent to search for us are looking for very specific traits. You, as you are now, will be picked out in a second if anyone sees you. You need a disguise."

"What about Councilor Gilderoy, or whatever?" Finn asks.

Artie shakes his head. "Wouldn't make sense for a councilor to travel by himself. No… we need to cook up something real good for this one. Something that won't have anyone giving you a second glance… they're looking for Kurt," he says, smiling and steepling his fingers. "So let's give them… the anti-Kurt."

Kurt does not like the look on Artie's face one bit. He can't help but feel it heralds only awful things…

…and he is totally, totally right.

Kurt takes one look at himself in the water's reflection and suppresses the powerful urge to vomit. "I feel dirty," he says. "On a spiritual level."

Artie has butchered him.

Or rather, butch-ed him. He's dressed in a horrific conglomeration of the most 'manly' things they could find or make with their supplies. Dirty, tattered robes that look like they haven't been washed for weeks, a rugged-looking backpack, horrifyingly messy hair that Artie somehow convinced him to put actual dirt in… they even went so far as to take their make-up and give him some fake stubble.

He looks absolutely disgusting. He is a mess of a human being. He is—

"Completely unrecognizable!" Artie announces happily.

Finn is dangerously close to giving himself an aneurysm from holding in his laughter. Mercedes giggles when she thinks he isn't looking.

Kurt hates them all. Just a little bit.

"This is wrong. This is… morally wrong. It has to be. There has to be some kind of natural law being violated here. You are unbalancing the world, Artie! I'm the Avatar. I can tell," Kurt accuses.

Artie just shrugs. "Look, if you want to do this thing, you need to do it right. All the wanted posters depict you as a squeaky-clean fairy of fashion expertise. This new rugged look will have even the sharpest eyes looking right over you without a second thought. Just think of it as another alter-ego!" he says, before snapping his fingers. "Oh! We should give it a name. Something manly… how about… Carl?"

"Bob?" Mercedes tries.
"Bruce!" Finn shouts.

Kurt rolls his eyes. "My new name is… Truk," he says simply.

Artie looks skeptical.

"What?" Kurt says sourly, crossing his arms. "You said you wanted 'the anti-Kurt.'"

"Hey," Artie says, raising his hands. "I'm just trying to make your life easier."

The Avatar just studies his nails impassively. "Whatever. So, we've successfully removed all traces of fashion and common sense from my wardrobe. I can move incognito. I still don't actually know where to find Blaine."

"He was going to Sho Fa before," Mercedes says thoughtfully. "It was his idea to go there to begin with, so I don't see any reason for him to have changed his mind."

"Good point," Artie nods in agreement. "Alright, so he's still headed for Sho Fa. He might've already gotten there. We were pretty close yesterday… I think. Unless I dreamed that?" he says, squinting and putting fingers on his forehead. "Yesterday was fucked up."

"Nope," Finn says. "The signs said we were probably about a day away."

"Well, there you go," Artie says. "Now, there is always a chance that Blaine came across a patrol like the one we ran into the other day. I like the guy, but dude is kind of naïve, and a little too trusting in people's innate goodness. Be on the lookout for any guard patrols that look smug or satisfied on your way there. Chances are, they've got your boy locked up somewhere."

Kurt takes everything in. "So I head to Sho Fa, stick to the main roads, keep my eyes open for guard patrols that have the-cat-owl-that-ate-the-canary expressions, and be prepared to rescue him from capture if necessary."

"Try to be stealthy about it," Artie says. "If anyone picks you out as the Avatar, the whole place will go on high alert and wind up lousy with soldiers in no time."

"I actually packed you an extra disguise in your bag," Finn says proudly. "Tossed in a whole bunch of black stuff in case you need to go all ninja."

Kurt raises his eyebrows, clearly shocked. But it's a pleasant shock. "That's very thoughtful, Finn," he says.

Mercedes turns skeptical eyes towards him. "Yeah," she says suspiciously. "It is. You sure that was your idea?"

Finn crosses his arms. "I can have good ideas sometimes," he pouts.

The sassy earthbender shakes her head, turning to Kurt. "Anyway," she says. "Much as I wish you'd just let us come with you, you're probably right about traveling alone. I don't want you to go trying to take the world on by yourself, but… the comeback kid over there," she says, nodding at Artie, "ain't out of the woods yet, and he still needs to rest and get his strength back."

He scoffs at her. "Always tryin' to keep a brother down…" he mutters.

"We'll be on the road behind you, so if you need to, you can just stop and wait for us. Otherwise, you meet us at the edge of town by nightfall, okay?" she asks.
Kurt nods. "Okay."

He turns to regard himself in his water-mirror one more time. Okay, maybe he doesn't look *that* bad, but... still. This is a huge sacrifice for him. Blaine had damn well better appreciate the lengths Kurt is willing to go for him. He doesn't exactly like it, but Artie's plan has its merits, and he made some pretty convincing points. Besides, if anyone knows anything about disguises...

"Alright," Kurt says, taking a deep breath and trying to get into character. He tries to make his stance look a little rougher around the edge, but just winds up looking slightly drunk. Which, he supposes, could actually work in a roundabout way. "I'm ready."

Mercedes hugs him. "Go get your man, baby."

He grins as he squeezes her back. "He isn't mine," Kurt says. "But I'd like him to be."

Finn steps forward and hugs him. "I'm so sorry, dude. I wish I hadn't—"

"Shh," Kurt says, hugging him back. "I think this time your screw-up might have been a good thing."

Artie slides up and offers him a fist to pound. "Get some," he says with a wink.

Kurt regards the fist coolly for about two seconds, before dodging around it entirely, getting down on his knees and hugging Artie for all he's worth. "For the record," he says, "I am so glad you're okay. And not just for your zany schemes."

Artie seems a little shocked, but winds up hugging him back soon enough. "Thanks, Kurt," he says simply, and Finn kind of wishes Kurt could see how bright he is smiling when he says it.

The Avatar stands up, turns around, cracks his neck a few times, swings his arms a bit to loosen up, and promptly... prances out the door.

"...there is no covering the fabulous on that child," Mercedes sighs.

"Can't be tamed," Artie says with a grin, before turning to look at her. "So... did I seriously almost die?"

"You were looking pretty bad, dude," Finn says seriously.

Artie looks contemplative for a few seconds. "Damn," he says eventually. "All that crazy shit we survive, and I go and almost get offed by a cold. That is weak," he sighs, shaking his head. "Oh well." He spins around to face them, shit-eating grin on full display. "So, I feel all sweaty and gross. Who wants to give me a sponge bath?"

Walking kind of sucks.

He knows this, logically, because he has done so much on-foot travelling in the past few months. Really, he should be *more* than used to this by now, and yet, every time he is allowed a break from endless moving via his own two legs, a part of him forgets just how annoying and tiresome and *time-consuming* walking can be.

Shame there's absolutely squat he can do to remedy it.

Travel-by-bending is out. Blaine hasn't taught him his little fire-skating trick yet, and Kurt is
nowhere near confident enough to try it himself for fear of burning his legs or simply scorching all of his clothes off and winding up naked in the wilderness. He could try an earth disc; basically a smaller, one-man version of the Rockmobile, but it has the same drawbacks—noisy, easy to track, very conspicuous. Riding a water wave would be less noisy, but no less conspicuous. Any kind of bending that isn't firebending will probably get him thrown in prison if he is spotted. And that won't do at all.

So he's stuck walking, or jogging for the time being.

Ah, well, he thinks. At least all of this disgusting sweat adds to the authenticity of the outfit.

He's about a half-hour into his trip when he spots a cart full of produce coming down the road towards him.

"Excuse me," he says lightly, before thinking better of it and plunging into his lower register, digging deep into his memory to try and recall all the random, arbitrary markers of manliness that people around here tend to go for. "I mean, uhhh… hey, you!" he grunts.

The cart driver looks up at him. "Ayup?" he says.

"Name's Truk," he says, spitting to the side. Instead of flying off like he wants it to, it just sort of dangles out of his mouth like a cherry on a string. He waterbending-flicks it to send it off, and turns back to the driver. "So, uhhh…" he says. "I sure do like scratchin' my balls and… belchin'," he says casually.

The driver grins at him. "Me too!" he says, scratching his balls (ew) and burping loudly (ew-ew) to demonstrate.

Fantastic. They've bonded. Kurt now feels comfortable asking him. "So," he says, "my idgit… uhh… nephew done wandered off by hisself. I need to find him so we can… shuck corn together. You seen a fella," he holds his hand up to about his eyes, "'bout yea tall, curly hair?"

The driver snaps his fingers. "Well, I'll be a hogmonkey's godfather!" he says brightly. "I saw a fella like that just up the road."

Kurt smiles. "Great! How far ya think he is?"

"Well," the driver says casually, "can't have gone too far, on account of him being all tied up and in custody and whatnot."

Well, there goes the smile. "Say what now?"

"Ayup," the driver nods. "Bunch of soldiers had him all roped up and tied to one o' them rye-noser-reeces. Reckon they thought he was one o' them evil, low-down, no-good ash eaters what travels with that Avatar."

Shit. Shit. They have Blaine. No one who hasn't worked in the Palace would even know what Blaine looked like, so they aren't going to know he's their freaking rightful ruler. They're just going to think he's a traitor.

"Well," he says, managing to stay somewhat calm. "Ain't hardly the first time I've had to bail that numbskull out of jail. Where you think they were takin' him?"

The driver points up the road. "There's a little mini-fort on up the road and off to the right. You'll find him there, my guess."
"Well, thank ya kindly," Kurt grunts. "I best be on my way. Happy trails to ya!"

"Back to ya!" the driver replies merrily, but Kurt is already jogging down the road, wondering if it's worth the risk of just saying 'fuck it' and conjuring up a small tidal wave to ride on, charging in and taking charge, kicking names and taking Blaine's ass back from their evil clutches.

That'd be the Firebender way to do it.

The Earthbender way would be to head there and wait, watching and listening for openings to strike and then hitting them where it hurts most.

The Waterbender way would be to figure out how to turn their strengths against them, using his knowledge to get them to take themselves out.

The Airbender way… well, he's not an airbender yet, so he can't exactly worry about that now.

What he needs to worry about is getting there, and doing so as fast as possible. Once he's there, then he can decide how to tackle this problem.

As soon as the cart driver is out of sight, Kurt slips off the road and ducks into some bushes. It's time for a costume change…

"Well, there ain't no hoe-down,
Like a Fire Nation hoe-down,
'Cause a Fire Nation hoe-down
Don't—MMMMFMFMFMFM!"

That's about as far as the poor driver gets into his song before a figure in black suddenly leaps out of the trees, pulls his hat down over his face, ties it off and pushes him back into his own produce. The sound of squishing fruit is agonizing to the unfortunate man—all those vitamins and minerals just bleeding out onto the earth, all that delicious, nutritious dietary gold soaking into his cart, lost to him forever. The fruit that he smushed with his hindquarters is even sadder than the fruit that's about to be stolen from him.

Smushed fruit is wasted. At least the stolen stuff will go to nourish someone's body, even if that body belongs to a stinking, no-good bandit.

He is just growing to respect the hugeness of this loss when suddenly, he realizes there's no more sound around him. Nobody's kicked him off his cart, nobody's taking his money, nothing. With a little bit of struggling, he gets his hat back up and looks around.

His moose. The darned fool stole his moose!

He laughs and shakes his head. What a doofus, stealing a dragon moose when all that delectable produce is just right there waiting for you.

Some people just have no clue as to what's really important in life.

As far as mounts go, the dragon moose is much more suited for pulling than outright riding, but it beats the crap out of walking, and is a good deal faster than Kurt would normally be. It isn't too long before he sees the fort poking a spire up from beyond the trees. Not wanting to be seen (even in his sleek, stylish ninja-wear), Kurt flips off the moose and grabs onto a tree branch, hoisting himself up into the forest canopy. He's far from Blaine-calibur when it comes to climbing and
navigating high places, but he gets around well enough. In no time at all, he's staring at the outer wall of the fort.

Just a few guards patrolling along the edges. They don't seem particularly astute or observant.

But Kurt realizes soon enough that this is because they don't know they have a prisoner yet. Out of the corner of his eye, he spots a few rhinos gathered at the gates, one of which has a very noticeable head of curly hair tied to it. Before he can sneak any closer, however, the gates open, and the patrol squad is allowed inside.

Crap. Now he has to get in there as well.

This is where Earthbending comes in. He's got to get his jing on. Neutral jing for the moment—watching, waiting, listening for opportunities.

Slinking silently through the treetops, making careful not to step on any birds or particularly loud squirrels, Kurt keeps his eye on the guard patrols around the perimeter of the fort. They do pick up just slightly in intensity after their prisoner arrives, but it's nothing he can't handle. The important thing is that they are predictable. Their routes are like clockwork, and all he has to do is watch them for a few minutes to pick out a hole that will allow him inside no problem.

As one guard passes by one of the hatches that leads inside the wall, he almost swears he hears it open and shut quickly. He turns around just in time to see one of his buddies round the corner. "Hey," he says. "You hear anything just now?"

His buddy shrugs. "Nope."

"Huh," the guard says, scratching his head. "Must've been the wind."

Kurt grins from behind his sleek black face mask. Getting in was easy. Now he just needs to figure out where Blaine is, and how he can get him out. Opting to put his covered hands and feet on the walls of the narrow hatch, he slides down instead of climbing, stopping just before the hatch meets a hallway. He listens for the sound of footsteps until he is reasonably satisfied that there are none, and drops down into the hallway.

Unfortunately, he didn't count on the fact that there might be guards who are standing still, and he lands in full view of one very shocked patrolman.

This is where Firebending comes in. Kurt takes no time to be surprised—he strikes quickly and decisively, his hand whipping out and chopping the poor fellow in the throat (to keep him from shouting), and his foot hooking around the guard's leg and breaking his balance. As he stumbles backwards, Kurt rather decisively finishes him off by grabbing him and slamming him face-first into the rungs of the ladder he just finished not-using, knocking him out cold.

Now he just needs to figure out what to do with the guy. Moving quickly, Kurt drags him down the hall until he reaches a metal door, opening it to find a supply closet. Reasonably satisfied at his choice of hiding spots, Kurt ties the guy's hands and feet with some chains on the shelf, before gagging the poor fellow with his own socks. He closes the door on the guy just as he hears footsteps rounding the corner, and leaps up to brace himself on the walls and lies flat against the ceiling.

The guard whistles a jaunty tune as he passes underneath Kurt without even glancing upwards. Fire Nation helmets are kind of obstructive like that.

He slinks around in this pattern, hiding in the shadows of the ceiling whenever a guard passes by,
until he finds a window that opens up into the main yard and springs up to it.

From there, he can get a good view of the layout of the place. There's the central keep, the stables, a couple of storehouses, a bathhouse, and covered furnace that probably belongs to a blacksmith.

He eyes the stables carefully. Those will probably factor into his escape. And they happen to be close enough to get to fairly easily. So close, in fact, that he can (and does) spring from the window to land on the roof.

This particular stable is a two-story affair. The first stable houses the animals. The second… well, Kurt isn't sure, but he intends to find out.

Slinking over to the edge, it doesn't take Kurt long to spot a window he can flip through, and he lands in the building, surrounded by several odd machines. He's got no clue what any of them do.

Fortunately, someone seems to be on their way up to show him, and they don't even know it. He slips behind one of the larger machines and listens.

"Poor little fellows," the worker says as he climbs up the stairs. "You must be so tired and thirsty after all that walking." He walks over to a barrel near a system of pipes that seems to go down into the stables. "Don't worry," he says, opening the barrel. "Daddy'll give you some nice, cool, clear, refreshing—EUGH," he spits as he gets a whiff of what's inside the barrel. His face screws up as he sticks his head out the window. "AVERY!" he shouts.

"Yes sir?" Avery replies.

"Were you born stupid, or do you work at it?" 'Daddy' asks.

"What do you mean, sir?" Avery asks.

"You brought me a damn barrel of alcohol, you idiot!" 'Daddy' shouts.

"Really?" Avery says. "I could've sworn it was water. I opened it up and looked right at it."

"Can you not smell? Hot damn, son! One whiff of this shit'll burn off a man's nose hairs!" 'Daddy' says.

"Well, actually, sir, that's kind of a funny story. You see, when I was a kid, me and my friends were playing with fireworks, and my nose somehow wound up with a—"

"I don't care, dipshit! Bring me some damn water up here! Taste it, if you have to," 'Daddy' commands.

It isn't too long before Avery comes grunting up the stairs, hauling a barrel of water. "Sorry, sir," he says. "I'll be more careful next time."

"You'd better be!" 'Daddy' says sourly as he pours the contents of the barrel into a large opening in one of the pipes. "You have any idea the trouble a bunch of drunken komodo rhinos would cause around here? It'd be a catastrophe!"

"Oh, yes sir, absolutely sir," Avery agrees. Having sufficiently watered their rhinos, they head down the stairs, where Avery adds… "it'd be kind of funny, though."

Oh, Kurt could not possibly agree more. Once he's satisfied the coast is clear, he hops out of his hiding spot, seeing the barrel of liquor exactly where they left it, the half-empty barrel of water
beside it. As near as he can tell, the rest of the machines control the stable gates. There's a lever for each stable, which Kurt can actually look down into via small holes near the water pipes. Most of them contain Komodo Rhinos, but the last one seems to have some kind of giant lizard. Whatever that one is, it looks a great deal sleeker and faster than the rhinos.

Oh, this will be glorious. With a smirk for no one but himself (you know, face mask), Kurt smoothly bends the liquor out of the barrel and into the pipes that flow down into the pens. The pipes lead to large water troughs, which the rhinos drink from with great gusto. If the liquor is anywhere as strong as it smells, the poor things will be utterly sloshed in no time at all. The lizard, however… that, he has a different plan for. He uses his bending to freeze the pipe shut before it gets to the last stable.

Satisfied with his escape plan, for the time being, Kurt walks over to the window and looks for a way to get into the main keep, the most likely place for them to keep Blaine. If it was stone, he could just bend right through it. Unfortunately, the Fire Nation works primarily with metal, not stone, so he's out of luck on that front.

All he can do for the moment is sit and wait. Neutral jing can be a bit difficult to maintain at times, but it's important to master it if he is going to master earthbending. Also important because he has no desire to fight the entire staff of this fortress by himself.

It's annoying. Patrols along the perimeter are regular, but the fortress itself is so busy that it's impossible to nail down any kind of pattern for the people pitter-pattering across the yard. If only there was some way to force them into a pattern…

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

A sudden ringing sound hits Kurt's ears. He looks up to see one of the guards on the outer wall near the gate clanging a large bell back and forth. Suddenly, from every corner of the yard, guards and soldiers pop out and line themselves up in perfect formation in the courtyard, standing at attention and staring up at the guard ringing the bell.

When it seems like everyone is there, the guard pulls out a piece of parchment and reads its contents aloud (a-very-loud). "THIS IS A REQUIRED WEEKLY TEST OF THE FIRE NATION EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM. IN THE EVENT OF AN ACTUAL EMERGENCY, THE RINGING OF THIS BELL WOULD BE FOLLOWED BY INSTRUCTIONS AS TO WHERE YOU ARE TO GO, WHAT YOU ARE TO DO, AND/OR WHOSE ASS YOU ARE TO KICK. THIS CONCLUDES THIS TEST OF THE FIRE NATION EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM. REPEAT, THIS IS ONLY A TEST."

The guard finishes and clangs the bell once more, and everyone goes back to normal.

Jackpot!

The emergency alert bell pretty much controls the entire base. If he can get it to ring again, everyone will be far too busy getting into position to worry about him slipping into the keep. Then, it's just a matter of getting Blaine and getting out without too much fuss. Or rather, a very great deal of fuss on the part of everyone but them.
The problem is getting the bell to ring without actually being there. Making a ridiculous racket is a great way to get everyone in the world to look at you, and he's kind of trying not to be spotted here.

He wonders…

The bell seems to be on a metal tower. He can't bend metal directly, but he can bend the earth underneath it. Vibrations travel quite well through metal, so if he does it just right, he should be able to get the thing swinging and ringing in no time.

With just a quick check of the small enclosed area between the stables and the outer wall, he jumps out of the window and lands softly on the ground. Squaring his stance, he takes a second to prime his fingers, feeling out the earth around him so that he can better tell the right way to do this. Once he's satisfied and loosened up, he sets his eyes on the base of the tower, snapping his elbows and wrists upwards and sending shockwaves through it. Sure enough, the waves travel to the top of the bell tower, and transmit fairly well to the bell itself. He only has to send a few more carefully timed shockwaves to start the thing ringing.

\textit{CLANG!}

\textit{CLANG!}

\textit{CLANG!}

\textit{CLANG!}

"Again?" Kurt hears someone mutter as everyone files out to line up in the yard. He runs to crouch in the shadows, sinking himself slightly into the earth as he watches the soldiers dutifully assume their assigned positions. Once he's reasonably sure everyone's there and most definitely looking away from the central keep, he darts around the perimeter and sprints inside.

He hears the guard from before as he gets through the door. "\textbf{THIS IS NOT A TEST OF THE FIRE NATION EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM!}" he announces.

"Oh, Agni," one of the soldiers mutters. "That must mean it's an actual emergency! What do we do?"

"\textbf{NO,}" the guard says. "\textbf{THIS IS NOT AN ACTUAL EMERGENCY.}"

"But you just said it's not a test!" another soldier shouts from below. "It's got to be one or the other, so which is it? A test or an actual emergency?"

"\textbf{NEITHER!}" the bell guard shouts, exasperated.

Kurt suppresses a giggle. This might actually keep them occupied longer than he thought…

It doesn't take him long to find the door to the basement where the holding cells are. As he heads down the staircase, down the long, foreboding hallway, he can't help but imagine what lies at the end of it. Will Blaine be grateful that Kurt is there to save him from his own foolishness? Or will it just be another reason for Blaine to resent him? Will he be happy to see Kurt? Will he throw fire at him like he did with Finn? Will he even want to speak with Kurt?

What if Blaine can't even stand to look at him?

What if Blaine would rather stay in prison than come with him?
Kurt can hardly even imagine what Blaine must have looked like when he attacked Finn out of anger. He can scarcely imagine those gentle features twisted into a hateful snarl, that calm demeanor shattered in the face of roaring, incoherent rage. For Blaine to have become that angry… Kurt had to have hurt him deeply by doing what he did.

He sighs. He can't take care of those that he loves when he is separated from them, but apparently, he's not that great at doing it when he's with them, either.

He hopes that Blaine can forgive him, even if the boy no longer wants to be with Kurt. He at least wants to know that he hasn't done permanent damage, that Blaine will be alright.

And that is the possibility that Kurt prepares himself for as he comes to the door leading to the holding cells. That Blaine will be there, alive, well, and wanting nothing to do with him. And if that is the case…

Then Kurt will save him. He will make sure that Blaine is alive and free, and then, no matter how much it hurts, he will let him go. Because Blaine is his own person, with his own wants and needs. And if those happen to not include Kurt, then… there's nothing he can do about that.

He reaches the door, and takes a deep breath to prepare himself. "As long as he's alive," Kurt says under his breath, "I can live with anything else. I just need him to be okay." And so he twists the knob, and opens the door.

The light of the torches on the wall gives the room a kind of foreboding red glow. He can see the first few cells are empty. It isn't until his eyes scan across to the fifth cell that he spots a dark head of curls lying on a dingy mat on the floor. Oh, La. Just seeing him is doing terrible things to Kurt's heart.

"Blaine," he says gently as he approaches the cell. "It's me. I know you probably don't even want to see me right now, but I'm only here to help you, I promise. I'm not here to force you into anything or make you do something you don't want to, I just… I just need to apologize." He takes a shuddering breath. "I'm so sorry. I should never have tried to control you like that, it's just… I'm so worried, and I… I couldn't protect you before, I just. I almost lost you once, and the thought of losing you again… I couldn't handle it." He sniffs. "But then, maybe I've lost you anyway… maybe I never had you at all. Blaine, I am so sorry for treating you like a child. Like you can't make decisions for yourself. I promise… if you can find it in your heart to come back with me, I will never do that again. I will respect whatever decision you make, even if it's the decision to never speak to me again. Whatever you want, I just… please, Blaine," he says, stopping in front of the cell, and looking at the clothed in raggedy prison clothes, lying with his back turned to him. "Please, say something," he says, a tear spilling over from his eyes.

"That… was beautiful." The boy turns over and—

"You're not Blaine!" Kurt says, horrified, mortified, and scandalized. The boy looks only slightly similar to Blaine outside of the curly hair. Lighter skin, slightly smaller lips, thinner face. He just. Poured his freaking heart out. To a complete stranger. "You… little… why didn't you stop me?" he asks.

"I'm sorry, good sir… you sounded incredibly heartfelt; I just couldn't bring myself to interrupt you," he says, seeming slightly embarrassed

Kurt is at a complete loss for life. He shakes his head, staring off at nothing in particular, one hand on his hips, and the other lashing around for lack of better options. "Unbelievable. This is… unbelievable. Where is Blaine?" he asks finally.
Not!Blaine looks at him quizzically. "Presumably, Blaine is the person that I am supposed to be, correct? Because I was simply sauntering along, minding my own business, when a bunch of soldiers abruptly tackled me, with a loud cry of 'GOT YOU NOW, CURLY-CUE.' The next thing I knew, I awakened here, awaiting the inspection of a 'Captain Quinn.'"

The Avatar is far too busy glancing around the other cells to pay attention to his story. "So there is no one else here? No one got captured but you?"

"Not that I am aware of," Not!Blaine says, pausing for a beat before adding. "Sir… not to impose upon you or anything but, would you please be so kind as to "bust me out of this joint?"" The quotation marks in that quotation indicate Not!Blaine's use of finger quotes. Yes, he actually uses finger quotes.


"Ah!" Not!Blaine says, clearly appalled. "But… but… you clearly came here intending to help someone escape! I have somewhere to be… and I have suffered a great injustice by being falsely apprehended!"

"Oh, get over yourself," Kurt sighs. "You aren't who they are looking for, so they'll probably let you go in no time. I'm sure you can survive your dreadful imprisonment for that long."

Not!Blaine is taken aback at Kurt's gall. "You mock me, sir!" He crosses his arms and turns his back to the Avatar.

Kurt gives him an eyeroll. "Oh, lighten up. Believe me, your life could be a lot—"

"HEY! Who goes there?"

"—worse," Kurt sighs.

The cell guard stands at the end of the room, firebending stance at the ready. Apparently, the test/not-test debate was finally settled to the satisfaction of all participating parties, leaving them all to screw over Kurt.

"Identify yourself!" the guard commands.

Kurt grins beneath his mask. Now is where Waterbending comes in.

Not literal waterbending, but the philosophy therein.

"I said identify yourself!" he shouts again.

Kurt starts calmly walking towards him.

"Stop where you are! Don't move!" the guard orders.

But Kurt just keeps right on walking.

With a painfully obvious roar to announce his attack, the guard launches an open-palm strike towards Kurt, sending a fire stream which he quickly and easily sidesteps, dashing forward and wrapping his arm around the guard's before he has a chance to recover. He is slammed face first onto the ground, and Kurt happily takes his keys. By the time the guard recovers, Kurt is on the other side of the door to the holding cells and casually locking him in.
"You…" the guard snarls.

The Avatar winks at him and dashes off.

Unfortunately for Kurt, he didn't take into account the alarm system. Heading over to a small metal panel beside the door, the guard pulls off the covering, sticks his palm over the hole, and firebends into it with all his might. The resulting flame sets off a series of charges laid into the walls, the end result of which is…

**DINGDINGDINGDINGDINGDINGDING!**

Kurt's eyes grow wide. "Well, fishsticks."

Looks like he might get a little mileage out of his escape plan after all.

"**ATTENTION, EVERYONE!**" Kurt hears echoing through the building. "**WE HAVE AN INTRUDER IN THE MAIN KEEP. REPEAT, INTRUDER IN THE MAIN KEEP! THIS IS NOT A DRILL, AND THIS TIME, I REALLY FUCKING MEAN IT!**"

The door at the top of the stairs bursts open, and three guards step through to confront them. The foremost guard starts to punch fire at him, but Kurt's arm lashes out like a whip and grabs his wrist, twisting it to the side and sending the fireball into the wall. Still holding onto his wrist, Kurt uses his other hand to strike him right in the chest, knocking the wind out of him. He then shoulder charges the stunned fellow, slamming him into his fellow soldiers and knocking the lot of them on their asses. The attack isn't enough to stun them for more than a few seconds, but seconds is all Kurt needs to jump right over them and head out the door.

*No bending*, he thinks. If he bends multiple elements, he's the Avatar. If he bends one, he's a bender. But if he uses no bending? He could be *anyone*, and they'll never know it as long as he doesn't blow his cover.

As he reaches the keep's exit, his path is again blocked by firebenders. Lots more this time—far too many for him to take on at once without bending himself.

"Surrender!" one of them says.

Instead, Kurt turns around and starts running towards the *up* staircase. Fire chases him the whole way, but he is nimble and quick and has no trouble with those candlesticks, jumping up to run across a table and selectively kicking dishes and silverware at the angry guards on his tail. The shower of soup, spoons, sourdough, and sandwiches keeps them off-balance long for Kurt to get to the staircase without anyone drawing a bead on him.

The staircase itself is easy once Kurt reaches it. The guards on it come at him armed with weapons, not elements. When one tries to spear him, Kurt spins to the side, grabs the spear and slams it into the floor, before using the leverage to kick its wielder in the face and spring over him. A swordsman is next—he attacks Kurt in an absolutely *idiotic* spot at the top of the staircase, is tripped for his trouble and sent rolling on down.

Upon reaching the second floor of the keep, Kurt finds exactly what he needs: a window. He launches through it beautifully, and lands on the roof of one of the storehouses. He leaps over to the roof of the second storehouse before anyone spots him.

"Hey!" they shout. "There he is!"

Fire flies at him from multiple directions, but he keeps right on moving, leaping from the second
storehouse onto the stable roof, running along the tiles and flipping down through the open window.

"Bingo," he says happily. He knows there are guards on their way, but they won't have time to stop him from doing what he is doing. With great gusto, he pulls each of the release levers on the stable gates for the rhinos, unleashing the terrifying fury of drunken beasts of burden on an unsuspecting…

They're asleep. The stupid fucking rhinos passed out.

Kurt smacks his palm into his forehead (it's okay, he's wearing gloves) and tries to think of something to remedy this. It hits him as suddenly as an explosion from a fireball that narrowly misses him.

"Stop right where you are!" the firebender demands. Kurt grins and inches over towards the barrel of alcohol.

"Stop!" the guard shouts. Kurt casually leaps onto the liquor barrel and kicks it at him.

He reacts predictably, punching a fireball at what he thinks is a barrel of water. Kurt leaps up to hang from the ceiling and shields his face as the barrel explodes violently, sending flame everywhere. The ruse works beautifully—the combination of the incredibly loud blast and the fire raining down on them from above awakens the poor, inebriated rhinoceroses and sends them lurching in blind panic out of their stables. The sounds of carnage are almost too brutal for him to hear as enormous beasts smack into guard after guard, drunkenly lurching into walls and turning over carts and—oh, Kurt is pretty sure he just heard the sound of one of the storehouses being smashed to smithereens.

"AHHH!" someone shouts. "THE BEASTS ARE REBELLING! WE KNEW THIS DAY WOULD COME."

"SAVE THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN!"

"There are no women or children on this base!"

"THEN EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF!"

It helps that some of the rhinos are still on fire (don't worry about them; it's the alcohol that's burning, and their hides are pretty fire resistant. It's why they're the Fire Nation mount of choice). Flaming rhinos definitely add to the fear factor.

"They're tearing the place apart!" someone shouts.

"Open the fucking gates and let them out!" someone else replies.

And that is what Kurt has been waiting to hear.

A chorus of 'open the gates' begins to resound from all corners of the fort as Kurt himself is all but forgotten about. As this happens, Kurt drops down and releases the last lever, the one for the giant lizard's stable. Running down the stairs at full tilt, Kurt makes it outside just in time to leap on the panicking lizard and take the reins. Holy moon-pimples, this thing is fast!

The gate is just starting to open, when…

"Hey! Don't let the intruder escape!" someone shouts. "Close the gate, you moron!"
...and now it's just starting to close.

Lashing the lizard as hard as he can, Kurt guides the speedy beast towards the rapidly narrowing
gates, and squeezes through just in time to—wait, hold on, they're stuck.

Fuck. The stupid thing's tail got caught in the gate.

"Crap!" Kurt shouts, lashing the lizard in frustration. "You and your stupid… length."

As if hearing and responding to Kurt's anger, the animal suddenly lurches forward, valiantly
clawing at the earth and attempting to escape from its prison, and… to Kurt's surprise, it succeeds,
and they speed off into the afternoon, angry guards shouting after them.

"Good job," Kurt says, patting the lizard on the head. "How did you get your tail out of… oh," he
says, looking back to find that the lizard's tail most definitely did not escape the door, and the tip of
it is no longer attached to the lizard. "Eeep," he says, sympathetically. "Sorry about that…"

The lizard moans, as though it appreciates the sympathy.

"Hey," Kurt says. "Look on the bright side. You're a lizard. You guys can grow those back, right?"

The lizard's reply is difficult to decipher, but it seems positive enough, so he decides to take it as a
'yes.'

The Avatar takes very little time to decide that this mount is the best mount ever.

It's fast, agile, capable of moving over almost any terrain, and is so fleet-footed that it can even run
over the surface of water for short distances. He reaches the edge of Sho Fa just after sundown, and
is profoundly saddened when he realizes that his giant lizard cannot come with him into the city,
due to being... well, a giant lizard, and therefore somewhat conspicuous.

"I'm sorry, my friend," Kurt says, patting the surprisingly gentle creature on the nose. "But this is
where we part ways."

It groans in protest (or something). "I know," Kurt says sadly as he removes the saddle from the
beast. "I know. Our time together was all too brief. But time is just an illusion, gentle lizard. Even
as it seems that we must part, I know we shall be together always... in our hearts," he wibbles,
choking up a bit towards the end.

...the stupid thing already wandered off. It didn't even listen to his heartfelt speech.

"Well, screw you too, buddy," Kurt snits, annoyed. All his heartfelt speeches are going to waste
today. At this rate, he isn't going to have any left for Blaine, when and if Kurt actually finds him.

He quickly changes back into his 'butch' outfit for his search around the city. He hopes he can get
at least a little looking done before he has to go meet Mercedes and co.

But as he reaches the edge of the city on foot, he realizes that this is going to be a much more
difficult task than he imagined. Sho Fa is built on multiple levels on the side of a large mountain
that is probably an inactive volcano. The lower level where Kurt is houses the casual businesses,
inns, and restaurants, as well as most of the city's residences. The middle level is full of tourist
attractions and theatres putting on various shows. The top level is where the wealthiest citizens
live, as well as the location of a train yard. The city itself is actually fairly new, though in typical
theatrical style, it's built to look old and rustic and dignified. It's astounding how a place can
manage to be both impossibly sparkly and dreadfully dingy at the same time.

The main problem is that Sho Fa is just too large for one person to search, on foot, by themselves. The city isn't quite as large as the capital, but it's fairly sizeable, and the multiple levels make it that much stranger to navigate.

Maybe he should just turn in for the day. Find an inn near the city's edge, wait for the F.A.M. train to arrive, and then have them all search together tomorrow.

Hopefully, Blaine won't get into too much trouble before they find him. And hopefully they won't waste hours side tracking themselves to rescue another Fake!Blaine. He sighs to himself as he walks past the city limits, more than a little tired from a day of walking, riding, and kicking ass and sneaking around. He's beat. So with another sigh, he comes to a decision and opens the door to the first inn that he sees at the city's edge.

He might as well check in for the night and get some rest. There is absolutely no way that he is going to find Blaine—

"WHOOOOO! This is the best party EVERRRRR!"

—in the first fucking place he looks.

"Hello, sir," the innkeeper says, looking up from his books and seeming a bit taken aback. "…my, aren't we the butch one today," he says with a small smile. "And how can I help you?"

'Truk' clears his throat. "That fella yellin' just now," Kurt says, keeping in character. "Where's he at?"

"Ah. That would be the tavern part of this inn/tavern, run by my partner right through here," the innkeeper says, pointing to a doorway into a dark, somewhat smoky room. Kurt can hear music pouring forth from within from a semi-competent band.

"I love…" a painfully familiar voice echoes from within. "I love this song. I love all your songs. You guys… you guys are just… the greatest band. Of all bands."

The innkeeper smiles at him. "I'm going to take a wild guess from the expression on your face and say that one's yours."

"'bout yea tall," Kurt says, holding his hand up again. "Hair curlier'n the tail-end of a moo-sow?"

"Yes, that's the one," the innkeeper says. "He's been in the tavern since he got here. The sight of his tab is slightly horrifying, so I wouldn't look at it if you have a heart condition."

Kurt sighs, nodding slightly to the innkeeper. "Thank ya kindly. I… errr… my identical twin brother, he'll be along shortly to pay," he says. "Cross mah heart."

With that, he heads over towards the tavern. He doesn't know what he expects to see from the sound of Blaine's slurred speech and semi-incoherent rambling. Several scenarios run through his mind as he walks.

Blaine dancing into the arms of some random slut and locking lips with her is most certainly NOT ONE OF THEM.

Teeth clench. Fists clench. Buttocks are clenched. Kurt's entire body practically crumples up like the angriest sheet of paper ever. Somewhere behind him, he is pretty sure the water in a potted
flower is boiling away.

There is no—he did not—he could never—**BITCHES SHALL BE CUT ON THIS DAY**.

Kurt shakes his head violently. No. No! He will **not** go into an Avatar State freakout over this… this… tacky *tramp* making out with his BLAINE. THAT BLAINE. IN THERE.

So with a smile bright enough to cause sunburn and possibly skin cancer, Kurt marches himself on into the tavern, past the sloshed patrons of various ages and sizes, and out onto the dance floor, where the—what is apparently a *maid*—continues to stare at Blaine, eyes sparkling with enamor as he flails spasmodically in what may or may not be some kind of dance. He sees her start to go in for another kiss and—swear to La—he has never moved faster in his life. He is at Blaine in a second flat, hand on his shoulder, whirling him around to face him.

"Bla—errr… *Ozark!*" he grits out through clenched teeth. "Well, skin me alive and make me into a handbag! What *are* you doing here?"

Blaine, being the big, *stupid* moron that he is, just *smiles* at Kurt. "Hey!" he says brightly. "It's… you! *You!* You're here! I'm so glad that you're here, HEY EVERYBODY!" Blaine shouts, stumbling a bit at the force of his own voice. "This is… this is… this is my friend! This guy is *awesome*!" he says.

A low-level cheer is sent up from a few of the bar's other patrons.

"You," Kurt says, still forcing himself to smile. "are twelve sheets to the wind. Let's get you out of here."

And there it is. Blaine's happiness melts suddenly, and he looks at Kurt sourly (a somewhat swervily). "Oh yeah?" he challenges. "Wwwell, what if I don't want to leave, huh? What if—what if I decide. That I *like* being drunk? And here? And want to stay this way?"

"Yes," the maid says. "This handsome young man has the right to do as he pleases, and I have the right to—"

"No one cares about you right now, sweetie," Kurt grits through his teeth. "Please go away."

The girl takes a level of offense melodramatic enough to be seen from space and promptly stumps off to actually do her job.

"Now look at what you did," Blaine accuses him with a slur that seems to be growing more pronounced the more upset he is. "You maderher go 'way. Whyyyyou do that?"

Kurt smile slips at last. "Please, just come with me," he says, pulling on his hand.

Blaine tries in vain to snatch it back, but he can't quite seem to coordinate all of his parts into pulling at once, so he just winds up following Kurt while bouncing against every object in sight. It's kind of like pulling a balloon on a windy day, and it takes a few minutes (and a few tables, a couple chairs, and at least one patron) before Kurt figures out how to guide him effectively.

Finally, he gains the presence of mind to latch onto a table with his other hand. "No!" he says. "'m not going! You can't tell me whattado. You're not…" he trails off, his train of thought derailing.

"Not what?" Kurt says, still trying to pull him away.

And Blaine goes from angry drunk to weepy drunk in like a second flat. "…you're not my father,"
he says, his voice low and fragile.

Kurt sighs, his own irate mood dissipating into the air like the smoke of so many patrons. He lets go of Blaine's hand. "I know," he says. "And I don't mean to act like it. I'm just… I'm worried about you."

"I'm not a little kid," he says sourly. "I can… do stuff. By m'self." He demonstrates this by trying to point at Kurt and take a step forward at the same time—a task far too complex for his inebriated cerebral cortex to process. Kurt barely manages to catch him before he faceplants. "Lemme go!" he says.

Kurt sighs. "Okay. If that's what you want." He stands Blaine up, and brushes him off. "I… I can't tell you what to do, you're right. So here's what I'm going to do instead. I'm going to go outside, sit down, and wait for you. You don't have to come out right away. You don't have to come out at all if you don't want to. But if you do… I'll be there." He pauses for a second, before adding softly. "I miss you."

Blaine doesn't reply, he just stares at Kurt with somewhat swimmy eyes, looking sad, scared, lost, hurt, confused… all of the things that make Kurt just want to wrap around him and never, ever let anything bad get through to him.

But he knows that isn't possible. Not with this boy. Blaine won't stand for it, and Kurt was a fool to think otherwise. If Blaine is ever truly going to be his, he has to come to Kurt on his own, and Kurt has to let him.

"I'll be waiting," Kurt says simply. "When… and if you're ready, come find me."

Blaine just keeps right on staring at him. Unable to stand his eyes for even one second longer, he dodges over to the counter, takes out a few gold pieces and slams them down. "Will that cover the price of my friend over there?"

The bartender skeptically eyes the money. "That'll work as a downpayment."

Kurt nearly chokes. "How much did he drink?"

"Not how much, honey," the bartender says. "But what. Your beau has very expensive taste. The only reason I kept serving him at all is because I have a soft spot for cute boys with broken hearts," he adds, a little scandalously. "Plus, I figured if worst came to worst, he could stick around and work it off. I wouldn't mind seeing that around the workplace a little more often."

Kurt gapes at the man. "Excuse me," he says. "I will thank you to stop perving on my… my friend."

"Oh, relax," the bartender says with a wink. "I'm taken. Your boy is safe. We've been keeping an eye on him all afternoon to make sure of it."

"Well… thank you," Kurt says, somewhat reluctantly. "The rest will be along shortly courtesy of… my… twin."

"Think nothing of it, honey," the bartender replies. "And I hope you two work things out. I really do."

"Me too," Kurt sighs.

As he turns to head outside, he catches a movement out of the corner of his eye. He turns just in
time to see Blaine bolt from the room, running as fast as he can. He doesn't go after him. Instead, he just walks outside, finds a little bench, sits down, and waits.

The night is cool, and relatively pleasant. It seems strange that the streets are so empty when the stars are so clear, the moon so bright, the ambience so nice. But there's barely anyone out and about in this part of town besides Kurt himself. It makes the night peaceful, but it also makes the wait seem so much longer. He sits there for at least an hour, maybe two. Every minute Blaine doesn't appear is another minute Kurt worries, and another minute he forces himself to endure.

He is just starting to wonder if he should take a hint and just leave, when the bench shakes slightly with the weight of another occupant. He looks up to find Blaine sitting there, staring straight ahead, still wearing that same mixture of the many flavors of misery.

He came.

He doesn't say anything for a long time. Kurt is determined to let him make the first move, so he continues to wait.

"Sorry I took so long," Blaine says at last. "I was throwing up. A lot."

Kurt winces. "Feel better?"

"A little," Blaine replies. "I think… I'm thinking better, at least."

Kurt nods. "I'm glad."

They fall into silence again.

Maybe Blaine is waiting for him? Kurt decides to take the initiative and apologize. "Blaine, I am so sor—"

"I miss him," Blaine whispers. "Every day." It's quiet, but such an intense admission that it cuts right through Kurt like a sharpened sword.

It hits him, then, what this is really about. What has been coming between them this entire time. All the things they have been holding back, holding against each other when they should have just held onto each other and let everything else fall into place. Whether it's the alcohol, the fight, the night, or a mixture of the three, Blaine is finally willing to let him in, and Kurt can't waste this moment.

So he scoots closer to Blaine on the bench, hoping the tacit encouragement will be enough for him to continue. Let it out, he thinks. I'm listening.

And miracle of miracles, it works. "He wasn't… perfect," Blaine says thickly. "Not at all. Sometimes… sometimes I felt like he barely even knew me outside of Firebending training. He… we didn't really… talk. But I still loved him. He was still my dad."

Kurt drapes his fingers over Blaine's like a blanket, and squeezes his hand. And almost like the boy is a sponge, a few tears spill out of his eyes in response.

And then it comes. The one confession that makes everything else fall into place.

"And I killed him," Blaine says, shuddering, sniffling, every word coming out more difficult than the last. "Might as well have… he was… he was fighting and I saw and… I just stood there… and watched… and did nothing. I was so scared… I couldn't even move, and… and… he had to save
me. He could save himself or he could save me, and he chose me. And I don't understand," he says, finally breaking into full blown sobs.

The boy crumples, and Kurt can't take it anymore. He wraps his arms around Blaine and pulls him into a hug.

And Blaine lets him.

"I'm so sorry," Kurt says. "Oh Blaine. I'm so, so sorry. Shhhhhhh..." And he keeps right on hugging him, squeezing out every ounce of the poisonous self-hatred that has been crippling him for so long. He just keeps rubbing circles on his back, rubbing his arm, rubbing the back of his head, whispering and shushing him until it becomes little more than a mantra, a soothing chant of meaningless sound to push away thought and let feeling take hold.

Slowly but surely, Blaine's sobbing gradually tapers off. Kurt gently pulls away from him, cups his chin and looks him right in the eyes.

"Listen to me, okay?" Kurt says.

Blaine nods.

"You did not kill him," Kurt says forcefully.

The Prince's face starts to crumple again, but Kurt squeezes it gently, keeping his attention.

"You didn't. Your father made a choice. And no matter what you did," he says, having to fight to keep his voice even, "or didn't do, in the end, that choice was his and his alone."

"But," Blaine sniffs. "But if I had—"

"It doesn't matter," Kurt says, hating how harsh it sounds even if it's true. "There is no changing the past. Your father made his choice, Blaine, and you have to accept that."

"He... he shouldn't have..." Blaine sniffs.

"But he did," Kurt insists. "And I don't think he would ever take it back. So please don't keep hurting yourself over this. You didn't throw the city into a riot, you didn't attack your father. All of that was done by that evil woman. That your father died to protect you... it has nothing to do with your actions or lack thereof, and everything to do with him, and how much he loved you. You're his legacy, and I know he would be proud of you."

Blaine sighs, takes a few more unsteady breaths, and just sits quietly. There's no way for Kurt to know whether or not he really got through to him, and he wants to say more, but something tells him that he has said enough. It's Blaine's turn now.

"To make him proud," Blaine says, turning to Kurt. "That's... that was my drive. The fuel for my fire. That's why I can't do it anymore."

Kurt's face twists slightly in confusion. "But... Finn said you were able to firebend at him..."

Blaine looks down, shame so intense that Kurt has to fight to keep his arms from clutching at him automatically. "That was... that was a horrible mistake. It's possible to use anger as a source of firebending, but it's bad. It should never be done, and I did it anyway. After everything I said about fire being dangerous and control being so important, I just went and... lost it. I'm so sorry."
"Is that why you didn't come back?" Kurt asks.

Blaine nods. "I didn't think you or… or anyone would ever want to see me again after that. I could have seriously hurt him. Or worse."

Kurt finds himself chuckling at this. Blaine's mortification at his laughter just makes it even funnier. "I'm sorry," he says, grinning, "but I just… you don't… okay, here's the thing. When Mercedes first officially met Finn? She spent most of the day chasing him around and trying to kill him."

Blaine gapes at him. "You're… you're serious. But why?"

"It's… complicated," Kurt sighs. "Suffice to say for now that they have a history that goes back further than either of them. It's taken a lot for them to get used to each other, for them to bury everything that could have made them mortal enemies… but they did it. And if Finn can be around Mercedes after that, I think he can forgive you for lashing out. We're people, Blaine. We screw up. We hurt each other." Kurt looks down for a second. "I screwed up," he says softly. "I hurt you."

Blaine looks at him sadly. "Kurt…"

"Please," Kurt says. "Let me say this. Blaine, I am so sorry that I lied to you and tried to control you. All your life, people have tried to fence you in and tell you who you are supposed to be, what you are allowed to do, where you are allowed to go. You've always struggled against that—against people trying to take away your ability to choose. And I just went and became another obstacle for you to circumvent. I wasn't thinking of you at all. I was thinking of me, and how I would feel if… if anything happened to you again because of me…"

"Again?" Blaine repeats, confused.

Kurt looks up at him. "Every time I think about that night, I kick myself a little bit because I didn't protect you. If I had stayed with you… if I had let you come with me…"

Blaine smiles at him. Does he have any clue how to be appropriate, like, ever? "Kurt," he says softly, "do you not see what you're doing?"

Kurt squints at him. "Apologizing and pouring my guts out to you? Is there something I'm missing?"

Blaine tilts his head to the side and has the nerve to be cute. "How about 'holding yourself responsible for the choices of others'?"

His jaw drops. "I… you… I am not."

"Are too," Blaine says gently. "If I can't do it, neither can you. It's only fair. Avatar privileges don't apply here," he grins.

Kurt finds himself performing his interpretation of the fish-on-dry-land mouth for several seconds, before finally realizing… "You're right. It really is the exact same thing, isn't it?" he says, feeling like such a goofball.

Blaine just smiles wider. "It is. And just do you know… I'd never, ever blame you for what happened that night. I've never even considered it."

Kurt is so relieved at that simple proclamation that he can't decide whether to laugh or cry. He very nearly does both. "Look at us," Kurt says. "What a mess we are."
"Got that right," Blaine agrees.

Kurt laughs and leans back on the bench. Blaine leans back with him, and the two soon find themselves resting against one another, shoulders and heads leaned together. Two tiny, dim candles sharing a flame. Sharing whatever warmth they have to offer each other.

"I'm sorry I acted like your father," Kurt says, after a while. "I'm sorry I tried to control you. I promise I won't do that again."

Blaine smiles. "You're not like my father, and... I don't want you to be." He turns his head so that he is facing Kurt, almost speaking directly into his neck. "I want... you and me... to be something completely different. I want to be close to you in ways I've never been with anyone."

Kurt turns his head as well, and now they are nearly nose to nose. "Does... does that mean..."

"I don't know what it means," Blaine says honestly. "I wish I did. But I know that... you are the most important thing in my life right now. I want to be close to you." The boy practically nuzzles him to punctuate that fact.

Kurt giggles quietly. "Well, you won't hear any complaints from me about that," he says.

Blaine locks eyes with him again, smiling gently. "Since we're exchanging apologies... I'm sorry I tried to cook your brother," he says simply. "And I'm sorry I ran away."

"Don't leave me again?" Kurt says hopefully.

"How about," Blaine suggests, "I'll accept that I don't need to run from you, if you accept that you don't need a fence to keep me near you."

"In other words," Kurt says, looking into Blaine's eyes. "We trust each other. Really, truly, and fully."

Blaine looks back. "Really, truly, and fully."

Kurt smiles.

Blaine opens his mouth, huffs out a laugh, and—

"Gaaaah," Kurt rasps, turning his head away. "Oh, La. Vomit breath. Oh, Blaine, that is rancid."

The Fire Prince blushes. "Sorry. I was concentrating very hard on breathing through my nose up until that point." He laughs, and Kurt laughs along with him, and it just... it feels wonderful.

So they go back to leaning against each other, staring up at the starry sky, bathed in the gentle glow of the street lamps just basking in the feel of being together. For a few precious, wonderful minutes, there is no world that needs saving, no Fire Nation under false rule. There is no Avatar, no Fire Prince. There is only Kurt and Blaine, together, and nothing else matters.

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After a few minutes pass, the two of them find that they are more at ease around the other than ever. So they start to talk.

"So... what happened to you today?" Kurt asks.

Blaine laughs. "I woke up this morning with some guy standing over me and pointing a sword at me. I almost wet myself. Turns out, I had stumbled onto his property by mistake, and he thought I
was a bandit. After I explained myself, leaving out a few choice details, he actually gave me a ride into town. And... uhhh..." he grins. "My first few shots of the wonderful brew known as 'Dragon Piss.' He said I looked like I needed it."

Kurt chuckles. "I'd say that was the last thing you needed."

"In hindsight," Blaine says. "Yes. But at the time, I figured... why not? By the time I got here, I was already tipsy. By the time you got here... I was full-on drunk, and..."

"Making out with random bar wenches?" Kurt supplies helpfully.

Blaine winces. "Yeah... sorry that... you had to see that. I was very, very drunk. I would have made out with Drizzle if you had put him against my lips by that point."

Kurt chuckles. "Well, as long as you don't intend to make that a regular occurrence, I think we can let it slide."

"Your grace and forbearance are truly remarkable," Blaine grins, bowing about an inch. "What happened to you today?" he asks.

Kurt thinks about saying 'nothing important.' But the truth is more interesting, and... well, they are all about the trust now. "I single-handedly infiltrated a Fire Nation fortress where I thought you were being held captive. Obviously, you weren't there, so I got a bunch of rhinos drunk, set some things on fire, stole a lizard and left."

Blaine gapes at him. "That's... wait, are you serious?"

Kurt scoffs at him. "Of course. The lizard was loads of fun, too. Best beast of burden ever," he says.

Blaine seems to mentally flail around for some kind of coherent response to Kurt's crazy adventures, before finally settling on... "It was probably a mongoose lizard. They're kind of hard to find." He puts his arms behind his head. "Always wanted to ride one..."

And they talk some more...

"So..." Blaine says cautiously. "Don't feel like you have to answer this, but... I'm wondering... what's your dad like?"

Kurt smiles wistfully at him. "He's... surprisingly wonderful. He doesn't always understand me, and he didn't really grow up in the friendliest environment towards... people like me. But he always tries, and he's always there when I need him."

Blaine leans into him a little more. "I'm glad."

"One of my favorite memories," Kurt says quietly, "actually happened just before I left on this journey. My sixteenth birthday basically consisted of a bunch of stuffy old sages telling me I was the Avatar, heir to the greatest legacy and keeper of the greatest power on earth. When they announced it, everyone bowed to me, including my dad. My own father bowed to me like some kind of god. I had never felt more uncomfortable in my life—I didn't want him bowing to me, I wanted him hugging me and telling me everything was okay," he sniffs, and smiles. "And then he did. Before anybody else got up, he looked up, saw my face, and was there in a second flat."

Blaine smiles, and wraps an arm around him. "He sounds wonderful. I'd love to meet him one day."
"Maybe you will," Kurt replies. There's a few seconds of silence. "And… I would have loved to meet your father."

Blaine nods. "I think… he would've liked you."

They're just reaching the tail-end of another conversation, when suddenly the trash can starts talking to them.

"Psst!" it says.

They turn to look at it, only to see a pair of glasses-rimmed eyes staring out at them from beneath he lid. "Artie?" Kurt whispers. "Is that you?"

"In the flesh!" he says. "And… you know, in the trash. I hate to interrupt your cuddling session, but we're waiting for you just around the bend. Get here quick. We've got news."

Kurt nods. "We'll be there shortly."

Artie nods, turning his eyes to Blaine. "You back with us, B-Money?"

Blaine blushes, but nods. "Yes. I'm back with you."

"Glad to have you buddy!" he says, and the lid closes.

"Ready?" Kurt asks, standing up and offering his hand.

"Ready," Blaine replies, responding with his own.

Hand-in-hand, they walk out of Sho Fa together, eager to greet the friends that await them. As they go, a strange sound tickles Kurt's ears. A light, beautiful voice, singing a strangely familiar melody… a very calming song, the melody gentle and lilting, soothing and sweet with just a hint of sadness and longing.

"Wait a second," Kurt says, turning back. The song seemed to come from the city, but the second he turns to look for the source, the singing seems to stop.

"What is it?" Blaine asks.

He stares into the city for a few seconds, before shaking his head. "Nothing. I just… I thought I heard something…"

Back in the carriage, Blaine holds up the invitation to the candlelight and reads it aloud.

"Councilor Kaze Keros formally invites you to the unveiling of a never-before seen SUN WARRIOR ARTIFACT. A gala event to be held in…" he trails off. "A Sun Warrior Artifact… Keros is a collector, and he runs a small museum. You don't think this is…"

"It seems fairly suspicious," Kurt says. "Sue gets artifact, sends it to Sam. Sam decodes artifact, sends it back. Sue wins Fire Nation with secrets from artifact, Keros gets artifact added to his collection by an 'anonymous donor.'"

"It… it could be a different one," Blaine says softly.

"You're right," Kurt says, "it could. But I think we should investigate a little more before we act on
anything, okay?"

Blaine nods. "Okay." He turns to the others. "Where did you guys even get this?"

"It fell off a—"

"Thank you Artie. Question answered."

"Whatever we're doing," Mercedes says. "Let's do it tomorrow, okay? The 'gala event' or whatever is in two days, so we have a little time to rest. I'd say we all deserve it, wouldn't you?"

A chorus of seconds resounds from the boys in the cart.

"Thought so," she smiles.

"Everyone, get dressed, and get into character," Kurt orders, with a small smirk. "Councilor Ganterson and crew are about to arrive in style…"

Councilor Keros waits anxiously at the train station, pacing ceaselessly until his footprints are practically embedded in the stone floor. The train is late. The train is never late, yet this one day when it carries an item of utmost importance, it deigns to dilly-dally. If only he were Coleman… he'd have everyone involved with this fired. His blood pressure does not need this kind of stress.

Strangely, the train actually pulling into the station does nothing to ease his nerves. It just gives his frustration a convenient target.

"Imbeciles!" he shouts the second the train door opens, practically leveling the poor unsuspecting conductor. "What took you so long?"

"We're s-sorry, sir, the tracks… there was a—"

"The question was rhetorical, conductor, I don't care what took you so long. There is no excuse for this. Not when a priceless historical artifact is on the line," Keros seethes.

The conductor bows. "Yes sir, sorry sir."

"Stop apologizing and get to work," Keros orders.

"Yes sir," the conductor says. "Where shall we deliver it?" he asks.

"Follow me," Keros orders sourly. "And… keep it covered. I don't want anyone to see it until the time comes."

"Yes sir."

As they ride the carriage into town, Blaine feels the air is a little awkward, and attempts to clear it. "Finn?" he says.

"Yeah," Finn says, looking at him.

"I'm sorry I threw fire at your face," Blaine says.

Finn shrugs, and gives him a crooked smile. "It's cool. Just… don't do it again. That stuff is scary."
Blaine nods. "I promise, no more firebending at friends. Unless, you know, they ask me to, for some weird reason."

And just like that, things are okay again.

"Stop here," Kurt says, pointing at the sign for *Berry Inn and Tavern*. "We'll be staying here tonight. We kind of… already have a bill."

Blaine blushes slightly as he gets out, assumes the role of the good servant, and opens the door for the Councilor, who exits the carriage with his nose in the air, already fanning himself. Finn exits before Mercedes, dutifully helping her step daintily down the steps.

As Artie goes to park the carriage, the others begin to head inside. Blaine is last in line when suddenly the person in front of him stops, causing him to get a face full of Finn's back.

"What is it?" Blaine asks.

Finn seems to be looking up, almost mesmerized. "Do you not hear that?"

"Hear what?" Blaine asks.

"That song!" he says. "It's beautiful."

Blaine listens carefully, attempting to make out any strains of music drifting through the night. As he listens, he starts to pick up on a melody…

Then someone bumps into him. "Move, punk," the guy growls sourly, a rough-looking character followed by several equally rough-looking extras. They shove Finn aside too, who stares after them sourly.

"Come on, Finn," Blaine says gently. "We should go inside."

The tall boy looks like he wants to stay outside and listen to the music, but it appears, for the moment, that the song has ended. "Okay," he says sadly. "Let's go."

Little do they know that though they cannot hear it, the melody continues…

She is on cloud nine.

Possibly clouds ten, eleven, and twelve, as well.

Dancing gracefully through the halls of the inn, a beautiful girl sways and prances, lost in the rapture of newfound love. It thrills and excites her, the story so familiar, yet so new. The mysterious, wounded stranger who comes to stay at the inn and drown his sorrows; the lonely, beautiful, talented young maid who catches his eye. They meet, and in an instant, there are sparks undeniable and electrifying. A connection that runs deeper than they could ever imagine. *Destiny* calls them into each other arms… him, the gentle, wounded soul… her Ozark. And her… the talented, young ingénue… his beautiful—

"Rachel?"

Rachel Berry turns towards the voice of her father. Well, one of her fathers, technically. She has two, don't you know, respectively referred to as 'Father' and 'Daddy.' "Yes, Father?"

He smiles at her. "Honey, I don't mean to pry but… I can't help but notice you're singing aria
She nods. "Indeed I am. It's a very moving piece. And it suits my voice exceptionally well, don't you think?"

His smile turns slightly painful. "Yes, all of these things are true, but good as you are, I can't help but note that… the last time you sang that song out of the blue like that, you said you were falling in love."

She turns away melodramatically, her lustrous black hair whipping around her. "I don't know what you're talking about," she says imperiously.

"Sweetie… far be it from me to rain on your parade, but please tell me you aren't falling for that boy you met in the tavern," Father says gently.

"And if I am?" Rachel says haughtily. "Need I remind you that I am a woman now, fully capable of dealing with my own romantic feelings and the consequences they entail."

"Rachel, that boy is gay. He is fruitier than a Fenghuang gift basket. I am thrilled that you are… at the very least… over that shifty-looking—"

"Ah!" Rachel says, deeply offended. "How dare you call him that? You of all people should know the pain of being judged at a glance based on nothing more than arbitrary factors of appearance as dictated by shallow societal standards. How could you turn that judgment around and… and foist it upon another?"

Her Father sighs. "Honey, I'm just trying to keep you from getting your heart broken. That's all."

Rachel sniffs the air. "Well… I appreciate your concern, but it is misplaced. I can deal with this situation myself, thank you. I'm going to bed now. Good night." She flounces off to her room on the top floor, closing doors with the optimal amount of force to ensure a suitably dramatic slam without causing lasting damage to the door frame (she and Father worked long and hard on perfecting that move).

This is to be expected, of course. Every great love has its obstacles—the greater the love, the greater the obstacles, both in frequency and size. Hers and Ozark's will be a love for the ages, she can tell. Operas will be written about it—mostly by her—and they will be performed for hundreds of years, held to the heavens as a shining example of lovers destined by the stars, guided by the providence of the sun into each other's arms…

…okay, fine. So she might once have thought that about someone else, but that was nothing more than a girlish crush. He only came around for a few days every month, charming her with his ridiculous bad-boy allure and constant air of danger and mystery. She is completely over him now, having found a much more suitable suitor. Yep, completely and totally over—

"Ah!" she says, jumping at the sound of a knock on her window.

"Rachel!" a voice whispers from without.

Oh crap. He's here. He's actually here! This is not at all what she wants. It's one thing to be over him when he's never around, but when he's there in front of her, looking at her with those eyes, speaking in that butter-smooth tenor…

"Open the window!" the voice whispers again.
Oh, right. She should probably let him in.

He steps through her window, dressed as usual in rugged-looking, dark-colored clothing, black hood and cloak firmly in place. Both hood and cloak have a few holes in them this time, and it takes her a second to realize they are the result of burns to the fabric. He's been fighting! "Oh... my..." she says, momentarily at a loss for words. "What happened to you? Where have you been? You were gone longer than usual, I thought... I thought..."

"Shh," he says, pressing a finger to her lips. "The past week or so has been... a bizarre nightmare that has, at times, defied explanation. But I'm here now. That's all that matters. I'm here for you," he says with a smile.

Even as her heart pitter-patters with conflict, she can't help but smile back at him as she reaches gentle fingers up to push back his hood. "Oh, Jesse," she says. "I was so worried about you... I've missed you so much."

"And I you," Jesse St. James smiles right back at her. "But I'm here now. I braved the dangers of the world, fought through countless cretins to return to your side. Don't I deserve a congratulatory kiss?" he pouts those stupid, irresistible lips.

"Of course," she says, pressing her mouth to his and claiming those lips even as it makes her feel like the very sluttiest of slutty sluts. She has already kissed and fallen in love with one boy tonight. Now her old flame has returned to reclaim her heart and make her fall in love with him again. Who will she choose? How will she choose?

She's always envisioned herself as the heroine of a great romance. But she never imagined being the young woman pursued by two men could feel so... ambivalent. She is torn between two men, two worlds, and she cannot keep them both.

_Oh well_, she thinks, as Jesse deepens their kiss and clutches her to him. _At least my story will be all the more exciting for the conflict._

Jesse St. James opens his eyes.

It isn't that he isn't enjoying the kiss—oh, believe him, that is _definitely_ not the case. No... he just has something he needs to attend to without Rachel knowing. And Rachel never opens her eyes during kisses, so he is relatively safe in that regard.

"_Find him, boys!_" Jesse hears a rough baritone grunt from outside Rachel's open window. "_He came through here, I know it!_"

Deepening his kiss, he clutches Rachel to him and is sure to keep her _quite_ distracted as he reaches around her, whirling one of his fingers in the air and conjuring up a small whirlwind to gently blow the window shut and close the curtains.

Satisfied, he closes his eyes, and focuses all his attention on Rachel, happy to have effectively cut her off from that part of his life.

What she doesn't know won't hurt her, right?

______________________________________________________________

_In the Upper Level, Councilor Kaze Keros twitchily darts his head from side to side as he guides_
the couriers between dark buildings, always on the lookout for potential threats, potential spies…
potential prying eyes. None must know what he did. Even if he did it for the good of the Nation…
people would have difficulty understanding the complex nature of politics. Some secrets are better
kept buried.

In the Lower Level, a group of career criminals comb the streets for one who has earned their ire,
foolishly searching the ground for a man who makes his home in the skies. They won’t find him
tonight… but criminals aren’t exactly known for their short memories when it comes to grudges.

On the top floor of Berry Inn and Tavern, Rachel Berry hungrily kisses Jesse St. James, even as she
realizes she is falling in love with another. Her heart is torn between them, and she can’t help but
thinking she should totally write a song about this. She has no idea of the countless secrets he
holds, both small and profound, which would turn her entire life upside down if only she knew
them.

And on the bottom floor, Hiram Berry finds himself confronted with two strangely familiar-yet-
unfamiliar faces, as a man in elaborate robes approaches the counter surrounded by his
entourage…

"Accommodations for five, please," Kurt says, placing the money on the counter.

...and an Avatar and his friends check into an unknown city, ready and willing to unravel its many
mysteries.

As the midnight hour approaches in Sho Fa, none of these groups really knows about each other…

But they will.

Oh, boy, will they ever.

---

A/N: And the plot finally kicks into high gear! Rachel makes her glorious debut, along with Jesse
(who has actually been with us for quite some time, incognito). Kurt and Blaine have reached a
beautiful place of understanding, but now Blaine must deal with the possibility that his father's
'friend' might not be so friendly. Meanwhile, said 'friend' is securing away a very important artifact
that could prove key to unraveling the mystery of the Solar Winds and what Sue might be
planning. And of course, the Fearsome Foursome could show up at any minute. What will become
of our heroes? Will Blaine ever reclaim his fire the way he longs to? Will Kurt ever claim Blaine
the way he longs to? Where is all of this insanity headed?

You'll have to wait to find out. ;D Please review and comment so I know I'll have an audience
when I return!
Day 12

Blaine is the first one to wake up that morning. He feels a familiar itch, a tingle in his leg bones, and hops out of bed with more enthusiasm than should be possible (Firebenders rise with the sun, after all). Something inside of him longs for release, and while it still isn't the fire that he has been hoping for, it's refreshing to feel, none the less.

He moves towards the door, when he hears a bleary voice mutter behind him, "Oh, Hills no. Tell me you ain't running off again."

He turns around to see Mercedes hop out of her own bed, and realizes, with no small amount of
guilt, that his excitement almost made him repeat his disappearing act. "Sorry," he says. "I just… there's something I need to do. By myself. But it won't take long, I promise." He gives her a sincere look of apology. "No more running. I'm really sorry… I didn't mean to worry you guys."

"Well, you did," Mercedes says simply, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "But I'm glad you decided to come back. I don't like runners," she continues, pausing to give him a glare that makes him want to turn into a sheet of paper and slip through the floorboards. But then, she softens. "But I do like you. So don't do that again. Otherwise, I might just have to hunt you down myself. Nobody makes my boo look like he did that night and gets away with it."

Blaine looks down. "I won't. Don't worry."

"Good," Mercedes smiles. "Now, go on and take care of business."

He nods, and starts to go, but stops just before his hand reaches the door handle. "Umm… just one question," he says. "How do you guys handle the appropriation of funds? There's something I need to buy…"

The sun is just a tease of light on the horizon. The air is cool and crisp, the barest hint of a breeze caressing his cheek as he steps outside. People are already beginning to trickle into the streets, but they are little more than a few drops of rainwater in a dry river basin. The city is empty. The city is open.

Blaine smiles.

The city is his.

He wastes no time, launching into a sprint down the sidewalk, running up along a wall and onto an awning. Light steps barely make an impression as he scrambles across the awning and leaps onto a balcony. There are three of them, side by side, and he leaps across them with practiced ease. The next building is a floor lower, so from the balcony, he leaps to the rooftop, just barely avoiding knocking over a cage full of birds (who are none too happy with the close call).

"Sorry!" he calls out without stopping. He's wanted to do this entirely too long to stop now. The next building is one floor higher, but that's not about to stop him. He leaps out and grabs onto a windowsill. Then, he hoists himself up to stand on it, jumps to grab the roof and swings himself over the top. His muscles are already starting to ache, and his lungs are already starting to burn, but Blaine can't be bothered to care. There is something in his spirit that longs to go higher, so see further, to run faster. From rooftop to rooftop he bounds and rebounds, agilely dashing across ropes, awnings, and overhangs. He crawls up a steeper roof like a panicked spider, flipping over the peak and sliding down the other side on his back, using the momentum to make a leap clear across the street.

He's never been in this city in his life, but something about it is innately familiar to him, and he feels just as comfortable skitting about its upper levels as he ever did back home. His body complains, but it's just a formality. Blaine knows it could never forget how to do this; that it delights in the rush even as it moans about the early hour.

He spots his destination, clearly identified in sign, and jumps off the roof, onto a tree. Off the tree, onto a lamp post, off the lamp post, onto the ground, landing in a perfect roll and popping up from the dirt like a startled mole. He takes but a moment to catch his breath and brush himself off, before arranging his face into his best charm smile, and casually walking through the door.
"Good morning," the attendant says, looking up from the counter. "How can I help you?"

Blaine walks up and leans on the counter with a grin. "Do you carry non-flammable hair gels?"

He steps out of the barber shop with his hair under control (and a few tips from the kind hairdresser on how to avoid over-gelling), he feels like himself for the first time in a long time.

He decides to walk on his way back, not wanting to draw too much attention to himself, and wanting to get to know the city a little better. It's about halfway through his trip that he suddenly finds his feet sinking into the cobblestone sidewalk, firmly rooting him in place. He's a bit baffled, until a small group of rocks arrange themselves into an arrow on the ground in front of him, pointing to a small side street. Knowing only two earthbenders and having left one in the hotel, Blaine is pretty sure who this message is from.

His feet are released, and he follows the arrow.

"Psst," a voice says. Blaine turns to the side to find a barrel.

"Artie, is that you?" he asks.

"Shhh!" the barrel hisses. "Not so loud."

"Sorry," Blaine apologizes.

"Act casual," Artie instructs. "Sit against the wall."

Blaine checks the ground to make sure he isn't sitting in anything disagreeable, and does so.

"Wear this," Artie continues. The top of the barrel slides aside, and a bamboo hat pops out and lands in Blaine's lap.

"But I just fixed my hair," Blaine pouts.

"You want people to see you talking to a barrel?" Artie asks.

With a sigh, Blaine plots the hat on his head and pulls it down so that it hides his face.

"Much better," Artie says, with a grin in his voice. "Now we can talk."

"Where were you?" Blaine asks. "You didn't come into the inn with us. Did you come in later?"

"How, exactly, do you think I would do that?" Artie asks.

It takes a second for Blaine to realize what he's getting at. "I… oh," he says. "Sorry."

"It's cool," Artie says. "I prefer to sleep outside."

"So, why'd you stop me?" Blaine asks.

"Well," Artie says. "At first I was kind of nervous that you might be running off again, but then I figured out you were going in the wrong direction."

Blaine blushes. "Yeah, I… I'm really sorry about—"

"Dude," Artie says. "It's cool. I've forgiven much worse. Anyway… I got these for you guys."
A bundle of folded maps lands unceremoniously in Blaine's lap.

"Now, you can go sightseeing or whatever," Artie says.

"Okay…" Blaine says neutrally. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm trying to get a feel for the city, and looking for things that aren't on maps, know what I mean?" he says. It sounds like the kind of thing that would befit a wink, so Blaine assumes he winks as well.

"No, I mean… just, in general," Blaine says. "How are you gonna get around?"

"I have my ways," Artie says, with an audible smirk. "I'll see if I can't find a wheelchair so I can join you guys out in the open, but I'm not having much luck so far. Until then, I'll be masquerading as the scenery. Don't worry about looking for me—I'll find you when the time's right. Get it?"

"Got it," Blaine says.

"Good," Artie says. "You can go on your merry way then."

"Wait," Blaine says. "Listen, Artie… I really am sorry for just… bailing like that. Especially when you were in such bad shape."

"Hey," Artie says. "I already told you; don't worry about it. At least you did what you could to help before you bailed."

Blaine smiles, looking down. "It's good to see you again."

"You too," Artie agrees. "Now you'd better get going. The world's starting to wake up, and while I have a hunch that this city is full of weirdoes, I'm still thinking you'd rather not be seen conversing with a container."

Blaine nods, patting the barrel a couple of times before standing up.

"Oh, and since you're so sensitive about your hair, leave the hat. I like it," Artie adds.

With a shrug, Blaine pops the hat off his head, casually places it on the barrel, and saunters off, whistling a jaunty tune. When he looks back, both hat and barrel are gone, and he can't help but grin to himself.

His new friends are weird. And he wouldn't have them any other way.

"Kurt," a voice says.

Kurt groans.

"Kurrrrrrrrt," it coos.

The Avatar sleepily swipes at the source of the sound. Beauty rest in an actual bed is a luxury that he hasn't been afforded in a while, and he will not suffer this interruption in his sleep cycle until absolutely necessary.

"Kurt, Kurt, Kurt, Kurt, Kurt, Kurt," the voice continues, until Kurt growls and sits up.

"Finn, I swear by the sea, if you don't…" he trails off. Finn is still asleep, completely failing to
respond to his outburst.

Or maybe he's just pretending to be asleep to annoy Kurt.

Hopping out of bed, Kurt marches right over to his supposedly slumbering step-brother. "What, Finn?" he says. "What do you want? Please don't tell me you're calling out my name in your sleep, because that just sends out all sorts of mixed messages that we really don't need to be dealing with right now..."

Nothing. Finn doesn't even so much as flinch. He really is still asleep. Which means that Kurt should be, as well. Maybe he just dreamed that voice.

It is upon turning around and going back to his bed that Kurt realizes he does not need to sleep. Because he already is asleep—he can see himself quite clearly in the bed, with rumpled hair and a rather unattractive stream of drool coming from his mouth.

"Oh," Kurt says to himself. "So this must be a spirit thing."

On rare occasions, Kurt's spirit sometimes separates from his body of its own accord. There is always some kind of reason behind it, and given what Kurt knows about this city, Blaine, and the voice that so rudely intruded into his unconsciousness, he is pretty sure whose spirit is calling him. It isn't Finn. It's the other tall annoying thing that he occasionally has to deal with.

"Avatar Groban," Kurt calls out. "What in La's name do you want?"

The morning sunlight coming into the room flickers and dims for a moment, rearranging itself into the shape of a tall, curly-haired man in Fire Nation armor. "Awww, come on, Kurt. Don't tell me you're not happy to see me!" he says with a wide grin.

Kurt responds with a polite smile. "Well, since you asked ... I won't tell you."

Avatar Groban scoffs. "Please. You know you like me."

Kurt shrugs. "I like you well enough. I just find you extremely grating to be around for any length of time. Now, what do you want?"

Groban holds up empty palms. "Hey, come on, now. I just want to talk..."

"Well," Kurt says. "Here we are! Let's talk."

"Yeah," Avatar Groban says with a slight grimace. "Except... you're not the one I need to talk to."

Kurt's jaw drops open. "You're joking. You must be joking."

"Hey," Groban says gently. "I promise, I won't be long. I just want to give my grandson a pep-talk. Well, not my grandson. More like my great, great, great, great, great—"

"I get the picture," Kurt snaps. "Why can't you just give the message to me, and let me tell him?"

"There are... reasons, I assure you," Groban says, waving his hands and waggling his fingers. "Mysteeerious, destiny-related reasons!"

Kurt rolls his eyes and sits cross-legged on the bed, primly examining his nails. "Sorry," he says. "But I'm going to need a little better than your assurance if you want to... body-jack me for any length of time."
Avatar Groban moves over to Finn's bed and sits on top of the sleeping boy. Naturally, being a weightless spirit, Finn is not at all disturbed by his presence. "Look, Kurt... you know how this Avatar thing works. I can't give you all the answers, even if I know them. You just have to trust me. Or, rather, trust yourself in deciding to trust me. It's going to help Blaine. It'll help both of you, actually." He holds a hand to his heart. "Avatar's honor!"

Kurt regards his predecessor coolly for a few moments. "Fine," he finally agrees. "What do I have to do?"

Groban grins. "There's a little theater I built in the middle level of Sho Fa," he says casually. "You may have heard of it. It's only the most famous concert hall in the Fire Nation..."


"Ha ha," Groban says. "Anyway... that's pretty much my shrine. My legacy, my contribution to the art world. Just take Blaine there and... well, you'll know what to do." He winks at Kurt. "Groban out."

And then Kurt wakes up in his bed. Growling in frustration, he tosses the covers off of himself and sits up. "Stupid Groban," he grumbles. "Would it kill you to give a straight answer for once?" he asks the heavens. "No, no it wouldn't, because you're already dead."

He gets out of bed and stomps over to the bathroom. His feet of fury are loud enough to rouse Finn. "Spirit dream?" Finn asks.

Kurt's frustrated growl and the subsequent door slam are all the confirmation he needs.

"That's rough, buddy," Finn yawns, turning over and instantly falling back into dreamland.

After Kurt is suitably beautified and calmed down, he and Finn head over to Blaine and Mercedes's room. Upon opening the door and getting a good look at the Prince, Kurt is unable to hide his surprise. "Well," Kurt says. "You're looking awfully debonair this morning."

Blaine smiles primly from beneath his lightly gelled head of hair. "Why, thank you, Kurt, that's awfully good of you to say," he says, in an exaggerated upper-crust accent.

Kurt resists the urge to roll his eyes. "Where did you even get hair gel?"

The Fire Prince blushes slightly. "I... ahh... might have woken up at the crack of dawn to go buy some."

Tilts his head to the side. "...really, Blaine? Really?"

He grimaces into a smile. "I like having my hair under control. I like it... a lot."


Blaine and Mercedes share a skin-slap of solidarity. Kurt loses the battle against his eye roll.

And Finn steps into the conversation with perfect timing. "I wonder what I'd look like with hair goo..."

"No," Kurt says emphatically. "Absolutely not. Blaine can indulge himself if he absolutely must,
but I am not letting his hair-care nightmare spread to anyone else. Now," he says, taking a second
to stick his head out the door and look around before shutting it. "Let's get down to business. We
have a counselor to confront, a Sun Warrior Artifact to investigate, and a… surprise, for dear
Blaine here." He grins. "Let's make some plans…"

Rachel Berry begins that morning the same as always. After her karmically-correct nutritious vegan
breakfast, she runs through her stretches, performs her flexibility exercises, and then moves onto
the rest of her exercises, all while practicing her vocal warm-ups and maintaining proper breath
control. Being a star requires dedication and hard work.

And talent, of course. But she was born with that, so the first two are her primary concern.

After suitably taking care of her body and voice (the primary tools of any aspiring actress), she
heads down to take care of her daily duties in helping her two gay dads in the upkeep of their quaint
little inn. It isn't the most glamorous work, but it does provide many opportunities for all sorts of
fascinating people to hear her sing.

She's just heading down the hall to the broom closet when she hears a startlingly familiar voice
from behind one of the doors.

"…just can't believe he would do something like that…"

Now, one thing you must understand about Rachel Berry—she believes in her ears. Her mind is a
cornucopia of sound and song, she has perfect pitch, and, most importantly, she never forgets a
voice. So she knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the voice she is hearing belongs to none
other than her beloved Ozark!

She was so worried after he had been dragged out by that incredibly rude, strangely dressed man
that she would never see him again. But fate, it seems, has other plans. With careful, soundless
steps granted to her by years of dance lessons, she presses her ear to the door and shamelessly
listens in (gossip is simply a part of celebrity culture, after all).

"…might need a crash-course in human nature, Blaine."

Gasp! She recognizes the other voice, as well. It's the other boy from last night, the one who
stormed in and made poor Ozark all weepy and miserable. Are they sharing a room? Could her
fathers' assertion about his sexuality be true? They would know, she supposes, but still… their kiss
had been so… passionate… so moving…

Wait a second, who is Blaine? She feels like she could know that name, and yet, like a gopherfly, it
buzzes off and burrows into the ground before she can get her hands on it.

"Kurt, I know… that people can be awful sometimes… but you have to understand—my father and
Keros knew each other for years. I just can't believe that he would betray him. Not without some
kind of proof."

Another gasp! Ozark's father is acquainted with Councilor Keros. Quite well, in fact; Ozark must
be from an affluent background. The one talking to him must be Kurt. Oh, this is juicy.

"Blaine, baby," a third voice cuts in, clearly female. "You are just the most wide-eyed, puppy-eager
idealist I think I've ever seen. But you need to face facts. You at least need to face the possibility
that Keros might turn out to be less than helpful. What if he just turns you in? Or just kills you
himself?"
Her breath shudders, and her pulse quickens within her veins. Whoever this Blaine character is, his plight must be serious indeed! So much drama… so much intrigue. Assassinations? Betrayals? What's next?

"He… I…" Ozark stammers.

"They killed your father," Kurt cuts in. "They tried to kill you. They almost succeeded. You know how dangerous this is, how serious these people are."

"…I know," Ozark sighs.

And suddenly, it clicks within her head. The 'Blaine' they are speaking about is, in fact, her Ozark! Or perhaps Ozark is Blaine. It's one way or the other. Either way, this just adds another layer to the mounting mystique. Pseudonyms! False identities! She isn't sure how much more of this she can handle, yet her ear refuses to come away from the door! She craves to hear more.

"You're the only thing standing between Sue Sylvester—"

GASP. The new Fire Lord has something to do with this!

"—and permanent rule over the Fire Nation. If you die, there's no more Fire Prince—"

MOTHER OF ALL INHALATIONS.

WHAT

DID HE JUST SAY!

Suddenly, it all comes together in her mind. Blaine. Blaine! She knew that name was familiar to her in some way, and now she remembers why—Blaine is none other than the only son of Fire Lord Anderson, heir to the Fire Nation throne! That Blaine is this Blaine! The Blaine in the very room just beyond the door against which she leans!

Her breath comes in gulps, and she holds a hand against her chest to calm her heart as it beats wildly against the wall of her chest. Her mind begins to connect all the elements of the story and the sweep of the narrative is simply too much—his sweet, simple smile, his impeccable manners, his high-class charm, his soulful, haunted eyes like floodgates holding back a river of pain and sadness and mystery—'Ozark' is none other than the supposedly-dead Crown Prince Blaine, fleeing for his life from a wicked usurper who has made a bid for his rightful throne!

She knew, of course, of the death of the Fire Lord, but she didn't really think too much about it. It was, of course, a national tragedy when he was killed, but it was sad to her in an abstract way—she had never really been touched in any meaningful way by the rule of Fire Lord Anderson, so she did not feel his passing very keenly at all. Now, however, her heart weeps for the cruelly deposed Fire Lord and the gentle boy he has left behind.

Oh, cruel fate! Oh, wicked destiny! Why do you hurt us so?

She had no idea—never in a thousand years would have guessed—that the one who had captured her heart and came to her for comfort was secretly a prince! Ever since she was a little girl, captivated by the musicals of old, she had dreamed of the day a prince would come and sweep her off her feet, and…

…and now that day has finally come! Surely, this is destiny as its truest and most powerful! The
Oh. Oh! Oh! She can't take it. It's all too much—too monumental, too epic, too powerful, too tragic. Her heart rages out of control, her breathing is wild and unhinged. Stars dance before her eyes and her vision clouds over, blinding her as her emotions reach a fever pitch. She must sit down, or she will surely faint. But there is nothing in the hallway to bear her!

Reaching out blindly, her hand wraps around the handle to the nearest door, and she thrusts it open. Leaning against the wall to support her weakened, unstable legs, she slides along it, head tilter back, hand over her heart as if to keep it from bursting out of her and taking flight. Eventually, she bumps into a small trunk and is able to place herself gently upon it, breathing heavy, head light. The action grounds her, and soon she is able to calm her fluttering nerves and regain her faculties.

It is at this point that she notices the four others in the room with her, each staring at her with various degrees of shock, confusion, anger, and (in at least one case) mild disgust.

Oh. That's right. The door nearest to her would be the door that she was listening through, wouldn't it? How silly of her to forget.

Well, she is here now. She might as well make the best of it. So she puts on her best showface and offers them the standard greeting.

"Hi!" she says happily.

But they only continue to stare at her.

She winces slightly. Tough crowd…

TO BE CONTINUED
The Sho Fa Experience

Chapter Notes

**Media:** Fic  
**Title:** Solar Winds (*Avatar: The Last Airbender* Fusion, 36/?)  
**Rating:** PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.  
**Spoilers:** None for either series that I am aware of.  
**Warnings:** None for this chapter. See Master Post for the grand list of warnings.  
**Word Count:** 5600  
**Summary:** Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will destiny conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

**Author's Note:** Hee. It's an interesting experience, reading the responses to these chapters sometimes. Rachel is such a divisive character—people seem to feel very strongly towards her one way or the other, but very rarely are people indifferent to her. XP My goal with Rachel is my goal with pretty much everyone—to do her character justice, to make her human and relatable, funny and flawed. Hopefully, even if you can't like the show's Rachel, you'll give this one a chance. ;) At the very least, you'll appreciate the juicy tidbits of backstory she brings in this chapter. Hope you enjoy!

**CHAPTER 36 – The Sho Fa Experience**

"...no more Fire Prince, no line of succession, and no way to remove Sue from the throne without a revolution or a war, both of which will cost countless lives," Kurt says sincerely, and Blaine crumples a little deeper into himself.

It kills Kurt to see Blaine like this. Almost as much as it kills him to see him hurt. Blaine is so... not 'innocent,' per se, but... naïve, maybe. Optimistic, idealistic, unrealistic. He wants so badly to be able to believe in people, to trust in them, despite all evidence to the contrary. Trying to take that away from him feels like removing the support beams from inside of his heart and waiting for it to collapse.

But a sad, disillusioned Blaine is better than a dead Blaine.
At least, Kurt sincerely hopes that is the case.

"I… understand where you're coming from. Maybe we should—"

And suddenly, the door opens.

Kurt spins around, ready to attack. Finn and Mercedes follow suit, while Blaine stands ready to do… something. He doesn't seem to know quite what, but he's definitely ready.

Fortunately, it's no one important.

Just the girl from last night who… seems to be having some kind of episode.

Kurt and his friends watch, wide-eyed and baffled, as she gasps dramatically, leaning against the wall to support herself and clutching her proverbial pearls (proverbial, as Kurt is almost entirely certain she can't afford real ones). She doesn't even seem entirely aware of them, moving around until she finds a trunk to sit on, whereupon she plops herself down and attempts to regain her composure.

Oh, please. Kurt is, when the occasion calls for it, ever-so-slightly given to drama. And if there is anything a drama queen recognizes, it's another drama queen. He lets his disgust at her transparent acting display fully on his face.

As she slowly seems to regain herself, she finally notices the other occupants of the room she so rudely barged into, and greets them with a chirpy "Hi!"

Unfortunately, Blaine once again demonstrates his ability to believe absolutely anything by rushing to her side. "Are you okay?" he asks. "You looked like you were having an attack."

Finn starts to move forward from behind Kurt, but he stops when Rachel's hand suddenly shoots out and latches onto Blaine's shoulder, a look of utter anguish on her face. "Am I okay?" she asks, incredulously. "That you can even still think of others after all you have been through… it just speaks so much of your character."

Kurt's eyes go a little wide at this. He doesn't like the sound of that. It seems a little close to the sound of someone who knows too much. He looks over at Mercedes, who is ever-so-subtly moving towards the door and shooting him a 'are you watching this?' kind of look.

"Are you okay?" the girl asks.

Blaine looks a little confused. "Ummm… yes? I'm not the one who just almost passed out. I'm right as the day."

Now the girl looks near tears. "You brave soul. You hide your pain so well. Oh, Blaine…"

Oh. Shit.

Several things happen at once.

Mercedes promptly slams the door and becomes a human brick wall in front of it. Blaine recoils from Rachel, regarding her with open shock. Finn… for some reason trips over himself and lands facedown next to Kurt, who promptly voices what everyone is thinking.

"What did you just call him?" Kurt says, his voice low.
The girl stands up, her face a picture of utter sympathy. "It's alright," she says. "You don't have to keep secrets from me."

"Wh-what secrets?" Blaine stammers. "I mean… pffft, secrets. There are no secrets here. What secrets? I mean… obviously, there are no secrets, but hypothetically, if there were secrets, what non-existent secrets would you be referring to?"


"It's okay!" Rachel says, utterly sincere. "I heard everything through the door—"

"You were eavesdropping on us?" Kurt asks.

The girl blushes just slightly, but holds her composure. "Not… at first. I was merely passing by when I heard a voice I recognized. Everything you were saying was actually quite audible. If you want to keep things secret, you should probably speak of them a little more silently. Or possibly in some sort of code."

"So… how much do you know?" Blaine asks, looking slightly sick.

"You are the Fire Prince," the girl coos with sickening sincerity. "Your rightful throne was usurped and your father was killed by a wicked villainess, and now you struggle to find allies and hope in a world that seems determined to betray you."

Blaine tilts his head slightly. "That's a… somewhat flowery way to put it…"

"But it's true, isn't it?" the girl asks.

Blaine starts to answer, but Kurt quickly draws him aside to have a short pow-wow with Mercedes by the door. "We'll be with you in just a second," Kurt says sweetly. "Sit tight!"

The three of them form a small triangle. It is then that Kurt notices that Finn is still on the floor and not even paying attention to them. "Finn!" he whispers intensely. "Get over here!"

The tall boy scrambles to his feet and joins the huddle.

"Okay, so," Kurt says. "This is... an unexpected and unwelcome development. What do we do?"

Mercedes shrugs. "Knock her out, put her in bed, and act like none of it ever happened? She'll think she dreamed the whole thing."

Blaine looks hesitant. "That's a little… violent."

"We could just bury her somewhere," Kurt offers.

Blaine and Finn both regard him with wide, horrified eyes. "Dude!" Finn says.

"I'm not saying we should," Kurt clarifies. "I'm just saying… it's an option."

The Fire Prince shakes his head. "No, we can't do that. Look, why don't we just… ask her to keep quiet?"

Kurt looks over his shoulder at the girl. "I may be judging her a little prematurely, but she doesn't strike me as the 'quiet' type."

Mercedes nods her head. "Oh, she's not. I know a gossip when I see one. That girl is a trout mouth."
"Well," Blaine says, "I don't really see many other options. We can't just… get rid of her because she's an inconvenience…"

At this point, Finn chimes in. "Umm, guys? I think she can hear us."

Everyone's heads turn to look at her, just in time to see her face morph from shock (and no small amount of fear for her life) to complete nonchalance.

Blaine sighs, breaking the huddle. "Listen, Renee—"

"Rachel," the girl corrects. "Rachel Berry."

"Rachel," Blaine amends. "You cannot breathe a word of this to anyone. Please," he says sincerely. "Not a single word. Even the tiniest slip up could get one or all of us killed."

Rachel looks appalled that he would even suggest it. "Oh, of course not! I swear by the sun, I will not disclose your secrets to anyone. I don't want to hurt you," she says honestly.

Blaine smiles.

Then she finishes her sentence with a bright grin. "…I want to help you!"

Blaine's smile turns uneasy. Kurt massages his forehead. Mercedes looks at her like she's crazy. And Finn just sort of… looks at her.

"I know that I may seem to be little more than the humble daughter of two innkeepers, but I am, in fact, a very talented up-and-coming local performer," Rachel states.

"You and everybody else," Mercedes mutters.

Rachel looks appalled. "I'll have you know that I am currently first understudy to the famed April Rhodes for the role of Kushinada in the current production of The Orochi Cycle! They would not give that role to just anyone."

Mercedes crosses her arms and stares at Rachel plainly. "Well, they didn't really give it to you, either, so I don't know what you're bragging about."

Kurt decides to try a little tenderness at this point. "Look, Rhonda—"

"Rachel," she insists, and Kurt suppresses a laugh because he might have kind-of-sort-of gotten it wrong on purpose.

"Right," he says. "Rachel, I'm sure you are very talented and… lovely, in certain ways, but I fail to see how that is—in any way—helpful to us."

"I could be your guide through the city!" Rachel chirps, undeterred by Kurt's passive-aggressive skepticism. "I am well-versed in the many famous landmarks of Sho Fa, and the historical significance behind them. I would be happy to show you anything you need to find." At this, she turns to Blaine, staring at him with stars in her eyes and oh, please. "I'm sure that you in particular would love to see all the wonders of this city, given how significant it is to your family."

Wait, what?

Blaine stares at her, brows furrowed. Even Mercedes and Finn seem much more interested now.
"I don't... what do you mean?" Blaine asks.

Rachel looks a little confused. "You don't know?"

"Know what?" Blaine asks again.

The girl is strangely quiet when she speaks next. "Blaine... this is your mother's hometown. It's where she grew up, where she made a name for herself as an actress and a singer. It's where your parents met, and..." she trails off, adding with a soft smile, "...where they fell in love."

You could hear an ant tapping its foot in the silence that follows that proclamation. It takes them all off guard, but none moreso than Blaine himself, whose eyes are clouded over and shimmering with moisture.

"I... I can't believe you didn't know..." Rachel says gently. "I didn't mean to upset you, I just—"

"No," Blaine says, his voice thick. "It's alright. I just... my mother died so early in my life... and my father could never bring himself to talk about her..."

"I'm so sorry," Rachel says, seeming sincere for perhaps the first time since Kurt has seen her. "I honestly thought you knew. I won't mention it again, if it upsets you—"

"Oh, no!" Blaine says, looking right at her. "Please, don't think that I don't want to hear about her... I do."

Rachel smiles back, and at that moment, Kurt knows that for better or worse, he isn't getting rid of her anytime soon. This is too important to Blaine. Kurt can tell by the look in his eyes that he needs this. And he has to admit... annoying as she is, at the moment, she is their best option in terms of knowledge of the city. Artie's maps are useful, but they won't guide them like a personal guide can.

"Alright," Kurt sighs, finally. "You can be our tour guide."

The aspiring actress beams and starts clapping excitedly. "Oh, thank you so much! I promise, you will not regret choosing Rachel Berry to usher you through the Sho Fa Experience."

He already does, kind of. But there's no use in telling her that. "Wonderful. Well, being that you have barged your way into our little circle of trust, we might as well get introductions out of the way and lay a few ground rules." He waits until Rachel's full attention is on him before he continues.

"Listen carefully..."

Artie Abrams has badgermole blood.

It's the only explanation for how impossibly awesome he is.

He pops up from underground on the underside of an empty crate, taking a second to breathe, brush himself off and make sure nothing exceptionally poisonous or unfriendly has latched onto him in his time underground (people'd be amazed at some of the funky shit happening just below their toes).

Burrowing is kind of like sprinting—you need to get where you're going, fast, and without stumbling. It's the main reason a lot of Earthbenders never even try to burrow—make one wrong move, take one false motion, and guess who just dug their own grave and buried themselves in it?
That's right, you did!

Fortunately, Artie has plenty of practice under his belt. In places like Sho Fa, when he needs to get around quickly without being seen, burrowing is pretty much his bread and butter. They never see him coming, they never see him going—they never see him at all, the ideal situation for any thief.

When he's feeling suitably rested, he closes his eyes and spreads his hands along the ground, planning his next move.

Tremorsense for Artie is kind of weird. He has it—all earthbenders do, even if most never try to develop it—but his doesn't work like most. He can't feel much of anything below his waist (though his bait and tackle are still perfectly functional, thank the spirits), but everything down there is still part of him. Energy and vibrations still travel through it. So when he's just sitting around, Artie's tremorsense is kind of fuzzy and unclear. Kind of like his vision without his glasses—he gets a vague idea of what's happening, but nothing… concrete.

When he uses his hands, however, everything becomes much more defined. The world around him is laid open, and pretty much anything on the ground is visible and distinct to him. Walls? Pffft. Walls can't hide you from Artie, not when he's really looking for you. Through the ground, he can feel a barrel and tell you what's inside, feel a person walking and guess (fairly accurately) what shoes they are wearing and what they do for a living. He can detect buried things—from treasure (acquire!) to ant colonies (avoid!)—and react accordingly. Most importantly, however, he can find (and sometimes, create) his next hiding spot.

Taking a deep breath, he promptly shoves himself back underground, steadily burrowing across the street, zig-zagging to avoid a couple of pipes and a shoebox with a dead cat-owl in it, and popping out inside of a storm drain. He hasn't found much of interest so far. Well, not much of financial interest—there's almost always something interesting going on around him. People do all sorts of crazy shit when they think no one is watching. Not that he's watching or anything.

Well, okay, maybe he's watching.

Fine. So Artie is, occasionally, kind of a creeper. It comes with the territory. Besides, it's not like he does anything super-voyeuristic or whatever—nothing makes him pull his hands back from the ground like he's been burned quite like the distinct vibrations of people doing the nasty where he can feel it. Gross. He can't imagine what it'd be like to see the world like this all the time. It's times like these that he's thankful he just has badgermole blood, and is not, in fact, an actual blind badgermole.

He's just getting ready to map out his next move, when…

"…be there in just a second, boss, I gotta dump this out!"

And that's all the warning he gets before Artie is promptly doused right in the face with a bucket of fish water (complete with dead fish).

With a silent sigh through his nose, he scrunches up his face and takes a second to pick the dead goldfish-guppies out of his hair, thanking the Hills that he didn't have his mouth open for that.

His is a dirty job, but someone's gotta do it.

Once he's recovered from that nasty mess, he again places his hands against the stone walls of the storm drain, and feels out the world around him.
It is then that he notices it. A barely-there vibration, moving away from him. A set of very, very light footsteps. Possibly the lightest he has ever felt—so light that he almost dismissed them as his imagination. You can learn a lot about a person from their gait; generally speaking, people don’t really think about how they walk. There are all sorts of walks in the world—stompers, skippers, draggers, bouncers, heel-walkers, toe-walkers, striders, meanderers, marchers, prancers, dancers… …huh. There is a slight chance that Artie thinks about walking more than is really healthy for someone in his position.

But that’s beside the point. A person’s walk can tell you a lot about them, and this person’s walk is telling Artie that they are very finely versed in the art of movement. No one can step that lightly without training. It’s almost as if they barely touch the ground at all.

Artie smiles. This is interesting.

He dives into the wall and heads to get a look at the source of the steps, surfacing beneath a discarded junk cart with a broken axle. Peeking out from beneath it, he can make out the shape of the figure as they turn the corner.

They're wearing a black hood.

…huh.

Well, that takes care of that, then. Artie knows what he'll be doing for the next however-long-it-takes-to-find-out-who-this-is. He can't be sure, of course, but Artie has a hunch that he has seen this guy before.

And Artie is all about following some hunches.

"Remember everyone's names?" Kurt says as they prepare to leave.

"Of course," Rachel reassures him. "This is just like a play! Well, really more of an improvisational acting exercise—"

"Yes, whatever," Kurt brushes her off. "And one more time—what happens if you use our real names and we get killed?"

"Your next incarnation will hunt me down and use me to invent painbending," Rachel repeats, not seeming terribly unnerved by the statement at all. Kurt is a bit annoyed. His game must be slipping.

With everyone in-costume and in-character, they slip out of their room and down the stairs.

"I just need to tell my dads what I will be doing for the day," Rachel says as they reach the bottom floor.

"…dads?" Finn asks. Kurt and Blaine give each other a surprised glance.

The answer to Finn's question comes quickly, as Rachel steps into the foyer where the barkeeper and innkeeper are both standing behind the counter, diligently pouring over a stack of papers.

"Daddy, Father," Rachel says warmly.

"Good morning, sweetie," the innkeeper says.
"And how is our little shining star this morning?" the barkeeper asks with a smile.

"I am quite well, thank you," Rachel beams, turning towards Kurt and the gang. "Councilor Ganterson, Lady Desiree, I would like to introduce you to my parents. This is Hiram Berry, my Father," she says, indicating the innkeeper, "and this is Leroy Berry, my Daddy," she continues, indicating the barkeeper.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Kurt says primly.

"Daddy, Father, this is Councilor Ganterson and his entourage, the lovely Lady Desiree, and his servants, Ozark and Zarko," she says sweetly.

"Nice to meet you as well," Hiram says. Leroy winks at them.

"So… wait," Finn says, opening his mouth for the first time in several minutes in such a way that Kurt is almost certain nothing good is going to come out of it. "So… you're both… guys."

"Yes," Hiram says, not impolitely.

"And you're both… her dad?" Finn continues.

"Indeed we are," Leroy says casually.

Finn looks confused. "But… how does that…"

The Berrys share a look. When they turn back towards Finn, they open their mouths to speak at the same time. They do not, however, say the same thing.

Hiram: "We adopted her."

Leroy: "We gave birth to her through our penises."

The look of horror on Finn's face clearly shows which of the two responses he heard.

"Leroy, stop it," Hiram scolds. "I told you not to say that anymore!"

"I'm sorry, Hiram, but I am just so sick of that question. Is it really that difficult a deduction to make?" Leroy snarks.

"Daddy," Rachel whispers. "Be nice! These are very important people."

"Actually," Kurt clarifies. "I am important. Her too, I suppose," he adds, indicating Mercedes, who looks put out. "Them, you may insult to your heart's content. I do it regularly," Kurt smiles, indicating his two 'servants.'

"How gracious of you, Councilor," Leroy says with a shit-eating grin.

"Oh, you are just the worst," Hiram sighs, with an eye roll.

"As I was saying," Rachel says, re-railing the conversation. "The esteemed Councilor was impressed by my knowledge of the city and its rich cultural history. He has asked me to be his personal guide to the many wonders Sho Fa has to offer. I hope that's alright with you."

"It's fine, sweetie," Hiram says.

"Far be it from us to deny an esteemed Councilor anything," Leroy adds lasciviously.
"Do I need to gag you?" Hiram asks pointedly.

Leroy turns to him with a smirk. "That all depends on what you intend to do with me," he says, his voice low and sultry enough to turn every face in the room bright red.

"Well, thank you, Fathers, we'll be going now," Rachel says, giving each of them a kiss on the cheek. She then turns to lead everyone out of the room before her fathers can embarrass her further.

"Bye sweetie!" Hiram calls out.

"Take good care of our guests!" Leroy adds. "Seriously, we need the patronage."

As Kurt turns to leave, he is pleased to note that Blaine seems to be blushing just as deeply as he is.

Finn on the other hand, looks a little pale. He at least has the good sense to wait until they are outside before timidly approaching Rachel, and quietly asking, "Ummm… so… which one was true?"

The resulting prominent, palm-shaped red mark on Kurt's forehead is easily disguised by some concealer.

Well, Artie was right. Sho Fa is full of weirdoes.

By the time they make it out into the city proper, the world is fully awake and the 'rich cultural heritage' of the city is on full display. As Rachel confidently leads them down the sidewalk, Blaine finds himself dodging around all sorts of interesting characters—a man with a large nose ring, juggling live turducken, two women in leotards who seem to Blaine to be made of rubber for all the strange, slightly frightening ways they bend themselves, and an odd, silent character in black and white who keeps making strange motions at him and staring at him with wide eyes…

"Sho Fa is a city rich in artistic talent. These lovely street performers are a wondrous example of the boundless varieties of self-expression one can find within the city's confines."

The gang passes by a cage with a bunch of nearly-naked men in loincloths, headdresses, and body paint. "I am a Sun Warrior!" one of them shouts. "A strong member of a once-proud native race, caged and subjugated for your amusement! Come, o Fire Nation, come and gawk at me! Let me amuse you!" he cries.

"As varied as the many forms of artistic expression are, so also are the many political views represented by our population. All manner of points on the political spectrum are represented here," Rachel says, matter-of-fact, as they pass by a large mural of the Fire Nation, surrounded by a wall of heavily-armed ships, as a cloud of skulls and bones gathers around it. 'NOTHING to FEAR,' is written just below a skull that appears to be laughing. He passes a man who is almost naked, tattoos of red covering most of his body, his hair wild, his teeth sharpened, a pair of prominent antlers on his head. "We gave you the gift of fire," the man growls at them as they pass, "and what did you do with it? You betrayed us!" he shouts, a burst of fire escaping from his mouth as he roars to the Heavens in outrage.

Mercedes and Kurt walk side-by-side, playing the part of the tourist perfectly, pointing and chuckling and making little whispered comments to each other, leaving Finn and Blaine to trail behind them. Finn, oddly enough, seems more interested in Rachel than in any of the marvels around him, leaving Blaine to gawk at this wide, wonderful world by himself. It's amazing how different Sho Fa is from the Capital, how dense and rich and varied everything is.
Soon, they come to an open courtyard, where a group of men in period costumes are staging a dramatic, heavily choreographed swordfight. People are gathered all around, eagerly watching the spectacle. Several children sit on their parents' shoulders, gazing with wide grins at the exciting fight.

It's astounding. Breathtaking, even, and in any other circumstance, he'd be delighted with everything he sees. But these aren't normal circumstances, and there are questions burning at the back of his mind, their need for answers overshadowing all else. He momentarily breaks character to rush ahead of Kurt.

"Rachel," he says. "No offense… this really is a lovely tour you're giving, and I don't mean to detract from it, I just… I'd really like to know about my mother, please."

The aspiring actress grinds to a halt and spins around to face the group. "Well, Bl—Ozark," Rachel corrects just in time thanks to a death glare from Kurt. "Her history is contained more within the middle level of the city, the Theatre District. We still have the remainder of the Market District to tour, as well as—"

"Could we skip ahead?" Blaine asks. "Please," he adds.

Rachel looks conflicted. "Well… I suppose we could. It's just…"

Mercedes stares at her strangely. "…you've rehearsed this, haven't you?" she says.

Rachel blushes. "…perhaps," she says. "I might have considered a momentary career as a tour guide to pay my bills while I did the obligatory bit parts and stage work required to refine my credibility as an artist."

"You thought you might become a tour guide, so you started giving imaginary tours?" Kurt asks.

Rachel regards him coolly. "I happen to know a great deal of local history. If I dreamed of putting that to good use one day, I don't see why that should be a problem," she says plainly, before turning back to Blaine. "And I suppose… if you want to, we can take the tour out-of-order and go to the Middle District," she says with a gentle smile, cupping his cheek with a reassuring hand. "I'm sure you'll be amazed when you hear her story," she says as she stares at Blaine with just a hint of mischief in her eyes. "You may even find a few… parallels between past and present," she says cryptically, winking at him as she walks towards the gate to the next level. Blaine follows quickly after her, and so completely misses the murderous glare that Kurt is sending at her backside as she goes…

Twinkle-toes is a pain in the ass to track. First of all, on top of the fact that his footsteps are like feathers brushing against the ground, the rest of the stupid city is waking up, so now every time he feels for the guy, he has to deal with the thousands of other people plodding around like drunken elephant goats while looking for the one set of footsteps he wants to find. It's like listening for a whisper in the middle of a full orchestra concert, and he winds up relying on his eyes more than his hands to keep track of his stalk-ee. That is dangerous business—if Artie can see the world, the world can see Artie, and he does not want to be seen right now.

Which is the perfect segue into the second major problem Artie is having to deal with at the moment.

"Mrrow," the tabby cat meows as it paws at the bush Artie is hiding in.
"Shoo!" he whispers. "Scat! Scram!"

Sho Fa is apparently home to a large number of 'cat people.' Thanks to his unwanted morning shower, Artie currently smells like fish. And cats like fish. Ergo, for the time being, no matter where he hides or how fast he moves, he winds up with a collection of cats sniffing him out and forcing him to move before someone notices the meowing menace being gathered in the streets.

Pressing his hand against the ground and focusing as hard as he can, he decides to take a shortcut that will hopefully throw his feline fan club for a loop.

With a deep breath, he sinks underground, and burrows straight into the basement of a nearby building, bursting out of the wall, sliding across the floor, and smashing into the other wall without even so much as a break in between. He surfaces in the alley on the other side of the building, in a small space between a dumpster and a wall. It's cramped, but it works, and that's all that matters. He saw the guy head back here before, so hopefully it won't be too hard to find him again.

Fingers to the ground, Artie listens to the earth.

Wait for it… wait for it… there.

The guy seems to be picking up his pace. Does he know he's being followed?

Artie grins for just a second, eager to resume the chase…

Then he frowns, as he feels the pitter-patter of pawprints against the dirt.

With little recourse, he takes a deep breath, and plunges again beneath the earth.

Looks like the chase is on for both of them…

"What does she think she is doing?" Kurt hisses to Mercedes as they follow their so-called guide to the next level.

"She probably thinks she is flirting with him," Mercedes whispers back at him.

"I know that!" Kurt whispers in response. "The question was rhetorical. Who does she think she is? That she can just… walk up to him and start trying to seduce him with tales of his dead family?"

"I don't know," Mercedes shrugs. "He's a pretty good-looking boy. You can't blame her for having a go."

"I absolutely can!" Kurt counters. "He is mine!"

Mercedes stares at him coolly. "And here I thought you were past all that."

The Avatar purses his lips. "You know what I mean. I didn't mean it like… like that."

"I know, honey," Mercedes says, patting him gently on the head. "Don't you worry your pretty little head. It doesn't matter what she does or doesn't do—she's not his type, remember?"

Kurt crosses his arms and sighs. "I know, I know. It's just… annoying. She is annoying. Every time she opens her mouth, I want to stuff a sock in it."

"Dude," Finn says from behind them. "That's mean. She's not that bad. She's… nice. And smart and stuff. Just because she knows a lot of words and, like, uses them… that doesn't mean you
should beat her up or whatever."

Kurt turns to gape at his step-brother. "Are we talking about the same person here? Do you actually hear anything she is saying?"

Finn just shrugs, looking off to the side. "I don't see what the problem is."

Kurt crosses his arms even tighter, blasting the universe at large with the full force of his bitchface as he stomps down the walkway. Crowds part before him; children scream and flee from the sight of him, fearful of his wrath.

All he can say is if she tries to kiss him again, all bets are off. She already got to claim those lips once before him. There is absolutely no way he will stand for it happening twice.

"Here we are," Rachel says. "The famed Theater District of Sho Fa."

They step through the gate, and Blaine's eyes nearly bulge out of his skull. It's amazing. Scads of wonderfully ornate buildings. Some with wide columns with intricate designs running all up and down them, others with statues of all sorts of mythical creatures and performers, still others with murals of incredible scenes from history and legend painted on several walls. The theaters are tall, imposing spectacles, each one carrying a unique sort of power, an expression of art as individual as the ones who designed them. The middle level seems to be dominated by a long line of these buildings, running along both sides of an enormous street that runs through the middle. As his eyes drink in the many wonders, something about what he sees seems strangely familiar to him…

"They sometimes call this place 'the Wide Street,' or 'the Broad Way,'" Rachel says wistfully. "It's my dream to perform here someday. So many wonderful roles… so many captivating stories…"

And that's when he sees the marquees, the signs announcing the productions running in the theaters. 'The Orochi Cycle.' 'The Fisherman's Wife.' 'The Girl from the Moon.' 'The Great White Wolf.' 'The Avatar and the Fire Lord.'

These are all stories he knows. Stories he recognizes at just a glance, stories told to him by his mother countless times across countless nights, captivating his imagination and making his spirit soar. These were her stories. This was her world.

This was her home.

As Kurt stomps up behind them, it takes but a single glance at the wonder on Blaine's face, the tears already gathering in his eyes, for all his annoyance to melt away. Sighing out his frustration, he smiles softly at the Prince, who looks even more child-like and innocent than he normally does (and that's saying something). If Rachel can make Blaine look like this, then he supposes he can tolerate her… for now.

"I… I know these…” Blaine says thickly as he pans his eyes across the landscape. "I know all of these… and…” He takes a breath. "…I can't even remember her name," he says softly. "I always just knew her as 'mom.'"

With a soft smile, Rachel steps beside Blaine and quietly begins to speak.

"Her name was Linda…"

TO BE CONTINUED
A/N: Coming up next… Blaine learns of his parents' history, Rachel wants history to repeat itself, and Kurt suppresses the urge to make her history. Meanwhile, Artie continues to track Jesse across town, and winds up biting off quite a bit of trouble for himself. Is it more than he can chew? We'll find out, soon enough…

Please leave a review or comment if you have any thoughts. ;)


CHAPTER 37 – Fire Lady Linda

Rachel leads them down the Way, speaking as she goes, narrating the history of the woman who bore him, the half of Blaine that he never really got to know. As they go, his eyes trace her history into the lines of the architecture.

"Linda Marie Clair," Rachel says, "was one of the greatest rags-to-riches stories of modern times. She was featured in at least one production of almost every play you can see from here, many times in a starring role."

"Rags?" Blaine asks. "What do you mean?"

"She wasn't born into affluence," Rachel says. "It's difficult, of course, to distinguish legend from fact at times, but everything I've heard seems to agree she was the daughter of a music shop owner who lived by very simple means. She had no formal vocal training, but her voice was marvelous to hear. She was discovered by a local director as she tuned the instruments one day, and he insisted she try her hand at performing."
Blaine nods, imagining his mother sweeping a shop floor as a young woman, tuning the instruments with expert precision. The image seems strangely fitting; she was always very hands-on.

"She held quite a few dramatic roles during her tenure," Rachel says, "and while she had her detractors, her acting was largely agreed to be fairly strong. You can see on your left, the Barrett Playhouse is currently hosting a production of 'The Girl From The Moon,' in which she had her most famous dramatic turn as 'Kaguya,' the title character."

"I know that one," Blaine says, turning his head slightly to relate the story to those walking with him. "It's about… well, obviously it's about a girl from the moon, but she doesn't know it. A farmer finds her in a bamboo chute, and raises her as his own. She grows up pretty well, but she always feels strange and kind of alienated, like she doesn't quite belong there. She winds up riding a flying bamboo chute back to the moon and meets her real parents, but she doesn't feel right there, either. In the end, she comes back to earth, and she is happy here, because it's what she knows."

Rachel nods. "Excellent summary! Even her critics praised the sense of estrangement and alienation she brought to the role." She pauses for a second. "It is a role that I feel I can relate to, at times. I myself was born without the gift of Fire, you see, and thus I am often very…"

"Wow," Mercedes cuts in with a small smile. "Sounds like a regular fairytale. A common girl becomes a famous actress, becomes a Princess, becomes a Fire Lady."

"Yes, well," Rachel says, her voice losing a bit of enthusiasm, "it was not always a smooth journey. At least, not for her..."

Blaine furrows his brow. "What happened?"

"One day, she was in the middle of a performance as Kushinada in The Orochi Cycle, and she just… left. Got up, walked off stage, and refused to come back," Rachel says sadly.

"Why?" Blaine asks.

"That's the thing, really. No one knows, and as far as I know, she never told anyone. She was blackballed for it."

"Umm… what's that mean?" Finn asks.

"No one would cast her," Kurt says. "She was basically exiled from the theater community."

"I was just about to say that," Rachel says, slightly annoyed, "but you are correct. She returned a year later, and no one would hire her. Often, they would refuse to even speak to her."

Blaine feels a twinge of pain in his heart at the thought of his mother being rejected so coldly. "So… what happened next?"

At this, Rachel smiles. It's different than the smiles he has seen from her so far—it seems warmer, more genuine, brighter without being blinding. "She kept at it," Rachel says simply. "She refused to give up, accepting whatever job they would give her and performing it admirably. Eventually, she was cast in minor roles, which allowed her to showcase her heretofore unknown talent for comedic timing. Her most famous comedic role being that of the comically voluptuous Priestess Rao in The Nine Tales of Ninetails."

"Vol… voluptuous? What's that?" Finn asks.
"Voluptuous. And… ummm…” Blaine says. "It means 'well-endowed.'"

Finn just stares at him.

"Blessed in… certain areas. Around the chest," Blaine clarifies.

Finn tilts his head to the side.

"Giant boobs," Kurt deadpans.

"Oh," Finn says. "Why didn't you just say that?"

Blaine blushes. "Nevermind. So… they liked her again?"

Rachel nods. "Slowly but surely, she was accepted back into the community. She went from unknown, to star, to pariah, and eventually, back to star. The end result…"

She stops in front of a very old, very distinguished-looking building. "…is that she was re-cast in the role of Kushinada when the actress who replaced her moved on. Here, at the Groban Theater, she reclaimed the role that nearly cost her everything she had worked for. And by all accounts, she nailed it."

Blaine smiles. "That's amazing. But… that's not all, is it?"

Rachel scoffs. "Oh, of course not, it's just... umm... the next section of the story… merits more than a simple telling of the tale. It's much more deserving of something along the lines of a… reenactment," she says excitedly. She bounces over to Blaine and puts a hand on his shoulder. "Wait here. I have a few things I would like to set up first. Someone will retrieve you shortly."

With that, she turns on her heel so fast that her hair barely misses smacking Blaine in the face (he can feel a 'whoosh' of air as it goes by). She dashes into the theater, leaving the rest of them to… stand around like idiots.

"She could've at least let us come into the lobby," Kurt says with an eye roll.

Blaine smiles at him, not quite able to come up with a response… his mind is occupied with the image of his mother in countless costumes on countless stages, acting out the stories that filled his dreams as a child…

Artie wonders; would he be a jerk if he punched out a cat? It kind of seems like it; he's much bigger than they are, not even taking into account his deadly kung fu skills. On the other hand, they're really annoying and nothing else seems capable of getting rid of them. He is not a fan of violence against animals (unless they instigate it, at which point, bring it, fuzzy), but hot damn these kittens are testing his patience.

If Mr. Light-Foot didn't know someone was following him before, he definitely knows it now. In fact, he probably thinks he is being stalked by an army of cats. Artie knows from experience how freaky that experience is because it's happening to him right now.

Hands to the ground. He feels for the guy's footsteps; a little easier to find because he seems to be running at this point. Artie dives under a building just as a pair of cats jump into the barrel he is hiding in. He cuts across the path and, because of his haste, pops up beside the trashcan he intended to cut the bottom out of and hide in. With little time to waste, he flips the trashcan over, empties it out, and puts it on top of him. Instant disguise!
Finn Hudson is about as subtle as a gassy buffalo bear.

"So," he says, sliding up beside Mercedes, who, for lack of better things to do, is reading the posters for upcoming shows plastered on the walls of Groban Theater. "Ummm… she's nice, don't you think?"

Mercedes turns to give him a pair of the most skeptical eyes she has. "Say what now?"

"Rachel," Finn says, grinning. "She's kind of… nice, don't you think?"

"Nice," Mercedes says carefully, "is not really the word I would use."

"But she's not, like, not nice," Finn says. "I mean, she's not like, evil or mean or anything is she?"

"No," Mercedes says with a shrug. "She's just pushy and bossy and overbearing and commanding, sticking her nose into everybody's business."

"Yeah!" Finn says excitedly. "So you like her too, don't you?"

Her face just keeps scrunching up in confusion. At this rate, she'll look like an old woman by the end of the night. "What in the Hills makes you think that means I like her?"

Finn's smile is unflappable. "Well, I mean, you should like her, because she's, like, like you…"

"Excuse me?" Mercedes says, turning towards him, hands-on-hips affronted.

Finn looks a little nervous, but bless him, the boy keeps right on talking. "All of those things you said about her… I mean, you should like her, right? Because you're all of those things too, and—"

"Oh, no," Mercedes says dangerously, stepping towards him. "You did not just go there."

"B-but you are! I mean, I thought…" Finn says backing away from her, towards the theater doors.
"Well you better stop thinking," she interjects, continuing to stalk towards him, "before you hurt yourself…"

"I, uhhh, I…" Finn stammers, his mind having difficulty conjuring up excuses because it's too busy walking backwards while trying to think of what might be said at his funeral. 'Finn Hudson... he was really tall, kind of handsome, and a pretty nice guy except when he was being a douche. He will be missed by some.'

Meanwhile, Kurt surreptitiously sidles up to Blaine, who is running his fingers along the stonework on the theater's exterior. "You okay?" he asks.

Blaine snaps to attention. "Yeah, yeah. I'm alright," he says, with a soft smile. It's weak, but genuine. "So, uhhh… what do you think of her?" he asks, somewhat shyly, blushing slightly.

Kurt cannot believe what he is hearing. Was that a… smitten tone that Blaine just used? Oh, no, no, no, no. Blaine cannot possibly like that shrieking dodo. This will not do. Kurt needs to put a stop to this, right now, and fortunately, Blaine has just given him the perfect opening. "Well, I think she is loud, obnoxious, pushy, delusional, self-obsessed, and a few eggs short of a nest, if you know what I mean," he says imperiously.

Blaine gapes at him, mouth open, eyes devastated. "You…you think my mom is… is…?"

Kurt's eyes nearly burst from sheer embarrassment and mortification. "Oh, no, no!" he says, horrified. "No, Bl—I mean… no. Your mother sounds wonderful," he quickly corrects, putting a gentle hand on Blaine's arm.

He seems just a little less upset now, and Kurt feels like kicking himself for being such a jerk. "Oh," Blaine sighs, "I'm glad," he says, offering Kurt an even weaker smile (Kurt, you drunken gorilla goat! Stop hurting your not-boyfriend's feelings!). "So… wait. Then, who were you talking about just now?" Blaine asks.

Kurt gapes at him for a couple of seconds. Really? Really? "Really?" he asks, out loud, completely by accident. "I mean… ummm…"

At that exact moment, the doors to the theater fly open, and Kurt has never been more thankful for an interruption in his life. Apparently, neither has Finn, who suddenly sprints past the bored, somewhat put-out-looking young man who stands in the entryway, nearly knocking him over in his desperate dash to get indoors.

The man glares after Finn for a few moments, before turning his attention to more important people. "Councilor and company?" he asks tiredly.

"Present!" Kurt chirps merrily.

The man gestures to the doorway, speaking in monotone. "Welcome to the illustrious Groban Theater, historical centerpiece of Sho Fa and indeed the entire art world. I will be your guide to the many wonders…" he trails off. "Blah, blah, blah, whatever. I'm supposed to be asleep right now, because we normally only do these tours in the evening hours before a show starts. But someone has made a special request on your behalf. A very loud request. And since that someone happens to know several things that could get me fired… just follow me, would ya?"

Affronted doesn't even begin to describe it. Kurt feels outright outraged. How dare this little twerp speak to someone in such an illustrious fake position as himself? "Well, I nev—" he starts, only to realize that the guy is already walking away from them, and Blaine is trailing along after him.
With his eager attitude and tendency to run after pretty much anything that moves, Kurt is seriously contemplating a leash for the errant prince by the time he gets indoors.

The lobby of the theater is, he must admit, a fairly stunning sight. It's an incredibly expansive room, wide with high ceilings and huge, impressive columns with very intricate stonework. They must have hired an earthbender to—actually, now that he thinks about it, Avatar Groban probably did this section himself. It does seem to feature him in a number of heroic roles; slaying dragons, climbing on top of giants, sailing the stormy seas, saving armfuls of orphans from a burning building… and of course, in the middle of the lobby, the full statue of the Avatar himself, Groban standing proudly in the midst of his creation, greeting all who enter into his sacred hall.

Mercedes flounces in right behind Kurt. Finn is already in the room, and seems to be trying to take cover behind the tour guide (which would be considerably easier were Finn not both taller and broader than the droning, miserable fellow). The tour guide is narrating in a speech he has obviously heard several times too many and could probably say in his sleep. "These magnificent stone monuments to his favorite roles were carved from pure marble by Avatar Groban himself during his construction of this theater over three hundred years ago. The carvings remain pristine and distinct to this very day, almost as if preserved supernaturally." He yawns. "Marvel at the intricacy."

Blaine does. The wonder he projects as he turns to look at the incredible stonework is almost too much to bear. How Blaine is so child-like, yet so mature, so wounded, yet so eager to open himself to others, is a mystery Kurt hopes to have plenty of time to solve.

"Okay, enough marveling," the tour guide deadpans. "This way, please," he says, ushering them into the theater proper (with Finn matching him step-for-step).

Mercedes walks beside Kurt as they head towards the theater entrance, but just as Blaine is about to pass through the doorway, something catches his eye, and he breaks away from the group. "What…" he breathes, staring up at a large, framed portrait on the wall. A man and a woman, clearly very much in-love, stand in the lobby. The woman stands just in front of the man, who has his arms wrapped around her waist, and his chin hooked over her shoulder, grinning from ear to ear as she regards him with a fond smile. "Who is…"

He doesn't seem capable of saying much more, but fortunately, the tour guide is far too annoyed with the world to notice how emotional Blaine is. "That is a portrait of Fire Lord Anderson with his beautiful wife, Fire Lady Linda. The two of them met decades ago in this very theater, yada yada, love at first sight—look, all this stuff is coming up, okay? I hate repeating myself, so please, just come on."

Kurt wants to deck him.

But Blaine just nods, tearing his eyes off the portrait with great effort and moving back into position.

"Poor boy," Mercedes says. "This can't be easy for him."

"Well, Mr. Sunshine and Fruit Pies here isn't exactly doing much to make it easy," Kurt points out haughtily.

"He doesn't know who he's talking to," Mercedes says. "That's a good thing, remember?"

Kurt sighs. "You're right, you're right." As they head into the auditorium, he takes another look around the amazing architecture of the lobby. "I wonder where Artie is," he says softly. "I'm sure
he'd appreciate the detail in this place."

Mercedes shrugs. "I wouldn't fret on his account too much. I'm sure he's having plenty of fun, wherever he is."

"OUT OF THE WAY!" Artie shouts, to very little avail. There is simply too much of everyone everywhere for them to part like the river before a waterbender. All he can do is try to take out as few people as possible—and to hit the healthy-looking middle-aged folks as opposed to the young'uns and elders. He does a fairly admirable job—bearded fat guy—"EXCUSE ME!"—for the most part, even though—lady in a super-bright pink dress—"SORRY ABOUT THAT!"—it can be kind of hard to tell from a distance—another bearded man—"COMING THROUGH!"—wait, no, that was a bearded lady—"SORRY, MISS!"—exactly who everyone is, because they're all dressed so weirdly—man juggling turduckens—"DUCK AND COVER!"—and so widespread.

Prancy-pants has taken to the rooftops, jumping like some kind of freakish human cricket. If Artie was pretty sure before, he is doubly sure now—this guy is an airbender, no doubt about it, even if he isn't the same one from Fenghuang. He seems vaguely aware that something is following him, but as far as he can tell, he hasn't pinpointed Artie himself yet.

It could be that the small platoon of cats trailing after him is makes for a much more visible spectacle than a moving, overturned trashcan.

Everywhere he goes, he can hear the sounds of feline carnage behind him. Screeches and cries, loud, panicked shouts of civilians who suddenly have kitty claws latched into their expensive clothing, unfortunate toupee wearers who find their rugs knocked out of place by cats leaping onto their heads. He's pretty sure he can hear the faint sounds of a turducken vs. tabby melee, with plenty of squawking and screeching and fluttering and hissing to go around. He does not want to be caught in the middle of that fight.

The guy turns, suddenly, and Artie tries to follow suit, only to slide side-long into a wall and daze himself for a second. There are, of course, downsides to handling like you have wheels—banking like you have wheels, for instance. Nonetheless, he recovers quickly and blasts onward, just in time to avoid a small wave of cats coming at him.

Well, not just in time. One manages to latch onto the front of the trashcan and is currently holding on for dear life, making discontented meowing sounds even as it refuses to let go.

"Get off!" Artie shouts.

The cat meows.

"This ain't no passenger vehicle!" he says again, navigating through a few corridors and across a small, fenced-in courtyard between several buildings, dodging around a bird bath, and nearly ramping off a large tree root that he doesn't see until he's almost on top of it.

He can just barely see the guy ahead of him, so he picks up the pace in an effort to catch up.

It occurs to him at this point to wonder; what, exactly, does he plan to do if and when he actually catches this fool? Not to mention why he is putting so much effort into chasing him. Really, at this point, it might be wiser to cut his losses and try to find him later, because any chance of sneaking up on him and learning his super secret airbender plans is pretty much out the window by now.

Unfortunately for Artie, this proves a bad time for thinking such thinky thoughts, as his unwanted
passenger chooses that moment to scoot up the side of the trashcan and put his furry belly right over Artie's eyeholes.

"BAD KITTY!" he shouts, trying to bring his slide to a halt (not as easy as you think!). "GET YOUR CAT-NIPPLES OUT OF MY FACE BEFORE YOU KILL US BOTH!"

With little recourse, Artie resorts to poking the cat in the belly with his fingers and trying to dislodge it by force. It doesn't fly off, but it does slide down just far enough to let Artie see out of his peephole again…

…just in time to see the guy he is chasing after standing right in front of him, ready to strike.

"Oh, shi—" is as far as he gets before the guy sweep-kicks towards Artie, sending a wave of air along the ground that hits him at just the right point to launch him, can and all, flipping end-over-end through the air before slamming into a wall. The can lands rightside-up, and Artie plops inside of it shortly thereafter, sinking in without even touching the rim.

*Three points to the airbender,* he thinks, and then, his vision is nothing but stars…

"Right this way, please," the tour guide sighs. The four of them wander into the darkened theater and are momentarily taken aback by the grandeur. Even in the dark, they can tell the place is incredibly grand simply by the way every sound seems to echo. The acoustics are absolutely stunning.

As they pass row after row of seats, the tour guide begins his narration again. "It was in this very theater that the Fire Lord Anderson met, and fell in love with the woman who would one day become his wife. The young Fire Prince Anderson was attending a performance Marcus Flintella's *incredibly long* epic, *The Orochi Cycle*, on behalf of his father. The Prince was known at the time for his handsome face, and the seemingly ever-present look of boredom and disdain that sat upon it. But on that historic night, everything changed…"

The guide trails off and stops around the fifth row. He gestures to a seat near the aisle. "This very seat is the same one that the future Fire Lord occupied on that fateful night. And today… it is your seat," he says, looking directly at Blaine.

Blaine gapes. "I… what? You want me to…"

"Sit down," the guy says, gesturing to the seat again.

Blaine looks at the seat somewhat nervously (it's just a *chair*), and slowly but surely approaches and lowers himself into it.

Kurt moves to sit beside him, but the tour guide's hand stops him (and Kurt is about *this* close from confiscating said hand as a penalty for his attitude problem). "Not you. Your seats are further back."

"I beg your pardon?" Kurt says dangerously.

The tour guide sighs. "Look. I'm just doing what I was told, okay? I can tell by the look on your face that you want this to be over as badly as I do, so the sooner you sit down where you're supposed to, the sooner we can all go home. Believe me—it'll be easier for everyone if you just sit where she told me to put you."

*She.* Kurt grits his teeth. He should have known *she* was behind this. "Fine," he grits, allowing
himself to be ushered to the eighteenth row, and seated between Mercedes and Finn. When everyone is in place, the tour guide moves to stand in front of the stage. At this point, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a crumpled up sheet of paper, unfurling it in front of his face to read.

"Yes, it was in this very theater that the young Fire Lord's heart was first pierced by the swift, sure arrow of truest love. As he sat in that sacred chair, his beloved appeared, playing the role of Kushinada, singing in a voice more captivating and beautiful than any he had ever heard before. Her passionate and powerful performance so moved the young Prince that by the end of the song, those sitting near him claim that his eyes were filled with tears he could barely contain. Throughout the rest of the five hour performance, not once did the Prince return to his former expression of boredom." He pauses for a second, muttering something under his breath. Kurt is able to distinctly make out the words '…writes this crap?' before he takes a deep breath and continues. "And so it was that the Prince's heart was won with song. Thus it was—and perhaps it shall be once again. For music has the power to move the heaviest of hearts, and heal the deepest wounds. Let the power of music take you back to that day so long ago, so that you may feel as the Fire Lord felt…" At this, he looks ready to barf. "…and let love bloom once again."

And suddenly, the curtains slide apart, the hitherto unseen orchestra in the pit begins to play, and a single spotlight appears onstage to reveal…

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Kurt says, shaking his head in disgust.

"Is she for real?" Mercedes whispers.

"Shhhhh!" Finn shushes them, his eyes glued to the stage. "It's starting!"

And standing there in full 'white robes of sacrifice' costume and make-up, Rachel looks right at Blaine and begins to sing.

They totally should have buried her.

Artie is brought back to his senses by the feel of something cold, wet, and shockingly coarse nipping against his skin. He opens his eyes, and...

Cat.

Fucking cat.

The fucking cat is licking his face.

Artie glares at the creature. "I don't know how many lives you have left, but you've got about three seconds before I subtract one, you feel me?"

The cat's ears twitch, and it promptly leaps out of the can Artie is currently contained in and scurries off. He smiles at his effective effort at intimidation, but the smile drops when he hears footsteps coming and realizes the cat was not prompted to scat by Artie, but by tall, dark, and sneaky. The footsteps draw closer, and Artie adjusts his glasses, preparing for whatever he sees.

The guy peers into the trashcan, and sure enough, it's the same airbender from Fenghuang. And oh, goodie. From the look on his face, he seems to recognize Artie.

"You!" he says, glaring down into the can.

The earthbender gulps.
Well, he doesn't really have a whole lot of options here, so he decides to go with his time-tested 'I'm fucked' strategy and see where it takes him.

Thus, he stares up at the hooded airbender, and plasters on his best shit-eating grin.

"What up?"

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: Coming up next—At Groban Theater, the power of music is duly demonstrated. Songs are sung and love blooms in the Fire Nation! Meanwhile, Artie does NOT sing 'Totally Fucked' from Spring Awakening, but you know he would if he could. It fits! :D

A review or a comment is always appreciated. ^_^
For Whom I Burn

Chapter Notes

**Media:** Fic

**Title:** Solar Winds (*Avatar: The Last Airbender* Fusion, 38/?)

**Rating:** PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.

**Spoilers:** None for either series that I am aware of.

**Warnings:** Mildly ablist jerkishness from one character.

**Word Count:** ~7200

**Summary:** Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will destiny conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

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**Author's Note:** Songs are performed, and love blooms in the Fire Nation! Told you that would happen. :P The first 'song' in this chapter is actually an original song I wrote for this story. Well, more of an original poem, since I can't put music into this thing. ;) The second should be instantly recognizable to most. Some big, important moments in this chapter—some expected, some not so much. I hope you enjoy! :D

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**CHAPTER 38 – For Whom I Burn**

Blaine is blown away. How wonderful of Rachel to stage all this for him! Sitting in the same chair, in the same building, hearing the same song that moved his father to tears… it just makes the story feel so much more *real* to him. It doesn't take long for him to pinpoint this part of the story—Kushi has been chosen by the village to be the sacrifice that Orochi takes back with him in exchange for sparing the rest of the village. He listens to Rachel's powerful voice as she begins to sing.

The song is a strong one, in which Kushi both accepts and defies her fate. She is willing to do what she must to save her fellow villagers, but at the same time, she berates them for their cowardice in bowing to Orochi and acquiescing to his evil wishes. She defies the dragon even as she walks willingly to his lair, refusing to cower before him.

*Will none defy the dragon?*

*Will no one stand and fight?*

*How can you bow before this wicked beast*
and call it right?

Are we not of the same fire
That bellows from his mouth?
And yet we lay ourselves down at his feet
To be put out?

Her voice rises to a crescendo as the song approaches its peak.

I will not be afraid,
Though the dragon shakes the heavens,
I will not turn away,
Though his fury snuffs the stars.

I will stand before him,
Though his breath could slay the legions,
I will not bow unto him,
For he cannot shake my heart.

I know for whom I burn...

She hits the note flawlessly, and holds it well.

I know for whom I long...
I know for whom I yearn...
For him, I will be strong...

I will be strong.

As the music fades, Blaine can't help but stand up and give the performer his most enthusiastic applause. The song was incredible, and she performed it perfectly.

His is a ray of sunlight to her, and like a mirror, she reflects his beaming smile to the rest of the world... or in this case, the rest of the audience.

Kurt is going to be sick.

"She's pretty good," Mercedes admits.

The Avatar rolls his eyes. "Sure, from a purely technical standpoint."

The earthbender gives him a sidelong glance. "Okay, so what's your standpoint?"

Kurt sighs. "She hit all the right notes, but her performance just felt... flat. Music, to me, is about passion and feeling. Great music captures something truly powerful and communicates it with everyone who hears it." The passion in his voice increases as he begins to wax poetic. "It moves you. For a brief moment, you feel exactly what the singer feels, as if you share a single heart."

"That was beautiful," Finn sighs, looking close to tears.

Kurt grins. "Thank you, Finn."

"Huh?" Finn asks, turning to Kurt as if he just realized he was there. "What'd you say?"

The Avatar gapes at him. "You are kidding. You were not just talking about her."
"Who else would I be talking about?" Finn asks.

He absolutely cannot take anymore of this. To the endless amusement of Mercedes, Kurt stomps over towards the stage, where Blaine has climbed up and is speaking to Rachel at that very moment.

"Thank you," Blaine says, putting his hands on her shoulders, trying to communicate through touch just how much this whole thing means to him. "Thank you so much," he says.

Rachel smiles at him. "It was my pleasure."

"No, really," Blaine says, pulling her a little closer, holding her a little tighter. "All the trouble you went through to prepare this for me, it… it paid off so completely…"

The girl's eyes light up like newborn stars at this point. "Really?" she asks breathlessly.

"Absolutely," Blaine says. "It just… it felt like…" His voice is suddenly clogged with emotion. "Like I was there… with him… in that moment…"

Rachel pulls closer to him. "Like… you felt what he felt?"

Blaine nods, closing his eyes. "Yes."

Rachel's heart feels like it's about to burst into a shower of sparkles and lotus petals. This is it! This is the moment where they kiss, and fall in breathless love forever. Where she becomes his everything, and he hers. Where fireworks are lit between them that burst into new stars and constellations, eternal candles in the night sky that spell out their love for future generations to read. All that's left is the perfect romantic kiss, the spark that lights the fuse. She closes her eyes, and leans towards him…

Kurt watches this in abject horror, increasing his pace while having a very heated internal debate on whether or not his firebending is precise enough to hit Rachel without burning Blaine. Even as he stomps towards them, he knows he will not make it in time to stop that freakish woman's fish-lips from assaulting Blaine's mouth and the whole thing just makes him want to explode. The second their lips meet, he's going to go into the Avatar State, and will likely wake up several hours later in a large, smoking crater where the city used to be.

The kiss seems inevitable.

And then, something unexpected happens.

Blaine opens his eyes and sees Rachel coming towards him with her lids shut and her lips puckered. His reaction is instant, instinctual, and, in retrospect, kind of awful.

He dodges her.

As she tries to smash their lips together, Blaine spins to the side and releases her. By the time he realizes what is about to happen, it's already far too late to stop it. Rachel's forward momentum carries her past the point of no return, and her eyes open again just in time for—

(FLOP.)

—a face-first landing on the stage.

Everyone winces at the impact. Even the orchestra members. Even Mercedes. Even the tour
"Oh my gosh," Blaine says, kneeling beside her. "Rachel, are you okay?"

It takes a few moments for her to answer. "I'm fine," she says. "Completely, perfectly fine." The girl peels herself off the hardwood and looks at Blaine with red, blotchy eyes, and he honestly feels like the biggest tool on earth.

"Rachel, I'm so sorry," Blaine says. "I… I wasn't expecting… I didn't realize you… you wanted…"


"Well, yeah," Blaine says uneasily, scratching at the back of his head. "I mean, it is kind of out of nowhere…"

Rachel looks appalled and even more upset. "Out of nowhere? So, when we kissed last night, that meant nothing to you?" By now, the discomfort in the room already has the orchestra slowly but surely filing out with slightly pained expressions on their faces.

Blaine's eyes go wide. "Rachel, I was drunk last night. I was so out-of-it, I would've made out with… with… anything with lips."

He doesn't realize how awful and insensitive it sounds until it's already out of his mouth, and Rachel's face crumples. "Anything with lips?" she says. "So I'm no better than a… a… fish to you?"

"No!" Blaine says. "That's… that's not what I meant…"

"I think your meaning was perfectly clear," Rachel sniffs, pulling herself up off the ground and mustering as much dignity as she can with a steady stream of tears ruining her stage make-up. "I have never been so humiliated in my life. I just… you seemed so nice… you were so sweet to me… and I thought… I thought…"

And she can't continue anymore. She turns and jumps off the stage, soaring right over the orchestra and running out of the room fast enough to flutter Kurt's robes as she passes.

"Rachel, wait!" Blaine calls out, but she pays him no attention. He leaps off the stage as well, and tries to go after her, but Kurt stops him.

"Let her go," Kurt says, gently guiding Blaine back towards the stage. "I have some… experience in this area. You are probably the last person she wants to see right now."

"What do you mean?" Blaine asks. "You have experience in falling flat on your face during an attempt to kiss someone?"

"Figuratively speaking… yes, that's pretty much it," Kurt says. "Suffice it to say the first boy I ever tried to kiss… did not take it well."

Blaine winces. "I'm sorry. I just… I feel so bad. I wish there was something I could do."

"You," Kurt says simply, "need to stay here with me. Believe it or not, there is something here that I need to show you. Don't worry, though," he says kindly. "I have some people who might be willing to help dear Rachel in her moment of need."

With that, he makes eye contact with Mercedes in the audience, motioning with his head to the door. Mercedes gives him the okay sign, and walks out.
Looking conflicted and miserable, the first boy Kurt ever tried to kiss walks out after her.

Yes, as much as it pains him to admit it, Kurt can't help but sympathize with Rachel now. You don't realize how vulnerable you are in a moment like that until you are completely and utterly rejected right in the middle of it.

And to think, just two minutes ago, he would have given anything for a nice, small, soundproof closet to lock her in…

The staredown is intense.

At any moment, Artie expects it to erupt into a throwdown, which he will summarily turn into a takedown because he's awesome like that. Sure, he's never had an actual, full-on fight with an airbender before, but he's reasonably confident in his ability to kick most any ass at most any time. Granted, being stuck butt-first in a trashcan puts him at a bit of a momentary disadvantage, but he can deal. He's ready and raring to go, just waiting for the first blow…

…which is why it shocks the crap out of Artie when that blow never comes.

Instead of attacking, the guy just rolls his eyes. "Man, you guys are creepy," he says, turning around and walking away for a moment.

Ummm… what?

With a little help from the earth, Artie manages to tip his can and send himself sprawling onto the ground. He sits up and looks at the strange airbender, keeping his face carefully neutral. He has absolutely no idea what is going on, but that's never a good excuse to freak out.

The airbender has his arms crossed, and is glaring sourly at him. "You know, you could have just told me who you worked for. You didn't have to smack me in the face with the proof. I'm still a little sore about that, and I mean that in both the figurative and literal sense."

Who he… what?

Artie imagined any number of directions this confrontation might take, but this is not one of them. Why is this guy acting like he knows him?

Well, whatever. At times like this, there is only one thing to do, really. It's time for Artie to practice what he preaches.

He plays along.

"You struck first," Artie says simply, with a shrug.

"Because I thought you were trying to steal my shipment!" the airbender says, exasperated. "Which, by the way, wound up happening anyway. And now I am up shit tree without a paddle or… whatever the phrase is. And where were you when all this was happening?" he asks.

"Around," he says neutrally.

"Well, it's good to see that you people are up as ever on your 'cryptic asshole' game. Something stable you can cling to in such an unstable world; truly, you are a rock in the storm," the airbender deadpans.
Artie just gives him a smirk.

"So," the airbender says after a second. "What do you want? I assume you have orders or something."

Well, that's a little tricky. Given the circumstances, Artie decides to go with veiled honesty. "Nope," he says.

The airbender looks a little thrown. "Then… what do you want? Why are you still following me?"

Again, Artie decides honesty is the best policy. "Just keeping track of you," he says simply.

The airbender sneers at him. "Again, creepy. Your little collective's obsessive need to keep tabs on everyone and everything is just a little off-putting."

Artie raises an eyebrow at the guy.

He shrugs. "I'm just saying. You could at least offer to help."

He almost says 'help with what?' and blows his cover. Fortunately, his brain switches tracks at the last second and his 'cryptic, all-knowing asshole' disguise remains intact. "Oh, you call me creepy and obsessive, but now you want my help?"

The airbender cocks his head to the side, somewhat less than amused. "Hey, you guys are just as invested in the success of this as we are. Since you're already here and you don't seem to be doing much else, why not lend a helping hand?"

Artie has to tread carefully here. He has no idea what 'help' entails, but he doesn't want to shut the guy down outright. But he also needs to know what, exactly, is going on here. More specifically, he needs to find that out without revealing that he doesn't already know. He looks contemplative for a second. "And what, exactly, would my helping hand be doing?" he asks. "It's not my job to do your job for you."

The airbender looks profoundly miffed for a couple of seconds, before abruptly deflating, his defiant streak just dropping right out of him. "Look, all I need is some help getting back my sky bison. I've been looking all around the city, and I still can't figure out where they took him."

"They stole your sky bison?" Artie says before he can catch himself. Really. It just seems so outlandish.

But the guy doesn't seem to catch his slip-up. "I know, right?" he says. "I have no idea how they found him, let alone how they moved him. I knew they'd be mad, but I never imagined they'd stoop to animal cruelty. Honestly, the criminal element in the Fire Nation is just so… unrefined," he says, disgusted. "I guess not all cities can be as tightly run as Ba Sing Se," he adds, with a smirk. "Maybe you guys should expand your operations."

"Maybe," Artie says, steeping his hands in front of his face to mull it over for a second. He doesn't know this guy. From what he's seen, he doesn't even particularly like him. But Artie is generally against animal cruelty (to the good fortune of many cats), no matter what the animal. He isn't quite sure what he's getting into, but he is pretty sure that agreeing to help will give him an opportunity to find out, and information on illicit airbender operations could come in handy when Kurt finally makes it to the Air Temples to start the last leg of his training.

"Look, I don't have all day," the guy says. "Are you going to help, or are you going to act like a rock and just sit there?"

The airbender seems honestly surprised. "Well… this is an unexpected, but not unwelcome development. A helpful earthbender. Will wonders never cease?" he says sardonically.

"Watch it, flyboy," Artie says flatly. "I could always change my mind and leave you to sort this mess out yourself."

The airbender holds up his hands in surrender. "Fine, fine. I apologize. Really, I do appreciate the help."

"That's better," Artie says with a smirk.

The guy steps towards him. "Since we're going to be working together, we may as well introduce ourselves. I know you guys are into the whole 'the collective over the individual' thing, but I assume you at least have a name. I'm Jesse St. James," he says, offering a hand.

He thinks about it for a few seconds, but eventually decides on his real name. "Artie Abrams," he says, grasping the hand and shaking it.

"A pleasure," Jesse says. "Now, come on. Let's get to work." And with his hand still clasped around Artie's, he does something the other boy does not quite expect.

He tries to pull him to his feet.

It works about as well as you'd think.

Which is, you know, not at all.

(FLOP.)

"Uhhhh," Jesses says. "Are you okay?"

"Peachy," Artie replies, pulling his face up out of the dirt and propping it on his elbows. "But I think before we move on with this little venture, there are a few things we should discuss, first…"

"So, what did you want to show me?" Blaine says, still carrying that tone of guilt that Kurt worked so hard to get him to drop. Granted, his new guilt is from a completely different place than his old guilt, but still.

"Ummm…" Kurt trails off, because he's not entirely sure how much Blaine knows about this particular aspect of Avatar-ism. Truth be told, Kurt isn't entirely sure how much he knows about it. "It's kind of hard to explain. Better that I show you."

"Okay," Blaine nods. "I'm ready when you are."

And then… Kurt has no idea what to do. Groban said he'd know what to do. Groban lied. Fucking Groban.

Okay, so… Kurt needs to channel Groban's spirit somehow. Generally speaking, that's easier to accomplish around a solstice, but there's nothing he can do to change the time of year. Other options include maybe getting a hold of a few of Groban's possessions, or finding Groban's very secret diary and reading it out loud, or… just… something that will bring their spirits closer together.
In any of those cases, his best bet is probably that tour guide. He seems to know his stuff, even if he doesn't necessarily like said stuff.

"Why don't you go have a seat?" Kurt asks. "There are some... things that I need to take care of."

Blaine smiles at him. "Oh? Am I going to get another performance?"

The statement hits Kurt like a blast of semi-frozen slush to the face. That's it! What better way to channel the spirit of a born performer than to perform? "Blaine, you are an accidental genius!"

Blaine's eyebrows shrug in confusion. "...huzzah for me?" he says.

"Huzzah indeed!" Kurt smiles. "Now go. Have a seat. I'll be back with you shortly!"

And he prances off to find that poor, miserable man and force him to give an even more detailed tour. Fortunately for Kurt, he doesn't have to travel too far to find him. The fellow is leaning against the doorway, snoring softly. "Wow," Kurt says to himself. "He wasn't kidding about his sleep schedule."

He hates to disturb the man's slumber, but destiny is calling, and if the Avatar can do his part, this guy can do the same. "Excuse me," he says gently.

No response.

Kurt gently nudges him with his foot. "Excuse me!" he says with a little more oomph.

The guy jumps. "She fondled me first!" he blurts in shock, before making an effort to shake and blink himself into awareness. "I... uhhh... wow. Must have dozed off there. What do you want?" he asks tiredly.

"I was wondering if you could give me a slightly more... detailed version of the Avatar Groban Experience," Kurt says simply.

The guy closes his eyes, leaning his head back against the wall. "Look, I already told you—we usually only give these tours in the evenings. I'm incredibly tired, and I don't feel like—"

Kurt produces a gold piece from within his robe. "I'll make it worth your while," he says, flashing it at the guy's face, holding it so the light glints off of it just enough to emphasize its shine.

The bleary eyes of the guide suddenly widen dramatically. "I... feel so much more awake now for some reason," he says simply. "Come with me!"

The tour guide marches off, and Kurt takes a moment to wave at Blaine, who is staring off into space. It takes a couple seconds to get his attention. Kurt simply nonverbally assures him that he will be back, and Blaine promptly nods and goes back to staring.

"So, what exactly would you like me to show you, most esteemed sponsor of the arts?" the tour guide says happily.

Kurt grins. Oh, how a little gold can affect such a remarkable change in attitude. "Well, now that you mention it, I'm looking for... a song..."
Artie rubs his forehead with his fingers. Most things in life get easier with repetition. But somehow, this conversation actually manages to suck worse every time he has to have it. "'Paraplegic' will work for me."

"Paraplegic. Alright then," Jesse says, and the conversation tapers off (finally!).

After explaining why Jesse's attempt at a helping hand ended with Artie in a human heap, Jesse decided to be 'nice' by fluttering off and fetching him a wheelchair. Of course, it would have been nicer if Jesse had actually asked instead of assuming he needed one. And even nicer if it wasn't stolen.

Which brings up an interesting thought…

"You didn't steal this from some little old lady who actually needs it to get around, did you?" Artie asks.

"Pfffffft," Jesse scoffs. "No," he says in a way that clearly means 'yes.'

"Dude!" Artie says. "That is a major karmic misstep! Put it back!"

"What is the big deal?" Jesse asks. "You need it, too!"

"No, I don't!" Artie says. "Did you see a wheelchair under me while I was chasing your ass around town? Hills no you did not."

"Look," Jesse says, "I'll give it back when we're done, alright? I promise."

Artie turns to assess the airbender for a few seconds. "You're not gonna take it back, are you?" he says simply.

"…probably not," Jesse admits with a shrug.

Artie's hand returns to his forehead. Douchebag, his brain mutters.

"Well, here we are," Jesse says, coming up on a slightly decrepit looking building near the edge of town. "This is where I put him when I'm in town. It's an old stable. Nice and roomy."

Finally, it's time to start the investigation. Artie looks at the old building carefully. "So this was the last place you saw him?"

"Yup," Jesse says simply.

"First off, how do you know he was kidnapped? Or… bison-napped, or whatever?" Artie asks.

Jesse produces a small note from his pocket, which Artie unfolds and scans.

WE HAV UR BYE-SUN. BRNG US MUNNEEZ N DURGZ OR WE KILLS HIM 2 DETH.

"Man," Artie says, shaking his head. "The education in this country is really slipping."

Jesse shrugs. "The criminal element in any society generally tends to be the least educated among them."

Artie looks up at him. "Yes, I can see that now," he deadpans.

The insult flies right past him. "Anyway… I don't exactly have 'munnee' or 'durgz.' At least, none
that I am allowed to give to these bozos. If I could just find out where they're keeping him, I could go in and clean house, but... I'm stumped," he says, running a hand through his hair. "Man... this week. You don't even know."

Artie cups his hands on his chin. "Let's think through this logically. How would you move a giant, flying animal the size of a small house?"

"Well," Jesse says, "I'd just hop on and ride him."

"You think that's what they did?" Artie asks.

Jesse shakes his head. "No," he says with certainty. "Mr. Duck would never obey the commands of a stranger."

Well, that's a head-tilter. "Mr. Duck?" Artie asks with a skeptical eye.

Jesse blushes slightly. "It's... his name," he mutters. "I didn't pick it out," he adds.

"...right," Artie says neutrally. "So, they couldn't ride him out. They'd have to find some way to take him by force. Any signs of a struggle?"

Jesse pushes Artie into the stable's interior. They don't see much of interest. "I'm guessing if a multi-ton airbending animal got into a fight with someone here, we'd know about it," Artie says. "So they must have subdued it somehow."

"I wonder how?" Jesse mutters.

Artie shrugs. " Doesn't matter. If he was subdued, that means they pulled him along on the ground somehow. That's a lot of weight, so I'm guessing whatever they used made some pretty deep impressions."

"I didn't see any tracks," Jesse says. "And yes, I looked. I'm not an idiot."

The earthbender just grins. "They probably tried to cover them from prying eyes. But they didn't count on the guy who can see with his hands."

At this, he thrusts himself out of the wheelchair and places his palms on the ground, sending out vibrations and seeing what pings him back. "Ha," he says after a few seconds. "Amateurs. There's a very distinct area of recently disturbed earth that leads northwest, out of town. They tried to cover up, alright, but they didn't try hard enough."

"Well, well," Jesse says. "I knew you'd come in handy." He looks down at the earthbender assessingly. "You know," he says carefully, "we'd make a pretty good team..."

"Yeah..." Artie says with a small grin. Then he drops it completely. "...how about 'no'?"

Jesse snaps. "Curses, foiled again."

Artie smiles and promptly earthbends himself back into the chair. "Come on. Let's get your bison back."

"Well..." Jesse says as they exit the building. "Technically, he isn't actually mine, per se."

Artie looks back at him. "Then whose is he?"
Brittany sticks her nose into the air, her face scrunching as she sniffs.

"What's wrong, Brit?" Santana asks, looking back at her rhino-mate.

"It's Mr. Duck," Brittany says, sounding seriously worried for what has to be the first time, ever, in the entire time Santana has known her. "I think he's in trouble!"

Santana isn't quite sure how to reply to that. "Ummm… okay?" she tries.

"We have to go help him," Brittany says seriously. "He just got out of rehab. He has so much promise."

Well... that doesn't leave much room for argument. Unfortunately, here lately, any room for argument is enough for Quinn… Santana looks over to the Chi-Ryu Captain. "Hey, Quinn," she says.

"What," Quinn says sharply.

Santana doesn't even flinch. "Britz wants a word with you," she says.

Quinn turns to Brittany. "What is it now?"

Brittany shrinks slightly at her tone. "Mr. Duck needs our help. He's too young and fluffy to die."

"Who is Mr. Duck?" Quinn asks, exasperated.

"He's my life partner," Brittany says simply.

Santana's head practically breaks her own neck spinning around to look at Brittany. "Say what now?"

"It's true," Brittany says with a sage nod. "Our bond is super profound."

Santana is slightly flabbergasted. Life partner? So is Brittany like… in a relationship with this guy? What the fuck is she doing with Santana, then?

"We can't afford any more detours," Quinn says simply. "We've already lost a ridiculous amount of time going back to investigate that stupid fake Prince those idiots caught."

"Hey," Puck adds. "At least we got some more rhinos out of the deal. Hungover rhinos, but, you know, still rhinos."

Quinn's head snaps around to glare at him. "What did I tell you about speaking to me? Or looking at me? Or being within fifty feet of me?"

Puck scratches at the back of his neck. "Ummm… don't?"

"Exactly," Quinn says, swiping a small arc of flame at his head. "Back up!" she orders.

The armored assassin and his loyal rhino sheepishly comply. Even Kilgore seems a little terrified of Quinn at the moment. Santana can't exactly blame him—since Fenghuang, Quinn must be taking a daily dose of Ultrabitch or something. She throws everything from fire, to supplies, to vicious, vicious words at anyone who pisses her off.

And by 'anyone who pisses her off,' Santana mostly means Puck.
"Anyway," Quinn grits. "As I was saying, we can't afford anymore detours. We need to stay on task."

Brittany looks sad for a few seconds, but eventually nods. "Okay. I get it."

Quinn looks relieved. "Good. I'm glad."

"Sorry," Santana says putting a sympathetic hand on Brittany's shoulder. Of course, truth-be-told, she's kind of glad that they aren't going to help Mr. Dick or whatever his name is. The last thing she wants is to see Brittany getting all starry-eyed over some dude. Brittany is hers.

"It's okay," Brittany says with a soft smile. "I understand. I had a really great time with you guys. Bye!" And suddenly, Brittany is leaping from her rhino to the treetops, bounding gracefully through the forest away from them.

"Hey, wait!" Santana shouts, but Brittany is already too far to hear.

Santana starts to go after her, but Quinn lets out a frustrated growl. "No!" she says. "Let her go."

"Say what now?" Santana asks. "Call me crazy, but isn't she, like, our best bet at finding Curl and the Gang?"

"No, she isn't," Quinn grinds through her teeth. "She was a helpful for a little while, yes, but we don't need her for anything. She can do what she wants. We have a job to do. Or do I need to remind you what's at stake for you personally should we fail to secure the prince?"

Santana glares at the blonde who happens to be her boss.

"Or do you have some personal reason to go after her?" Quinn asks snidely, with a mirthless smirk. "Something completely unrelated to the mission? Some kind of attachment to the little airhead?"

Santana's teeth grind hard enough to turn rock into gravel, but she doesn't say anything.

"I'll take that as a 'no,'" Quinn says. "Good, then. We'll keep going."

So they do. And Santana doesn't care. Really, she doesn't. Brittany was fun while she was around, but now she's not, and Santana has shit to do. They all have shit to do. Brittany has her own shit, Santana has her own shit, so they will all just go and roll around in their separate piles of shit and everything will be shitty for everyone.

…

She's pretty sure she intended to go somewhere else with that.

Fuck it. Whatever. The point is... Brittany is the one who left. The one who chose Mr. Dick over her. Which is just fine and fucking dandy. Santana doesn't give a fuck. Never has, never will. So if she has to keep going and leave Brittany behind, that's exactly what she'll do. She'll move right on, and she won't even look back. Not even once.

And definitely not twice.

Finn and Mercedes split up to look for Rachel. She totally books it, like, way faster than either of them can follow, so they have no idea where she went. Mercedes looks around the inside of the building, so Finn goes outside.
He looks around, having no idea where to even start looking. After a few seconds of this, he turns around and decides to go back inside and ask Mercedes where he should start looking.

That's when he sees her.

Standing on the freaking roof. Like, near the very edge. His heart jumps up and cuts and flip and gets stuck sideways in his throat for a couple of seconds causing him to choke a little bit. "No!" he shouts up at her. "Don't jump!"

And then he dashes back into the building. "Don't jump!" he shouts as he runs through the lobby (getting a few weird looks from the remaining orchestra members as they file out).

"Don't jump!" he shouts as he dashes up a staircase, nearly knocking over Kurt and that really depressed guy who showed them around the place.

"Don't jump!" he shouts as he dashes around the upstairs hallways, looking for a way to get further up. Mercedes pokes her head out of one of the side rooms she is checking as he passes.

"Don't jump!" he shouts as he scrambles up the ladder like the worst koala crab ever, banging his arms and hands and knees against, like, every rung because he sucks at climbing.

"Don't..." he gasps as he finally reaches the roof, his lungs practically flat from all the not-air that Finn has forced into them. "Don't..." he pants, "...jump..." he wheezes, stumbling towards Rachel and bending over double to try and, like, inflate himself again.

Rachel is looking at him, slightly mortified. "Your concern is touching," she says carefully, "but I never had any intentions of jumping."

Finn nearly falls over at this announcement.

Wait, no, he totally falls over. It just takes him a couple seconds.

"Oh my gosh!" Rachel says, running to kneel beside him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine!" Finn somehow says in the weird squeaky voice he had before he turned 13 and transformed overnight into a giant whirlwind of awkward, flailing limbs.

"Did you run all the way up here?" Rachel asks.

Finn shakes his head. "No... I had to stop running... to climb the ladder..." he pants.

She just tilts her head at him.

"So..." Finn asks after a second or two. "If you weren't gonna jump... why are you up here?"

Rachel turns to look off at the horizon. "I just... like it up here. My hair billowing in the breeze makes everything seem much more significant and meaningful."

And then there is a little breeze that makes Rachel's hair swoosh out behind her, and Finn totally gets what she means. "Oh," he says, finally catching enough of his breath to sit up. "Well, that's good. I'm really glad you weren't gonna jump. 'Cause you're a really pretty singer."

Rachel turns to look at him, a little surprised.
Finn takes this the wrong way. "I mean… not like, you're just pretty and you're a singer, but you sing and it's pretty…"

Her eyes widen, and Finn kind of panics just a little.

"I mean… not that you're not pretty, because you totally are! You're totally very, very pretty, but I wasn't talking about your prettiness, I was talking about your voice-prettyness. You're a person who sings pretty. A pretty person… who sings pretty. You're very pretty," he finally finishes, blushing slightly and looking down.

Fortunately for Finn, she sounds happy. "Well… thank you," she says. She's totally smiling, just a little bit, when he looks up. "I only wish I could agree with you. I am feeling decidedly unpretty at the moment."

He looks at her and… "Well, yeah, you've got all this weird blotchy make-up stuff running down your face from all your cries, but that's just stuff. It comes off."

She smiles a little bigger. Score! "I suppose it does, doesn't it?" she says.

"Yeah. We should—you should… clean up," he finishes lamely. "You'll feel better after."

"Good idea," Rachel says, standing up and offering him a hand. He isn't sure why, cause he is totally eight times her size and would just pull her down on top of him if he took it. But he takes it anyway, and gets up on his own.

"Sorry you got all… embarrassed, and stuff," Finn says as they head over to the ladder.

Rachel sighs. "It's my fault, really," she says sadly. "I have to stop getting so invested in these things. I can't just keep falling in love with every boy who is just a little nice to me."

"Oh, totally," Finn agrees. "I mean… not the 'your fault' thing, but… you should… umm… you should only fall for guys who are, like, a lot nice to you."

Rachel spins around to look at him, a really weird smile on her face. "Oh?" she says. "Do you have an example of such a guy?"

Finn becomes like some kind of human thermometer, getting all hot and having his face turn red from all the stuff rushing up to it. "Uhhhh… I'm… I… I don't know… you know… the guys that you know, so… I can't really say," he finishes lamely.

She actually looks a little disappointed. "Oh," she says. "Well… it's good advice, nonetheless. I'll remember it…" she trails off, tilting her head. "I'm sorry… what was your name again?"

"Finnhudson!" he says, way too fast like it's one word.

"Well, Finn Hudson," Rachel says. "I'll remember that. Thank you."

"No problem," Finn says, hopping on the ladder (he should totally go first, cause if she falls on him, she'll just bounce right off, but if he falls on her, he'll totally crush her flat). He starts climbing down.

"And for the record," Rachel says. "I think you are a very nice boy."

He kind of hits his head on the next rung, but he doesn't even care.
Blaine sits alone in the quiet theater, reflecting on... well, basically everything.

This entire day has been an emotional rollercoaster of unreal proportions. All these huge chunks of his own past that he never even knew existed, suddenly unearthed and presented to him like he is supposed to know what to do with them. He's immensely thankful that he knows his mother better now, but in a way, this just makes him feel her loss all over again. The portrait in the lobby... they'd looked so completely smitten with each other. In a way, he understood a little better now, why his father had shut down when she died. He understood, even if he still didn't like it.

And then Rachel had tried to re-enact his parents' love story, with him completely oblivious to her the entire time. Had she really fallen for him so quickly? Was he really that blind to her advances? He felt so bad for her... her performance was definitely good, but it just didn't make him want to... you know... love her. He couldn't even imagine falling in love with someone because of a song...

When I am down
And oh, my soul, so weary...

Suddenly, a voice fills the air. Blaine's entire posture immediately stands at attention, and he leans forward in the seat. He recognizes the voice instantly, and at the same time, he feels like he's never heard it before in his life.

When troubles come
And my heart burdened be...

Kurt stands alone on the stage. He sings with no orchestra, no accompaniment, not even a single instrument playing along with him. His voice rings high and clear from every corner of the massive theater, like it was meant to fill the space. And he looks directly at Blaine the whole time.

Then I am still
And wait here in the silence...

Blaine can't breathe. His lungs seem to have seized up, his chest clenching at every note from the beautiful boy on stage. Kurt's singing voice is like nothing he has ever heard before—so light, but carrying such immense weight, so agile, but so stable and strong. It resonates within him, echoes in the empty chambers of his heart. Kurt sings the song to Blaine and Blaine alone, and every word rings with absolute truth.

Until you come
And sit a while with me.

And then he starts the chorus.

You raise me up
So I can stand on mountains.
You raise me up
To walk on stormy seas...

His entire body responds to the song in ways completely outside of his awareness—he leans forward, wanting to be closer. His hands grip the seat in front of him, wanting to feel the music as surely as he hears it. His jaw clenches, his eyes mist over, and he is completely unaware of all of this. Every iota of his attention belongs to Kurt.

I am strong
When I am on your shoulders.
You raise me up
To more than I can be...

And there is a small part of him that balks at the words. It says ‘no, this can't possibly be true, he can't mean this.’ It says that Blaine should be singing this to Kurt, not the other way around… and yet, Blaine cannot question the honesty of the song, the honesty on Kurt's face, the honesty in every perfect word that rings from within him…

Rachel sang to him, and Blaine was impressed.

Kurt is singing to him, and Blaine is… Blaine is moved.

And then, Kurt closes his eyes and launches into a second, higher chorus, and it almost seems like there are other voices singing right along with him.

You raise me up
So I can stand on mountains.
You raise me up
To walk on stormy seas...

It takes Blaine until about halfway through this chorus to realize that it isn't his imagination—there are multiple voices singing the song now. And they are all coming from Kurt.

I am strong
When I am on your shoulders.
You raise me up
To more than I can be...

The voices gradually taper off, and only one voice remains when the song finishes.

You raise me up
To more than I can be.

It isn't Kurt's.

Suddenly, every lamp burning in the theater seems to dim. A wind from nowhere stirs within the room, incredibly powerful, yet somehow not violent at all. The flames within the lamps are not extinguished by the winds, but rather leap from their wicks and ride it, jetting through the air in a steadily smaller orbit around the Avatar. Kurt stands on the stage, his expression neutral, his eyes remaining shut as all the light in the room concentrates around him.

And suddenly, Kurt is the light.

His eyes open, and from within him bursts a haunting, unearthly glow unlike anything Blaine has ever seen. The sight of it is both beautiful and terrifying—it speaks of something older and deeper and far grander than he can grasp at. It tells of the stars and the planets, the sun and the moon and the cosmic order that extends so far outside of their tiny world, to past, future, and beyond.

At that moment, Blaine glimpses eternity.

The flames encircling Kurt grow larger and stronger, burning brighter and brighter until they obscure him entirely, and Blaine has to shield his eyes to protect them from the light. Gradually, the fierce and powerful winds die down, and the firelight fades.

The other light, however, remains.
Blaine's eyes return to the stage, and the sight that greets him momentarily stops his heart.

Kurt is nowhere to be seen.

Standing in his place, complete with the unearthly glow in his eyes, is a figure Blaine recognizes instantly. The figure from the statues, from the murals and carvings, in the flesh right in front of him.

Avatar Groban graces him with a benevolent smile.

"Hey there, Blaine."

_A/N: Coming Up Next_ – Avatar Groban has a little chat with his descendant, while Mercedes has a little chat with Rachel. Meanwhile, Artie and Jesse continue to track down Mr. Duck, unwittingly putting them on a collision course with Brittany. What will happen when they collide? What wisdom does Avatar Groban have to impart? You'll find out… eventually! :D

As always, reviews and comments are loved.
CHAPTER 39 – Crossroads

Artie slides to a halt near the edge of the cliff. Jesse walks behind him, eying him with no small amount of trepidation.

"Dude, you are freaking me out with that sliding thing. How do you even do that?" he asks.

Artie's response is utterly flat. "I keep a small army of ants in my pants to carry me around. I command them by sweating."

"That's gross," Jesse says, scrunching up his face, and Artie resists the urge to just bury his head in the dirt out of frustration.

"Be quiet for a few seconds," he says, putting his palms to the ground. "I'm trying to get a good picture of where they're keeping him and I need to concentrate."

"Alright, alright," Jesse says, raising his hands in surrender.

With the silence, Artie is able to focus his senses and feel out the interior of the cave. "There's six
of them," he says after a few moments. "They're in and out of the cave at regular intervals, but Mr. Duck is definitely down there. He's tied down, but not moving. I think he's asleep."

"He's not… you know… dead, is he?" Jesse asks, actually sounding somewhat concerned about something other than himself for once.

"No," Artie says. "I don't think so."

"Good," Jesse says, sounding relieved. "That would be really hard to explain to my superiors. And Brittany," he adds. "I'm actually kind of impressed they got him in there. Sky bison hate being underground. I'd have figured he'd bite someone in half before he let them put him in a cave."

"I'm still wondering how they managed to subdue him," Artie says. "They've got… stuff down there. Boxes of weapons, boxes of junk… I'm guessing this place was used for something else before they turned it into bison jail. But they've got one little box down there, and I can't figure out what's inside of it. And I'm willing to wager that it's probably something extremely important to know," he finishes.

Jesse sticks his head over the cliffside to peek down at the criminal scum. "Please. The only thing I need to know is that they have something that belongs to me—kind of—and I want it back."

"Dude," Artie says, sliding up next to him. "Don't just rush in there. We need to make a plan."

"Oh, come now," Jesse counters, "I've taken down worse than this. The odds are always in my favor. Honestly, in the game of life, airbending should probably be considered cheating. It just isn't fair to the other elements."

Artie must continually remind himself that he does not, in fact, want this guy to just go down there and get himself killed. "I'm not saying that you couldn't just pop on down there and blow everybody away. I'm saying you could do it better if you had some kind of plan."

Jesse looks contemplative. "Hmmmm… improvisation versus scripted acting—the spontaneous performance against the rehearsed, pre-planned arc. If nothing else, this will be an interesting thought experiment. Plus, if your plan sucks—which is a very real possibility—I can always just screw it and do things my way." He turns to Artie with a smile. "Alright, then, plan-maker. Make me a plan."

A concession is a concession—Artie will take it. He puts palms to ground again. "Okay… from what I can tell, they have a fairly predictable patrol pattern. There's one who hangs near the entrance, and two more who walk back and forth outside."

At this, Jesse pulls a long, thin staff from under his cloak and begins to scrape it in the dirt.

The earthbender grins. It's good to see his companion is finally paying attention and taking notes. "Now, I'm guessing the one who hangs near the entrance keeps his eye on the two patrolling in case something happens to them. The thing is, judging from his heart rate and posture, he's about to fall asleep. When that happens, there's a brief moment in the other two's patrol routes where either one of them can be taken out without anyone seeing. Here, I'll show you." He slides over to what he assumes is Jesse's dirt diagram of his master plan…

…only to find a picture of a sky bison standing on its hind legs and biting the heads off stick figures.

Artie directs an unamused glare at the airbender.
Jesse looks down at him. "Oh, I'm sorry. Were you saying something? Something important, I mean."

"I was giving you my plan," Artie says.

"Is that what that was?" Jesse says. "I assumed by your dull, droning tone of voice that you were talking about rocks, or sand, or something equally boring."

Artie sighs. "I need a drink," he mumbles.

"I've got a very nice vintage of Western Temple Wine in my rucksack," Jesse says.

Artie rubs his hands over his face. "You weren't supposed to hear that," he grumbles, annoyed.

Jesse tilts his head at him. "Then why'd you say it?"

Artie opens his mouth to reply, only to find that he has nothing to say. "...that's a good question." He shakes his head. "Look, whatever dude. Here's the plan; do exactly what I tell you, exactly when I tell you, okay?"

"That doesn't sound like a very good plan," Jesse says skeptically.

"Just... trust me," Artie says. "Follow my lead, and everything will be—"

"Brittany!" Jesse says, wide-eyed.

"No, everything will not be Brittany," the earthbender sighs. "It will be—"

"No, look!" Jesse says, pointing down below them.

Artie spins around to see a figure dressed in yellow leaping through the trees with a kind of ease and casual grace that would make a cat green with envy. As the figure approaches, Artie is able to make out long blonde hair, and a bright, slightly ethereal smile.

"That's Brittany?" he asks.

"The one and only," Jesse replies.

"Where'd she come from? What's she doing?" he asks.

"She has a weird way of always finding her way back to me," Jesse says. "I used to panic when she disappeared, but she always turns up eventually."

"Oh, crap," Artie says. "They're going to see her!"

It's kind of hard not for them to see her, seeing as she jumps out of the trees and lands in the open area right in front of the cave. The two thugs spot her immediately, and begin to speak with her as they approach.

"Shit!" Jesse curses. "Sorry, plan's off." He twirls his staff in the air and slams it onto the ground, causing two large, bat-like wings to unfold from within. "It's showtime."

Artie sees what is coming and tries to stop it. "Dude, wait, your thing is—"

Alas, he is too late, and Jesse leaps off the cliff, attempting to glide to Brittany's aid... only to go sailing off to one side because one of his glider wings has a giant hold burnt through it. "Crap!" he
says as he begins to tilt. "I forgot about thaaaaat!"

And then he crashes into a tree.

"Well, this day just gets better and better," Artie sighs. With a deep breath to prepare himself, retrieves his gloves from his sleeves, letting familiar feeling wash over him as the many tiles slide over his skin and slot into place on his hands and fingers.

Jesse was right about one thing. It's definitely showtime.

Finn is somewhat surprised to find Mercedes waiting for them at the bottom of the ladder.

"Did she jump?" Mercedes asks.

"No," Finn says. "She wasn't gonna. She just likes… windy hair… or something," he mumbles.

Rachel comes down after him, sliding off much quicker than he did. "I am not in any way suicidal," Rachel says imperiously. "To deprive the world of my talent would be an unforgivable crime on my part."

Mercedes snorts. "Well, it's good to see you're already back on your feet. That was a pretty nasty fall."

"Yes, well," Rachel says, "I suppose I should be used to public scorn and embarrassment. I'm sure there will be all sorts of horrible rumors for me to deal with when I become famous."

"Oh, we all get a little embarrassed every now-and-then," Mercedes says as they walk down the hallway. "Keeps us from getting our heads all inflated. Isn't that right, Finn?" she says, glancing at the tall boy.

"Uhhh, what do you mean?" Finn asks.

"Oh, come on," she says teasingly. "If anybody knows how to deal with embarrassment, it's you."

"Oh?" Rachel asks. "Is that so?"

"No," Finn denies petulantly.

"Mmmmmmmm," Mercedes says, nodding her head. "Poor boy is a disaster on two legs. Tripping over himself, tripping over everybody else, smacking his head on doorframes, walking into signs... and that's just the physical stuff."

Finn turns steadily redder with every passing remark.

"You never know what's gonna come out of that boy's mouth. One time we were at the market, talking to this sweet little fruit-selling lady. As we were walking away, you know what Finn told her?"

"What?" Rachel says, clearly intrigued.

"Have a nice baby," Mercedes says with a grin.

At this point, Finn has passed 'tomato' and is rapidly approaching 'strawberry.' "It was an accident!" he insists. "It was supposed to be 'have a nice day,' but I saw a baby out of the corner of my eye, and..."
Rachel suppresses a giggle fit.

Finn sighs.

"Oh, Finn, I'm sorry," Rachel says, still holding back laughter. "It's just…"

"The poor woman did not look remotely pregnant. She thought Finn was calling her fat. Tossed fruit at him until he was out of sight. Got him real good once with a honeydew right to the head. Everybody called him melon-head for a few days after that one," Mercedes finishes.

And Rachel can't hold it back anymore. She bursts into open laughter, and Finn crosses his arms and pouts angrily. He's pretty sure that Rachel thinks he is a giant walking joke now… which is pretty much what he is, but it was nice not to be called out on it for once. "Thanks a lot, Mercedes," Finn grumbles.

"I'm just trying to make the girl feel better," Mercedes says casually, smirking at him. "Look how much she's laughing."

He cuts his eyes over to Rachel, who seems almost ready to fall over.

"You made that possible," Mercedes says with mock-sincerity. "Doesn't it feel good to bring that kind of joy into somebody's life?"

"No," he grumbles.

"Oh, Finn," Rachel says finally starting to recover. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

"It's okay," Finn says, smiling a little. At least she thinks about his feelings.

"Come on, sweetie," Mercedes says. "Let's go wash all that gunk off your face."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Rachel smiles. "Lead the way!"

The two of them march off into a side room. Finn starts to follow, only to have the door slammed in his face.

"Girls only, please!" Mercedes says from behind the door. "Boys wait outside."

Finn glares at the door, trying to make it powerful enough to pierce through and get to Mercedes. Sadly, it doesn't work. All that's left for him to do is poutily lean on the door and try to hear what they are saying.

Hey, it's totally unfair for them to lock him out like this. He's allowed to listen in, especially since they are probably talking about him.

He hears one last thing as their voices fade from his hearing. "If you thought that was funny," Mercedes says. "Wait until you hear about the time he got beat up by a fish…"

Finn smacks his head against the wall. Why does he only get to be right when it sucks?

It takes a second or two for Blaine to regain the ability to speak. "Wh-where's Kurt?" is the first thing he stammers out. It's the obvious question.

"Kurt's right here," Avatar Groban says, gesturing to himself. "He hasn't gone anywhere. He's just channeling me. In a way, he is me."
Blaine just tilts his head at the Avatar. "I don't…"

Groban gives him a sympathetic smile. "Yeah, I didn't either. It's kind of weird. Think of the Avatar as… a rubber band ball." He grabs at an imaginary ball as he tries to explain. "A single big thing made out of lots and lots of little things. Kurt is just one rubber band on the ball, but he's also the entire ball, in a way. It's like that with everyone. You get it?"

Blaine stares at him for a few seconds, thinking hard. "No," he says, shaking his head.

Groban scratches at the back of his neck. "Don't worry about it. Just think of it as Kurt taking a backseat for the time being. You and I need to have a little chat, o descendant of mine," Groban grins. "Hop up here with me."

Blaine has no idea how to react to any of this, so he complies, moving onto the stage. "I'm your descendant?" he asks as he walks slightly closer to Groban. He doesn't want to get too close.

People with glowing eyes are very intimidating.

"Yes indeed," Groban grins. "You and a small percentage of the Fire Nation population."

Blaine's eyes widen. "What?"

"Yup," Groban says. "That song Kurt was singing? You can't imagine the amount of tang that song got me. Agni's prophylactic, kid, you heard it yourself. Don't even lie—you were about to jump Kurt's bones before I popped in."

The Fire Prince turns an alarming shade of red and very nearly bursts into flames from sheer embarrassment. "You… that's… okay, why are you here?" Blaine finally asks. "I mean… not that I'm not honored to be in your presence, Avatar Groban, it's just… this is very confusing. And disturbing. In more ways than one," he says simply, averting his eyes. "Could you… ummm…” He waves his hands around his eyes. "…turn that off?"

The Avatar takes a couple of seconds to figure out what Blaine is talking about. "Oh! The eye-glow. Yeah… that does tend to freak people out." He closes his eyes for a few seconds, and when he opens them, they are normal. "Better?"

"Yes," Blaine nods. "Thank you. Now… what do you want? Why are you doing this?"

"Alright, so…” Groban says, stepping closer to Blaine. "Down to business. You, little man, are in kind of a pickle, but I think you already know that, don't you?"

An exhalation passes through his nose as he nods.

Groban counts Blaine's problems off on his fingers. "The Nation that's supposed to be yours doesn't even know you're alive and wouldn't recognize you if they saw you, you've got enemies and assassins trying to track you down, everyone you loved is likely dead, the world outside the Fire Nation might actually be even more dangerous than within, and to top it all off, someone went and doused your campfire and now you're burning about as well as a bunch of soggy logs. That about cover it?"

Blaine crosses his arms and gives a brief glare to the Avatar. "Yes, that sums it up nicely. Thank you for reminding me of all those horrible things."

"Ah," Avatar Groban says, smiling slyly while holding up a finger, "but that's the thing. Yes, those are all horrible and I'm sure they make you feel terrible, but there are other things to consider. I am
The Prince tilts his head at the Avatar. "What do you mean?"

"You, my dear Blaine," the Avatar says, putting a hand on Blaine's shoulder, "are a crossroads. A lynchpin of destiny, if you will. Your life or death could change the fate of the Fire Nation—even the world."

"What?" Blaine barks.

Groban grins at him. "See? Now, how does that make you feel?"


Groban drops his grin and winces.

"Ah. We'll need to work on that…"

"Hey, blowhole!"

Hector jumps like someone just flicked his nipple. "What?"

"Wake the fuck up," his boss says. "Something's going on outside."

"Oh," Hector says. "Sorry."

Standing fully from his position against the wall, Hector takes a peek outside. The patrol outside is distracted by a girl in yellow.

"Hi," the strange girl says.

The thugs stare at her.

"I'm Brittany," she announces.

The two of them look at each other like they're not quite sure what to do. "Umm," one of them grunts. "Nice to meet you?"

"I know, right?" Brittany smiles. "I'm awesome."

That reduces them to staring blankly again.

"My friend is in there," she says, pointing to the cave. "I don't think he likes it. You should let him out."

They look at each other again and smile. "Awww, he don't mind it so much," the other one grunts. "Why don't you come inside and see for yourself?" he asks. He turns towards the cave and winks.

That's Hector's signal. With a grin, he pulls out his blowgun and pops in a Shirshu-spit dart. They're actually running pretty low on Shirshu venom—the damn bison keeps trying to wake up. Still, he's pretty sure he'll only need one shot here, as long as he's patient. He waits for the perfect moment, imagining all the fun he could have with a girl like that when she's a little more… pliant.

"You taste like poor foot hygiene," Brittany says sadly, looking at the thugs. "I don't think we can
be friends."

"Awww," thug one coos. "That's a real shame, sweetheart. Because I'd love to for us to get to know each other," he says with a wink.

"I know," Brittany says. "You want me. Everybody does. It's okay to look, but not to touch."

"And what if we decide we want to touch anyway?" thug two growls, fixing her with a malicious smirk.

Brittany shrugs. "I'll kick you in the balls so hard they'll bounce around inside your head and fly out of your ears," she says plainly.

The thugs open their mouths to reply, but something interrupts them. A semi-panicked scream sounds from above, and what appears to be a giant bat suddenly sails gracefully into a leafy tree, smashing rather crunchily into the upper limbs.

They're all distracted for a second. Fortunately, thug one realizes an opportunity when he sees it and grabs Brittany while she's looking away, restraining her arms and putting her in the perfect position to be tranquilized.

Hector grins. He kneels, takes a deep breath, puts his lips on the end of his blowgun, takes a second to aim…

…and promptly chokes on his own dart, as some wiseass pops up right in front of him and blows his blowgun before he does.

Hector coughs and sputters, clutching at his throat as he stumbles backwards.

"Here, let me help you with that," the guy says calmly. He promptly socks Hector in the gut with enough force to make him spit the dart right out. The guy catches it in mid-air, spins it around, and promptly hurls it right into Hector's forehead.

His last thought as the venom takes hold—pretty good aim for a guy with glasses…

Having dealt with the blowhard, Artie turns his attention to where Brittany…

…is no longer being held captive, having easily slipped from her captor's grip. She is currently peppering him with a barrage of air-fists, which are, ironically enough, knocking the wind right out of him. Thug 2 swipes at her with his sword, but she ducks it easily, sweep-kicking a wave of air along the ground to knock him off his feet, following that with a straight kick that blows him into a tree. Then she turns her attention back to Thug 1.

Seeing Brittany clearly has the situation outside handled, that just leaves the inside thugs for Artie to take care of.

There is one nervous-looking guy who is completely unarmed. He presses himself against the wall of the cave, trying not to be seen. Artie glares at him and makes a sudden movement, and that's all it takes to have him shrieking and fleeing the cave.

One down, two to go.

The two remaining guards have a sword and a spear, respectively. Spear guy tries something first, running forward and thrusting at Artie's chest. Artie just lies down, grabbing the spear handle as it
passes over him and smashing it into the wall. He then makes a claw with one hand, and fires a rock glove at it, pinning it to the wall.

As spear guy tries in vain to pull his weapon from its stone anchor, sword guy makes his move. Rushing towards Artie and raising his weapon over his head.

Big mistake.

Artie just jets towards the guy, sticking his arm out and slamming it right into his knees as he passes. The guy flips end-over-end before crashing face-first into the ground and falling still.

Spear guy finally manages to dislodge Artie’s glove from the wall, retrieving his spear and turning around to menace his opponent. The earthbender just smiles, holding up his un-gloved hand and making the international sign for 'come at me bro.' Spear guy grins and starts to move forward. What he doesn't realize is that Artie's 'come at me' was not for him. He doesn't realize much of anything until Artie's discarded glove slams into his head from behind, causing him to stumble forward. In the midst of his stumbling, Artie propels his other glove at the guy's unguarded face, forming it into a fist just before the nice, crunchy-sounding impact. Spear guy goes down like a sack of wet hair as Artie summons both his gloves and puts them away.

The earthbender emerges from the cave just in time to see Brittany directing a forlorn expression at her fallen opponents, one of whom is out cold, while the other is very much conscious and clearly wishing he wasn't, curled into the fetal position with his hands between his legs, rocking back and forth and making sounds no guy should be able to make. "My master told me that some people only learn through violence," Brittany says sadly. "I'm really sorry that you're those people."

Jesse chooses this moment to finally disentangle himself from the tree, falling to the ground and landing on his feet. He whirls his arms to conjure up a small updraft, removing the excess leaves from his clothes and hair.

"Jesse!" Brittany says happily, running over and wrapping him in a hug.

"Brittany!" Jesse smiles, returning her hug. "I knew you'd find your way back, sooner or later." He breaks the hug and puts his hands on her shoulders. "Are you okay? Nobody hurt you, did they?"

Brittany responds by swishing her hair over her shoulder. "Bitch, please," she says calmly.

He tweaks her nose fondly. "That's my girl!"

"So," Artie says, sliding up to them, "this is Brittany?"

"Oh!" Jesse says, turning to Artie. "I almost forgot you exist. Brittany, this is Artie. He's a creepy earthbender."

To his credit, Artie only briefly rolls his eyes before offering her his hand. "Nice to meet you," he says.

"I know," Brittany replies, but she shakes his hand anyway.

"Brit here is like my little sister," Jesse says brightly, "only better, because we don't hate each other like my actual siblings."

"We're both way awesome," Brittany nods. "Some people just can't deal," she says with a shrug.

"Well, you're awesome," Artie says to Brittany, nodding to the downed thug. "Jesse here seems
more inclined to spend his time up trees without paddles."

"Hey," Jesse says. "That was a minor, heat-of-the-moment slip up. Where are the other jerks around here? I'm always happy to wreck someone's day while simultaneously proving a point. I'm great at multitasking."

"I already took them out," Artie says simply.

"Yup," Brittany nods. "Well, all of them except the guy who ran for help."

Air and earth both turn mildly shocked eyes to Brittany. "Say what now?"

The girl shrugs. "The scaredy guy. He went to get his friends. They'll probably be here soon."


Jesse looks at him strangely. "Nice is not a word I normally associate with you guys."

Artie does his best to shrug it off. "I'm just one-of-a-kind, I guess. Now come on, let's get your bison loose before the rest of the thug brigade gets here."

With a shrug, Jesse walks into the cave, followed shortly by Brittany. As he goes slight breeze rustles the leaves on the tree he fell into. A small, thin canister suddenly falls from the branches, landing softly on the grass near Artie. He must've dropped this when he crashed, he thinks. The canister looks like the kind that people use to store scrolls and protect them from damage, so it takes Artie all of a half a second to decide what to do with it.

As quickly and quietly as possible, he pockets the dropped item, and follows the airbenders into the cave…

"It's very good of you to be so nice to me," Rachel says somewhat quietly as she splashes her face with water. "You really don't have to."

"I know," Mercedes says. "Believe me, I'm not nice to anybody unless I damn well feel like it."

"Really?" Rachel asks, wiping her face with a towel and looking at Mercedes through the mirror. "I don't annoy you? The sound of my voice doesn't make you want to put scorpions in your ears so their stings cause temporary deafness via swelling?"

Mercedes looks at Rachel strangely. "Where did that come from?"

"I have a very keen memory for… insults," Rachel says calmly. "I've received plenty over the years."

"Well, to answer your question, no," Mercedes says, before thinking better of it. "Well, not all the time," she corrects. "I kind of feel you on what went down in the theater. I can relate."

"Why did I think he liked me?" Rachel asks sadly. "He was just so sweet…"

"Oh, honey," Mercedes says. "That's just Blaine. He's a natural sweetheart. A little thick sometimes, and a little awkward most of the time, but he's got a good heart. He's gay as bright pink basket of multicolored cotton-candy rabbits, though."

"Oh," Rachel says. "My father was right. That greatly annoys me, so I think that means we have a very strong parent-child relationship. It's only natural for children to resent their parents for being
right, after all."

Mercedes huffs. "Don't I know it," she says.

The actress tilts her head. "You have… children?"

"…kind of," Mercedes says. "My grandma and I were the only earthbenders in our village, so we had a lot of responsibility. We more or less wound up taking care of all the kids, so pretty much everyone wound up looking at me like I was their mama, or their big sister. Kind of awkward when some of them are older than you, but maturity knows no age," she grins.

"I absolutely agree with you there," Rachel says imperiously. "It isn't my fault that my thought processes are so much more detailed and elaborate than my peers."

Mercedes rolls her eyes, but there's no malice behind it. "That's what I meant when I said I could relate. There was one boy in the village that I had a little crush on a few years back. When I finally got up the courage to ask him out, he looked at me like I was a two-headed monktopus. Said it'd be like dating his own sister."

Rachel winces in sympathy. "That's awful."

"It was pretty mortifying. But," she says, "there was something that made me feel better, and I think it'll help you too."

"And what is that?" Rachel asks.

"Pampering," Mercedes says with a grin.

"Oooh," Rachel says excitedly.

"Mmmmmhm," Mercedes continues, grinning wider. "When we get done here, you and me are gonna go into town, get our hair done, nails done, manicure, pedicure, full facials and deep tissue massages, my treat. By the end of the day, we will be the finest bitches in Sho Fa. You feel me?"

The other girl looks stunned. "Oh, my… I couldn't. That sounds wonderful, but… it's so expensive."

"Don't you even worry about the cost," Mercedes says. "I don't mind payin'. Matter of fact, I want to." Mostly because it's stolen money, but she doesn't feel the need to mention that to Rachel.

The girl beams at her. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!" she says, bouncing up and down. "This is going to be so wonderful!"

"It'll definitely be something," Mercedes says neutrally, the sudden burst of supernova-level energy from Rachel giving her brief second thoughts. She quickly pushes them down, however. This is her first opportunity in ages to have some honest-to-earth lady time, with an actual lady. She might be just a little bit desperate here, so she's taking what she can get. "Come on, now, finish up, and let's go get the boys."

As Rachel finishes getting out of costume, the conversation takes a slightly different turn. "Did you ever feel… out of place, in your village?" she asks.

"What do you mean?" Mercedes replies.

"You know," Rachel says, "Like you don't truly belong there."
"I think everybody feels that way sometimes," Mercedes says, "but for me, there ain't no doubt; that place is my home. I still miss it."

The other girls sighs. "I love my daddies, I truly do. They are wonderful people, and wonderful parents. But I've just… always felt slightly out of place here. It could be because I'm not a firebender and the other kids laugh at me, but… I just feel like there is something missing. Possibly something that I am missing. Do you understand?" she asks as she finishes.

Mercedes thinks about it for a few seconds as they head to the door. "Honestly? Nope. But you never know," she says. "You might be right. You might be destined for great things."

"I certainly hope so," Rachel says. "Otherwise, it'd be a waste to give me all this natural ability."

Mercedes grins at her, and the two of them open the door to the hallway to find Finn sitting against the opposite wall, still pouting. Upon seeing Rachel, he immediately picks himself up and dusts himself off, plastering on a smile. "Hey," he says. "So… what next?"

"Now," Mercedes says, ushering Rachel past them, "we go and collect Kurt and Blaine, y'all head on home, and me and Rachel have a girls' day out."

"But that's not fair!" Finn says, annoyed. "I wanted to… uhhh… talk… to Rachel today."

"You can talk to her when we get back," Mercedes says simply as they walk into the lobby.

Suddenly, Rachel gasps. "Oh, my," she says softly.

"What is it?" Finn asks.

"Look!" she says, pointing to the statue of Avatar Groban.

Both Finn and Mercedes turn to the statue and gasp in near-perfect unison. Its eyes are glowing with an all-too-familiar light.

"Oh, Hills no!" Mercedes breaths softly.

"Holy crap," Finn says. "Something's wrong. We have to get to Kurt!"

And he is off down the stairs, taking them two-three at a time, Mercedes and Rachel following after…

Blaine can't breathe. Or, apparently, stand, as he is now sitting at the edge of the stage and he has no idea how he got there. "You can't… Blaine breathes, using up all his air with just those two words and having to start over. "You can't be serious."

"I absolutely can," Avatar Groban replies, sitting a short distance away. "And sometimes, I am! Now, for instance."

"Why?" Blaine asks. "How? Explain yourself!" he demands, before suddenly remembering who he is talking to. "I mean… explain yourself, sir. Please."

"There's really not that much explaining to do, Blaine," Avatar Groban, leaning back on his hands to stare at the huge, darkened auditorium. "You are the Prince. Your rightful place is on that throne. Someone else has taken that throne from you. Whether or not you get it back… whether or not you survive—" Blaine winces. "—will have a huge effect on where this Nation goes. You
yourself have seen the waking nightmare that is Sue Sylvester, on a good day. Give that woman the reigns to an entire country, and it isn't going anywhere good."

"So… what?" Blaine asks. "With me, it is?"

Groban shrugs. "I can't say. People want the future to be a lot more clean-cut than it is. Time and destiny are… complex. There is a lot of movement going on. So many different forces trying to steer the world…" He trails off, noting Blaine's increasing trepidation and misery. "Hey, I can tell you that in all honesty, it would be hard for you to be worse for the Fire Nation than Fire Lord Sylvester."

"Well… that's just great!" Blaine says, overwhelmed and near tears. "Fantastic. I just have one question: what am I supposed to do? All of those things that are stacked against me… how am I supposed to win against those? I don't know anything about ruling a country, I don't know anything about anything outside of the Capital besides what I've read in books, I can't… I can't even firebend…" His breath comes in gasps and sputters, and suddenly, he can't talk anymore.

"Whoa!" Groban says, hopping up and rushing over to him. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, hey, Blaine…" He puts a reassuring arm around the boy's shoulder, rubbing his back until he calms down. "Wow, I suck at this. This was supposed to be a pep talk. Make you feel better, not worse," Groban says, annoyed at himself.

Blaine just concentrates on breathing and trying not to pass out.

"Hey, come on now," the Avatar says in a soothing voice. "It's okay, buddy. Nobody's saying you have to do all of this stuff right now."

The young prince looks at least somewhat relieved by this. "But I still have to do it," he says quietly. "And I just… I don't know if I can…"

"Blaine, listen to me," Avatar Groban says, turning the boy so that the two of them are facing each other. "What you are now isn't what you'll always be. People grow, buddy. They change. They learn from their mistakes and grow stronger. That's the fire in them—for as long as they can, people seek new fuels to burn, new things to ignite them and allow them to grow. That's a big part of the reason your spark has gone," he says, poking Blaine in the chest in an oddly fond way. "You're not moving anymore. You're stuck, afraid to go forward."

"I just… I don't know how," Blaine says, his voice thick. "I don't know how to deal with everything that happened to me, I don't know how to move forward. I don't know how to be Fire Lord, or to lead people." He sniffs. "I'm sorry. I wish I was better at this."

At this, Groban looks genuinely sad for him. "I know, I know. It's tough, buddy. You don't ask for the position, the position asks for you, and 'no' isn't really an option. You're just… born into it." He gives him a half-smile. "Now you know how Kurt feels. How I felt."

"What'd you do?" Blaine asks.

Groban shrugs at him. "I stepped up. Not knowing what would happen, not knowing if I would be good enough, smart enough, strong enough, whatever. I didn't know anything—all I knew was that the world needed an Avatar and I was it. Much like Kurt is doing now. And much like you." The Avatar's hand finds his shoulder again, but instead of offering reassurance and comfort, he offers strength and support. "The Fire Nation needs a Prince, Blaine. And you are it."

"So I guess I have to step up," Blaine says, breathing a little more evenly.
"You don't have to do anything," Avatar Groban says. "But I think you want to. I think it'll be better for everyone—including you—if you do." He grins at the young Prince. "You've got it in you, Blaine. I know you do. You just have to be who you are."

A miserable look flashes across Blaine's face. "Who I am..." he mumbles. "There's another point on the list of things I don't know."

Groban squeezes his shoulder. "So figure it out. Or," the Avatar says with a sly smile, "decide."

"Decide?" Blaine echoes.

"Yup," the Avatar says, patting him on the back. "Decide who and what you want to be, and then... be it. That sounds like a very fire thing to do, don't you think?" he finishes with a wink, standing up.

Blaine no longer seems in danger of passing out, but he still fights a fierce inner war. "This is all so huge..."

"Hey," Groban says, pulling Blaine to his feet. "You don't have to do it all today, remember? Start small. I can tell you—that Sun Warrior tablet? Get it. It's important. The spirit world is all atwitter over it—I haven't got any specifics for you, but I can tell you Sue is brewing something big."

"Okay," Blaine nods. "I think I can handle that."

"Hey, now", Groban says, holding up a finger. "What's this 'I' business? You don't have to do it alone. You've got great friends. You've got an Avatar who would do anything for you."

Blaine smiles against his will even as he blushes.

"There we go," Groban grins. "There's the pep I was going for!"

The Prince looks at the Avatar with a bemused sort of fondness. "You are a very strange man," he says.

Groban snorts. "Pffft. You should meet Gaga. And on that note," he says, "I should probably give back your Avatar pretty soon. Channeling like this takes a lot out of you, especially if you aren't used to it. He'll be out of it for a while, so take good care of him. He really put himself on the line for you."

Blaine's eyes are inscrutable as he looks at Groban. "Kurt... did this for me?" he asks. "He gave up control... put his body under incredible strain... just so you could talk to me?"

"I told you," Groban says. "Kurt will do just about anything for you." The Avatar smiles at him. "Now, it's time for gramps here to take a hike back to the spirit world and let you crazy kids get on with your lives."

"Thank you, Avatar Groban," Blaine says, giving him the customary Fire Nation bow of respect.

"Don't thank me," he says with a wink. "Just come here and give your many-times-great grandpa a hug before he goes," he adds, spreading his arms out.

The Prince grins and starts approaching the Avatar. He never suspects the trap that Groban springs on him. "Psyche!" he shouts. "Think fast!"

Suddenly, a burst of flame erupts upwards from his body, splitting in mid-air to return to the lamps
from which they came. When the flames clear, Kurt once more stands before him, arms wide, eyes closed. With a soft moan, the Avatar pitches forward, unable to stand any longer.

There is not even a moment's hesitation. Blaine rushes forward and catches Kurt as he falls, wrapping his arms around him and just holding him like the precious, wonderful thing that he is.

"Blmmmnnne?" Kurt slurs, his entire body slack from exhaustion. "Blmmmnnne," he says again.

As the doors to the theater burst open and Finn, Rachel, and Mercedes pour in, Blaine can't hear a word they are saying. The quiet, pitiful moans coming from Kurt drown out every other sound in Blaine's world. As their friends draw near, Blaine holds him tighter, clinging to him for dear life, pulling Kurt's head onto his shoulder and threading gentle fingers through his hair.

"Shhhhh," he whispers. "It's okay. It's okay. I've got you."

He means it.

A/N: Coming Up! The next chapter will be the final one of this 'day.' The one after that begins Day 13, the final and most important day of Act 2. I don't want to spoil too much, but I can tell you that while I wound up tossing out most of the other chapter names in my 'preview' several chapters ago, Raise Your Glass and Trainwreck Extravaganza will both definitely be used, and they both take place on Day 13. Oh, and Trainwreck Extravaganza is no longer the finale of Act 2. The name of the actual finale, I can't tell you, but I think you'll like it. ;) Thanks again for all your reviews and comments!
Mr. Duck is a little deeper in the cave than can be seen with the naked eye. When they finally get
to the bison, Brittany does not like what she sees.

"Oh no!" she says, running over to leap onto his enormous head and hug him. "You have so many
boo-boos."

He kind of does. His horns are all scratched, there are numerous scorch marks on his fur, and he
even appears to have the bison equivalent of a black eye.

"You donate to charity. And you're such a good role model to aspiring young bison. How could the
universe be so cruel to you?" Brittany says, near tears.

"Hey," Artie says, sliding over to her. "It's okay. He might be scuffed up and scratched, but he's not
hurt badly. He's just asleep. All we have to do is wake him up and get him out of here."
Brittany nods at him, wiping her eyes. "Okay."

As Artie slides around to smash the chains holding Mr. Duck in place, Jesse looks slightly embarrassed. "Ummm… there is a slight chance that most of those happened before he was kidnapped."

Brittany glares at him.

The male airbender shrugs. "Really bad week."

Strangely enough, this explanation satisfies her, and she turns her attention back to the wounded bison. "You are so brave," she says. "Like a baby shark who tells a whale that he can't build a pottery shop in the coral reefs because it violates the zoning laws."

Artie stops his progress for just a second, his brain having no choice but to chew on that for a few seconds to see if it's intellectually edible.

It's… chewy.

He quickly resumes his work, and finishes in short order, smashing the last chain with a nice, thick spire of rock. "There we go!" he says. "Mr. Duck is free to fly!"

"Yay!" Brittany claps. She hops onto the saddle on his back, while Jesse hops on his head and takes the reins.

"Alright, Mr. Duck, let's blow this firehole," Jesse says. "Yip-yip!"

Nothing happens.

"Yip-yip!" Jesse repeats.

Nada.

"Guys?" Artie says, poking the gigantic creature in the nose a couple of times. "I think he's still asleep."

"Well, we'll just have to wake him up!" Jesse says, hopping down, taking a position right next to the bison's head, and proceeding to shout "HEY!" in an airbending-enhanced voice that makes Artie's eardrums want to curl up in a corner and cry.

"OW!" he shouts back at him. "Dude, warn a brother before you go screamin' the roof off."

"Jesse!" Brittany scolds him. "That's rude. Everyone knows the best way to wake up a sleepy air bison is to tickle him."

To demonstrate, Brittany proceeds to crawl around Mr. Duck's furry body like a four-legged spider, occasionally pausing to scratch and poke him in various places.

Nothing. Not even so much as a huff.

"What's wrong with him?" Brittany asks, sounding worried.

Artie puts his hands to the ground. "I don't know. I can't see anything physically wrong with him. He just seems to be in a deep sleep. Maybe…"

And then his senses pick up that little box again. Now that he's closer, he can get a clearer picture
of what's inside. Not crystal clear, but clear enough to make him smile.

"I think I've got it," Artie says, starting to slide towards the box, when suddenly, the echo of loud, angry voices bounces into their neck of the cave. "Uh-oh. Sounds like the rest of the animal lovers club has arrived."

"Oh, yay!" Brittany says clapping. "Maybe they can tell us what's wrong."

"Brittany, he didn't mean that literally. He was being ironic," Jesse says patiently.

"Oh," Brittany says, sounding disappointed. "Well, I guess that's good. Iron is very important for a healthy body."

Once again, Artie finds himself tilting his head at the girl.

"I'll handle this," Jesse says, pulling out his staff again running his fingers through his hair. "These clowns will rue the day they trifled with Jesse St. James."

He dashes off fast enough to cause a small draft in his wake. Brittany looks after him for a few seconds. "Why is Jesse going to fight mushrooms?"

Another head tilt. Artie is going to break his own damn neck if he keeps this up. "Say what?"

"He's going to fight the triflers," Brittany says. "Those are delicious mushrooms, right?"

It takes him a couple of seconds to make the connection. "Oh," he says, almost proud that he figured it out. "You're thinking of truffles."

"Oh," Brittany says, smiling down at him. "Then what's a trifler?"

Artie considers the question carefully. "A good-for-nothin' type of brother," is the answer he finally decides to give.

"Oh," Brittany nods. "Well then, they suck. I hope Jesse blows them all. Hard."

His entire body winds up tilting at this one. He's pretty sure he hears his neck pop.

The assorted scumbags are gathered around the entrance to the cave when Jesse reaches it. None of them want to be the first to go in, and he takes this as a tremendous sign for the kind of reputation he has (rightfully) earned among the lowlifes of this country.

"We know you're in there, St. James!" someone calls. "Come out, and get what's coming to you!"

"Oh, you brought payment for all the valuable time you're making me waste? How thoughtful!" Jesse says, grinning to no one in particular.

"Ha ha," the voice replies. "Very funny. The only present I'm giving you is the business end of a whole bunch of sharp objects, delivered to your guts, free of charge!"

"Now, now," Jesse says casually. "Is there really a need for all this violence? Are we not men of honor, and valor, and other similarly noble-sounding words?"

"No, actually," the voice sneers. "We ain't."

"Well, in that case..." Jesse says with a calm smile, strolling out of the cave and into the open like
he hasn't a care in the world. The various armed men who surround him back up slightly as he emerges, never letting him out of their sight. "I have just one thing to say to your so-called special delivery…"

In a shining example of stage-perfect timing, the tell-tale whistle of the first arrow reaches Jesse's ears at that exact moment. The archer fires at him, thinking himself hidden in a tree. Please. With but a thrust of his arms and a whirl of his wrists, Jesse conjures a current of air right in the arrow's path. The miniature jetstream, shaped by his motions, guides the arrow harmlessly around the airbender's body, and sends it soaring right back to its master even faster than it came.

The archer falls out of the tree and lies still. There is a collective gasp from the crooks, who take a collective backstep.

Jesse smiles and takes a bow.

"Return to sender."

And the fight starts in earnest.

He finds the little box, and brings it over next to a torch to he can get a better look at its contents.

PROPERTY OF HECTOR
DO NOT TOUCH

Just to be safe, Artie dons his stone gloves before flicking the lock and opening the case. Within is exactly what he expected to find—a plethora of darts just waiting to be poisoned, and perhaps more importantly, a plethora of poisons.

"What are those?" Brittany says, jumping down next to Artie, barely making a sound when she lands. She bends over to look at the contents of the box.

"Be careful!" Artie warns. "Don't touch them. This is what they used to put Mr. Duck to sleep. It's bad stuff."

"Can we fix him?" Brittany asks.

"Well," Artie says, "only a complete idiot would carry all this poison around without an antidote on-hand, so… I'd say the odds of us being screwed vs. not-screwed are about even." He squints at the box. There are a ton of small bottles with various labels on them. "Let's see here," he says, squinting studiously. "Man, this guy must be a specialist or something. Shirshu, Shirshu, Shirshu, Two-Headed Rat Viper, Dragon Frog, Jellysquid, Platypus… Platypus?" he balks, squinting at the bottle.

Artie gives a skeptical glance to Brittany, who shrugs. "I like platypuses. But I'm kind of confused why they're called platypuses and not duckbeavermolesnakes."

"You make an interesting point," Artie muses. "Who names these things?" He spares the question only a second before shaking his head and moving on. "Okay, let's focus on the task at hand… we have… Si Wong Cactus, Cho Qing Stinging Nettle, Buzzard Wasp… crap, I have no idea what any of these do," he finishes lamely. Taking a closer look at the box, he quickly realizes that it's segmented to unfold into multiple levels, making it more of a toolkit. Unfolding the second layer reveals… "Antidotes! Sweet. Now all we have to do is… figure out which poison they gave Mr. Duck, which still leaves us completely stuck. Crap!" Artie very nearly facepalms, almost forgetting that he's still wearing his gloves. That would've left a mark.
"Can we just try one and see if it works?" Brittany asks.

Artie shakes his head. "Giving the wrong antidote can be just as dangerous as actual poison. We need to be very careful."

Brittany nods and wanders off, while Artie cups his chin in deep thought. "Okay, I'm thinking our best bet would be to revive one of the people we knocked out and administer standard Omashian Navel Torture until they tell us what they used. The only problem with that is the issue of time… hmmm…"

He continues to think as Brittany saunters back over to the poison kit and bends over it.

"What are you doing?" Artie asks.

"Putting these in their place," Brittany says, holding up some empty bottles. "I found them next to Mr. Duck."

The earthbender slides over to the box and grabs the bottles, holding them up to the light.

"Brittany, you're a genius!" Artie says brightly.

"Really?" Brittany says just as brightly.

Huh. He did just say that, didn't he? "I'm as surprised as you," Artie says with a shrug. "Look," he says, holding up the bottle. "All these empty bottles are labeled 'Shirshu.' That must be what they're using on Mr. Duck! You just saved us a ton of time. And on a less important note, you saved some poor guy a lifetime of picking sand out of his belly-button."

"Everybody wins," Brittany says.

It takes only a few seconds of bottle-shuffling to come up with the antidote. "Ummm… Brittany, I think I have to poke Mr. Duck with one of these needles to make him feel better. Is that okay?"

The airbender nods sadly. "Sometimes we have to be cruel to be kind."

"Wise words," Artie says, pouring the antidote into one of the darts. "I'll try not to hurt him, I promise."

With that, he promptly jams the dart into the side of Mr. Duck's exceptionally large noggin, and hopes for the best.

It takes a couple of seconds, but soon, a deep, slightly unsettling noise resounds from deep within Mr. Duck's throat.

"He's waking up!" Artie says.

Brittany nods. "That's his 'bison hangover' noise. He's had a rough night. Poor baby," she says, jumping onto his head and using her whole body to give him a hug.

"You stay with Mr. Duck and bring him out when he's ready," Artie says. "I'm going to check on Jesse…"

Artie emerges to a fascinating scene of chaos. People are running in several different directions, no apparent coordination between them. A few of them make to attack Artie, but a few quick chops with the rock hands are enough to change their minds.
Jesse makes a vertical column of air strong enough to blast a guy into the sky. Then he jumps up after him, takes his staff and smacks him into the ground like a human projectile, taking out two more people with a rather impressive thud. The crowd can't seem to decide whether they want to run towards him or away from him.

The airbender lands with a casual grace. "Is that it? I haven't even started sweating yet."

There's still a decent number of people with weapons aimed at him, but for the most part, all Artie sees is a rather fascinating conglomeration of injured and unconscious foes in various positions around the battlefield. Some are sprawled in the dirt, some are leaning against the cliffside, many are hanging from the trees… it looks like someone detonated a people-bomb in the middle of the clearing. And Jesse? His cloak is a little more singed, a little more ragged, but as far as the man himself goes… Artie can't see a scratch on him.

"Do you know what this is for me and my colleagues?" Jesse asks the gathered crowd. "This is a light workout. This is the kind of safe, casual exercise approved for pregnant ladies and people with brittle bone disease. This is nothing. You are nothing. If I were you… well, if I were you, I'd probably kill myself, because that would be horrible. But if I were you, I'd also leave to spare myself further embarrassment. You're only hurting yourselves at this point."

The minions are obviously incensed by this, but they keep their distance for the moment. Jesse seems capable of pinning them down with little more than a glare, and for all his air-headedness, Artie has to hand it to the guy—if he can do this, he's got to be a spectacular bender.

A roar from within the cave distracts Jesse for just a moment, which the assorted mooks take as their cue to attack. Rather than fighting them, however, Jesse takes a tremendous leap through the air, landing squarely on the head of Mr. Duck as he emerges from the cave. The enormous creature looks none-too-happy with its captors at the moment, and Artie is suddenly greeted with a very vivid mental image of exactly what it would look like to fight an animal the size of a house with the ability to fly and blow over buildings. It is not pretty.

He surreptitiously slides a little further away from the beast.

Jesse, ever the showman, smiles at his audience. "Thank you all so much for attending today's performance of Firebenders Being Flattened (in B Flat). You've been a wonderful audience."

A couple of mooks make their way towards Mr. Duck. A single snort from the beast sends them sprawling in the other direction.

"Oh," Jesse says. "Is that a request for an encore?"

This time, the gathering of mooks seems to be in agreement. They have no desire whatsoever to fight Jesse St. James, his friends, and an air bison.

"I thought not," Jesse says, taking his position on the bison's head as Brittany happily jumps into the backseat. He turns to Artie, and gestures to the bison's back. "Hop on!"

Artie is more than a little hesitant. He stares at the beast with wide eyes. "Uhhh… no thanks. You guys go ahead. I can find my own way back," he says simply.

"Nonsense!" Jesse smiles. "We'll take you. I insist. It's the least I can do after you all the help you've provided."

"No, really," Artie says, his throat feeling a little dry. "It's fine. I'll just slide on out of here."
'Oh, don't be such a spoilsport," Jesse scolds. "Mr. Duck, grab him. Let's show Mr. Abrams some good old fashioned airbender hospitality!" The bison lets out groan of acquiescence, and summarily takes to the air, swooping around towards Artie.

At this, Artie's eyes bulge enough to become full-moon round. "No, no, no, nononononono—" He tries in vain to slide away, but the bison is already up to speed. Artie can't accelerate fast enough, and soon, he finds himself clutched between two of the bison's six very large paws and lifted higher and higher into the air. His legs dangle helplessly beneath him as they fly higher and higher into the air, and his hands (not quite trusting the grip of bison paws) cling to the thing's fur for dear life. "Put me down!" he shouts, frightened, but not quite overwhelmed with blinding terror. "Putmedown, putmedown, putmedown, N!"

To his horror, the bison begins to ascend even faster.

"NO!" Artie shouts, growing more and more panicked as more and more distance comes between him and his beloved earth. "THAT IS NOT DOWN! THAT IS THE OPPOSITE OF DOWN! OH CRAP. OH SHIT! AAAAAAAAAAAAHH!

His brain kind of checks out on him after that.

So Brittany notices that Artie likes to scream a lot.

"...AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHAAAAH!!"

A lot of a lot.

All the loud noise is kind of bothering Jesse, who has that scrunched up look on his face like he swallowed a bug. "We're out of danger," he says to Artie. "The bad guys are gone. You can stop screaming now."

"NO, ACTUALLY, I CAN'T!" Artie shouts back.

"Will you relax?" Jesse sighs. "Jeez, it's like you're scared of falling or something."

"NOT… FALLING," Artie says, breathing all funny like his lungs are going through a nasty divorce and no longer speaking to each other. "SCARED… OF HITTING… THE GROUND!"

"You're an earthbender," Jesse scoffs, waving him off. "The earth will catch you, right?"

"YES… IT WILL!" Artie shouts back, his voice all scratchy like the big fuzzy post Mr. Duck likes to use his claws on. "AND THEN… IT WILL TURN ME… INTO FERTILIZER!"

"Ohhh, fertilizer!" Brittany claps. "I love flowers! What kind would you be?"

"I DON'T KNOW," Artie says, and it almost sounds like a cry-y voice. "Please, please put me down!" he begs, and Brittany's heart frowns for him. She crawls over to Jesse.

"He sounds really scared," she says.

"I just can't fathom why anyone would be scared of heights," Jesse sighs, and Brittany wonders why he is talking about ghosts. Fathoms are scary. Jesse told her a story about the Fathom of the Opera one time. He was really ugly.

"I think I should go help him," Brittany says.
He looks at her funny for a couple of seconds, but he totally caves. He always does. "Fine," Jesse says.

Brittany smiles and hops over the saddle, crawling down the side of Mr. Duck to figure out where Artie is. She finds him hugging one of Mr. Duck's legs super tight, like it's his best friend, who is also a pile of sticks that will fall apart if he lets go. His legs are all floppy and dangling below him, and he kind of looks like a really awkward kite tail. "It's okay," Brittany says, "I've got you."

She grabs him and then he reminds her of how much he likes to scream. 
"AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!" he says, all the way back up to the top of Mr. Duck, until she sits him down in the big old saddle.

"There we go!" Brittany says. "Is that better?"

Artie blinks for a couple of seconds, and then all of a sudden he is lying on his stomach and hugging Mr. Duck again with his eyes shut, and awwwwwww. "Yes," he says, still breathing funny. "Thank you… Oh shit… oh fuck… oh hills…" he pants. His breath is running away from him and he can't catch it. She looks at him for a couple of seconds and notices something awesome.

"Oh my gosh!" Brittany says. "Are you a chameleon?"

Artie has a really hard time lifting his head up, but he does, a little bit and looks at her. "What?" he says.

"You changed colors!" Brittany says, feeling super excited. "You were all skin-colored, but now you're super white. You're the same color as Mr. Duck!"

Mr. Duck makes a happy 'oh, rapture! Queen Brittanica uttered my name!' noise, but it scares Artie, and he puts his head down again. Then, Brittany notices awesome thing the second.

"Awww, you look like a baby monkey clinging to its mommy's back," Brittany says. "You're so cute!"

Artie says something kind of quiet, and Brittany has to lean close to hear him.

"...just want to pass out. Why can't I pass out?"

It's then that Brittany notices something not awesome at all. There are totally wet streaks on his cheeks. He totally was crying, and kind of still is. He must have been super, super scared. And suddenly, lots of things click together in Brittany's head to form a jigsaw puzzle of mission statement. Artie totally looks like a baby monkey and Artie is crying and changing colors, so Brittany feels it is now her official purpose in life to make him all better. Crying baby chameleon monkeys are not cool at all.

"Here," Brittany says, crawling over to him. "Maybe this will make you feel better." She starts giving him one of her super awesome relaxing massages.

But he totally doesn't even respond or say 'ah' or make a pass at her.

"Maybe what will make me feel better?" Artie asks.

"This," Brittany says, massaging him a little harder. He still doesn't do anything, and Brittany wonders if she is losing her magic touch. The mystical raccoon told her that her fingers worked miracles, but she's been rubbing his legs for like two minutes, and he hasn't even moved.
"Brittany," Artie says, opening his eyes. "You're not doing any—oh." He changes colors again, this time to reddish pink. "Ummm… yeah. That's not gonna work. Maybe, uhh—if you do it… above my waist..." he says, and stops, dropping his head again.

Well, it's not her normal routine, but Brittany totally believes in the value of good customer service, so she tries it. "Okay," Brittany says, scooting a little further up. "How's this?"

She starts kneading her fingers into the super, super tense muscles in his back, and he totally goes all buttery on her, melting into soft moans of happiness. "Mmmmmmmmm," he breathes.

"Does that help?" Brittany asks with a smile.

"Mmmm-hmmm," Artie nods. He's starting to turn all skin-colored again, so she takes that as a sign that she is doing a good job.

So she keeps going, untying all the knots his muscles are in. He has a lot of muscles in his back and shoulders and arms, which is interesting because his legs felt all skinny and weird. But she likes un-knotting him. He makes soothing sounds.

After a few minutes, she decides to change positions and brings him with her. She picks him up, and he flinches a little bit, trying to grab onto the saddle and pull himself back down. "Don't be scared," she says. "We're just sitting back. I want to do your head now."

He looks up at her, and his eyes say 'but why?' She just calmly sits against the back of the saddle and pulls him into her lap. Then, she massages his head, and he is once again calm like a great airbending master sitting on a mountaintop, eating banana-onion noodles and discussing philosophy with the goats.

"That feels… oh my gosh," he says softly. "Thank you."

She keeps going, and soon, she feels his whole body sigh against her as he drifts off into dreamland.

Brittany smiles. Mission accomplished.

Santana stares up at the sky, feeling totally broody. She is definitely miserable, but she has no idea why. There's no reason for her to be miserable. They are closer than ever to their target, they'll probably catch him within a day, and then she can finally get out of this stupid, sweaty country. There is no reason for her to be sad, and yet… she is.

What the fuck, world? Why you gotta bring a bitch down when she's just starting to find her place in the sun?

It's only because she's staring up at the sky that she even sees the bison as it flies overhead. She immediately knows who the bison is carrying, and she reacts appropriately. "Give me the telescope," she commands.

"What?" the Chi-Ryu riding with her asks.

"The telescope! Now!" she orders.

The Chi-Ryu hands her the device, and she is up and off her bison in record time, swinging up to the tree top for a better spying spot. She unfolds the telescope and takes a good look through the lens, and the sight that greets her makes her blood cells pull out razor blades and threaten to cut a
bitch.

Brittany—HER Brittany—is sitting there with some guy in her lap. He's just dozing his life away with a content little smile on his face while she grins and plays with his hair.

Her fury nearly snaps the telescope in half. Santana holds the scope steady and memorizes that smiling, bespectacled face.

Brittany's man—her precious Mr. Duck—better hope he never meets Santana in an alleyway. Because she never forgets a face.

And as of today, she's out for blood.

Artie slowly makes his way back into the land of the living, his body in a state of relaxation the likes of which he hasn't felt since... well, ever, as far as he can remember. The world that comes into focus is mostly blue, and it takes him a couple of seconds to realize that they are still flying.

To his shock, he isn't nearly as terrified of this revelation as he thought he would be. There are several possible reasons for this.

It could be that he hasn't made any attempts to look down yet. That probably has a lot to do with it.

It could be how sleepy and comfortable he is, leaning against a fairly soft, squishy pillow. (He's pretty sure he went to sleep against Brittany, but she apparently moved him, as she is currently sleeping in the corner of the saddle, curled up like a cat.)

It could be any number of things... but Artie is pretty sure that most of it has to do with the thing that woke him up.

Namely, Jesse standing in front of him and staring at him with a very unsettling smile.

"Whoa," Artie says blearily. "Creep much?"

Jesse tilts his head at him, his smile growing slightly wider and no less unsettling. "You know... my memory is a little... fuzzy sometimes," he says, his tone of voice lowering Artie's blood temperature a couple of degrees. "You know how it is with us airheads... so I was hoping you could remind me; what is your boss's name again?"

Shit. Artie tries to play it off. "Are you really that oblivious?" he challenges.

Jesse's face doesn't change in the slightest. "Humor me."

Artie desperately searches for some kind of tell, some kind of hint, but absolutely nothing is forthcoming. This time, he really and truly has nothing.

This time, he really is fucked.

"You don't know, do you?" Jesse asks after a few seconds of silence.

The earthbender lets a breath out through his nose, desperately trying to keep calm in the face of what he is pretty sure will end in a very nasty smear on the ground. "What gave it away?"

"Nice," Jesse says calmly. "Real agents are never nice. They are completely ruthless. They take down all witnesses. They show mercy to no one, and they leave nothing to chance. So in a way, I suppose you were right before. Being 'nice' really was your undoing," he says pulling his staff off
Artie's heart is nearly shaking his chest apart, and his fingers clench in vain on the material of the saddle, hoping against hope that he'll be able to hold on. Oh, Gods. He doesn't want to die like this. He doesn't want to die at all. His face remains calm, even as he feels his eyes moistening from what he knows is inevitably going to follow this.

"I have to say," Jesse says, sounding almost sincere, "you played this very well up until that point. I might never have noticed if it wasn't for that one slip up. I can't believe I made it so easy for you—I'll really need to be more careful in the future. But truly, I am impressed," he says. "Well done."

Artie just fixes him with a glare. He doesn't want any of this douchebag's compliments.

"Unfortunately, that doesn't change anything," Jesse says. "See… I can admire a good liar. But Mr. Duck? Mr. Duck hates liars," he sneers, "barring myself, of course. So… my temporary companion…" he says, brandishing his staff. "I'm afraid this is where you get off."

Artie clenches his jaw in preparation. "What will you tell Brittany?"

The airbender shrugs. "I'll tell her I dropped you off on a cloud. Not only will she believe it wholeheartedly, but it technically won't even be a lie."

He clenches his fingers even tighter onto the saddle, knowing that it won't be enough to keep him onboard. The only way this is going to end for him is in a very long fall, followed by a sudden stop.

"Fare thee well," Jesse says, his smile turning outright venomous as he raises his staff to strike. "May your beloved earth greet you with open arms."

Artie curls in on himself slightly, and that's when he feels it, in a small pocket on the inside of his robes. "Wait!" he says. It isn't a voice of panic, but a low, dangerous threat. Thank the hills, Artie just remembered that he has leverage. He pulls the scroll canister out of his robes and brandishes it at Jesse. "You're not missing anything… important, are you?"

Jesse's smile drops when he sees the canister. He lowers his staff and begins patting himself down, trying in vain to find the very thing Artie holds. He glares at the earthbender. "How did you get that?" Jesse demands.

Artie shrugs. "Does it matter? I have it. You want it. And if you send me flying into the wild blue yonder… you'll lose it."

Jesse breathes like a bull when he is angry. "Maybe I'll just pick it off your splattered corpse," he says.

"Maybe I'll eat it on the way down and you can pick it out of my poop," Artie challenges.

Jesse continues to glare at him for a few tense seconds, before finally clenching a fist and punching the air in front of him lamely. "Damn you!" he says.

Artie feels relief so intense he nearly starts crying. He doesn't, though. You can't show that kind of weakness in front of a guy like St. James. And Artie is hardly out of the woods. "Here's how this is going to go down," Artie says. "You are going to land this bison, and I am going to get off. When I am safely in contact with the ground, I'll toss this up to you and high-tail it out of here. You get to keep your precious little secret whatever, and I get to make a nice, gentle, non-lethal landing. Nobody gets hurt, nobody gets dead. Sound good?"
The airbender crosses his arms petulantly for a few seconds. He then makes a sudden grab for the canister, but he is nowhere near as fast as Artie.

"Ah-ah-ahhh," Artie says, waggling his finger at the sneaky would-be snatcher. "No funny business. We're both gentlemen here. Let's keep this... respectable."

Jesse keeps his angry glare up for a few more moments, before finally deflating in defeat. "Fine," he spits, stomping over to the reins of the bison and sitting down, giving some kind of command to lower the creature that Artie totally miss because Artie's heart is still pounding in his throat and drowning out most other sounds. He feels like he's won here, but he doesn't dare relax until he's actually on the ground.

The descent seems like it takes forever, but eventually, Mr. Duck touches down in a wooded alcove just outside of Sho Fa.

Jesse turns to look at him. "Well, cough it up."

"When I'm on the ground," Artie reminds him.

"So get on the ground," Jesse says imperiously. "Are you expecting someone to lower you down?"

The earthbender glares at the puissant airhole, but says nothing, instead choosing to calmly push himself with his hands over to the edge of the saddle, hoisting himself over and then slowly climbing down the bison's fur until his bottom finds the bottom.

Jesse lands beside him in short order. "Hand it over."

Artie pulls the scroll out of his robe. "What is it?" he asks, knowing he probably won't get much of an answer.

"It's... a message. From someone else, to someone else. About... something that someone doesn't know. What do you care? You don't need to know this. Hand it. Over," he grumbles.

Though he kind of wants to see what's inside of it, Artie, at least, is a man of his word. He tosses the canister at Jesse's head. The airbender catches it easily and almost immediately launches into an attack, sending a powerful blast of air down at the spot...

...where Artie used to be.

"Shit!" Jesse curses, looking in vain around the alcove for any sign of the earthbender. He finds nothing. And it infuriates him. Leaping back up onto Mr. Duck, he looks out into the forest and calls out a warning. "This isn't over!" he says. "No one trifles with me and gets away with it."

When no response is forthcoming, he lashes his bison and flies off.

A short distance away, in a small gathering of bushes, Artie watches him leave, waiting until he is out of sight... and promptly collapsing. He falls onto his back, panting like a marathon runner and placing his hand over his thrumming heart to keep it in his chest. A few tears of sheer relief spill out of his eyes and he can't even bring himself to care. He's faced death a few times before, but he isn't sure he has ever been quite that close to it.

Also, apparently flying scares the shit out of him. Good to know.

In a few minutes, he'll pick himself up and get back to business, but right now, he just wants to relish in the arms of mother earth and thank every god he can name that he's still alive.
Being nice is apparently much more dangerous than being a jackass. In what kind of fucked up world is *that* true?
The world is a hazy shade of orange when Kurt's eyes next open. He is staring up at the ceiling of the Berry Inn, lying across his bed.

"Hey," says a gentle voice from the side. Turning his head a bit reveals a smiling Blaine, sitting at his bedside on a small chair.

"Welcome back, sleepyhead," Blaine says, wincing slightly at his own awkwardness. Fantastic, Blaine. Talk to him like he's five. That'll earn you tons of points.

Kurt stretches himself out a little bit, noting with no small amount of satisfaction how Blaine's eyes definitely do not leave him at any point during the process. The Prince's mouth falls open a little further, and all thought seems to desert him. "It's good to be back," Kurt says languidly. "And good to see I was so well taken care of while I was out. How did I get here?"
This seems to snap Blaine out of his momentary trance. He gives his head a little shake. "Ahhh, well… we kind of had to…"

"This is a terrible idea," Blaine says.

"If you have a better one," Rachel says imperiously, "I would be more than happy to hear it." She adjusts the weight of Kurt on her shoulder, attempting to move the snoozing Avatar into a less uncomfortable position for both of them.

"Dang it, girl," Mercedes says from the other side of Kurt. "Keep your shoulders up. You're short enough as it is. You keep fooling around and you're gonna drop him, and then it will be on."

The boy dangles between them, a pair of dark glasses hiding his closed eyes. Rachel managed to finangle his collar so that his head doesn't droop too much, and they've gotten him to close his mouth and stop drooling for the time being, but that still leaves a little over a hundred pounds of dead weight to distribute between them.

"Why can't we just carry him?" Finn asks.

"We're in-character, dingbat," Mercedes says. "The Councilor's servants walking with him arm-in-arm like this wouldn't make any sense, and it'd draw attention. But the Councilor being seen arm-in-arm with two lovely ladies makes perfect sense. Plus, this way, everybody will be too busy staring at us to see that he's knocked out."

"Oh," Finn says. "Gotcha."

Blaine kind of wants to carry him anyway. He's felt cold ever since they made him put Kurt down while they discussed what to do with him. But for the time being, he knows it's better to play his part.

"You two go hail a cab or something," Mercedes instructs. "We'll be right behind you."

The Prince shares a look with Finn, and the two of them take a second to square themselves and straighten their posture before heading out into the city. It takes them only a few minutes to find a cab, and soon, Mercedes and Rachel emerge from the building, Kurt between them, the two of them laughing and carrying on so much that it seems like Kurt barely even exists. Blaine and Finn block them from view as they hoist Kurt up into the cab, and soon, the five of them are on their way back to the Berry Inn.

Only Hiram is in the lobby when they arrive. His response to the spectacle of the councilor being carried between his daughter and another woman is a primly raised eyebrow. As a bartender, he's probably learned not to ask too many questions about this sort of thing.

"My daughter, the golddigger," Blaine hears him mutter as they head up the stairs…

"The indignity of it all," Kurt says, only mildly mortified.

"Hey, be thankful it wasn't worse. Rachel wanted to draw open eyes on your eyelids before I found those glasses for you," Blaine points out.

"It's a good thing you did," Kurt says. "I can forgive a lot of things, but daring to mess with my skin while I'm asleep is dangerously close to my limit." Blaine grins, because Kurt approves of his actions, and his fond tone takes all sting out of his words. "Speaking of Rachel… where is
"While we were riding back, Finn got all forlorn looking at the moose pulling the cab. I think he went to check on Drizzle. Mercedes and Rachel went to have a girls' day out, after, of course, I assured Mercedes that I would never leave your side," Blaine says with a soft smile, and Kurt tries to ignore the way his heart flutters at the word 'never.' "I've just been here waiting for you to wake up," Blaine finishes, averting his eyes for just a second.

"Well, I'm awake," Kurt says. "And I appreciate the company. I presume your chat with Avatar Groban went well?"

Blaine looks contemplative at that. "He certainly… brought a lot of things into focus. In his own, unique way," he adds, in a slightly traumatized tone.

Kurt smiles. "I know what you mean, believe me. Groban is a test of patience on a good day, but he has his moments. I suppose there wouldn't be much point to the cycle if all the Avatars were the same. Some are bound to be weirder than others."

"Oh, and you are a paragon of normalcy," Blaine says with a grin.

"I am extraordinary," Kurt says haughtily. "That is very different from just being weird."

To his surprise, Blaine puts a sudden stop to their banter by agreeing with him. "Yeah," he says quietly. "You really are." And then he is looking at Kurt, his eyes sparkling in the fading sunlight, his face so sweet, so open that it momentarily takes Kurt's breath away.

The silence between them is tense, but it isn't an awkward or painful tension. It's one of potential, of a moment that could become almost anything. Blaine is staring at him with eyes like thirsty desert dwellers, drinking him in as if they might not see him again for days. It is almost physically painful when he tears his eyes away from Kurt and stares down at the bed. Kurt almost says something to break the moment…

And then, Kurt's hand is wrapped in both of Blaine's, and that look is back in full force, stronger than ever, and Kurt can barely think, let alone speak.

Blaine's voice carries so much with it. "Kurt… I…"

He falters, and Kurt would push him on, but all he can think is Blaine is touching my hand, Blaine is holding me, Blaine is looking at me like he's never seen me before and he's been looking for me forever, Blaine is…

Blaine is speaking again. "Kurt, there is…"

And suddenly, the door bursts open and in walks Mercedes and Rachel.

"Boys," Mercedes says breathlessly, causing Blaine to let go of his hand (No, no, no!). "We have a problem."

"Yes, we do, and it just walked in the door!" Kurt thinks, wishing he were one of those strange lizards that can squirt foul-smelling blood out of their eyes to ward off predators (and wondering if his current blood pressure is high enough for him to just do it anyway).

"What's wrong?" Blaine asks.

"Well, we were out at the spa," Mercedes begins, "when…"
"Okay, I can perhaps understand the idea behind the avocado face mask," Rachel says from the tub next to hers, "but why do they put cucumber slices over our eyes?"

"Brings down swelling," Mercedes says simply, relaxing in her own tub, cucumbers and green goop firmly in place on her face.

"My eyes are not swollen," Rachel says.

"How would you know if you never tried anything that might un-swell them?" Mercedes asks.

She grins when she hears Rachel gasp. "You're right. My entire facial structure could be hidden behind a mask of... of puffiness, and I'd never know it." She sighs. "I definitely needed this day."

"Everybody needs this day every once-in-a-while," Mercedes agrees. "A nice, quiet day of rest and relaxation." She's kind of hoping Rachel will take the hint and put a sock in it so the two of them can relax, but if her experience so far is any indication, Rachel Berry will take just about anything but a hint.

Unfortunately, even if Rachel did catch a clue, it sounds like another girl will be joining them soon. "...well, then, you were doing it wrong!" a strange, vaguely familiar voice says from outside the room.

"Miss," the masseuse says nervously, "I'm... I'm sorry if I hurt or upset you, I didn't mean to—"

"Well, you did," the voice says. "If anything, I feel even less relaxed than I did when I came here." She grumbles something under her breath. "...stupid Puck... something something, "...to tell me I need to relax..."

"Miss, if this upcoming final stage of your Relaxation Journey does not soothe your spirit and calm your mind, I can safely say that nothing will," the masseuse says tiredly.

"I assume this is the part where you smear produce on my face?" the girl asks.

"Errr, well..." the masseuse trails off.

"You can forget it. Not with your inept hands. Give it here, I'll do it myself."

"But miss—"

"That wasn't a request," she cuts him off. There are a few seconds of silence.

"Oh my gosh," Rachel whispers. "You're listening too, aren't you? You are just as much of a gossip monger as I am!" she says excitedly.

Mercedes finds herself smiling even as she scolds the girl. "Be quiet! We might miss something."

"There," the girl says. "All done in no time flat. And I did it without hurting myself or fondling anyone inappropriately."

"Miss, I told you, that was an accident—"

"YOU are about to have an accident if you don't be quiet. Hand me those cucumbers and get out of my sight."

"But Miss, how will you get to the tub without my hel—"
"I'm quite capable on my own, thank you. Now leave."

Mercedes hears a sigh, followed by a door closing. A few more seconds pass, and the door to the bathing room proper opens. A few cautious steps, and the sound of someone's hand feeling along a wall follow.

"The tub closest to you is empty," Rachel says helpfully.

The girl gasps. "Were you eavesdropping on me just now?"

Mercedes jumps in here. "Oh, no, honey. Nobody needed to drop eaves. Everything we could have ever wanted to hear came right up to us. I think half the building heard you chewing that poor boy out."

A few more cautious steps. "Well, he deserved it. That little pervert thought he could get away with copping a feel during his so-called massage—" And suddenly, the unmistakable sound of a foot hitting a bathtub far harder than it intends to.

Mercedes winces. "Oh, heavens. Are you okay, honey?"

"Fine," the girl grits out, clearly hopping on one foot. "I know how to deal with pain, believe me."

Here, the sound of her finally lowering herself into lovely, warm water of the tubs is heard. "Oh... oh that feels so good..."

"This part really is the best," Rachel sighs. "It's like all your problems just melt out of you and seep into the water."

"This is amazing," the girl sighs. "Maybe I was too hard on the masseuse..."

"You sound like you have your fair share of problems to melt away," Mercedes says.

"You have no idea," the new girl replies.

"Well then, you've come to the right place," Mercedes says. "Let's all just sit here and soak for a while."

"That is a plan I can get behind," the girl sighs.

They soak in blessed silence for a few more minutes.

"I guess I did need to take a day off," the girl says again. "I've been going nonstop for the past two weeks... I thought I could handle it, but I didn't realize until I hit this water just how tired I am."

Something about that comment strikes Mercedes as odd. Two weeks has been an interesting time for pretty much everyone she knows. She pushes for a little more. "Maybe it'll help if you talk about it," she says. "Come on, give Mama Mercy an earful."

The girl sighs. "Thank you, but I can't. My mission is very important. It's... classified." She pauses for a second. "Though it is nice to have a sympathetic ear. No one I travel with would listen to me like this. I can't show this kind of weakness in front of my troops, or that razor-tongued vampire lizard... well, scratch that. One person would listen to me, but only so he could get into my pants while he feigned sympathy."

"Troops," Mercedes says. "Are you in the military?"

The girl hesitates. "More or less, yes."
Rachel jumps in excitedly here. "Are you a leader? Ohhh, that's amazing! I can't tell you how excited I am to see women making headway in a traditionally male-dominated field such as military affairs. Though I can't really say much for her policies, I hoped the new Fire Lord would be a positive role model for aspiring young women."

Mercedes has nothing nice to say, so she says nothing at all.

The other girl, however, seems curious. "Not much to say for her policies?" she asks. "Do you disapprove of the new Fire Lord?"

"Well," Rachel says chirpily. "I personally cannot give much of an opinion, as I have barely been touched by the sweeping changes she has instigated. Though I must say, if nothing else, I have to admire her support of the arts."

"Her what of the arts?" Mercedes says.

"What do you mean?" the girl asks.

"She is requiring all members of the Royal Navy to attend mandatory dance classes," Rachel says. "Dance is such a wonderful medium of expression, and just a few lessons can have a profound effect on posture and movement. It's refreshing to see someone acknowledging its value so openly."

The girl sounds troubled and somewhat annoyed when she speaks next. "...why wasn't I told about this?" she says to herself.

"Oh, are you in the navy?" Rachel asks.

"No," the girl says. "So... I suppose it doesn't concern me..." She trails off for a few seconds, and Mercedes hears her shake her head a bit. "Ugh, now I'm feeling decidedly un-relaxed again. I just need to focus on my mission. Nothing else matters at this point."

Mercedes has the good sense to suppress her inner gossip to avoid closing the girl off.

Rachel, however, does not. "What mission might that be?" she asks.

"I told you," the girl says somewhat testily, "I can't say."

Mercedes kind of wants to throw something at Rachel, but there's nothing nearby and she'd probably miss anyway. "Sorry," Mercedes says. "My friend here is an insatiable gossip. She loves bein' in everybody's business."

"Oh, it's alright," the girl says. A few seconds pass. "Out of curiosity... just... speaking hypothetically; if you were looking for someone, how would you find them?"

The question sends up alarm bells in Mercedes's mind, but Rachel remains as oblivious as ever. "Well, when pets are lost in Sho Fa, the owners sometimes put up posters to show people what they look like and let them know where to bring them."

"I already did that," the girl mutters tiredly. "You've seen the posters—oh, shit," she sighs. "Well, I pretty much just gave it away, didn't I?"

And that's when it hits her. "You're looking for the Avatar, aren't you?" Mercedes asks, keeping
her voice steady.

The girl sighs. "Got it in one," she mutters.

There is a splashing sound.

"What's that?" the girl asks.

"Oh," Rachel says, sounding slightly nervous. "One of my cucumbers popped out. Sorry."

Mercedes removes her own cucumbers to look over at the girl. She didn't really get much of a close look at her, but Mercedes is pretty damn sure that's the blonde girl from the night when all this started.

Oh,

snap

"Ugh," the girl sighs. "Now I've just gotten myself all worked up again. This is stupid, I shouldn't even be here, I should be doing my job—"

She starts to get up, reaching for the vegetable slices that obscure her vision. Mercedes reacts instantly. "Nonononono," she says quickly. "No, sweetie, sit back down."

"I can't," she says, "I have to—"

"I mean..." Mercedes says, a little calmer. "It'd be better for you if you sit back down. You're tired, I can hear it. You'll think clearer and faster once you've allowed yourself a little rest. Trust me, sweetie. You don't want to go after that nasty old Avatar when you're off your game, do you?"

Praise the Mountains, it works. The blonde pauses as she is about to get out, and then settles quietly back into the tub. "I guess you're right," she says. "I'm just... having a hard time relaxing."

"I know!" Rachel suggests a little too eagerly. "How about I sing you something nice and calming?"

"...really?" the girl says skeptically.

Really! Mercedes mouths at Rachel.

"Just let me try it," Rachel continues. "I have a very soothing voice. If you don't like it, you can tell me to stop."

The earthbender waits with baited breath for the girl's answer.

"Well, I suppose it couldn't hurt. Give it a shot," she says.

Mercedes rubs her hands together in anxious anticipation as Rachel begins to sing a gentle, soothing tune. Against all odds, it actually sounds kind of nice. The girl has a very nice tone even when she isn't blasting the walls down with her voice. It's kind of surprising.

What's even more surprising is how it takes barely even a minute or two for the air to be filled with the soft sounds of snoring.
Damn, Mercedes thinks. Girlfriend was not kidding about being tired.

"Come on!" she whispers to Rachel, who continues singing her song softly even as they both get dressed. She even has the courtesy to gradually fade herself out as they leave the sleeping girl in the spa…

"…and we came straight here," Mercedes says.

Kurt mulls this over quietly as Blaine appears to sink to a place deep inside of his own mind. "A blonde girl?" the Prince asks quietly.


Blaine's jaw clenches, and he closes his eyes.

"They've caught up with us," Kurt says quietly. "We need to move on."

"We can't," Blaine says suddenly. "Not without that Sun Warrior artifact."

Kurt turns to him. "Blaine, you heard what Mercedes just said. These are the same people who nearly killed you the last time you met." A slightly pained chirping noise leaps from Rachel's throat, and to her credit, Kurt can't actually tell whether or not it’s pure dramatics on her part.

The Prince scratches at the back of his neck and Kurt can tell he is surreptitiously feeling for the scar. "I know. Maybe I'm tired of running," he says, his voice uncomfortably low, his face in shadow.

The Avatar's mouth falls open. "You can't be serious. You can't even firebend. I know you're not thinking of challenging these lunatics…"

Blaine looks at Kurt, seeming just a little hurt, but he concedes the point. "I know, I… I really wasn't," he says quietly. "But we can't leave the city without that Sun Warrior… thing. Avatar Groban said as much, and even if he hadn't… all Sue's evil plans, all the information about the Solar Winds starts with that. There has to be something on it that can help us."

A concession deserves a concession, Kurt supposes. "Well, we know who has it…"

"Wait," Rachel says. "This is the same Sun Warrior artifact that Councilor Keros and his wife are unveiling at the big party tomorrow?"

"Yes," Kurt says.

"We think," corrects Blaine.

The Avatar turns a flat, confrontational stare on his royal companion.

"Interesting," Rachel says. "You know, there is a small chance that I might be called upon to perform at—"

There is a knock at the door. Everyone freezes. No one dares make a move or sound.

"Uhm… could somebody please open the door?" Finn says. "This is kinda heavy."

Rachel snaps to action first, opening the door to make way for Finn, carrying a fairly large box.
"Thanks," he says as he hefts the box over to his bed. "Special Delivery for Councilor Ganterson," Finn says with a smile.

Kurt raises an eyebrow. "Is this something I'm actually going to want?"

"Please," says a voice from within the box. "You know you love me."

Rachel nearly jumps out of her skin. "Oh my gosh!" she whispers. "There's a person in there!"

"Oh, La," Kurt sighs, rolling his eyes. "Close the door."

Rachel quietly complies as Finn fiddles with the box until he finally gets it to open, folding the sides out like a flower blooming to reveal Artie as the bud.

"Surprise, yo!" Artie says with a grin.

"Where have you been all day?" Mercedes asks.

At this, Artie looks a little shell-shocked. "That… is a fascinating story, to be told at another time."

And suddenly, Rachel is right in front of him, smiling and holding out her hand.

"Rachel Berry," she says.

Artie looks panicked for a split second. "Adam West," he says, taking her hand.

"No, dude, she's cool. We trust her," Finn says.

"Mostly because she didn't give us a choice," Kurt mutters.

"Ohhhh, cool," Artie says, giving her a more genuine smile. "In that case; Artie Abrams. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Rachel replies. "So, I'm going to ask the obvious question; why did Finn bring you here in a box?"

"Finn was just helping me overcome my ancient archnemesis; the staircase," Artie says simply.

Rachel looks at him strangely.

"I can't walk," he clarifies.

"Ohhhhh!" Rachel says. "Oh, my… if you don't mind me asking; what happened?"

Artie looks at her flatly. "Well, I was sleeping in an alley one night when someone snuck up and replaced my legs with giant tube socks filled with steaks."

The girl looks mortified and more than a little confused. "That's… awful?" she tries.

"I've learned to live with it," he says, before unceremoniously grabbing her and shuffling her out of his field of vision (to her great indignation). "So… I did a little investigating today."

"Oh?" Kurt says. "Learn anything useful?"

"Why yes I did," Artie says with a smile. "Barring a little… unforeseen sidetracking, I managed to infiltrate the upper level and find Keros's house."
"Ooooh," Kurt says. "Very nice. Did you bring us goodies?"

Artie smile becomes more of a grimace. "Not… exactly."

Mercedes looks at him strangely. "Why not? I thought you were Mr. Master Thief."

"Thief?" Rachel balks.

"Yes. Highly wanted criminal. Just like—oh, I don't know, everyone else in this room but you?" Artie says with a nonchalant shrug.

"…wow," Finn says. "I never thought of it like that, but you're kind of right. We're all outlaws!" He seems inordinately pleased by this.

"Focus, people!" Kurt says, snapping his fingers. "Okay, this little tidbit of info dropped before you dropped in, but this city? Is no longer safe for us. The Fake Fire Lord's forces have tracked us here and will likely commence to an exhaustive search of the city very soon. We need to leave, but we need that Sun Warrior whatchamacallit, which brings us back to—why didn't you bring it here? I thought you were good at snatching artifacts."

"I am!" Artie says defensively. "They call them 'artie-facts' for a reason, you know. But part of being a good thief is picking your targets, and knowing when to strike. I could barely get within fifty feet of Keros's house, let alone get inside. There were people everywhere. As far as I could tell, it was split between people who were helping prepare for the party, and security. Lots and lots of security," Artie says emphatically.

Kurt looks at Blaine. "It's almost as if the Councilor has something to hide," he says, with a little more bite than he means to.

Blaine closes his eyes and sighs. "Okay, okay," he says. "I still don't know if I can really believe that… he would do that. But you're right in that it's probably best we don't chance it. We still need what he has, though."

"We'll just have to steal it," Artie says.

"But you just said you couldn't get close to the place. How are you going to steal it if you can't get inside?" Blaine asks.

"I can't get close to the place right now," Artie says. "And I'm not going to steal it. We are."

There is a collective increase in air intake—not quite a gasp, but close.

"Oh my La," Kurt says breathlessly. "Is this a heist? Are we doing a heist? Please tell me we're doing a heist."

Artie grins. "We're doing a heist!"

"Yay!" Kurt says, bouncing up and down on the bed and clapping, to Blaine's amusement.

"This is all so exciting," Rachel whispers to Mercedes.

Artie, ever the sharp one, cuts her off. "Ummm… you are not involved," he says simply.

Rachel looks put out. "Why not?"

"Because I don't know you?" Artie says.

Artie stares at her.

"Go on!" Rachel smiles. "We're all listening."

"Yeah," Artie says. "That's the problem. You're still here, listening." He attempts to shoo her away with his hands.

"Dude, I told you, she's cool," Finn says.

"It doesn't matter," Artie says. "She's not involved. There's no reason she should hear about this."

"But—" Rachel starts to protest.

"Bye!" Artie waves. "Nice meeting you."

The young actress adopts a powerful pout, and looks to the others for support. Blaine seems lost in thought. Finn already tried and failed. Mercedes is looking at Kurt, which means that Kurt controls her fate…

"Sorry," Kurt says, "but he's right. There's really no reason for you to know about this. It's less of a risk—for us, and you."

"Very well," Rachel sighs. "I can tell when I'm not wanted…"

She can? Kurt mouths to Mercedes.

"…so I'll leave you to your planning. Just know that I will expect a full apology when and if you need my local expertise to accomplish your mission. I will be in my room upstairs." With that, she performs a pirouette and flounces out of the room with enough dramatic flair to knock the leaves off of a few potted plants on her way past.

Mercedes closes the door after her, giving Artie a very stern look.

"What?" he asks.

"You're not falling into old habits or anything, are you?" she asks.

He looks offended. "What? No. I'm not… that has nothing to do with it."

"Are you sure?" Finn asks gently.

"Yes," Artie says. "I'm absolutely sure. Tina trying to decapitate me was kind of a wake-up call in that department. This has nothing to do with the fact that she's a girl, and everything to do with the fact that she is extraneous. She has nothing to offer the plan. Is she even a bender?"

"Nope," Kurt says.

Artie nods. "Well then, there you go. It's always better for fewer people to know a secret. That's the only thing I was thinking about." He looks a little chastised when he quietly adds. "I'm not like that anymore."

"Good," Mercedes says. "Just checking. Now, on with the plan…"

Artie smiles. "Alright. So, the basic idea goes a little something like this…"
Rachel flounces right straight up to her room and slams the door behind her. He… how *dare* he! How *dare* that disrespectful little snot treat her like that?

Sure, he may or may not have had a point, but he didn't have to be so *rude* about it. It isn't like she is some untrustworthy gossiping biddy who can't keep her trap shut about anything. She *knows* how to keep secrets!

*Ohhhh!* She wishes Jesse were here so she could tell him about this. She lets out a sigh as she flops down on her bed, staring up at the gold stars painted on her ceiling.

Jesse… oh, what a conundrum. She'd gone after Blaine so quickly and completely disregarded Jesse. It was probably wrong of her to do that, but… it isn't like she and Jesse are anything *official*. Jesse comes and goes as he pleases, often without even telling her. She has no idea where he goes or why, but he spends most of his time away, and that is simply far too unstable a foundation to build any kind of lasting relationship upon.

Perhaps if she pushed him, she could get him to settle down with her. She *does* enjoy his company, and he seems to genuinely *get* her desire—no, her *need* to shine like the star she knows that she is.

Suddenly, there is a knock on her window. Which of course, means only one thing—speak of the spirit, and he shall appear…

She throws open the window and smiles at him. "Jesse," she says. "I was just thinking of you."

"I'm always thinking of you," he responds sweetly as he propels himself easily into the room. "Ah…" he sighs. "It's so wonderful to see you at the end of a particularly difficult day."

"Oh?" Rachel presses gently. "Difficult in what ways?"

"I'd rather not even think about it," Jesse says, dodging smoothly. "While I'm here, I prefer to think of only you."

*This is it!* she thinks. This is her opportunity to test their relationship—gauge if they could ever be something more. "I enjoy thinking about you as well, but… sometimes I'm really not sure *what* to think."

Jesse's smile falters only slightly, his eyes displaying his confusion. "What's there to think about?" he asks. "I'm charming, handsome, brilliant and talented. And…" he pauses for effect, "I'm absolutely crazy about you."

"And yet," she sighs, "you're almost never *here*. Every month or so, you breeze into town and we have a few wonderful days together and then you're just… *gone*. And you won't tell me where you go, or what you do, or why."

His smile loses a little more curve, becoming more of a straight line across his face. "Rachel… we've been through this. I'll… I'll tell you when the time is right."

"When is the time going to be *right*, Jesse?" she asks. "We're both seventeen! We're not getting any younger!"

He sighs, and turns away from her, staring out the window. A few seconds pass in silence. She is about to try pushing him again, when he cuts her off. "Are you happy here?" he asks.

It strikes her as a very odd question. "Why do you ask?"
"Just answer the question," he says softly. "Please."

"I… I guess," she says. "I mean, the stage is where I belong, so of course I'm happy to be around it, even though I am… struggling at the moment. But struggle is an integral part of my formation as an artist. My strife will give me the experience necessary to channel a truly authentic performance."

"So… you are happy? Completely and totally? There's… nothing else you want?" Jesse asks.

She thinks for a moment. "Well," she says quietly. "Sometimes I think…"

"What?" Jesse presses.

"It's silly," Rachel says, with a small smile.

"No, please," Jesse says. "Tell me."

"Sometimes I just… I feel like I don't belong here. I have almost no friends, everyone either seems to hate me or ignore me entirely. All my attempts to fit in end in disaster. I feel like Kaguya, the little moon girl, stranded in a foreign world. And I love my daddies, I truly do, I just… I can't help but wonder if maybe… there is something else out there." At this point in her monologue, she has turned away from Jesse.

So she doesn't see him slowly reaching into his cloak, pulling out a small canister and gently setting it on her desk alongside her music books and art supplies.

"I don't even really know what it is that I'm looking for, I just… I feel I'm missing something," she says softly, turning back to him.

When she meets his eyes again, he is wearing an expression that she has never seen before. He looks at her with no smile at all, but his eyes are so intense, so piercing that she can't look away. "Rachel… there is something that I have to tell you." He walks up to her slowly, taking her hands in his and taking her breath in the same motion.

"What is it, Jesse?" she whispers.

"Rachel… you are…"

And suddenly, there is a knock at the door. Jesse's eyes grow wide with panic, as do her own. Her fathers don't approve of Jesse in the slightest, and if they find him there…

"Hide!" she whispers.

She need not tell him twice—he scampers into her closet and softly closes the door behind him.

Rachel swiftly moves to the door and pulls it open, expecting to find one of her parents.

But that is not who awaits on the other side…

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A few minutes earlier…

"…well that sounds all fine and good, but you're forgetting one thing," Blaine says.

"What's that?" Artie asks.
"They aren't going to let anyone in without an invitation," Blaine says simply.

"Really?" Kurt asks. "Not even the esteemed Councilor?"

"Not even him. No one gets in without a written invitation, for precisely this reason," Blaine says. "If it was just a guest list or based on prestige, anyone could say they were anyone and walk right in."

"Crap," Artie says. "One of us posing as a servant probably won't draw too many eyes, but four of us? That's pushing things. Damn it, I was counting on our disguises actually having some merit. Now I have to come up with a whole new plan…"

"Wait," Finn says. "Didn't Rachel say she might be performing at the party?"

"Oh yeah," Mercedes says. "She did say that."

"Maybe she could get us invitations!" Finn says excitedly.

"Well, I guess we should ask her," Artie says.

Four sets of eyes pin him to the spot, and he winces.

"I'm going to have to apologize to her, aren't I?" he says.

"Yep," Mercedes says, grinning smugly.

The male earthbender purses his lips, and sighs. "Okay, okay. I'll do it. Bring her here."

"Uh-uh," Mercedes says. "That's not an apology. You don't ask a woman to come to you so you can apologize. We have to go to her."

Artie stares at her flatly. "I'll get right on that," he deadpans.

"What's wrong?" Blaine asks.

Artie stares at him even more flatly. "I. Can't. Walk," he says, making sure to enunciate every word.

"So why don't you just slide to her?" Blaine says with a shrug.

"That's an earthbending technique," Artie says, a little less biting. "So… it only works on the earth. I can't do it on surfaces that aren't stone or dirt."

"Oh," Blaine says.

"Come on, dude," Finn says. "I'll carry you."

He moves to pick up Artie, but the earthbender balks at him. "The Hills, you will!"

"Well, how are you going to get up there, then?" Kurt asks.

Artie looks thoughtful for a few seconds. Then he smiles and promptly pulls his box back together around him.

"Dude!" Finn says. "How is that any different from me just carrying you, besides you being a lot heavier?"
"It's more dignified," Artie says from within the box. "I feel less like a baby, and more like a really awesome present!"

Mercedes rolls her eyes. "Boys," she sighs. "Alright, big man, get your bud-in-the-box and lets mosey up to our inside woman."

With a sigh, Finn hefts the heavy box a little harder than necessary, prompting a "Hey!" from Artie.

Blaine and Kurt rise from their seats (Blaine staying behind to make sure Kurt doesn't have any trouble walking or anything). With that, the five of them head down the hall and up the stairs to Rachel's room in the attic. Finn sets the box down a little harder than necessary at the top of the stairs, prompting a "Dude! Precious cargo!" from Artie.

Finn winces. "Sorry, man," he says, panting slightly. "That one was an accident."

"Oh, so the first one wasn't?" Artie asks.

Kurt brushes past them and knocks on the door. Blaine can hear a little shuffling from within, and a few seconds pass before Rachel appears at the door.

"Well," she says, looking a little… relieved. "This certainly is a surprise!"

"We feel the same way," Kurt says neutrally. "May we come in?"

"Oh, by all means, yes!" Rachel says, pulling the door open and standing beside it as their hostess. "Welcome to my humble quarters. Please, make yourselves at home."

Blaine takes a look around the bright pink room with various shining gold stars on its many surfaces, little notes of encouragement posted on the walls, a case for Rachel's many trophies and awards, and decides that humble is probably not the right word.

They file in, and Finn hefts Artie into position at the foot of Rachel's bed. "Rachel," Kurt says, "someone here has something to say to you."

"Oh?" she says, acting coy. "I wonder what that might be."

Blaine hears Artie sigh from inside the box.

"Oh, wait!" Rachel says suddenly. "I'm sorry. One second…" She turns around, facing the small closet. "Jesse?"

There's a loud smack from the inside of Artie's box, almost as if he violently flinched and hit his head.

"It's okay. It's not my dads—you can come out now!"

The closet door opens, and… a man in a strikingly familiar, hooded cloak emerges. Blaine gapes at him—there's no way. There is absolutely no way this is the guy who attacked them in Fenghuang. He tries to look at Artie for confirmation, but Artie is still packaged goods.

Turning around to look at this 'Jesse,' it takes them approximately two seconds to lock eyes. Jesse's widen in recognition.

Oh, shit.
"Everyone, I would like you to meet Jesse St. James," Rachel says, introducing him with a beaming smile. "He is… a very dear friend of mine," she says, giving him a one-armed side hug. "Don't worry," she says. "I assure you he is completely trustworthy."

"It's a pleasure to meet you all," he says, returning Rachel's hug with fondness and unmistakable familiarity.

Kurt glares at her. "Oh, well, that just makes me feel so much better," he grumbles, before raising his voice with a sigh. "Kurt Hummel," he says neutrally. "Why don't I just wear a friggin' sign…" he goes back to grumbling.

"Mercedes Jones." The earthbender looks Jesse up and down somewhat approvingly.

"Into a volcano," he says, swallowing thickly.

"Had to think about it, did you?" Jesse asks, semi-jokingly. Finn blushes and looks down.

"Blaine Anderson," he says, offering his hand.

Jesse takes it after only a moment's hesitation.

Finally, it comes down to the room's last occupant, who… isn't saying anything.

"Ahem," Kurt says with a longsuffering smile. "Sorry. Our last member is just a little… shy," he says, kicking the box.

"Oh," Rachel scoffs. "Come, now. You don't have to be shy, Artie…"

All eyes are on the box, so no one sees the way Jesse's eyes practically bulge out of their sockets at the mention of that name.

Finally, the box unfolds, and an uncharacteristically nervous-looking Artie smiles at the world at large. "Artie Abrams," he says, giving a little wave. "Nice to meet you," he says, somewhat insincerely.

"Nice to meet you too," Jesse replies, with equal insincerity. "Errm… all of you, that is. Charmed."

"I'm sure Jesse will be happy to help you in any way he can," Rachel says, looking pleased with herself. "But first… I believe one of you had something to say to me?"

Artie appears torn. His eyes shift back and forth between Rachel and Jesse, and it's interesting to note that Jesse's eyes are now focused almost exclusively on Artie. "We came here," Artie says, sounding a bit hoarse and taking a second to clear his throat. "So that I could apologize."

Rachel nods at him. "Very well. I'm listening."

"I'm sure Jesse will be happy to help you in any way he can," Rachel says, looking pleased with herself. "But first… I believe one of you had something to say to me?"

Artie appears torn. His eyes shift back and forth between Rachel and Jesse, and it's interesting to note that Jesse's eyes are now focused almost exclusively on Artie. "We came here," Artie says, sounding a bit hoarse and taking a second to clear his throat. "So that I could apologize."

Rachel nods at him. "Very well. I'm listening."

"Rachel," Artie says. "I'm… sorry that I was so rude and dismissive of you earlier. You were right—it looks like we might need your help after all." He sighs. "Please forgive me."

"Great!" Kurt says brightly. "So, you're performing at this little shin-dig, right?"
"Well," Rachel says. "I said there was a chance I could perform. Miss April Rhodes is set to perform several pieces from The Orochi Cycle's latest revival. Should anything happen to her, I, her understudy, would be expected to perform those duties. But sadly, I highly doubt Miss Rhodes would miss such a prestigious event..." she trails off.

Kurt looks annoyed. "So... you're not performing?"

Rachel starts to shake her head, but Jesse jumps in and cuts her off. "Actually, she is," he says, smiling brightly at her.

She is taken aback. "I am?" she asks.

"That... is what I was just about to tell you! Before they came in!" Jesse says, a little too enthusiastically. "Miss Rhodes will not be able to make it to the party tomorrow, so you will be performing in her place!"

"Oh," Rachel says, looking concerned. "What happened to her?"

"She... ahhh... had somewhere else to be," Jesse says.

"How very strange. I mean, I know she has her... problems, but she always seemed very dedicated to her art," Rachel says softly.

"Who cares?" Jesse says brightly. "This is it! The break you've been waiting for! It's your big chance to perform for the Fire Nation elite!"

This effectively distracts Rachel, who immediately goes bug eyed and begins bouncing up and down and squealing. She is almost enough of a distraction to make Blaine miss Jesse slowly sliding over to Rachel's desk and sliding what appears to be a small canister into his cloak.

"Well, I'm glad you're as excited about this as I am," Jesse says semi-calmly. "I'm afraid I really must be going now."

"Going?" Rachel says. "But you just got here!"

"I just remembered something I have to... take care of," Jesse says with a smile. "Don't worry, I won't be going far."

He starts to move towards her window, but she stops him. "Wait! For my set list tomorrow... I might need to perform one of the duets. The actor who plays Susano might not be available on such short notice, so... would you be my Susano?" Rachel asks sweetly.

Jesse looks a little torn, but eventually, he grins at her. "Of course," he says.

To which Rachel chirps and bounces again.

"I suspect you will get official word sometime tomorrow morning," Jesse says. "So try to act surprised. Everyone," he says, addressing the group at large. "It was lovely meeting you. I assure you that I will mention none of this to anyone. Good luck!"

With that, he throws open the window, and is gone.

Blaine and Artie share a look that clearly says 'we must discuss this later.'

"Well, that was weird," Mercedes says.
"Oh, don't mind Jesse," Rachel says fondly. "He's always coming and going. The important thing is that I can help you now!" she says excitedly. "As a performer, I get two complimentary guest passes. Normally," she says, somewhat quietly, "I would give those to my fathers. They love to see me perform. But under the circumstances… I think they would understand that helping the Avatar is more important."

Kurt actually smiles at this—not like the smiles he usually directs at Rachel, but a genuine, honest smile of gratitude. "I appreciate that. I honestly do," he says warmly.

Artie, who appears to be stuck in a momentary Jesse-induced stupor, shakes himself out of it. "Okay, so… we have two guest passes. Those go to the golden couple here," he says, indicating Kurt and Mercedes. "The Councilor and his Lady Friend. Blaine," Artie says, looking at him. "You're the least conspicuous out of all of us, so you'll be the guy on the serving staff. I'll have your outfit by tomorrow. Which just leaves the problem of Finn…"

"I could… I don't know," Finn says. "I'm not sure how much help I'd be. I could just stay here."

"Oh!" Rachel says. "Finn, you can come on as part of my stage crew! I'll need someone to help me out with set up, prop management, costuming…"

"Awesome!" Finn says suddenly. "I mean… umm… thanks! I'd… I'd love to help," he says, smiling shyly, and oh, wow. Blaine may be oblivious most of the time, but he's pretty keen when he actually tunes into something. And he would have to be blind to miss a crush of this magnitude. He feels an inexplicable urge to tease Finn about it while simultaneously urging him to act on it, but decides to save it for later.

"Alright, so Finn is in," Artie says.

"What about you?" Kurt asks.

"I'm getting there, I'm getting there!" Artie says holding up his palms. "Alright, everybody gather 'round. Here's what's gonna be going down…"

A little later that evening…

"WOO-WEE!" April Rhodes proclaims to the heavens as she stumbles out of the latest in a long line of wine tastings she's been to that evening. "Hey, Hanz!" she calls out to her chauffeur, blearily holding her hands in front of her face. "How many fingers 'm I holdin' up?"

"Phew!" she says, going in to wipe her forehead and smacking herself across the face instead. "They went all tingly and numb on me, so I's afraid I lost a couple. Little rascals wouldn't stay still long enough for me to count 'em. They're having a dance party! Just like you, me, and the rest of the world!" She throws her arms up into the air and starts swaying, presumably to keep up with the way her vision is swimming. She isn't quite coordinated enough to pull it off, however, and nearly falls over. Fortunately, Hanz is a quick hand, and catches her. "Come on, Miss Rhodes, let's get you into the coach. You've got a big day tomorrow!"

"Every day is a big day!" April cries out joyously. "We're livin' large, Hanzy-boy!"

"Yes, miss, we certainly are," Hanz says patiently.

"You know," April says as he opens the coach door and gently guides her in. "You're cute. Have I
slept with you? I should sleep with you. We should do it. Right now! Just have some wild, nasty stagecoach sex. Right here in the stagecoach!

"I… don't think that would be a good idea," Hanz says patiently. "Seeing as I am quite happily married."

"Ohhhh yeaaaaahhhh…" April says, pointing at him. "I 'member now. Oh, Hanz. You're a good one. They don't make 'em like you anymore. Which is a shame, 'cause if they did, I'd eat 'em up like a starved walrus and at one o' them all-you-can-eat shrimp buffets. Just suck 'em down."

"I'm sure you would," Hanz says, hopping out of the cab. "Are you comfortable?"

"I can't feel my lips!"

"I'll take that as a yes. Let's get you home."

"No place like it! Like yours, like miiiiine, liiiiiike…" She takes a deep breath, and Hanz closes the door just before she starts belting out a "HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOME!" loud and high enough to wake the entire city should it have gone unhindered.

His is a tricky job, but he's gotten pretty good at it, he likes to think.

Lashing his moose to get him started, he drives Miss Rhodes back to her abode through the darkened city streets, completely unaware of a certain hooded man keeping an eye on him. When he is just about to turn the corner to Miss Rhodes' estate, he suddenly feels himself propelled from the driver's seat by a tremendous gust of wind.

He slams into the ground, dazed and surprised, and recovers just in time to see an enormous white creature grabbing onto Miss Rhodes's coach and sailing off into the heavens with it. "YEE-HAW!" he hears her cry as she flies away. "I'm defying gravity! Fuck you, gravity! WOOOO!"

He can only gape at the sight as it fades into the darkness of night.

Well, that was certainly unexpected.

He should probably inform Miss Rhodes's housekeeper that she won't be in tonight. And there's the matter of the gala tomorrow that she will likely not be attending. Oh, and he should probably get around to figuring out what the flying fuck just happened.

And finding Miss Rhodes, of course.

But it's important to prioritize ones' tasks. So… first thing's first.

That housekeeper…

After Artie has explained his plan and everyone has a rough idea of their purpose therein, Kurt decides to call it a night and sends everyone to bed. They'll finish preparations for the party in the morning—it doesn't start until the afternoon, after all, so they've got a little time.

As Finn boxes up Artie and carries him back down the stairs, Kurt sends Mercedes on ahead and waits at the bottom of the staircase for Blaine.

The Prince comes down looking so tired that Kurt almost doesn't say anything. But…

That moment.
The signals and energies that were flying between them just before Mercechel came in and threw it all into chaos… it refuses to be ignored. Kurt *must* know where it was going.

"Blaine," he says, putting a hand on his shoulder and smiling at him. "I know it's been a long evening, but… I think you were about to say something to me before we were interrupted. If you'd like to finish… now would be a good time."

And Blaine looks at him again. This time, however, it is with soft, sad eyes, full of uncertainty. His voice hitches. "Kurt… I…"

He takes a deep breath. Kurt's own breath mimics him perfectly.

"It… it can wait," he says. "It can wait until tomorrow. We've… we've all got a lot on our minds," he sighs.

Kurt deflates so quickly that he's honestly shocked he doesn't just flatten into a piece of parchment and slip through the floorboards. "Oh," he says quietly. "Alright then."

Blaine starts to move, but seems to have trouble taking the first step. He looks away when he speaks again. "Goodnight," he says.

"Goodnight," Kurt echoes.

And they go their separate ways, to their separate rooms, to think their separate thoughts, until the morning comes.

*His mother is closer than ever to his thoughts that night, so the dream continues. Her narration is so powerful that Blaine can almost feel the vibrations of her voice. He watches the dream boy as he flees the flame that once was his.*

"*And he loved the fire no longer... and yet, the fire loved him still.*"

*The flame refuses to be left behind and pursues the boy through the mounds of ash that once made up everything that he loved. He can almost feel the boy's terror in his own bloodstream, feel his own heart pounding in time with his fleeing footsteps.*

"*Even amidst his fear and pain, the fire came after him. The boy could not escape it. He was so very afraid of being burnt yet again, so afraid that the fire would consume him, consume whatever was left…*"

*The boy dodges through the mounds of ash, scrambles up and over piles of it, desperate to escape the chasing fire. His clothes are soon covered with soot, and his skin and hair are filthy and patched in black.*

"*He hated the fire, and loved the ash... so in the ash he stayed. Afraid and alone, forever fleeing the flame that still sought him, seeking love from cinders that could not give it. In the ash... he remained.*"

*And suddenly, Blaine is no longer watching.*

*His eyes sting with the specks of ash that blind him. His hands feel dry and dirty and pained from being caked with grayish black dust. He coughs and sputters, stumbles on unstable footing as the soot slips from beneath him, and soon he crashes to the ground. He feels the heat of the flame as it approaches him, and tries to scramble away, but he can't seem to get any purchase on the ground.*
It seems the fire is destined to consume him…

But it stops before it reaches him.

He scoots away from it a bit, still nervous from the heat.

The fire follows him, but remains at the same distance. Almost as if there is an unseen line that it cannot cross.

Blaine isn't sure what to do, so for the moment, he just sits in the ash and warily watches the flame for any tricks or sudden movements.

It is after a few minutes of this that Blaine notices his mother has stopped her story. Her voice has vanished, leaving only the gentle cackling of the fire, and stark, cold silence in its wake.

For a while, there is nothing.

And then he hears it. Footsteps on the ground, coming towards him. The gentle hushing sound of ash being swept aside or stepped across.

He turns to the sound, and… there she is. As bright and vibrant as he could have ever remembered her, beautiful and strong, wavy black hair shimmering in the reflected firelight, regal robes hanging beautifully on her strong frame. She smiles sadly at him as she crosses over the ash piles and kneels beside him, running her hand through the dust. She says nothing.

"Why did you stop the story?" Blaine asks her.

She regards him with a quiet sort of resignation—the look he remembers her wearing the last time he ever saw her. When she speaks, her words tear him in two.

"Because… that's all there is."

A/N: Whew! That was quite the thing. Mercedes Jones—a cockblock in every universe. XD Okay, so I'm sure many of you have already figured it out—Raise Your Glass is indeed the multi-part chapter covering the party, the heist, and all that it entails. ;) We're so close I can practically taste it! Will the party go as planned? What exactly is the plan? What was Jesse going to tell Rachel? What was Blaine going to tell Kurt? What will Artie and Blaine do about Jesse and his potentially nefarious schemes? What will Finn do about his crush? And will they be able to avoid Quinn and her Frienemies long enough to do anything at all?

You'll find out soon enough. ;) Reviews and comments are always appreciated!
Jesse's Girl

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 42/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, swearining, violence.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: None for this chapter.
Word Count: ~5700
Summary: Kurt Hummel, the current Avatar, finds a Firebending teacher in the young Prince Blaine. Is that all he finds? Or will destiny conspire to push them into becoming more, to the world and each other?

Author's Note: You may be wondering why this took so long to post. Well, I wrote it about three different times before I was satisfied with it. Sometimes, the hardest things for me are the transition chapters. I know where I want to be, but I have to get there, and sometimes the process is just annoyingly hard. Ah well. ;P This chapter is primarily Jesse POV. I hope you enjoy it! :P

CHAPTER 42 –
Jesse's Girl

Day 13

The curtain rises.

Lights up. Brilliant golden sunbeams dance over the city's rooftops. The stage is filled with characters. Crowded even. The audience's attention wavers—they don't know who to root for, they don't know who the stars are.

But only for a moment.

All the other characters are flat. One-dimensional, useless caricatures created exclusively to highlight the main attractions. The extras exist solely to bring more attention to the stars.

One by one, the cardboard cutouts masquerading as people fall over to reveal the three-dimensional
figures—the rounded, complex characters that give the story its meaning, the ones the audiences love and see themselves in (even if they have to stretch a bit—or a lot—to measure up). Yes, one by one, all the other pieces will fall until only two remain.

His beloved Rachel, and himself.

Spotlights on Rachel and Jesse. They lock eyes from across the stage and are immediately drawn towards one another, as if caught in a whirlwind of fate—

"Jesse," Brittany says from the bathroom. "I need help."

"Brittany!" Jesse groans from the hotel bedroom, pausing mid-stroke in his morning combing routine. "You are interrupting a very important internal monologue!"

"But I can't stop washing my hair," Brittany says sadly. "The bottle says 'lather, rinse, repeat.' It just goes in a circle. I think it's cursed. It's an evil bottle; it wants me to wash my hair until I die."

Jesse thinks about this for a few seconds. "Just wash until you run out of shampoo," he says calmly. "Then you can't repeat, and no one will be able to blame you."

"That's a good idea!" Brittany says happily. "You're really smart."

"I know," Jesse smiles.

Now, where were they? Ah, yes. Rachel runs to him, leaps into his arms and faints, knowing that he will catch her. Safe in his grasp, he lifts her up, up, up into the air, into a world she never imagined. Her breath hitches as she beholds the tiny world beneath her—so very far beneath—and she clings to him ever tighter, afraid that she will fall and become small again.

But he won't let her fall.

That's not how this story ends.

Rachel always believed that her life was a fairytale.

She was right, of course.

She just had the wrong tale in mind. She is not the humble maidservant to be found and swept off her feet by the handsome and dashing prince, elevated from commoner to royalty by love that knows no bounds. Rachel was never common.

No. Rachel is the princess in this story.

And Jesse is going to save her from this banal life of common people and common dreams. He will lift her up to where she belongs (beside him). And together, their beauty and talent and charm will be beloved by all.

Alas, that ending is still a little ways off. They have entered the final act of the story, and many are the obstacles in the hero's path. Before the curtain falls for the final time, Jesse has to take care of those other characters who threaten to derail the story's ending.

In this case, it is perhaps best that the heroine never know the whole truth.

Time to silence the hecklers…
April Rhodes wakes up in the back of a stage coach.

Nothing new about that.

Well, excepting the fact that she has all her clothes on, and she's by herself, and the stage coach is hers. All those things are new.

She tries to stand up, but she's still got her sea-legs (cause of the ocean of liquor she set sail on the evening previous) and everything wobbles. She stumbles into the door and squints against the sun peaking in through the windows.

"Alright, sunny-boy," she grumbles. "You and me, we can't keep meeting like this. One of us is gonna have to tone it down, and I can sure-fire tell you, it ain't gonna be me. So put a damn thimble over it, you big flaming ball of bright. Quit blinding a woman first thing in the mornin'."

The sun, tragically, stays just as obnoxiously bright. It is obviously a morning person. What a horrible, un-natural thing to be.

"Fine, fine," she grouses. "I guess you can't help it. You gotta be what you were born to be, and so does me."

She stumbles to the other side of the coach and opens the other door, thankful that there's much less light shining into her brain on that side. She steps down the first step, steps down the second step, and starts to step down the third step before she realizes that the third step is a few thousand feet higher than the others.

She's on top of a damn mountain.

What in the blazes did she drink last night? A couple shots of that pink stuff, and she feels like she's floating. But she's never actually floated before.

She hears footsteps on the other side of the car, and turns around. "Hanzy-boy, I think we took a wrong turn somewhere, sweet-cheeks."

She stumbles to the other side of the coach, checking to make sure there's ground underneath her before stepping out. Did she and Hanz have sex last night? Is that why he drove all the way up here? Wanted a little privacy? 'cause April Rhodes ain't exactly a stickler for privacy. She's a star no matter where she is—if people want to watch her perform, well, more power to 'em. Maybe they'll pay attention and learn something.

"Hanz, baby? You pass out on me?" she stumbles around the cart to look for the feet making steps…

…and finds herself face to face with a mountain goat.

She squints at it.

It baas at her.

"Don't take that tone with me," she grumbles. "Pretty sure you eat garbage. You're in no position to judge, mister."

It baas again.

She is taken aback. "You horny little varmint! I see you, undressing me with your beady little goat-
eyes."

It tilts its head at her.

"Uh-uh," she says. "For-get it. I am a Lady, you fuzzy pervert. I have standards!"

It baas again.

"You're darn tootin'," she agrees, and flounces off to go find Hanz… or someone. Anyone, really.

Being stranded on a mountain has taught her a valuable lesson.

It's lonely at the top.

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Jesse slips soundlessly into the Berry Inn through the back door, taking care to avoid any Berry men who happen to be puttering about, as it is very early in the morning. It is a relatively simple matter to sneak up to the second floor where the interlopers dwell. He is butter-smooth, whisper-soft, and lemon-fresh. None can match his impeccable prowess as a spy.

He's gone over this meeting several times in his head. Several alternatives came to mind—murder, bribery, hypnotism… all of which were far too much trouble to bother with. In the end, he decided to go with the two simplest paths. Should one fail, he will default to the other.

Path 1: Apologize.

It isn't his normal modus operandi. He isn't in the business of apologizing, mostly because he isn't in the business of doing anything wrong, ever. Sure, people occasionally think that he has done something wrong, but that has more to do with their flawed, imperfect perceptions of reality than any imperfection in Jesse. He is usually more than happy to correct these poor, lost souls. But today is different. He's trying something new.

Besides, since people only think he has done wrong, he only has to make them think that he is sorry. No sincere feelings of remorse are required—it's a simple acting exercise, and a marvelous opportunity for him to practice his technique.

As he reaches the door, he hears voices whispering from within. Everyone seems to be already awake, and having a very intense discussion. He listens in.

"…have to tell Rachel!" A rough voice, panicked and emotional, clearly unrefined, uneducated, and un-intelligent. Probably the tall one. What was his name? Fudd? Firr?

"I agree," a smoother, calmer voice replies. Its tone is measured, its diction precise. The short, curly one. Blair, or something. "I haven't known Rachel for very long, but I consider her a friend. It would be terrible of us to keep this from her."

"Agreed, I suppose," a strangely high voice joins in. Probably the self-absorbed one that looks like a Porcelain Moments figurine. Kurt, he thinks. "Rachel is… well, she's tolerable at times. With all she's doing to help us, we owe her this much."

"I am all for smacking down that teabag in whatever ways I can." That voice, he instantly recognizes. The strange mixture of precise diction and lazy drawling, not to mention the very distinct tone… it's the damned cripple. "So Hills yes, I am onboard. Let's squeal like moo-sows on this motherfucker."
"I'm glad we're all in agreement," says the only female voice in the room, full of ever-present sass and defined by an absence of nonsense. Mercuries. Maybe. "I thought that boy was too damn slick to be real."

Oh, custard fluff. They're talking about him. Cripple and the Curl have already ratted him out to the others, but it seems they haven't yet told Rachel. Well, it looks like he has arrived just in the nick of time, in typical heroic fashion.

He knocks on the door.

The tall one opens it. Jesse greets him with his best charm smile. "Good morning," he says. "I'm just stopping by for a friendly chat before HRRRRK—"

The last sound is not in the script, but is, in fact, an improvised response to very long hands wrapping around his throat and jerking him into the room. Within seconds, he is tied up in a bedsheets and pinned to the ground. To add insult to injury, the cripple is sitting on top of him. Ew, ew, ewwww. With how he gets around, there's no telling what kind of unspeakable things are collected on his bottom.

"Well, well," the cripple says smugly. "Look what the cat dragged in."

Jesse smiles up at him. "Artie!" he says, infusing his voice with happiness. "I was hoping I would see you here."

"Why?" he asks. "Come to finish what you started?"

"Yes," Jesse says, "but not in the way you think! I actually came here… to apologize."

He awaits the collective gasp of shock. It never comes. Ugh, what a terrible audience.

"Are you for real?" the sassy black one sasses at him. "You tried to kill him! You think you can just waltz in here and apologize, and everything will be alright?"

"No," Jesse clarifies. "I think I can just two-step in here. The ambient rhythm is all wrong for a waltz. And if an apology isn't good enough for you, what would you like me to do?" he asks.

"Die in a fire?" the tall one mutters.

"I can get behind that," Artie grins.

"Guys," the curly one says. "Maybe we should hear him out."

A collective gasp of shock. What? Oh, the audience favoritism here is just appalling. That delivery was terrible. Brittany wouldn't have believed that, and she'll believe anything.

"Blaine," Kurt says. Oh, that's his name! "Your terrible judge of character is showing. There is no reason—"

"I'm not saying we should believe him," Blaine says. "I'm saying we should listen to him before we decide anything. That's all."

Kurt mulls this over for a moment. "Fine. Let him up."

Artie glares at him before leaning over and pushing himself off of Jesse. He then pulls himself across the floor with his hands, sliding on his bottom. How terribly unsanitary! But then, earthbenders tend to like filth in general. Theirs is a strange, uncouth element. If nothing else, he
could strap sponges and brushes to his hindquarters and make a decent living as a floor scrubber at some low-end diner.

Jesse stands up, and brushes himself off. "Thank you," he says calmly. "While I understand your reticence to trust me, I assure you that I am here with only the purest of intentions."

"Bender, please," Artie scoffs.

"It's true!" Jesse insists, deploying his 'wide-eyed innocence' look. "I am truly sorry that we met under the circumstances we did. We got off on the wrong foot."

"You attacked me," Blaine says.

"You nearly killed me," Artie grumbles.

"That's two feet," the tall one groused. "Both your feet are wrong. You suck!"

Jesse rolls his eyes. "Both of those were a simple case of mistaken identity!"

"Oh, so you are, in fact, willing to commit murder," Kurt drawls. "But only on certain people?"

"I thought you were a thief!" Jesse says, pointing to Blaine. "I've been hounded by thieves the entire time I've been here. You stumbled out in front of me, covered in… product. What was I supposed to think?"

"Well, you could have asked, and given me a reasonable chance to explain myself before passing judgment and attacking me. Sort of like we're doing to you, right now," Blaine says, his voice low, his expression suffused with condemnation.

"So I made a hasty decision. It's not like I actually hurt you, or anything. Air can be a very kind element—my intention was simply to immobilize you and neutralize you as a threat. That's all," Jesse explains, using the smooth, plaintive voice of the mediator.

"Yeah," Artie chimes in. "You're a total sweetheart. Hence you threatening to throw me off your bison hundreds of feet in the air. Ain't nothing 'kind' about that."

"You," Jesse says, "I thought were a spy."

"And that justifies killing me?" Artie asks.

"Yes!" Jesse insists, letting perhaps a little too much genuine heat into his argument. "You have no idea what it's like to do what I do. I am just a delivery boy. I take precious cargo and I make good and damn sure it gets where it is supposed to go. The cargo is very, very expensive, and as with any object of worth, there are people willing to take it by force. Willing to kill for it. If the wrong information gets leaked, I could be killed. If a rival group gets wind of my route, I could be killed. If I lose valuable cargo and somehow survive the encounter, I could very well be killed by my own superiors. So forgive me if I'm a little less-than-willing to take chances!" he finishes, breathing hard. He was a little more passionate than he intended there, but it might well be paying off.

The room is silent for a few moments.

"You're still a douchebag," the tall one mutters, and Jesse has had just about enough of his snide little insertions.

"Okay, who are you, again?" he asks, turning to the mis-proportioned miscreant.
"What exactly is your problem with me?"

"My problem is that you're a friggin' rat viper. You lied to Rachel and you attacked my friends!" he says.

Jesse starts to feel just the barest hint of nerves. "When did you talk to Rachel about me?"

"This morning," Blaine says. "She decided to go for a jog in the 'crisp, refreshing air of dawn' to let out some of her nervous energy. I asked her about you. And she said she didn't know much."

"So?" Jesse scoffs. "That's not lying. That's simply… withholding certain truths."

"I don't see no difference," says Miss SassyPants.

"Your use of double-negatives tells me otherwise," Jesse says, perhaps a bit too snidely.

"No," Blaine says. "Mercedes is right. Keeping something that important from Rachel is no different than outright lying about it."

"What business is it of hers? Knowing would just cause her undue distress," Jesse says simply.

"Dude," Artie says. "Your 'business associates' or whatever kidnapped your air bison. Who's to say they wouldn't do the same with your girlfriend?"

Jesse opens his mouth to utter a rebuttal, but the words stall before takeoff. Possibly because he… well, he honestly hasn't thought of that before. He intends to come up with a perfectly logical explanation for his actions that will satisfy all involved and absolve him of any wrongdoing. But for some reason, his mouth betrays him, and he says "You can't tell her!"

"Ha!" Kurt says, jumping into the conversation. "I knew it. You wanted something. That's the only reason you came here. You're not sorry," he accuses. "You're sorry you're about to get caught."

"Kurt's right," Blaine says, and Jesse glares at him. Do you have any thoughts of your own, or are you just here to agree with everyone? "And so is Artie." Question answered. "By not telling Rachel what you do and the risk it involves, you're putting her in danger, even if you don't realize it. Even if we were to give you the benefit of the doubt and accept your apology, it wouldn't change the fact that you're purposely keeping her in the dark about this, and that isn't fair to her."

Well, crap. This isn't working terribly well. He decides to try one more sincere plea. "No, please," Jesse says, actually pleading. Ugh, the things he is willing to do for love… "Please, don't tell her. My relationship with Rachel is… complicated. You have no idea what you would be doing to us."

"Well, I guess we're about to find out," Mercedes says, heading towards door.

"Wait!" Jesse says.

"Uh-uh," Mercedes says. "This conversation is over."

"Bye!" Kurt says, mock-cheerily. "Nice chatting with you."

"You're making a mistake," Jesse warns, his voice carrying the barest hint of a growl.

"Is that a threat?" the tall one says, standing up to his full height and squaring his shoulders. It's a clear attempt to intimidate, and it is the deciding factor in Jesse dropping the character of Mr. Nice Guy.
"Actually," he says, slipping on a serene smile. "Yes, it is."

Before bigguns can react, Jesse reaches into his cloak and produces his trump card.

Or rather, his trump wanted poster.

*There's* the collective gasp he was looking for! He knew they would come around. There is no audience that Jesse St. James cannot win.

The tall one starts to walk towards him, but Kurt pulls him back with a soft "Finn, don't."

"That's right," Jesse says, "Finn." He adds just a hint of malice to his smirk and his tone as he continues. "Wouldn't want to do anything that might draw attention to you, right, Artie? Mercedes? Kurt? Blaine?"

He chuckles to himself. "You were fools to give me your real names. Because apparently, I'm not the only one who knows them. And now, I know who you are."

"So… let me get this straight," Terrence sighs, massaging the bridge of his nose. He thought his promotion to Captain of the Sho Fa City Guard would make his life easier, or at least objectively *better* in some way. Here lately, it has been nothing but an endless stream of headaches, occasionally broken up by *migraines*. He looks at the girl across the desk from him. Chi-Ryu Captain Quinn Fabray sits and stares down her nose at him, flanked by a bored-looking bald-ish guy (Puck) and an annoyed dominatrix (Santana). She's looking at him like he's a bug—a particularly *stupid* bug, at that.

He sighs and goes over her demands again. "You want me and my men to sweep the entire city, top-to-bottom, looking the following; a tall white male, a gay white male, a *gayer* white male, a paralyzed white male, and a black female. You want us to round up everyone fitting those descriptors and bring them in so you can peruse them to see if they match the outlaws. Is that about right?"

"Yes," Quinn says. "What is so hard about that?"

Terrence sends a despairing gaze towards the heavens. "Where do I *begin*?" he sighs. "Alright… first let's try to narrow the field a little bit. The posters you gave us to plaster around town are somewhat… *vague*. Are there *any* other descriptors you can give us?"

"Well…" Quinn says looking distant in thought for a moment. "…the tall one has dark hair."

"*Fantastic,*" Terrence drawls. "That narrows it down *so* much. Anything else?"

"The black one was kind of… you know… on the healthy side," Puck contributes.

"She was?" Santana asks.

"Oh, yeah," Puck says. "Definitely. I notice these things."

"The suspect sheet just gets narrower and narrower," Terrence sighs.

Santana retreats into her own mind for a moment, and returns wearing a look of accomplishment. "The paralyzed one wears glasses," she says, smirking.

Terrence can only gape at her. *Really?* "Really?"
"What's wrong with that?" Santana asks. "That's useful information!"

"Except I'm pretty sure glasses can be taken off," Quinn deadpans.

Santana crosses her arms. "So? Hair can be dyed," she says, cocking her head. "And weight can be lost," she says, turning to Puck.

"Not in two weeks!" Puck counters.

Quinn snorts. "Clearly you've never heard of the Sue Sylvester Master Cleanse," she mutters.

"Alright, so..." Terrence says, attempting to re-rail the discussion before they all plunge into a canyon and die in an explosive, fiery death. (Which is starting to look better and better in comparison.) "We have a larger black woman, a tall white male with dark hair, a paralyzed white male... possibly wearing glasses. Is there anything else you can give us?"

"Curly!" Santana says with a snap. "The gay one has dark, curly hair. He's a little on the short side, too. Oh, and also? He's mixed. Don't know exactly what, but there is definitely spice in that white rice."

"Marvelous," Terrence says, continuing to take notes and wondering how severely you would have to be injured in the line of duty to earn early retirement. "Mixed-race gay male with dark curly hair. Anything else?"

The three of them think for a bit. "That's all we can offer you, besides the sketch on the wanted poster."

"Great!" Terrence says, tossing his hands in the air like he just doesn't care. "So we're looking for a dino—"

"Remove the reptilian features," Quinn cuts him off sharply, "and you have a perfect match."

"Alrighty then!" Terrence says with exaggerated enthusiasm. "Based on the descriptors that you have given us, factoring in the size and population density of the city as well as the various demographics that dwell therein, with every single man on the task, it should only take us... oh, about a month to accommodate your demands. Whereupon we will contact you with a list of suspects that could stretch from here to the Capital, for you to lovingly sort through while we feed and shelter the entire lot in the incredibly massive prison complex that I am sure is now waiting for me just outside the building, seeing as that's the only thing that could enable your insane plan to be even remotely workable and it would be ridiculous for you to come in here and demand that I acquiesce to this ridiculous request without it!" By the time he finishes, he is wide-eyed and red-faced, and feeling a little manic.

Quinn is glaring at him, unimpressed. "Are you done having your little meltdown?" she asks. "Because you have a lot of work to do."

Terrence sighs, and vows to make one last attempt at being reasonable. "Look, I'm sorry, but have you seen the size of this city? There are thousands upon thousands of people living here, from all corners of the Fire Nation. There is simply no practical way to gather people based on information as flimsy as what you've provided."

Quinn looks ready to start setting things on fire, but to the surprise of everyone in the room, she grits her teeth and accepts the verdict. "Fine," she says. "Come on, you two. Since the local authorities are clearly incompetent, we will perform the search ourselves..."
Terrence sighs as they exit, and thinks of an Ember Island vacation to calm his nerves. He was promoted not more than a month ago, and he's already too old for this damn job…

"You slimy little weasel," Kurt says, appalled. "You wouldn't."

"I absolutely would," Jesse says with a grin. "I could have twenty guards here before you even finished getting dressed. I have a very powerful voice—it travels well."

"You do know that I'm the Avatar, right?" Kurt says.

Jesse shrugs. "I figured you, in all your ancient wisdom, would understand my position and be more forgiving. Clearly, I underestimated you."

"In more ways than one," he growls, but Jesse holds up his hand.

"Now, now," he says calmly. "There is no need to get testy. You've forced me to resort to blackmail, but my conditions are still the same. All I require…" he says, pausing for effect, "…is your silence. You keep my secrets, and I will keep yours."

"You… jerk," Blaine says, looking outraged enough to spit. "We could all be killed if they find us here. This isn't some stupid game; we have a lot more at stake here than your relationship," he says.

Jesse jumps in. "I suppose that means I win, then, doesn't it?" he says, his voice smooth and confident. "I hold the better cards, and you have more to lose."

No one has anything to say to this.

"Ha," Jesse says, relishing in the feel of victory. "It appears the cat is on the other foot now, isn't it?"

Artie tilts his head at that. "…wait, what?"

"Or… wait," Jesse says. "Damn it. I screwed up the line. Was it… the shoe is out of the sack? Or…"

"I'm about to introduce my shoe to your sack," Mercedes warns.

"Temper, temper," Jesse says. "We're all civilized people here. I see no reason we can't solve this without violence."

"I'll solve you!" Finn says, abruptly launching himself at Jesse. He tries to bull-rush him, but Jesse is faster and quickly sidesteps him, resulting in Finn dashing right past. The giant spins and tries again, and this time, Jesse is less kind, pivoting around him and throwing a gust of wind at his backside. The blast sends him flailing and stumbling across the room, where he trips over his own giant feet (Ha!) smacks face-first into the wall (Ha-ha!) and falls on top of the cripple. (Ha-ha-ha!)

"Finn!" Kurt shouts, rushing over to him. "Artie! Are you okay?"

"If you want a fight," Jesse says neutrally. "I'll be happy to take this somewhere more… appropriate."

Mercedes and Blaine look ready to strike, but suddenly, a stepped-on rake, Finn pops right up and starts coming towards him again. Everyone moves to try and stop him. Blaine and Mercedes try to
hold him back from the sides, Kurt pushes him back from the front… even Artie latches onto him before he is completely off the ground, wrapping his arms around Finn's shoulders and being carried up with him.

To Jesse's shock, the four of them don't seem to be quite enough to hold him back. The red-faced giant is making steady progress towards him.

"Finn, no!" Blaine says.

"Let me go!" Finn growls.

"Down, boy!" Mercedes cries. "Heel!"

"No!" Finn says. "I'm gonna tear this guy apart!"

"Finn, wait…" Artie says.

"Oh, come on! You, too?" Finn says.

"I'm not holding you back!" Artie says. "I'm coming with you! We'll kick his ass together!"

"Stop it, both of you!" Kurt orders.

"Why?" Finn shouts, still steadily coming towards him with just enough fury in his face to make Jesse steadily back away. "There's five of us and one of him! Why are we taking his crap?"

"What do you want us to do, Finn?" Kurt asks. "Kill him? Are you really willing to go that far?"

It's this that causes the raging beast to slowly, slowly deflate, until it seems he can barely stand on his own. They gently guide him to the bed, where they sit him down, allowing Artie to drop off his back. Mercedes looks ready to rend him asunder, but Kurt, Blaine, and Artie hover protectively around Finn.

"It isn't fair," Finn says, sounding near tears.

"Neither is life," Kurt says sadly. "Sometimes, we just have to do the best we can with what we have. And in this case, we don't have very much."

At this point, Jesse has finally recovered from the little unexpected spectacle of the amazing raging beast-man. "Well, I'm glad we all see eye-to-eye—"

"Get out," Kurt says.

Jesse balks at him.

"Leave!" Kurt orders. "You hurt my brother. Your presence is a serious test of my patience and you do not want me to get angry."

Jesse holds his hands up. "Just… as long as we're clear," he says simply. "Can I trust you to keep quiet?"

"We'll keep your little secret," he spits. "Now leave, you oily little snake. You're clogging my pores by existing."

Jesse exits the room with five hateful sets of eyes on his back, smiling the entire time. It isn't until is out the window and on the rooftops that his smile falters.
That didn't go at all how he intended it to. All he really wanted to do was to apologize and let everyone put the past behind them. After all, who really wants to get on the Avatar's bad side? The blackmail was meant to be a just-in-case thing. He didn't expect Captain Righteous, the Gelled Wonderboy to get all uppity and moral on him. Or for Finn Hudson, human thermometer, to get all red-faced and rage-y at him.

Well, whatever. So they'll never be friends. So what? Jesse St. James doesn't need friends. All he needs is Rachel and his adoring public. Now that

Out of the corner of his eye, he spots her, jogging with a bright smile on her face, her hair up in a little ponytail, as dedicated as ever to making her dreams reality.

He smiles. This world is too small for her. It's time for her to leave it behind…

Finn sulks on the bed beside Artie, both of them a little bruised.

"You okay, big buddy?" Artie asks.

"Yeah," Finn sighs. "Are you? I kind of squished you. I'm sorry."

"Pssh," Artie says. "I've been squished by worse than you. Don't even worry about it."

"I can't believe we're actually going along with this," Mercedes says. "That slick, slimy, sneaky little two-faced blowhole…"

"We should've kicked his ass," Finn says.

"We would've kicked his ass," Artie adds, nodding agreement. They share a fist-pound.

"Well, we don't really have much of a choice at the moment," Kurt says. "Right now, Jesse has us by the proverbial balls."

Blaine stands nearby with a pinched expression, his arms crossed. "He is an awful, awful person," he says, disgusted. "Not only does he lie to her and keep her in the dark—he even steals from her."

Finn looks appalled. "Are you serious?"

Blaine nods. "I saw him last night. He took something off her desk."

"Like what?" Mercedes asks.

"A little canister. Like people carry scrolls in."

Suddenly, Artie sits up. "Say what now?"

Blaine looks over at him. "Yeah. He took it off her desk while he thought no one was looking."

Artie makes a shape with his hands. "Was it about yay big? Kind of a dark blue, with little swirly patterns on the outside?"

"Yeah," Blaine says, squinting at him. "You saw it, too?"

The earthbender nods. "I did, but not in Rachel's room. He had it with him before. I swiped it, and traded it for my life when he tried to send me sky-sailing. Whatever it is, he didn't want to lose it. He said it was a message to someone."
"Rachel?" Blaine asks.

"Sounds logical to me," Artie says.

"But why'd he take it back if it was for her?" Finn asks.

"Maybe there's something he doesn't want Rachel to know," Mercedes suggests.

"Or maybe…" Kurt interjects. "There's something he doesn't want us to know about Rachel…"

She practically buzzes as she runs home, barely even noticing his silhouette as she passes, until he calls to her.

"Hello, beautiful."

Rachel turns to beam at him. "Jesse!" she says excitedly. "You were right! I just ran into the event planner for the party, on his way to give me my official performer's pass and guest passes!" She holds up several little sheets of paper with official-looking emblems on them. "I'm so excited I could explode. I feel like I just drank a carton full of lightning. Oh!" she cries suddenly. "I feel faint. Catch me!"

She swoons.

He catches her, of course, and sweeps her off her feet. "My darling!" he cries. "Are you alright? Speak to me, my love! Let me hear that voice which makes the songbirds murderous with jealous rage."

"Oh, Jesse," Rachel sighs. "It's all so overwhelming! After so many years of toil and strife, my much-deserved big break is upon me at last, and I can barely contain myself!"

"Well then," Jesse says with a smirk. "Perhaps I should keep my surprise to myself. I wouldn't want you to explode from sheer happiness, after all."

Rachel drops out of his arms immediately, breaking the scene. "A surprise? What is it? I want it! Give it, give it, give it!"

Jesse smiles at her. "Well, it isn't really something I can give. More something I can… offer," he says cryptically.

"You are such a tease!" Rachel says, hitting him playfully. "Tell meeeeee."

"Okay, okay," Jesse laughs. "I've been thinking about what you said and… you're right. I'm not here for you nearly enough. You deserve someone who can be there when you need him."

Rachel clutches a hand to her chest, her eyes wide. "Does that mean… you're staying?"

Jesse winces. "Not… exactly. I'm leaving again," he says. "Tonight," he adds, walking up to her and taking her hands, before delivering the dramatic reveal.

"And I want you to come with me."

A/N: Only one more chapter to go before the party! Reviews and comments are awesome. ^_^
Author's Note: It seems that people are getting a bit impatient with the story, myself included. No, really—Act 3 is awesome, and I want to be there now. :P But what's next is certainly nothing to be missed! In this chapter; Kurt and Blaine dance around each other, figuratively and literally. Mercedes ships it, and is just as frustrated as you are. She gives Blaine a talking-to, and in the process, reveals several chunks of backstory that people have been clamoring for. Meanwhile, Rachel makes an important decision, and Finn struggles under the weight of the secret he must keep. Enjoy!

CHAPTER 43 – Party Crashers

It's later in the day. Artie has gone out into the city to secure some supplies. Finn is trailing after a strangely subdued Rachel, receiving instructions on what his many duties will be over the course of the evening (only about 20% of which he will retain).

Which leaves Blaine, Mercedes, and Kurt in their hotel room.

"Straighten your posture," Blaine says.

Kurt elongates his spine.

"Good. Square your shoulders," he instructs.
Kurt pulls his shoulders back and feels like he's trying to poke someone with his nipples.

"Great," Blaine says with a smile. "You're... probably going to be sore after holding that for a while, but if everything goes well, we won't have to be at the party for that long."

Mercedes sighs, standing nearby in perfect 'ladylike' posture, with her own back straightened and her nose upturned. "To be honest, I don't know why we don't just bust in, snatch the thing, and bust out. All this hoity-toity society crap is rubbing me all the wrong ways."

"Artie said there was a ton of security," Blaine says. "And he only has a general idea as to where the thing actually is. I don't want to risk anyone getting hurt, especially if there's a chance we might not even get what we need."

"But is this really necessary?" Kurt asks. "All of these rules... posture, poise, proper pinky placement—"

"—all designed to make it easy for the rich to distinguish themselves from the commoner," Blaine says. "You have to act a certain way around these people. Believe me—they're like tigersharks. If they see the slightest hint of weakness, they pounce. If you don't hold to the rules, they're going to get suspicious. It's one thing to fool a commoner into thinking you're high society, but fooling an actual high society patron is another animal entirely."

Kurt sighs. "Fine. Continue your lesson, oh Master of Manners."

Blaine gives him a gracious bow. "At your command, my liege." He straightens up again. "Ah, yes, thank you for reminding me. We need to teach you how to bow."

Rolling his eyes, Kurt regards Blaine with the imperious 'you-are-a-bug' stare that he has spent the day perfecting. "I know how to bow, Blaine. Pretty sure it involves bending at the waist."

"Yes, but do you know who to bow to? Or what to do with your hands?" Blaine asks, stalking around Kurt and surveying him carefully.

He raises a finger. "I... ah... no."


Blaine places a closed fist in his open palm, and bows.

Mercedes does the same. "Good," Blaine says.

Kurt thinks he does it perfectly, but suddenly, Blaine is all up in his personal space, straightening his fingers. "Don't cup your hand so much. It's meant to look kind of like a fireball, see?"

Blaine arranges Kurt's hand into the proper shape and holds it up so he can see it.


Blaine grins at him. And then, all of a sudden, he turns bright red and snatches his hands away like Kurt is made of boiling hot lava. "Well, uhh... they certainly won't think so if you get it wrong, so... you should... keep practicing."

Kurt quirks an eyebrow at him. Blaine has been acting strangely since yesterday. He seems hesitant to touch him, and whenever he forgets himself and does it anyway, he quickly recants. It's strange, and a little unsettling. Blaine has never had a problem touching him before—what changed?
"Are you mad at me?" Kurt asks.

Blaine turns around, looking horrified. "What? I... no!" he insists with complete sincerity. "Not at all. Why?"

Kurt blinks and huffs out through his nose. "You've been acting strange lately. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Blaine insists, swallowing thickly. "I just have... a lot on my mind."

The Avatar gives a soft 'hmm,' and practices the bow again. Blaine turns away to berate himself for his cowardice. Mercedes tries not to hurl herself through a window from sheer frustration. This dancing around has got to sto—

"Dancing!" she says suddenly.

Blaine turns to her, wide-eyed and fearful. "What?"

"There will be music at this party," Mercedes says simply. "So there'll probably be dancing too, right?"

The Prince looks thoughtful. "You're right. I suppose I should teach you one of those as well..."

Mercedes grins, proud of her newly concocted master plan. There's so much tension between these boys—a nice slow-dance will have to make something happen. It never fails.

Unless, of course, one of the boys in question isn't even involved in the dance.

Which is exactly what turns out to happen, as a few minutes later, Kurt and Mercedes are dancing together as Blaine sits on the bed and hums a gentle song for them to step to. "You guys are pretty good," he says, tapping out the rhythm as he speaks.

The earthbender rolls her eyes. Time for drastic measures.

Taking care to make sure she isn't too obvious, Mercedes jams her foot underneath Kurt's as it comes down.

Crunch.

"OW!" she says, hopping around a little. "Watch where you're sticking them clogs, waterboy!"

"Sorry!" Kurt says as they resume. "I... well, I don't think I did misstepped..."

She does it again.

"OW!" she shouts, throwing her hands up. "Okay, I cannot work like this. Mister Ostrich-feet over here is a danger to my health and sanity."

"I... I really don't know what I'm doing wrong," Kurt says.

Blaine looks at them both with tilted head. "You seem to be doing everything correctly, I'm not sur —"

She cuts him off by grabbing him off the bed and shoving him into Kurt's arms. "Teach this boy how to dance with me, Blaine," she says. "’cause if he stomps on my feet one more time, I'm gonna have to start stomping back."
The two of them stare at each other for a few moments. Blaine wipes his palms on his pants and gives an unsteady smile. "Alright, well… I suppose I can see your technique better from… up close," he gulps.

"Am I still leading?" Kurt asks, his throat suddenly dry.

Blaine nods. "Yes. Just… act like I'm Mercedes," he says lamely.

With a nod, Kurt grabs Blaine's hand, and wraps an arm around his waist. Mercedes smiles softly as she starts humming the same song as Blaine. It starts off poorly—the two are a little out-of-sync and feeling a little too awkward to really get it right. They look at their feet, bump heads, giggle and apologize. But Mercedes continues to hum, and Kurt and Blaine continue to dance, and slowly but surely, they fall into perfect step. She watches them as they lose themselves in the moment, the motion, the music... each other. It isn't long before neither of them is looking at their feet, but instead, staring directly into each other's eyes. Soon, the dance progresses far beyond what Blaine taught them, but neither loses a step. They move with and for each other, through each other, even starting to add little flourishes that have nothing to do with the dance. They respond to each other naturally, read each other perfectly.

Mercedes sees this and can't help but wonder what in the Hills is taking them so long to get together.

And suddenly, the dance is over, and in a single moment, she has the answer she is looking for.

The two slow to a halt, closer than she has ever seen them, so entranced with one another that Mercedes could probably sneak up on them wearing tap shoes and a dress made of bells, and they'd never know it. Their mouths are open and they are breathing heavily, so close that they can taste each others' breath. And then… it just stops. It never goes any further. They freeze in that position, both with so much desire painted across their faces that parents would probably shield their children's eyes as they passed. And they aren't even doing anything.

Kiss him! she mentally screams at Blaine.

But he doesn't get the message.

And all of a sudden, Kurt breaks away from Blaine. "I'm sorry… I… I have to go."

He is out of the room in a second, leaving a flustered Blaine and a fantastically frustrated Mercedes in his wake.

With the deadly calm of a cheetah-snake stalking its prey, Mercedes quietly moves over to the door, slams it shut, and regards Blaine with unimpressed eyes.

"We need to talk."

"Honey?" Lady Keros says, sticking her head into her husband's darkened study. "Don't you think it's time you started getting ready for the party?"

"No," her husband spits back sourly.

She pastes on a patient smile and tries to reason with him. "But dear, the party is for you."

"No, the party is for you!" Keros counters. "It's always for you! You'll take any excuse to throw another stinking fancy gala and get together with your obnoxious friends to gossip about everyone."
The 'big unveiling' was your idea, so you can do it by yourself!"

She tries to find him in the shadows, eventually spotting him hunched over his desk. His messenger hawk sleeps in the cage nearby, looking like it's fresh off a journey. "More news from the Fire Lord?"

"Oh, mind your own business, will you?" Keros spits. "I have enough problems without you shoving your enormous nose into everything of mine and sniffing around like a starved shirshu."

At this, she finally drops the charade. "Alright, fine," she says, her voice deadpan. "Here is the deal—you look like a back-alley bum with a serious amphetamine addiction. If you want to come downstairs to the party, I am offering to clean you up and make you look presentable. Otherwise, you can have an orgy up here for all I care, but stay out of sight."

"Pah," Keros scoffs. "As if I would want to be seen and accosted by any of the dreary, miserable souls who attend these wakes. No, my dear, you go on without me. You and the bottle have such a lovely repartee at your little gatherings—I would hate to come between you."

"As always, you are as charming as you are kind. Ta, dear," the Lady says, leaving him to his misery. With the way he's been acting lately—hiring more and more security, constantly looking over his shoulder at every loud noise, losing sleep and muttering to himself when he thinks no one is around—there is a very real chance he might be losing his mind.

And who is she to stand between him and his insanity? After all, if he goes to the loony bin, she gets all his stuff.

Finn is in Rachel's room. Rachel is talking a lot, but it's… less a lot than normal.

"Now, you will be expected to set up the lights beforehand so that my body is evenly illuminated and my best features are highlighted at all times. My best side is front and slightly to the left, but I'll try to make it easy on you by singing mostly at an angle. I feel that increases my sense of allure and mystique, and…"

Suddenly, Rachel gets all sigh-y and wistful again. She's been doing that a lot today. It's kind of creeping Finn out.

"Are you okay?" Finn asks. "You look kind of… sad. I don't mean like crying, though. You're kind of… hungry-sad."

Rachel stares at him like Finn stares at a food he doesn't quite know is food yet. "If I tell you something, will you promise to keep it a secret?"

"Sure!" Finn says instantly. He's kind of stoked Rachel trusts him.

"I am kind of sad," she says. "But also… somewhat excited. I'm eloping tonight," she says with a bright grin, "with Jesse!"

Finn's brain trips and lands on a really hard rock and spends a few seconds clutching its knee and rocking back and forth. When it comes back, Rachel is looking at him strangely.

"Finn, are you okay? You look like I just told you the moon was dying," she says. "That's right, isn't it? Waterbenders worship the moon, don't they?"

"Yeah, yeah," Finn says. "We do, kind of, and I… ummm… I just… I don't know what to say." The
truth works as good as anything else right now.

"Neither did I," Rachel says. "When Jesse proposed it to me, I was so taken aback by the request that I couldn't answer him. He told me to think about it and tell him tonight, and… I've decided to go," she smiles. It kind of fails after a couple seconds, though. "I can't tell my fathers—they would never approve—but I'm sure they will understand someday. Daddy always says it does a person good to get out and see the world, and Father just wants me to be happy… he doesn't really like Jesse, but Jesse makes me happy. So he'll come around."

"But…" Finn says. "What about your… thing?" He fumbles around for the right words. "I mean, the month lady is gone, and you're her undercarriage…"

"April Rhodes," Rachel corrects, "and the term is 'understudy.'"

"Right," Finn says. "But yeah. If she is gone, and you go away too, who will be… the girl? Kushi?"

Rachel waves him off. "Important roles like that always have at least two understudies. I'm sure Sunshine will perform just fine in my stead. Her accent mostly disappears when she sings, so the audience shouldn't have too much of a problem understanding her…"

"Oh," Finn says softly. "Okay."

Rachel sighs at him. "I hate keeping such a big secret like this from my fathers, but… it's time I started making my own way in the world. They know I don't want to keep working in the family business. I love them, but my mind is made up," she says, nodding to herself like she's making sure she agrees with herself before she does anything she doesn't like. Ow. Finn kind of hurt himself thinking that sentence. "So… now you know!" Rachel grins, and slaps his arm playfully. "Thank you for letting me get that off of my chest. It feels good to tell someone."

"No problem," Finn says, his face a vast, white blankness, like the tundra in a blizzard.

"Now, in terms of make-up, I believe I am capable of—"

"Hey, Rachel," Finn says.

"Yes?" she asks, her eyes wide and weirdly innocent, and yet, kind of not. Finn doesn't want to crush her happiness, but… seriously, Jesse St. James is a douche, and who knows what will happen if Rachel goes off with him? He might… you know… trade her for crack or something!

"Ummm…" he says. "Hypodermically speaking—"

"Hypothetically," Rachel corrects.

"Right," Finn nods. "Hypothetically… say you had a boyfriend who was just… kind of… a gigantic jerk. Who lies and does bad things. Would you… hypothetically… want to run away with him?"

Rachel tilts her head at him, baking the question in her brain like a delicious cupcake (Finn is kind of hungry). "What a strange question…" she says, full of thought. "I suppose it would all depend on what he did, and whether or not he is willing to change. After all, none of us are perfect, though some of us are closer than others." She smiles at him. "I'm sure even you've done things you aren't proud of."

Finn blushes and looks down. "Uhh… yeah. But… I only did those things because I was stupid,
and I panicked, and I didn't think, and... I'm really sorry about them. I'm trying to make up for them. The hypocritical guy—"

"Hypothetical," Rachel corrects again. "Although given the context, 'hypocritical' could possibly make sense…"

"Right, that guy, he's not sorry at all. And he doesn't want to change. He wants to keep doing bad stuff. Would you still want to go with him?" Finn asks.

Rachel considers the question a little more. "Well, I suppose… if that were true, my only option would be to present him with an ultimatum. He could choose either me, or his life of wickedness. Naturally, the power of our love would illuminate the darkness in his mind and make him see that I am the only thing he truly wants."

Finn sighs. "Okay…"

"Why do you ask?" Rachel asks, again with her weird super-innocence.

"Just wondering," Finn says. "Forget it. Let's talk about important stuff. Like… you!" he says, smiling even though he isn't really happy.

Rachel takes it anyway, though. "I like your priorities," she says. "Now, I can apply my own stage make-up. I might need you to help me out with my hair, though, I—ohhh! I wonder if your waterbending could be used to make my hairstyling easier. You put it into any position while it's wet and then dry it instantly! You'd be like a hairbender! I was thinking we could do it in sort of a…"

"Alright, here is the deal," Mercedes says plainly. "I'm going to ask you a simple question. You answer 'yes' or 'no.' Understand?"

Blaine looks ever-so-slightly terrified, but nods, nonetheless.

"Do you," Mercedes says, "or do you not want a piece of that sweet Avatar ass?"

Blaine's whole face widens in complete shock. "What?" he barks.

"That was not a 'yes' or 'no,' sweetie," Mercedes says, looking anything but patient.

"I… I don't…" Blaine stammers.

"Oh?" Mercedes asks. "Is that a 'no'?"

"It's…"

"Because it doesn't look like the answer is 'no!'" she continues. "So what is it?"

"I don't know!" Blaine half-shouts.

She continues to glare at him, unmoved. "You don't know?" she scoffs. "That is weak, boy."

"What?" Blaine asks again, seeming less afraid and more indignant.

"You got cloth in your ears, or are you just slow to catch on? I said that is weak. As in that is a weak answer, as in that is not an answer at all. To put it in bluntest terms; bullshit."
"What do you want me to say?" Blaine asks, throwing up his hands. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry that my entire life was turned upside down two weeks ago! I'm sorry that losing everyone I've ever loved has left me feeling a little uncertain about this kind of thing. I... I just... I don't know what I'm doing here!" he cries. "I'm sorry that I don't quite have it as together as the rest of you!"

The earthbender looks at him like he just grew two more arms and started playing ukulele with them. "Together?" Mercedes scoffs. "You are trippin', boy. Nobody here has it together! Have you met these people?"

Blaine shakes his head. "What do you mean?"

The earthbender looks at him for a few seconds, like she's trying to asses him for structural faults. "Sit down," she says.

Blaine is feeling a bit petulant at the moment. "Okay, you can't order me around like some—"

"Sit down," she repeats.

"Yes, ma'am," Blaine sheepishly replies, quickly moving over to the bed.

Mercedes stares at him archly for several seconds. The room seems to take a breath as she begins to speak. "There's a lot about us that you don't seem to know, so let me break it down for you, show you the dirty underbelly of how our little group works."

She holds up a finger. "Kurt left everything he knew to save a world that hates him from a threat he barely understands. The Avatar used to command respect, but now everywhere he goes, he is scorned and mocked. People have even started blaming him for the very problem he's trying to fix!"

She holds up a second finger. "Artie is a criminal who forgot half his life and is scared to death of his own memories. That boy acts as cocky as the day is long, but you know what? It's all a front. He hates himself, and the sad part is, he doesn't even really know what he's hating on."

A third finger joins the first two. "Finn? Finn is here for two reasons; one, he's so scared of being alone that he lets himself get treated like dirt as long as nobody leaves him, and two, he feels guilty."

The Prince squints at her, tilting his head. "About what?" Blaine asks.

Mercedes shakes her head, dropping her fingers. "Where do I even start? He hurt Kurt something awful; that story ain't mine to tell. He got us all thrown in prison while he ran off like a coward and left us there—even his 'best friend,' who he knew for a fact was terrified of getting locked up again. Oh, and he's the son of a mass murderer."

Blaine's jaw drops. "What?"

Mercedes nods soberly, and holds up four fingers. "Which brings us... to me. Damn near every adult in my village, including my own father, died over the course of a war. That war... was fought between the Earth Kingdom, and the Northern Water Tribe."

The Prince can only stare at her in shock. He lets out a breath that almost sounds like a 'No...'

She keeps right on going. "Finn Hudson's father was the most powerful waterbender in the Northern Tribe. And during that war, he killed my daddy, and thousands of other people. He orphaned everybody I know. I am traveling with the son of a man that I grew up hating the way..."
she pauses for a second, taking a breath and looking Blaine dead in the eyes. "...the way you hate Sue Sylvester. And some days, I think I'm over it. But some days... I just..." She seems to lose her words here, shaking her head and sighing.

The poor boy looks near tears, so Mercedes softens her voice as she finishes. "Now be honest; how together does that really sound?"

Blaine cups his hand over his mouth, at a complete loss. "I had... I had no idea. That's... all of it... I can't even..." He takes a breath, and puts his thoughts in order. "You guys all seemed so close. I honestly thought you were like a family."

"We are," Mercedes says. "And this is why; none of us have it together on our own. None of us has any of this figured out. We don't know what we're doing, but we know we have to do something, and we know how we feel about each other. Finn is here because he loves Kurt. So am I. We put up with each other for exactly that reason. Artie is here because he loves Finn and believes in Kurt. Kurt is here because we all stand behind him and support him every chance we get." She looks at him with a completely open expression, stressing every word. "We have nothing to cling to in this life but each other. And that's why I'm asking you this, Blaine. I'm not trying to beat you up or make you feel bad," she says softly, "but you need to figure this out, honey. Why are you here?"

For a moment, his eyes become distant and bright. His face is a picture of longing—of a dying campfire in desperate need of fuel. "I... I care about him, I do. So much. I just... I don't know what to do. I don't want to screw this up."

"Well," Mercedes says. "No offense, but you kind of are. You are confusing that boy something fierce. One minute, you're all over him, and then it's like you can't stand being around him." She puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes it gently. "Figure it out, Blaine. Otherwise, all this emotional whiplash is gonna make Kurt's head fall off. And I'm tired of seeing that boy hurt."

With that, she walks out of the room, leaving the Prince alone with his thoughts.

She finds Kurt sitting in one of the other bedrooms, quietly staring out the window.

"Am I just... inventing all of this in my head?" Kurt asks without looking at her. "All the touches we share, the little intimate moments, the smiles and winks and nudges... are those not supposed to mean anything? Am I just reading it all wrong? Again?" he sighs.

"Blaine is just... a little confused, sweetie," Mercedes says, sitting on the bed beside him. "He'll come around eventually."

"Oh, don't say that," Kurt sighs. "Now you're just getting my hopes up, and that is the last thing that I want. If you never get your hopes off the ground, you can't drop them and watch them shatter like snowglobes."

Mercedes rolls her eyes at his melodramatics. "Yes, but if you never hope for anything, what kind of life is that? Boring, gray, and depressing. Besides, you don't always get disappointed."

Kurt arches an eyebrow at her. "My win-loss record leans heavily towards the 'loss' side in that department."

"True," Mercedes allows. "But it's not a hundred percent."

"Still, there comes a point when you have to realize that things conform to a certain pattern. You just have to look at your life and say 'this is how things are going to be,' and accept that," Kurt
sighs. "I fall in love with a straight boy and get painfully rejected. I fall in love with a gay boy, and oops—he just wants us to be super-awesome BFFs. He doesn't actually like me."

The earthbender tisks at him, scooting closer. "Well, you know what I think?" Mercedes asks, before answering her own question. "I think he likes you. I think you've read everything right. I think he's just not as quick on the uptake as you are, so it might be a little while before he figures out what you already know."

Her rundown of his love life earns a small smile from Kurt. "Well," he says. "I'm certainly no expert on the subject, but any assessment that paints me in such a flattering light is one that I will have to accept." He bumps his shoulder against her. "Thanks, Mercedes."

"You're welcome," she says. "Now, come on. Let's go be prim and proper ladies and gentlemen. My pinky needs more warm-ups. The last thing I need is to pull a finger muscle…"

"...I'm sorry, Leroy, but that just isn't in the budget!" Hiram sighs. He loves his Lele, he really does, but the man just does not understand money.

"It would pay for itself in like a month or two, at the most!" Leroy counters. "The sequins on the windows would not only keep the rooms cooler, but they'd make those windows pop like corn on a hot tin roof!" He makes a sunburst with his hands to demonstrate.

"Yes," Hiram replies. "And they'd also make the building an eyesore, maybe blind a few messenger hawks into crashing through our sparkly, expensive windows!"

"Well, excuse me for trying to put a little dazzle into this drizzle," Leroy mutters, crossing his arms.

"Believe me, honeybuns, you sparkle bright enough to offset any—"

Their conversation is interrupted by a small stampede of footsteps on the staircase coming down into the lobby. The esteemed Councilor and his entourage make a regal entrance, followed by… their daughter? Who seems to be very dressed up, for some odd reason.

"Councilor," Leroy says, nodding in greeting. "Rachel, you're looking awfully nice this evening."

She blushes and smiles bashfully at her fathers—and it immediately rubs Hiram the wrong way. Rachel is never bashful.

"The Councilor and his lovely wife have invited me to the big party at the Keros Estate," Rachel says softly.

"Oh?" Hiram says, looking at the Councilor, who seems to be carrying a new air of imperious grace.

"Indeed," the Councilor says. "She has been most gracious and helpful to me during my stay here. I have always admired quaint, small, comparatively dingy places such as this. They are so much more real than the fancy, grand hotels."

Hiram notes the exact moment when Leroy's smile goes from sincere to 'I secretly want to kill you.' "Well, I'm glad you enjoyed your stay," Leroy says through clenched teeth. "That is very generous of you."

"Rubbing noses with the cultural elite of the Fire Nation will present a marvelous opportunity to share my talent with those who might otherwise miss out on my wonderful performances," Rachel
says. "I might even find a sponsor. Wouldn't that be amazing?"

Hiram smiles. His little girl is always enough to bubble up his champagne when things start to feel flat and stale. "I'm thrilled for you, sweetie, I'm sure you'll knock 'em dead."

"Darling," says the Councilor's wife. "Don't you think we should be on our way? I would hate for us to be unfashionably late."

"Yes, yes," the Councilor says, shaking his head and waving his fan towards the door. "We go, we go. Gentlemen, it has been my great pleasure to be your guest. I wish you sunlight and success in the future."

The two Berrys bow in gratitude to the Councilor. "Thank you, sir."

The Councilor, his wife, and the tall and short servants proceed to file out the door to where a fancy-carriage with a rather ornery-looking driver waits for them, leaving Rachel standing alone and facing her fathers. She seems unusually hesitant, and Hiram's heart breaks for her.

"Are you nervous, honey?" Hiram asks.

Rachel purses her lips and nods.

"Well, don't be," he says. "I know you'll do just fine."

"Anyone who doesn't see you for the gem that you are isn't worth your time," Leroy adds.

Suddenly, Rachel's face crumples, and she dashes over to them, leaping with shocking ease over the front desk and grabbing them both into a powerful hug. "I love you so much, daddies," she whispers intently. "Thank you so much. I couldn't have asked for better fathers."

They squeeze her back. "We love you too, Rachel."

"My little diva," Hiram grins.

"My shining star," Leroy laughs.

They hug for a few more seconds, before Rachel finally breaks it off, her eyes shining with tears that never escape (as they would ruin her make-up). She heads towards the door.

"Go get 'em, tigress," Leroy shouts.

Rachel turns back to look at them in the doorway, her expression seeming torn and sad, yet oddly jubilant, before turning away and heading out. It lasts for only a second, but Hiram feels like he will never forget that look.

There's something about it that feels… oddly… final.

As the carriage trots to its destination in the late afternoon sun, Santana Lopez and a small contingent of Chi-Ryus will pass by them on a Komodo Rhino. Santana will catch sight of the driver out of the corner of her eye, and give him an odd stare as she passes him, feeling he is familiar somehow.

Artie Abrams will note this stare and remove his glasses with incredible speed. When Santana pulls her rhino up beside him to get a better look, she will be somewhat confused, and dismiss her intuition as a fluke.
Artie will wipe a bead of sweat from his forehead.

Within the carriage, Blaine Anderson will catch a fleeting glimpse of her through the window, and clench his fist even as he looks away.

Kurt Hummel will put a soft hand on his shoulder and rub it gently. Blaine will smile at him, more grateful than he can say.

Mercedes Jones will watch this happen with equal measures of fondness and annoyance at the ridiculous boys she travels with.

Rachel Berry will stare out the window at the city that has been her home for her entire life. She will look at each building, at the hazy orange skyline formed by their composites, as if she wants to memorize every inch… as if she might never see it again.

Finn Hudson will look at Rachel much the same.

Quinn Fabray will march around the city on her rhino, her eyes locking on each head of curly hair she spots, her hopes rising only to be dashed when it turns out to be the wrong person. Her fury will build slowly and steadily as the search wears on.

Noah Puckerman will call a brief halt to his search in order to wash Kilgore. He will pay extra for the scented soap. Kilgore will approve.

Jesse St. James will leave Brittany S. Pierce in charge of their air bison, bidding her farewell until later that evening, as he has a very important date to get to.

Brittany will spend most of his absence braiding said air bison’s hair.

Before the night is over, each of these stars will shoot across the sky, colliding in a brilliant storm of fire and light.

Every life involved will be changed forever.

And none in quite the ways they expect…

A/N: Keep in mind that Mercedes's description of Finn's father as a 'mass murderer' is very one-sided. Finn obviously thinks very differently. There will be more on the war and the circumstances surrounding it (and how it ended) in Act 3. Reviews and comments are always welcomed. Raise Your Glass is next! :D
Raise Your Glass, Part 1

Kurt Hummel is dressed to kill. With nothing but nimble fingers, raw determination, and maybe just the tiniest bit of bending-based assistance, Kurt has tailored his amazing Technicolor dreamrobe into a fierce, fabulous, form-fitting outfit that makes him look like a rainbow-tailed sparrowkeet in mating season. His sneer makes flowers wilt. His wit is sharp enough to cut tempered steel. His imperious gaze and impeccable posture put him above even the well-to-do patrons of this little gala event. He dances above them like an airbender walking on clouds. Everything about him screams 'I am in a class of my own, bitch, betta recognize.'

He is the Avatar, after all, so it's kind of true.

Mercedes matches him step-for-step. She is a devil in red—a qipao conformed to her figure and designed to squeeze her various fruits in the just the right ways to make them seem plump, juicy, and ripe for the picking. The dragons embroidered into the sleek gown are purposely designed to run along her curves and emphasize her killer shape. She need not look around to confirm the many
male eyes locked on her as she struts past—the sound of scolded husbands, smacked arms, and snapped fingers clue her in to the other women's desperate attempts to reign in their mates’ wandering libidos before they get themselves in trouble. But it'll do them no good; today, trouble has come to them. The Lioness is on the prowl, she has the scent of fresh meat in her nostrils, and no prey shall escape her claws.

Oh, yeah. They are the hottest bitches in this joint.

The two of them smirk at each other as what can only be Lady Keros quickly moves through the crowds to greet them.

"Welcome, welcome!" she says, smiling in a manner so plastic that Kurt would likely feel more welcome from a stick figure with a speech bubble. "Welcome to the Illustrious House of Keros! I am Lady Keros, and I will be your hostess for the evening. I am honored to meet you, Mister…?" she trails off.

"Councilor," Kurt corrects, enunciating each syllable enough to produce trace amounts of spit. "Councilor Archebald Ganterson."

Lady Keros's eyes widen in sincere shock. Genuine emotion on her face is somehow even more unsettling than the fake kind. "Oh, my!" she says. "Councilor Ganterson, I had no idea you were coming, if I had, I would've—"

"I do as my whims dictate. None can predict them, not even me, so I forgive your lack of preparation," Kurt says evenly, nose in the air and eyes on the countless paper lanterns strung across the room.

"Oh, thank you, Councilor," Lady Keros bows. It is just like Blaine said—it's all in how you carry yourself. If you believe it, you can make them believe it as well. It probably helps that no one has seen the Councilor in a few decades; though everyone seems fairly certain he is still alive, no one remembers what he looks like. Lady Keros isn't even questioning him—this might be easier than he thought.

"This is my outlandishly attractive wife, Desiree," he says, gesturing to Mercedes, who gives just the slightest bow to Lady K.

"Welcome to the Illustrious House of Keros, Lady Desiree," Lady K says.

"Mmmm," Mercedes says flatly. "Illustrious. What a… generous way to describe it."

Lady K's head tilts slightly to the side, and Kurt is pretty sure he hears her teeth clench, but her plastic smile stays as bright and cheerfully unsettling as ever. She would make quite the card player. "I am honored to open my home to you. Please, make yourselves comfortable," she says. She sweeps her hands towards the tables on the side of the room. "Feel free to sample the famous cuisine of world-renowned Fire Nation Chef, Cordon Flambé, made fresh to order." Her sweep continues to the stage on the far end of the room. "Let the sound of music fill your ears and heart with delight—currently performing are local favorites, 'Boiling Oil.' As the evening progresses, we will continue to showcase some of Sho Fa's most promising up-and-coming talent, including regular tabloid headliner, April Rhodes!"

An attendant appears out of nowhere, rushing up to whisper something in Lady K's ear. "...ah. It appears that Miss Rhodes was unable to attend this evening. We will instead receive a performance from her understudy, Miss Raquel Ferry, who I am sure is just delightful," she says, stressing 'delightful' the way an unlicensed dentist might stress 'completely painless.'
"Yes, yes," Kurt says, waving her off. "I am sure your quaint mainland entertainment rituals are at least as amusing as watching monkeys flinging feces at birds, but what of the main event?"

"Ah!" Lady Keros says. "That will be the capstone of the afternoon. The Sun Warrior Tablet is currently in the back room, being prepared for display by the Nation's top anthropological experts!"

"My heart vomits with anticipation," Kurt says hauteuly.

"And where is your charming husband?" Mercedes drawls. "I've heard so much about him. I was rather hoping we could become... friends."

The Lady tilts her head just a little more. She is beginning to look like her head and body are mismatched—if she tilts too much further, it's going to pop right off. "He is... indisposed, at the moment," she says. "Feeling a little tired from his duties under the New Fire Lord. Though I am certain he is with us in spirit—"

"Darling, I'm bored of this woman," Mercedes announces, looking towards her 'husband.'

"Very well, my delicious fruitcup," Kurt says. "We dine. Thank you for your hospitality, Lady Keros. I am certain tonight will be... shall we say... scorched into the collective memory of all in attendance."

He smirks as he brushes past her. If only she knew how very sincere he was...
asks, slipping easily back into character.

"Fetch me some hors d'oeuvres, dearie," Mercedes says.

"Coming right up!" Blaine nods. As turns to go, he 'accidentally' knocks a piece of silverware off the table, kneeling to pick it up. "Do we have the cargo's location?" he whispers.

"Affirmative," Mercedes says. "In the back, being prepared for display."

"Is Artie in position?" Blaine continues.

"He dropped us off a few minutes ago, so he should be ready by now. Good luck!" Mercedes says.

Blaine nods at her, puts the silveryware back on the table, and heads back towards the kitchen, where the hot-tempered Chef Flambé rules the roost with an iron fist and a filthy mouth.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, you stupid sandsniffer!" the Chef roars, violently hurling a rice dish which Blaine just barely has time to duck. "It's a fucking rice cake! Are you honestly telling me that you're so fucking stupid that you can't even tell when the fucking rice is overcooked in a fucking rice cake?"

"N-no, Chef!" the cook says.

"Oh, fuck me," the Chef sighs. "My kitchen is staffed by howler monkeys. Brilliant!"

The Chef does wonders for Blaine, spewing molten hatred and flaming insults like an open lava vent. People can't look at him (eye contact is seen as a challenge), but they can't explicitly look away from him, either, so mostly, everyone just looks really hard at what they are doing. This makes it easy for Blaine to slip past them unnoticed, into the back hallways.

Taking up a position against the wall just outside the kitchen door, he looks down the hall as two armed guards talk to each other, watching as a third passes by and greets them. The guards salute each other before turning and marching off, and Blaine makes a mental note as to which ways they go.

He needs to know this kind of thing. After all, the back rooms are his responsibility…

"B-Money, this is where you come in!" Artie says, nodding at the Prince. "As our resident ninja-monkey, you are my point man in this operation. Your job is to keep your eyes on the back rooms to see where the guards are, and when. Watch them, count them, track them, and learn how they tick, because you're the one who has to get past them and snatch the stone."

"Okay," Blaine says. "But what do I do with it once I've got it? I don't think I can hide something like that under my shirt."

"Simple," Artie says, "Give it to me."

"Where will you be?" Blaine asks.

The earthbender grins. "Everywhere."

After a couple more seconds of watching, Blaine decides to duck back into the kitchen to avoid being yelled at. Chef Flambé hasn't really noticed him so far, and he is desperately hoping to keep
that streak alive.

"I wouldn't feed this to my **dog**, you stupid cow!" Chef Flambé bellows at a staff member as Blaine re-enters the room. "Cook it again!"

Having no desire to watch people get burned alive, literally or figuratively, Blaine quickly dashes over to where a tray of appetizers is waiting to be taken out. He snatches it up and heads out into the ballroom again, eyes scanning his surroundings for the sign.

Placed along the walls at regular intervals are very large clay pots (easily large enough to hide a person) filled with tall, exotic flowers. Most of them are white, red, and pink… but one particular pot has a dash of bright orange in the mix.

Blaine grins. He casually saunters over to Mercedes's table, dropping off the appetizers.

"Finally," Mercedes sighs. "I was beginning to feel faint."

A couple of apologies later, Blaine is headed towards the pot with the orange flower. Once he is close enough, he stands at attention, subtly using his foot to knock against it five times in quick succession.

After a couple of seconds, Artie's head pops out of the dirt behind the flowers. "**My man, B!**" he whispers. "Just who I wanted to see!"

"**I do believe I was promised a present,**" Blaine whispers back, looking for all the world like he is an eager, helpful servant awaiting an order, as opposed to a crazy person talking to a flowerpot.

"**I do believe you're right,**" Artie grins. "I've got just the thing for you…"

"**All around the ballroom—and all throughout the building,** for that matter—are big ol' pots of flowers, mostly Sun Stalks and Explododedrons, noted for their pleasing aromas and ability to mask other scents. Lady K is apparently a fan, which works out great for us—her pots are the perfect size for yours truly. I can't really do much on wood floors with hundreds of people around, but I **can** give you support and intel from the flowerbeds. If you need me, just find one, and knock five times. I'll be hanging underground until then."

"Doing what?" Kurt asks.

"**You'll see,**" Artie winks. "**If I need you, I'll stick this baby in with the other flowers.**" He pulls out a blindingly bright orange bell-shaped flower. "**The Neon Duskbell. Bright enough to be noticed, but not so rare as to seem out-of-place in a Fire Nation flowerpot. If you see bright orange sticking out against the reds, purples, and pinks, step on over, and I'll give you a present.**"

"**What kind of present?**" Blaine asks.

Artie waggles his eyebrows. "**It's a surprise…**"

Artie's hand pops out of the soil, holding a small, wooden cigar case.

"**Got you some Shirshu-spit darts,**" Artie says quietly. "**Just one is enough to send even a giant like Finn falling over like a tree. If you're ever in a tight spot, or you just need to shut somebody up real fast, these babies are your best friend. Just be careful not to stick yourself.**"
Blaine quietly pockets the box. "It's not… lethal, is it?" he asks.

"Nope," Artie says. "Just paralyzing."

"Where did you even get these?" Blaine asks.

Artie waves him off. "They fell off a cart."

He's gone before Blaine has the chance to inquire any further.

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**Hector squints at the bottle as he carefully adds a few drops of Long River Rattlesnake venom to the mixture. After his humiliating defeat at the hands of the airbender and the earthbender, he decided to help himself relax by mixing up some fascinating new poisons. He feels like he's on the verge of the perfect blend when hears the door to his chamber open. "Somebody here to see ya," Tom spits.**

"I'm busy!" Hector shouts, not even looking up from his current mixture.

"Says he knows ya," Tom continues. "Knows your name, anyway. Got paralyzed by a stinging scorpion bat, wanted to know if you could help."

Hector looks up. "Scorpion-bat venom doesn't paralyze its victims," he says.

Tom shrugs. "Well, tell that to him."

"Look," Hector growls, turning back to his kit. "Unless he has a shit-ton of money, tell him to come back tomorrow. I don't have time for visitors right now."

"Don't worry," a strangely familiar voice says. "This won't take long."

Hector looks up to see a rough-looking guy in a wheelchair. His face is covered in scars, and he's wearing what looks like an old ranger's uniform. Hector's never met anybody like this guy, and yet, he feels like he knows him somehow.

Then, the bastard smiles. Hector knows that smile. "You!" he shouts.

"What up, G?" the guy says. And then a stone fist slams into his face, and the lights go out in Sho Fa…

---

Artie tunnels down to his newly-carved hideout. After hi-jacking the knockout juice from Hector, he spent most of the day underground, carving out tunnels beneath the Keros estate, carving through the floors underneath the flowerpots and making entrances for himself. He could've technically gotten into the building like this, but the scads and scads of guards would've apprehended him in no time, and even if he got away, it'd just have set the whole city on alert and gotten them all into trouble.

No, this is the way to do it. If everything goes right, they should be able to snatch the tablet without anyone even realizing it until they are long gone.

*If everything goes right.* Wow. Did he honestly just think that?

He must be slipping.

Putting his hands on the ground, he closes his eyes and waits for his next summons. There is only
one aspect of his plan isn't ready yet, and it's supposed to be checking in with him at any moment.

Sure enough, he feels the distinct vibrations of five quick knocks to a clay pot. It comes from the hallway in the backstage area, so Artie can pretty easily guess who is calling him up. He grins and tunnels up to meet the very large set of feet he feels shuffling anxiously along the ground.

As soon as he pops up, Artie finds a frenzied-looking Finn right in his face.

"Dude, you have to help me," Finn says urgently. "Rachel is freaking out!"

Artie shushes him, looking around to make sure no one is paying attention. "Dude, be a little less subtle, why don't you! Are you trying to blow my cover?"

"Dude, I'm sorry, but I've got bigger stuff to worry about! Rachel is going crazy!" Finn says.

The earthbender tilts his head. "Going? I'm pretty sure she came out of the box like that."

"This is way worse than usual," Finn says.

To punctuate his point, Artie hears several very high-pitched shouts, followed by distinct impacts against three separate walls of the nearest dressing room. At least one of the hits sounded very shatter-ish.

"Holy hills," Artie says. "What set her off?"

"Jesse St. Jerkface," Finn says. "He promised her he'd be here, but he's not. He totally bailed."

The earthbender massages the bridge of his nose. "Well, I guess that's one less thing I have to worry about now. If he isn't here, hopefully, that means he can't screw things up," he says.

"I told her she could just perform without him, but she really wants to do a duet, and she won't stop yelling, and she has a pretty strong arm for a girl and it hurts when she throws stuff!" Finn says despairingly.

Artie shakes his head sadly. "Finn, buddy, I wish I could help you, but the only solution I have to offer involves knocking her unconscious, and I'm pretty sure that's a temporary solution at best. You know her better than me. Do what you can, okay?"

Finn sighs deeply and nods. "Okay."

With that, Artie vanishes back into his pot, leaving Finn alone to deal with the Wrath of Berry. Summoning all the courage he can muster, he takes a deep breath and heads back into the dressing room...

"Excuse me," Rachel says, jumping in the path of the rolling conversation like she's trying to run an insurance scam. "But I couldn't help but notice that your plan, as well-thought-out as it may seem, has no role for myself."

Artie gives her a smile that is just the tiniest bit insincere. "Well," he says cheerfully, "I was just getting to that actually. You have a part to play, and the best part is you really don't even have to do anything!"

Rachel squints at him. "What do you mean? Of course my participation is going to play a vital role —"
"I mean," Artie clarifies, "you don't have to do anything you wouldn't normally do. All you have to do is sing."

"I don't understand," Rachel says.

"You are the ultimate audience distraction," Artie says. "You come out and perform, and hopefully everyone in the room looks at you, which means nobody is watching us."

"Well, of course everyone will be looking at me while I sing," Rachel huffs, crossing her arms. "It will likely take incredible strength of will on your part to ignore me. I'm a very magnetic performer."

"We'll do our very best," Kurt assures her.

"What am I doing?" Finn asks.

Artie looks at him with a smile that almost looks like a wince. "You... get to take care of Rachel. Good luck, buddy!"

"He said he would be here!" Rachel shouts, stomping her feet in her dressing room. "I can't believe he would just... abandon me like this!"

"He kind of sucks," Finn says, testing the waters.

Rachel looks at him, aghast. "How dare you badmouth him in front of me?"

Finn should probably try writing things down before he says them. That way, he would have to read them and actually think about them first. "Umm... I was just..."

"I will have you know that Jesse St. James has been there for me for several years!" he shouts, pointing her finger at him. "...on and off!" she adds, after a couple of seconds.

"But—" Finn tries.

"He understands me," Rachel says. "Do you know how much that means? All my life, I've been ostracized because of the sheer magnitude with which my passion for the stage surpasses everyone else's. Jesse gets that! He, too, strives for true greatness, the kind that will make him a legend! He is sweet, and charming, and handsome, and smart, and has a voice that flows like a babbling brook!"

"I was just—"

"So don't you dare say one foul word about that no-good, show-skimping, lying bag of lies in my presence! I WILL NOT STAND FOR IT!" Rachel shouts so hard he can feel it, and Finn is pretty sure she could, like, blast his face off with the force of her voice if she tried hard enough.

"I'm sorry," Finn says. He really isn't—not about Jesse. He's just sorry that Rachel is so upset about everything. "But he's supposed to be here, and he's not," Finn continues. "So... what do you want to do?"

"Well," Rachel sniffs, "at the moment, I have a strong urge to continue yelling and throwing things until my angst is properly vented. But... the show must go on, I suppose." She tries to muster up a smile for him. "How do I look?" she asks.
Finn looks at her for a couple of seconds. "Scary," he answers honestly.

Rachel's eyes swell up with tears. "What?"

"No! I mean—you're..." Finn stammers. "It's just because you've been all flailing around and shouting and now you're all worked up and your hair is, like, everywhere, and I'm sure we can fix it if you just tell me how and you can totally see for yourself if you just go look in the mirror and please don't throw anything at me!"

The girl crosses her arms and pirouettes with enough force to send a few wadded up tissues flying off the table. She marches over to the mirror and stares at herself for a good long moment, taking in all she sees. "I do look a bit of a mess, don't I?" she says quietly.

Finn walks up behind her. "I think you're beautiful," he says honestly. "But... yeah, we might wanna fix your hair."

Rachel turns and smiles at him. "You really are a sweet boy, Finn Hudson."

He blushes and tries to look down, but because Rachel is so much shorter than him anyway, when he looks down it kind of looks like he's trying to stare down her top and he so isn't, so he looks to the side instead. "Thanks... umm... so... how do you want me to—"

Suddenly, the dressing room door bursts open. "And lo, as the dark hour approaches, the hero, like a sunrise, bursts from the east to drive back the shadows!" Jesse says, stepping through the door and striking a pose.

"Jesse!" Rachel cries, leaping out of her seat and practically going through Finn to get to him. Instantly, the fact that he is super-late and that Rachel was totally pissed at him five seconds ago is completely forgotten. She slides to a stop in front of him. "You came! I was so worried about you."

"I braved many dangers on the path of love," Jesse says, staring down at her and making a face that makes Finn want to puke. Preferably all over Jesse. "I battled long and hard, faced enemies innumerable, and nearly fell to my foes in my quest... but just as it seemed the end was upon me... I remembered your face, and found strength anew."

Okay, Finn seriously is going to vomit if this doesn't stop. His stomach is already threatening him in rumbles.

"Never leave me again!" Rachel cries, kissing him deeply.

Finn doesn't remember wanting to slam his head into the wall, but that's definitely what happens. Several times in a row.

And the two lovebirds are so caught up in each other that they don't even notice. "I must go where the winds take me," Jesse says sadly, "I cannot fight my destiny. But... I could perhaps use a companion in my journeys. Have you considered my proposal?"

"I have," Rachel says coyly, "and I've decided..."

Jesse raises his eyebrows in anticipation.

Rachel sighs and looks at him sadly. "...yes!" she cries suddenly, breaking into a ginormous grin and jumping up to wrap around him like a snake (and suddenly, Finn has a wonderful vision of Jesse St. James being squeezed so hard by a giant python that his big stupid head pops right off).
He grabs her and spins her around. "Oh, Rachel!" he says excitedly. "You've made me the happiest man in the world. Our journey together will be a tale told for centuries. Together, you and I will be legends!"

"I can hardly contain myself!" Rachel says brightly, before taking a deep breath and centering herself. "But for now… I must. I believe we have a show to do."

"Ah, but of course," Jesse says, tweaking her nose. It is at this point that he seems to notice the frazzle-dazzle look she has going on at the moment. "Oh, heavens," he says. "What happened to your hair?"

Rachel plays it off easily. "Oh… you know how this dry Fire Nation air can exacerbate one's frizz."

Jesse, at this point, finally notices Finn in the room. "Oh, don't tell me… he did it, didn't he?"

"Hey!" Finn says, offended.

"Actually—" Rachel starts to correct him.

Jesse just shakes his head and ushers her into a chair. "Rachel, you really can't trust someone as uncultured as Finn to be able to handle the delicate art of hair care. You weren't going to let him touch your face, were you?"

"Well…" Rachel begins, but Jesse is already 'guiding' Finn out of the room. You know, if by 'guiding' you mean 'shoving.'

"I appreciate your willingness to insert yourself into a position you are completely unqualified for in a time of apparent crisis," Jesse says, "but now that the professional is here, your services will no longer be required." He shoves Finn out into the hallway. "Just have a seat out here," Jesse says. "We'll call if we need you."

'We won't,' he mouths as the door closes.

Finn growls and punches a hole in the wall. He just wants this whole stupid thing to be done. The sooner they finish this stupid plan, the better…

"Overall," Artie says, "here is what's going to go down. Kurt and Mercedes will be in the main ballroom, brewing up trouble and serving it to others. When they cook up enough incidents to distract the guards, Blaine will slip into the back and snatch the stone. Once he has it, he'll pass it off to me via potted plant, and I'll smuggle it out underground. Once I've got it on lock-down, Rachel will give the performance of a lifetime, and you guys will use the distraction to slip out before anyone notices. Then, we will ride away from the city, sipping wine and laughing heartily at our fantastic success."

"Yeeeeeahhh," Kurt says warily. "That seems likely."

"Not saying it will," Finn says carefully. "but… what if something does go wrong?"

Artie shrugs. "We improvise. We're pretty good at on-the-fly thinking, right?"

Mercedes laughs. "Only because we'd be dead if we weren't."

"Come on, guys," Blaine says brightly. "I'm sure everything will work out. Think positive!"
"I agree with Blaine," Rachel says. "One should always try to maintain an upbeat, optimistic attitude. It's very helpful in dealing with crushing disappointment and failure, because instead of dwelling in a pit of despair and misery, you just find something else to be positive about!"

Blaine looks at her, a little uneasy. "That's... not exactly what I meant..."

"Well, I'm positive about one thing," Artie says. "Positive we 'bout to rock this party!"

"Awww, yeah," Mercedes says. They high five.

Kurt leaves the meeting with the unmistakable feeling of impending disaster.

The only question is how big of a disaster it will be...

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: In case you're wondering—Chef Cordon Flambé is intended to be the Avatar!Verse equivalent of Chef Gordon Ramsay. :P
Rich people are boring.

Kurt practically has to nail his hands to his thighs to keep from twiddling his thumbs or playing with his hair while the Duke of Waht-Evah prattles to the Chancellor of Hoo-Kaers about some kind of sport that involves catching balls in nets… or spikes… or something. Kurt always blanked out when his dad and Finn had their little sports talks, and apparently it now functions as a reflex. It never fails to amaze him how many things about a society can be completely different, with just a few things remaining as constants. Sports talk is, apparently, a constant among males, which means that Kurt is feeling decidedly out of place with his newfound companions.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the gender fence, Mercedes smiles politely while a Countess and a Duchess hold a progressively more aggressive game of richer-than-thou. They prattle on about all sorts of things that Mercedes truthfully has no interest in whatsoever—expensive clothes, the latest trends, designer pets, their private beach houses on Ember Island, their privately-owned beaches, blah, blah, blah.
It takes a second or so of eye contact from across the table for them to silently communicate their mutual need for escape.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Kurt says. "I must away for a moment."

"Ladies," Mercedes says. "I'm going to freshen up. Be right back."

Their companions dismiss them quickly. The men go back to sports talk. The women back to one-upmanship.

And Kurt and Mercedes wander a short distance away to have a little chat.

"I have no idea what I'm doing," Kurt says, annoyed. "All these doofuses want to talk about is sports. I can't undermine them if I don't even understand half of what they are saying!"

"The women are no better," Mercedes says, massaging her forehead. "All they do is prattle on about all the expensive shit they buy, trying to out-rich each other. It's like they're speaking another language."

Kurt raises his eyebrows at her, intrigued. "Do they mention fashion, by any chance?"

Mercedes considers this for a few seconds. "They do," she says.

"Ah-ha…" Kurt drawls, smirking with fiendish glee. "You know, I seem to remember the Duke and the Chancellor eying you up earlier this evening…"

Mercedes reaches over to the appetizer tray and pops what appears to be a small blob of congealed rainbow into her mouth.

It happens all at once.

*Her eyes widen. Her pupils dilate. Her body temperature rises. A light sheen of begins to form on her skin as she reclines in her seat, her tastebuds experiencing nothing less than unbridled ecstasy.*

*Whoever this Chef Flambé guy is, he is damn good at what he does.*

*She moans. She groans. The noises that come out of her blow straight past 'inappropriate' and land well into 'scandalous' territory.*

*Everyone at the table is staring at her.*

"My compliments to the Chef," she says lasciviously.

*The women try not to seem too eager when they snatch a few blobs for themselves.*

*Meanwhile, the men eye her with a decidedly different kind of hunger…"

"That was quite the performance you put on," Kurt says with a grin.

Mercedes shakes her head. "Oh, no, honey, that was no act. Those little blobs are like
tonguegasms."

Kurt quirks an eyebrow at her. "Huh. Might have to try one myself… either way," he says, smirk returning. "I have an idea…"

When they return to the table, Mercedes is the first to take a seat…

…between the men.

"Hello boys," Mercedes says. "Mind if I join you?"

"Errr…" the Duke says, looking uneasy. "Well… your husband… he might…"

"Oh, he's no problem," she says. "He's right over there."

She waves coyly to Kurt, who is now seated across the table with the ladies. He gives a little wave back.

Turning back to the boys club, Mercedes puts on her best veil of innocence. "I just heard you boys talking about… that ball game, with the net," she says, looking confused. "What did you call it?"

"Kuai Ball?" the Chancellor says.

"That's it!" Mercedes says excitedly. "I've always been curious… I was wondering…" she trails off, leading them on with an exaggerated pout. "Could you boys explain it to me?"

"Of course!"

"Certainly!"

They speak at the same time, and immediately launch into an explanation of the ins and outs of the game. Mercedes listens attentively—not because she's really interested, but because it's vital to her plan. Years of being around boys have taught her several useful lessons… one of which being thus; if left unchecked, a disagreement between boys about sports will inevitably lead to bloodshed. She smiles as they talk, nodding at all the right places, just waiting for the chance to plant the first seed and watch the chaos grow…

Meanwhile, Kurt chooses a more roundabout way of dealing with the ladies. Having given each of them a once-over to spot their weaknesses, he lays the trap carefully…

"Councilor," Countess Gertrude says, looking across the table. "Your wife…"

"Oh, she is fine," Kurt says, waving her off. "She merely aches for the acquisition of knowledge. I, on the other hand," he says, nodding to her, "ache for beauty."

"Oh, well," the Countess blushes.

"Indeed," he says, turning to the slightly younger Duchess Dorothy. "In my presence this evening are two of the most radiant stars to shine on the earth, or in the heavens."

"Stop it," the Duchess says, turning away coyly.

"Come now!" Kurt says. "Do not be shy! The two of you are immaculate. If the choice were offered, I do not believe I could choose between you."

The ladies lock eyes for a split second. "Oh?" Countess Gertrude says.
"Indeed," Kurt says, clutching a hand to his heart. "And do you know what impresses me most?"

The ladies lean forward.

"How natural you are," he says sincerely. "I have always admired the products of nature's providence. The man-made, the artificial, it all strikes me as a pale imitation of the true beauty to be found in nature. Your clothes, your jewelry, your hair, your flawless skin, all of it as natural as the day you were born. Truly, your natural beauty makes the eyes of my soul weep sparkling tears of awe. Equally magnificent, the pair of you," he finishes, his voice thick, averting his eyes to dab at them with a hankie. He counts the seconds.

One… two… three…

"Well… I wasn't going to say anything," the Duchess says, full of false sweetness, "as I didn't want to stir up trouble between the Countess and her husband, but… I do believe that necklace is a fake."

The Countess gasps. Kurt gasps right along with her. "Say it is not so!" he cries.

"I'm afraid it is," the Duchess says, sickeningly sycophantic. "Real sparkgems have a slight internal glimmer when you turn them, almost invisible to the untrained eye." She puts a hand on the Countess's shoulder. "It's alright dear; you can't be expected to spot these things. Your eyesight probably isn't what it used to be. Hardly your fault."

Burn, Kurt thinks, fighting back his grin. "Oh, you poor thing," Kurt says, seeming at least a bit more sincere than the Duchess.

"I suppose I owe you thanks," the Countess says, staring archly at her younger opposite. "Please, allow me to repay your kindness by pointing out that your white lion-lynx scarf is, in actuality, died skunk-mink."

The Duchess can't seem to decide whether to widen or narrow her eyes, so she gives one eye to each.

"By the breadth of Agni's waistline!" Kurt says, scandalized.

"True white lion-lynx has a much softer curl, and a lighter sheen. It's the kind of thing you learn to spot with experience, darling," the Countess says with a carnivorous grin.

"Are you sure?" the Duchess asks tersely. "Perhaps your aging eyes are mistaken—"

"Oh, no, dearie," the Countess counters. "I'm quite sure. There is one more aspect of died skunk-mink that sets it apart from genuine lion-lynx…"

At this, Gertrude reaches up and grabs onto the fur scarf, yanking a handful of hair out of it with admirable ease. "Skunk-mink fur comes right out! One can only wonder how many places this poor thing has shed since you started wearing it."

The Duchess clenches her teeth. "Well… thank you for that. I will certainly be more careful in the future." Her testy gaze rakes over the Countess for several more seconds, before she finds reason to smirk again. "As long as we're on the subject of things that are fake, I feel it would be terribly rude of me not to mention…"

Kurt hides his smile behind a sip of tea. This is going to be a cakewalk…
Unfortunately, Blaine can hardly say the same for his job.

"You there!" a man with an outrageously curly mustache calls. "More tea!"

"Coming right up, sir!" Blaine calls, dashing over to refill the man's cup.

"Excuse me, tea boy!" a woman in a deep purple dress calls. "My cup is empty!" she holds up the cup as an accusation against him.

"Terribly sorry, ma'am," Blaine says, running towards her, pivoting and pirouetting around other guests while carefully balancing his tea tray on one hand. He refills her cup with admirable speed, but she simply harrumphs and turns away.

"Tea boy!" calls another voice.

Blaine bounds over.

"Hey! I'm running dry over here!"

The Prince sprints to the rescue.

"You! With the helmet hair and the teapot!"

Sho Fa's newest bus-boy buses himself with aplomb.

"Waiter!"

"Tea boy!"

"Excuse me!"

"HEY!"

"IF I DO NOT GET SOME TEA IN THE NEXT FIVE SECONDS I AM GOING TO SCREAM UNTIL I PASS OUT!"

Back and forth across the floor, Blaine is bounced between tables like a little rubber ball. He administers his tea quickly and quietly, serving with a smile and always bowing graciously. He takes pride in his work, being sure to always act in a friendly, speedy, efficient manner.

It isn't until he is on his way back to the kitchen to refill his teapot that he suddenly realizes; this isn't even my job! Why on earth does he care so much about this?

Blaine stops for a few seconds, blinking and thinking.

He… might have a slight addiction to people-pleasing.

Whatever. He'll worry about that later.

"Raw, raw, RAW!" Chef Flambé roars as Blaine enters the kitchen. He dashes underneath the Chef's flailing arms as he lambasts some poor entry-level grunt on his inability to cook meat. Quickly finding another pot of tea, he replaces it on his tray and starts to head out. "I do not run a kitchen that serves raw food!" the Chef shouts. "I do not run a kitchen that serves sub-par meals! MY KITCHEN IS PERFECT! SO STEP UP, OR GET OUT!"

Blaine picks the second option, even knowing that the Chef isn't actually talking to him. The last
thing he wants is to get on that man's bad side.

... 

The Prince slides to a halt again.

**Is** that the last thing that he wants?

Hmmm...

Blaine smiles, quickly getting back to work with a new pep in his step.

He completely understands why Kurt gets that little smirk of his whenever he comes up with a plan. Having an idea is an *electrifying* feeling, and Blaine has a pretty good one, if he does say so himself...

Finn has his ear carefully pressed against the door, trying to hear whatever is happening inside, when he hears something else entirely.

"Is this the dressing room of Miss Rodell Betty?"

The voice makes Finn jump, which nearly makes him hit his head on the doorway. He's dangerously close to hitting his head on everything anyway, so surprises are totally not cool with him. Spinning around like a pissed off tornado, Finn spots a guy with a notepad who looks very... *pointy*. Like, that's the best way Finn can describe him. He looks like he could stab you. *With himself.*

"Sir?" Pointy Guy says. "I asked you a question."

"Oh," Finn says. "Uhhh, yeah, this is Rachel's room."

"Ah," the man says. "She is present, yes?"

"Yes," Finn says.

"And her costar?" asks Mr. Point.

Finn grits his teeth. "Him too.

"Fantastic," he replies, making notes with a little pen. "They are on in ten minutes. Please inform them of such."

"Okay," Finn nods.

Pointy Man starts to head off, and suddenly, a thought bounces out of Finn's skull and into his mouth.

"Hey!" Finn says. "Uhh... both of them are on? At the same time?"

The man turns back, arching an eyebrow at Finn. "Yes. The first number is a duet."

"Oh," Finn says, nodding. "Well... umm... Jesse was running a bit late. He... umm... might not have time to, you know, get ready. Rachel wanted me to ask you if she could do, like, a solo first, and have the duet come later."
Pointy raises his other brow to join the first. "Very well. Miss Betty—"

"Berry."

"—will be on in ten minutes," he says, scribbling stuff on his paper pad.

"Thanks," Finn grins.

Pointy walks off without another word.

The waterbender knocks on the door to Rachel's dressing room.

Of course, Jesse opens it. "Finn," he says with an annoyed smile. "You're still here! Despite being completely superfluous!"

"I'm not sick," Finn says, already tired of dealing with the jerk. "I haven't had the flu since—"

"What do you want?" Jesse cuts him off, glaring at him.

"I just wanted to talk…" Finn says, before barging past Jesse into the room. "to Rachel—"

"FINN!" Rachel shouts, turning around to glare at him and cover her boobs.

Her boobs which are naked.

Her naked boobs, which Finn is looking at, but not looking at, because they are covered by her arm, but he is staring at her arm because he knows there are boobs underneath and it's like the sun when people tell you not to stare at it, and that just makes you want to stare at it more because—

"FINN! GET OUT!" she shouts with super-Rachel-force, and Finn finally gathers enough sense to cover his eyes.

"Sorry!" he shouts. "Sorry! I just wanted to tell you that some guy came by and said he had to rearrange the songs because Jesse was running late so you're doing your solo first and you're on in ten minutes, okay, bye!"

Jesse grabs him and shoves him towards the door.

He slams into the wall on the way out.

Twice.

The door slams behind him, and Finn is pretty sure that, like, all of his blood is in his head now. His face needs to share with the rest of his body because he kind of feels like he is going to pass out soon.

And he can't afford to pass out right now. This might be his one chance to get Rachel alone and tell her what he knows about Jesse St. Stick-up-his-ass.

Oh, yeah. He's squealing like a startled moo-sow. He doesn't care what Jesse thinks or does. Rachel deserves to know the kind of douche she is about to run off with.

And Finn is going to tell her.

Just as soon as he drinks, like, a ton of water because all of a sudden, his mouth is, like, really dry…
"Well, far be it from me to point out the obvious!" the Duchess seethes, rising to her feet, her voice growing louder and louder. "I'm sorry that you have to wear so much make-up that you probably melt in direct sunlight!"

"Ladies, please!" Kurt says uselessly, eying the two ladies with all the pretend horror he can muster. Their little spat is starting to gather quite the crowd.

"I'd rather melt than be made of rock!" the Countess responds scathingly, ejecting from her own chair. "Tell me, darling, how do you eat? Is your jaw more flexible in the mornings or do you just have someone pre-chew your food?"

Both women are practically plum-faced with fury. It's only a matter of time before the explosion.

"What on earth is going on here?" Lady Keros says, pushing through the crowds.

"Cat fight in the making!" a gruff voice shouts.

"My money's on the frumpy old one!" a younger voice replies.

"Have you seen the claws on the skinny one?" a smooth voice asks.

"My friends!" Lady Keros pleads to the women in question. "There is no need for all this arguing. Why don't we all just step outside—"

"STAY OUT OF THIS!" the bellow in unison, turning back to each other.

The Countess is the first to speak after that. "By the way, I simply must know what kind of eyedrops you use. It's startling how your eyes stay moist despite the fact that you can barely blink! Or are those fake as well?"

The old bird knows how to press buttons, that's for sure.

And fortunately for Kurt, this particular button is labeled 'detonation.' "They're certainly more real than your wig, you balding old witch!" the Duchess shouts, stepping forth and ripping off the older woman's hairpiece, revealing the barely-there net of gray underneath.

The crowd gasps in outrage.

The Countess, by contrast, is enraged. "Well, at least I started with hair and lost it! You can't lose what you've never had... little Miss Paper Boobs!" With that, the older woman steps forth and grabs the front of the Duchess's top, pulling it out, reaching down, and producing two wadded up rolls of paper in her hands.

Kurt is pretty sure at least one woman faints outright.

"You... bitch!" the Duchess roars.

And it is on.

Faces are slapped. Claws are raked. Heels come down on toes, and the crowd goes wild.

"Oh, my dear gods," Lady Keros breathes, horrified. She snatches a glass of wine off a passing waiter's tray and downs it in a single gulp before shouting "Security!"
Blaine tries not to look like he's paying too much attention as he counts two guards spilling out of the backroom to contain the melee.

Meanwhile, out of the corner of his eye, Kurt spots a bit of orange in a flowerpot, and quietly slinks away from the crowd, admiring the ferocity of the battle as he goes.

The Countess has a *mean* left hook. Woman could probably cold-cock a platypus bear into unconsciousness if she really needed to. At least one guard gets to experience this firsthand as he tries to pull the women apart.

*Yeouch,* Kurt thinks. *Good thing he was wearing a helmet…*

Meanwhile, Mercedes is concocting slightly grander plans.

"Flames alive!" the Duke says, eyes on the melee. "What has gotten *into* my wife?"

"Oh," Mercedes says, waving him off. "I'm sure it's nothing. She probably just needs to step outside and cool off."

"I don't know," the Duke says. "Maybe I should check…"

The earthbender eyes him carefully. "Do you *really* want to talk to her when she's like that?" she asks, pointing to her as she is carried from the room, her long, spindly legs lashing out to destroy anything they can reach.

"…good point," the Duke gulps.

"*Anyway,*" Mercedes says, drawing his attention back to her. "I believe you were just getting to the importance of having an ironclad left front on your team. You said it was the most important element, did you not?"

"Ah… yes…" the Duke says. "Indeed, most people don't realize it, but the left front is—"

"Oh, balderdash," the Chancellor says. "The Left Front is *not* the most important element. Important, yes, but the *most* important? I'm afraid that distinction belongs purely to the back center. A good server in that position is the difference between victory and defeat."

"Get over yourself!" the Duke scoffs. "Just because *you* play back center doesn't make it the most important position. Servers win games, sure, but *left fronts* win championship!"

"You are so full of shit!" the Chancellor cries.

"Well, clearly the two of you have very divergent opinions. Surely there is some kind of historical precedent to back your arguments. Are there any other fans of this fascinating sport in the building? Let's get their perspective!" Mercedes says excitedly.

"Good idea, milady!" the Duke says. He turns around and shouts over his shoulder. "Hey, Phil! Come over here and tell this jerkoff how real men play Kuai Ball."

"Coming!"

"Thome ovey hewe and thell thith therkoff how weawn men pway Kway Baww!" the Chancellor mocks. "Carl! Joe!" he calls out. "We've got another *lefty* who thinks he's a big shot over here!"

"What?"
"Another one?"

Mercedes looks rapt in attention as the men continue to gather. Men and sports fights are like flies to a tub of syrup. All it takes is one foot stepping in, and they're stuck there 'til the bitter, bitter end…

Five knocks, and up Artie pops.

"Nice work on the duke-out with the Duchess," the earthbender compliments.

"All in a day's work," Kurt says primly. "I assume you have something for me?"

"Boy, do I ever," Artie says. His hand pops up from the dirt with a tiny glass bottle filled with a clear liquid. "This, my friend, is Dragon Frog Juice."

Kurt's eyes widen as he pockets the bottle.

"It's apparently pretty strong stuff, mostly hallucinogenic in nature, known to cause—"

"I know what it does," Kurt says simply.

"…oh," Artie says, shrugging. "Okay. Well, you shouldn't have too much trouble, then. A couple drops in somebody's drink, and they will be the life of the party in no time."

"I can hardly wait," Kurt says, grinning far too fiendishly.

Artie is just about to question him about his smile when he feels the vibrations of another summons. He grabs the duskbell and ducks back underground, rapidly sliding through his tunnels clear to the other side of the room, popping up next to Blaine.

"Can you get me a bug?" Blaine asks as soon as he pops up.

Artie gives him the fish-eye. "The Hills you need a bug for?"

"Just trust me," Blaine says simply. "Can you get me one?"

The earthbender shrugs. "Sure. Wait here."

He's underground again in a second, fingers to the earth, feeling for any creepy crawlies who might be hiding nearby. A quick slam of his fist produces a blaze beetle, and a second slam makes it worthy for transport.

"You didn't want a live bug, did you?" he asks as he pops back up.

Blaine shrugs. "Eh, either way is fine." Artie hands him the dead bug, and he pockets it, quickly dashing back to the serving floor. "Thanks!" he says as he leaves, leaving Artie a little worried and more than a little intrigued as he heads back underground.

He doesn't even get a second's worth of rest before another set of five knocks has him riding over to the backstage hallways.

"Jesse's here," Finn says.

Artie tries to look past him again, when Finn says. "Don't worry, nobody's around. I checked."
"Well… crap," Artie says. "Thanks for telling me, but I really don't know much I can do about it."

"I know," Finn sighs. "Stupid… guy."

The earthbender shrugs, offering a sympathetic gaze. "I know it sucks, dude, but this is one of those times where you just have to let it be. I see no options on our table at the moment. Neutral jing, my man. Watch, and wait. We might get an opportunity to sort this out. It might even sort itself out."

"I hate waiting," Finn grumbles.

"It's something you have to work at," Artie sighs. A sudden uptake in the party's rumble-o-meter sets Artie smiling. "I've gotta go, but keep the faith, okay buddy? It'll all work out."

"Okay," Finn says. "Thanks."

With that, Artie heads back underground, positions himself beneath the main ballroom, and feels the carnage that prepares to unfold…

"…the Phoenix Talons won *four National Championships in a row!*" the Duke shouts. "All of them after Lombardi joined the team!"

"Two of those wins are contested and you *know it!*" the Chancellor counters. "Allegations of referee bribing, possible pepper-doping by none other than Lombardi himself—"

"Oh, please," one from the Duke's side shouts. "Now you're just making baseless accusations!"

"Baseless my ass!" one from the Chancellor's side counters. "You think the Kuai League made pepper-doping illegal the year after that just on coincidence? Lombardi was a fraud!"

"Your *face* is a fraud!" some random dude tosses in for no apparent reason.

Kurt keeps his eyes on the budding catastrophe as he takes a seat on the far, far side of the room next to a prim, quiet-looking fellow. "What an evening this is! Quite eventful, don't you agree?"

The man moves nothing but his eyeballs to stare at Kurt. "Indeed," he drawls, his speech careful and measured. Every motion of his seems to be incredibly carefully choreographed. He cuts his turducken into completely even slices as he eats it, his food, silverware, and napkins are all laid out in a perfect pattern. And his wine glass is on Kurt's side. Oh, this is *perfect*. He can't *wait* to see this guy on Dragon Frog Juice.

"I can only hope the atmosphere calms down soon. All this excitement agitates my muscle spasms," Kurt says quietly, calling a waiter over to place his order.

"Indeed," the prim and proper man says neutrally, taking a perfectly poised bite of turducken.

Back over in the world of Mercedes, the girl finally decides to spring the trap. "Now, which one did you say it was again?" she asks. "The 476 Dragon Riders, or the 478 team?"

An equal number of people on each side of the room bellow:

"*476!*"

"*478!*"
And once again, it is on.

The two sides charge each other like opposing armies, and Lady Keros downs two more champagne flutes before calling "Security!" and stalking off. At this point, she is ready to resort to near-drastic measures, and she pretty much has one option left in terms of taming this party before it explodes in her face...

And as the guards slam the sports enthusiasts to the ground, Mercedes grins to herself. "Boys," she mutters, heading off to join her husband.

This time, half a dozen guards appear, and Blaine is seriously starting to wonder how many more could possibly be back there. Maybe they won't even need his bug plan.

Still, better safe than sorry. With that thought, Blaine goes back to wandering around the room, keeping a careful eye on the various patrons and their interactions with the waiters.

It shouldn't hurt to have a little insurance...

Finn waits anxiously for ten minutes to be up. Of course, he really doesn't know how much time has passed already, and there's no clock anywhere he can see it, so...

"You!" a slightly slurred voice says.

Finn turns to see a scary smiley plastic lady stumbling towards him. She's pointing her finger at him and waving it around, and he thinks she might be trying to cast a spell or something.

"Where's that singer girl?" she asks after a couple of seconds.

"Getting dressed," Finn says. "She's supposed to go on in ten—"

"NOW," the scary lady says. "She's going on NOW! This party is going in the crapper and I need to restore the vibe before I get too drunk to care. Get her on stage."

Finn stares at her, not really sure what to do.

His course of action becomes clearer when she claps her hands in his face. "NOW!" she shouts, and Finn turns to dash to the door of Rachel's room.

"Ummm, Rachel?" Finn says through the door. "Time is up. You've got to go onstage now."

Jesse opens it again, just wide enough to stick his head through. He glares accusations at Finn, sneering as he speaks. "You're just making all of this up, aren't you?" he says. "They didn't change the setlist. They haven't changed Rachel's call time, either. You're just trying to get her alo—"

"MOVE." Like a gopher-bat, scary drunk lady pops out of nowhere and flies straight at Jesse, knocking him out of the way and causing the door to fly the rest of the way open.

Rachel squeals.

Finn covers his eyes again.

"Put a shirt on!" scary lady orders. "You're up, toots, and you better be spectacular!"

Mercedes finds her 'husband' in the corner and quietly takes a seat next to him. "Honestly," she
says, both to Kurt and the other man at the table. "The people they let into these parties. What is the world coming to, when savages like that can just waltz into a place like this and act like they belong?"

The man turns his eyes towards her. "Indeed," he drawls.

"I quite like this fellow," Kurt says. "He possesses a simple, quiet charm, yet also an air of elegance, not unlike the mating dance of the silver-breasted peacockadoodle."

"I'm glad you're making friends, sweetie," Mercedes says sweetly, patting his hand.

Suddenly, the lights in the room dim. Firebenders in the upper catwalks bend the various hanging lamps to a much lower intensity, while a single spotlight firebender intensifies his flame and aims his light at the stage.

An incredibly sharp-featured man walks out from behind the curtain.

"Rachel Berry!" Mercedes hears someone whisper from offstage.

"Silence!" the man says.

"But my name is—" the voice whispers again, but is quickly cut off by the man.

"And now, the Sho Fa Theater Guild, in accordance with the Keros Estate and our sponsor, Breadstix restaurant, is proud to present, in the role of Kushinada in Flintella's The Orochi Cycle, Miss Rochelle—"

And suddenly, Rachel herself bursts from the side of the stage in full costume, body checking the man hard enough to send him stumbling into the wings on the other side of the stage. "Rachel Berry!" Rachel finishes for him.

She looks down into the pit, where a fuzzy piano player seems to have materialized out of nowhere to play for her. "Hit it, Brad!"

Brad does so.

A gentle piano melody fills the room, and the tittering and gossiping and carrying on slowly but surely dies down to almost complete silence. Where before, the room was filled with anxious, uncertain energy, the presence of music seems to have a powerful calming effect.

Blaine keeps his eyes and ears open. He notices a particularly cross-looking couple continuing to badger a rather frantic and miserable-looking waiter for several seconds after everyone else has fallen silent. He smiles to himself as he follows the poor fellow back into the kitchen. Targets acquired.

As he leaves the room, Rachel opens her mouth, and begins to sing.

"On this day…
My beloved waits for me,
Down beneath the blazewood tree,
Where we lay…

Every night…
Where we sit and count the stars,
Claiming each one to be our
Mercedes props her hand on her elbow and listens. "She really is good," Mercedes says softly.

"I must admit," Kurt concurs, just as quietly. "She has a wonderful voice."

"Indeed," the prim and proper gentleman says, having turned his entire head to look directly at Rachel. Kurt is rather annoyed to note that this is more regard than he gave either of them, but there's no point in dwelling on it. The best revenge is living well, after all, and when that's not available… well, spiking a drink with Dragon Frog Juice is a pretty close second.

Taking care to make sure no one is watching, Kurt reaches into his robes and pulls out the bottle, uncapping it in his lap. With the dexterity of a master, he bends the juice out of the bottle, through the air, and right into the gentleman's wine glass. He even takes a second to bend the wine, stirring it so the solution is nice and evenly distributed throughout, before replacing the bottle and turning his attention back to Rachel.

Over in the kitchen, Blaine tails the poor abused waiter as he goes to retrieve an entrée. "Hey," he says, setting his tea tray down on the counter.

The guy starts, nearly jumping clean out of his clothes. "Wh-what do you want?" he stammers.

Blaine holds up his empty hands. "Hey, relax, man. It's okay. I saw that crazy couple you were with just now."

"Holy crap!" the poor waiter says. "They are so freaking picky! It's like every little thing pisses them off. I've had to bring them their entrée twice already."

"That sucks," Blaine says. "Look… if you want, I could trade positions with you. I'm the tea-boy, but I'm tired of bouncing all over the room. You take my job, and I'll take yours."

"Really?" the poor waiter says, looking entirely too hopeful. His eyes are practically overflowing with grateful tears. It's really kind of sad. "Thank you! Thank you so much!" he says, grabbing and shaking Blaine's hand, before bounding over to grab Blaine's discarded tea tray, and stepping out of the kitchen with—if this is even possible—more pep in his step than Blaine.

"Wow," Blaine says. Yeah, if there was any residual guilt about sabotaging someone else's meal, talking to that poor waiter just completely annihilated it.

"Order up!" Chef Flambé says, placing a tray on the serving counter. "For the third stinking time," he mutters under his breath as he walks away.

Blaine grins and snatches the tray, carrying it out into the ballroom as Rachel approaches the end of her song. It's still nice and dark in the ballroom, so no one sees him surreptitiously slip a small beetle carcass into the middle of the stuffed pheasant.

As Rachel finishes holding the final note and the applause kicks in, Blaine approaches the picky couple's table, making a subtle effort to hide his face. "Your orders, sir, madam," he says calmly.

"It's about time!" the woman spits at him. "I thought I would turn to dust before you got here with the right food."

"And it better be right this time," the man grumbles. "Or we are going to have some very strong words for you and your so-called cook."
Blaine simply places his fist beneath his open palm and bows to them, quietly walking away.

Rachel bows. "Thank you, thank you," she says, basking in the warm glow of rightfully earned praise and adoration. Attention, sweet attention! How she loves it.

Finn stares at her from stage left, starry-eyed and completely smitten. He has to tell her. He has to tell her the truth, because she's just… she's too amazing to be with a guy like Jesse.

The girl almost bounces off the stage as the curtain closes. "They liked me!" she says excitedly. "Oh my gosh, Finn, they liked me!"

"They'd be stupid not to," Finn says, smiling at her as they walk back to the dressing room. "You were amazing."

"Thank you," Rachel says sincerely. "Oh, I can't wait to see how they're going to react to our duet. Jesse and I have astounding chemistry. Based on our musical compatibility alone, we were clearly destined for each other from before time began…"

"...yeah," Finn says, his smile slipping. Rachel has so much energy that she is, literally, running circles around him. His robes flutter as she orbits him, chattering and chattering, so happy that Finn can't quite bring himself to ruin it for her.

"...we'll be married and famous together, forever and ever, and people will write songs and plays and—"

They open the door to her dressing room and step inside, and…

"He's not here," Finn says, looking around.

Rachel's orbit immediately grinds to a halt. "What?"

The two of them scan the room as best they can, but there is no sign of Jesse St. James whatsoever. There are signs of other things, though. Things seem to be strewn about the room at random, like there was a miniature whirlwind a few minutes ago. A window in the connecting bathroom is broken, glass littering the floor.

Rachel's hands fly up to her mouth. "Oh my gosh," she says quietly. "He's gone!"

She dashes out into the hallway. "JESSE!" she calls, dashing down the hallway.

Finn starts to go after her, but as he steps forward, his foot lands on top of something and he almost crushes it, just managing to keep his balance and remove his foot at the very last second.

The waterbender's jaw drops as he sees what he almost stepped on.

It's a little canister. With blue and white swirls on it, just like Artie and Blaine described it, except…

…except now, there are little scorch-marks on the outside. Like fire was shot at it, or very close to it.

Unable to resist his curiosity, Finn pops the lid of the canister and pulls out the scroll, unfolding and reading what it says.

Or… well, he would have read what it said, if there had been any actual words on it.
But there aren't. Instead, there are just… drawings.

Drawings of a woman who looks kind of familiar, doing all kinds of weird poses.

…what the crap?

Finn squints at the paper, trying to figure out what it's supposed to mean, how it could possibly be related to Rachel.

After a few seconds, he realizes that the poses are like steps in a sequence. Almost like a drawn dance lesson, or something.

It takes a few more seconds for him to realize why the woman looks so familiar.

She basically looks like Rachel, only older. Maybe a little taller.

It almost looks like…

Like she could be Rachel's mom.

TO BE CONTINUED
CHAPTER 46 –
Raise Your Glass, Part 3

The semi-ruffled head of Lady Keros pokes through the door to the artifact room.

"Is the thingy ready yet?" she slurs.

Gregory looks away from the tablet, glancing back at her, annoyed. "Not yet. I still need to add a few—"

"HOLY CRAP," the Lady sighs, somehow managing a full-body eye roll, cupping her hands around her mouth as she shouts; "NO ONE CARRRRRRRES."

Gregory is not amused. "Do you really think this will foo—"
"Do you *really* think anybody's here is going to give a crap?" the Lady asks. "Everyone here is a moron. Draw a fucking smiley face on it for all I care, just *hurry up*. I need distractions!"

"Yes, milad—" Gregory starts.

He doesn't finish, however, as the Lady has already flounced back to the ballroom.

Gregory sighs. "The things I suffer for my art…"

It's pretty common knowledge that Fire Nationals, in general, are fairly impulsive people. Blaine likes to think he's more careful than most, but even he has to admit that sometimes his enthusiasm bodily picks up his common sense and runs off with it, forcing him to act without really considering the consequences.

For example; putting a small, crunchy bug carcass in the middle of an otherwise tender and chewy meal in an attempt to gross someone out.

What kind of unintended consequence might result from such an action?

If you said 'choking,' then congratulations: at the moment, you are smarter than Blaine!

"Honey?" Miss Angry asks, staring at her husband oddly. "Dear, are you alright?"

The male half of the Angry Couple is clutching at his throat and hacking and sputtering and spasming and making all the generally accepted international symbols for *'NO, I AM NOT OKAY.'* No one really seems to know what to do, so the small crowd that actually notices settles on standing around and gasping in shock like they do at *absolutely everything*. Blaine is suddenly very aware that this man might actually choke to *death* and it will be completely his fault. He has a brief image of himself so overcome with guilt that he turns himself in to the authorities and spends the rest of his life in prison with no hair gel and nothing to climb on.

It is not a pretty sight.

Blaine has to *do* something.

Unfortunately, he doesn't know what. His need for action overwhelms his desire for rational thinking and, well…

Imagine, if you would, being in the middle of a fancy party when one of the serving boys dashes across the room, leaps through the air, and delivers a flying drop kick to a wealthy patron's gut.

What kind of unintended consequence might result from such an action?

If you answered 'lots and lots of unwanted attention,' then congratulations: you are, once again, smarter than Blaine!

On the bright side, the obstruction is violently ejected from the man's throat, saving his life.

On the dimmer side, said obstruction smacks his wife in the face and falls down her top, prompting her to scream in exquisite horror. Her scream is timed *just* so that it prompts everyone to turn around as Mister Angry goes sliding across the floor and Blaine recovers from his soaring dragon kick. Thus making it seem like the woman was screaming about her husband being surprise-attacked from above, and not about the dead beetle in her blouse.
There is a collective gasp of horror, followed by **dead silence**. Blaine suddenly finds himself the center of attention for the *entire room*.

Normally, this would have him preening and smiling like crazy, but right now, he's kind of afraid that he is about to be lynched.

"Oh, for the love of... **security!**" Lady Keros shouts, more exasperated than shocked.

Two more guards file out of the back as the crowd seems to close in on Blaine and oh shit, oh *shit*, he blew it, he blew it, he blew it, he just blew the whole stupid plan with one stupid move and now everything is ruined and he is going to *die*. Or go to prison. Maybe both. But not in that order. Probably.

"There," Lady Keros says, sloshing a half-full wine glass at Blaine. "Him! Make him go away. He drop-kicked Mister... Mister..." She hiccups, trying in vain to recall the man's name. "Well, I don't know who he is, but that's besides the point! You are not allowed to drop-kick my party guests. That sort of thing is *frowned upon!* So take this boy outside and *frown upon him*. Violently, and with extreme prejudice."

"Come with us, son," one of the guards say, moving towards Blaine and grabbing him by the shoulder as his heart plummets down to his foot and bursts out of his heel.

Kurt watches the entire spectacle unfold from the opposite corner of the room, face schooled into the polite smile of secret horror. "**What is he doing?**" he asks Mercedes.

The earthbender shrugs. "**No idea. That kick had great form, though. I'm impressed.**"

**"So not the point of what just happened!"** Kurt seethes, watching with increasing panic as a lost-looking Blaine is escorted towards the exit. He is one second from calling the whole plan off and picking up some smack to lay down when the universe *finally* decides to cut them a break.

It comes in the form of none other than Mister Angry himself.

"Unhand that boy!" he says, rising to his feet. The guards, quite used to being ordered around, comply. The man's face is red as he stomps up to Blaine, who is slightly afraid that he's about to get punched.

"Young man," Mister Angry growls. "I want to shake your hand."

Blaine's eyes bulge. "What?"

Mister Angry grabs his hand without even waiting for permission and pumps him like a water spout. "You just saved my life, my boy!" he says merrily. "I was choking!" he says, to the room at large. "And while you lot stood around and gawked, this upstanding young man took *action* and saved my bacon. So stop staring and give him a hand!"

Kurt is so relieved, he very nearly sighs his lungs inside-out.

A small round of applause bursts forth from those paying attention, and Blaine bashfully scratches at the back of his neck, blushing. "Thank you, sir," he says.

"No problem, son. My honor demands that I recognize the one who saved my life," he says, bowing to Blaine.
"But that's not all!" Misses Angry interjects, holding up the successfully-fished-out beetle in her hands. "It also demands that we strike back against the one who tried to murder you with his foul cooking!"

A collective cry of outrage spreads through the onlookers.

"Great gods!" Mister Angry cries. "Is that what was choking me?"

"Yes!" the Misses replies. "What do you say we go shove it down the Chef's throat, and see how he likes it?"

"A splendid idea, love," Mister Angry says, taking a second to fix his robe and straighten his pants, before letting out a mighty battle cry and charging the kitchen, his wife by his side.

Blaine gapes at the pair of them. As does everyone else.

Except, of course, Lady Keros. "Well, don't just stand there!" she shouts at the already-present guards. "Go! Attacking the Chef is frowned upon! Start frowning!"

The poor guards share a look of camaraderie and confusion, before charging the kitchen themselves.

It is at this point that Blaine decides to just go for it. As the crowd titters about the insanity and everyone gossips about everyone else, Blaine quietly slips into the back hallways and begins searching for his prize.

He isn't entirely sure how much more this party can take before it implodes entirely.

In fact, he's not even really sure the party needs their help to implode.

In the opposite corner of the room, Kurt returns to the task at hand, sitting and stewing in his infinite frustration. The prim and proper gentleman hasn't touched his wine since Kurt went through the trouble of drugging it.

"All this excitement is making me thirsty," Kurt says, picking up his own glass (full of water) and sloshing it around. "I certainly could go for a cool, nice, refreshing drink right about now."

"Indeed," the gentleman says, dabbing at the corner of his mouth with a napkin before bringing another perfectly proportioned piece of turducken to his lips and continuing to eat.

Kurt takes a long, luxurious drink from his glass, being sure to draw it out for as long as possible, taking extra care to throw his head back, throat on full display as he swallows.

Nothing. Guy doesn't even blink.

Kurt growls, and Mercedes looks at him questioningly. The Avatar simply crosses his arms and pouts.

For someone with such impeccable manners, Mr. Prim is really starting piss Kurt off.

This is a dark time for Rachel Berry. The star-scribed love between her and Jesse St. James has been beset by yet another great obstacle, and the girl cannot help but wonder how much more fate expects her to endure! The endless cycle of love and loss and love again and loss again inflates and deflates her heart like a balloon, and soon, she will surely either burst open or shrivel up into
nothingness.

"Jesse!" she cries, dashing down the hall, looking for her lost lover. Thousands upon thousands of scenarios play themselves out across the stage of her mind as she runs. What if Jesse wasn't lying? What if he really did face some kind of great evil to get here, and now it has returned for vengeance? What if some horrible fate has befallen him? What if the forces of evil attacked him in their dressing room and he chose to surrender himself rather than endanger her life? What if—

Rachel is so caught up in her vivid inner universe as she turns the corner to head back into the dressing room, she does not see the exceptionally tall human wall running towards her. The two of them collide, and Rachel bounces off of him like criticism off of April Rhodes.

"Oh my gosh!" Finn cries. "I'm so sorry!"

"Owwww," Rachel groans from the floor, rising slowly and clutching at her poor, bruised face. Life is so cruel! Not only does it wound her emotionally by tearing out her very heart, but it wounds her physically by placing giants in her path as she is blinded by despair.

Finn is the very picture of woe as he bends the water forth from the small animal skin he carries with him on his belt. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't know where you were and I wanted to find you because you were panicking like crazy and I didn't want you to get hurt, but I kind of caused you to get hurt anyway and I'm so sorry." He finishes, looking so earnest that Rachel can't help but feel even angrier at him, because his big, dumb earnestness makes it very difficult for her to be angry with him at all. "Where does it hurt?" Finn asks.

"My entire face," Rachel says miserably. She imagines herself looking like one giant bruise. Her face will probably swell up and become all discolored and misshapen. She won't even be able to hold it up properly! She will have to be carried around on a stretcher while everyone points and laughs at her big, purple, bulbous head... oh, she can't possibly be expected to perform in this condition!

"Here," Finn says, gathering the water around his hands. "Let me help," he whispers, gently cupping Rachel's cheek, and oh.

Oh my.

The water around Finn's long, muscular fingers begins to emit a soft blue glow, which seems to cancel out all other light. He massages her cheeks gently, presses on her temples, gently sweeps the water around her jaw... the chill of the liquid contrasts with the warmth of his hands, and her pain is quickly replaced by an indefinable tingling that spreads like wildfire from everywhere he touches her. For a few seconds, Rachel forgets about everything. Her world shrinks to a single point of blue light just bright enough to illuminate them both. All Rachel can see is Finn's concerned face as he gently ministers to her own. There is no Jesse. There is no party. There is nothing and no one but the two of them.

And then Finn withdraws his hands, (prompting an audible gasp from Rachel) the water flowing away right along with them, and the moment is over. "Do you feel better?" he asks, bending the water back into his pouch.

Rachel runs her fingers along her cheeks, ghosting over the spot where his fingers left her. "Yes," she says quietly.

He smiles, crookedly—he always does that, she notes. His little smiles are so one-sided. Like he isn't entirely sure he should be smiling, but he just can't help it. She finds herself smiling back at
him as he reaches down and helps her up (and he is so strong, she can tell, but he holds her carefully, like she is fragile—no, like she is precious).

And then it hits her.

Suddenly, Rachel Berry's world shifts on its axis. The sun turns blue, rain flies up from the ground, birds swim in the ocean and fish soar in the sky. Everything that was settled is now disturbed. Everything that was certain is now decidedly un.

And in this strange, frightening new world, Finn Hudson looks very different. She doesn't think she will ever look at him the same.

Oh, no.

"No, no, no!" Rachel says, shaking her head as if trying to expel her traitorous thoughts. "No, I can't do this again," she says forcefully, more to herself than anyone else.

"Can't do what?" Finn asks, looking concerned again (stop it, stop it! Stop caring about her so much!).

"Nothing," Rachel says with finality, steeling herself against her emotions. Everything is flooding back to her—the world their little moment kept at bay returns in force, and Rachel must put aside her feelings and deal with it. She is an actress. She can control her own emotions. She can keep her heart in check while she attempts to find with her missing boyfriend, who she is going to elope with! She can keep her stupid, traitorous feelings under wraps while she deals with the fact that she is expected to perform a duet with someone in just a few minutes and she has no duet partner…

"Rachel," Finn says. "About Jesse… I found something, and I think you should know about it…"

He takes a breath, seeming uncertain as to whether or not he should continue.

"Later," Rachel says suddenly, surprising even herself.

"What?" Finn asks.

"I don't know what happened," Rachel says, her voice firm, "but wherever Jesse went, I can't help him right now. There is one absolute in theater, one unshakable rule that aspiring actors and actresses must adhere to. One thing that the theater lives and dies by."

Finn's face is nothing but open curiosity. "What is it?"

Rachel walks over to a pile of scattered papers on the floor, picking up a copy of the score, before turning to face him, her eyes determined.

"The show must go on."

Blaine steps lightly, always on the lookout. He is ready, at a moment's notice, to run, or hide, or make a desperate attempt at lying. He has no idea how many guards are left in these darkened, torch-lit hallways, but there can't be that many. There are only so many people who will even fit back here.

Unfortunately for him, all it takes it one to fuck him over.

"Hey!" the guard says, spotting Blaine as he rounds a corner, passing the hallway that connects directly to the kitchen. "What are you doing back here?"
Blaine freezes for a split second, his mind in desperate motion for a good answer.

The sound of several explosions and a sudden burst of fire from beneath the kitchen doors provide him with all the answer he needs.

"What was that?" the guard asks.

"Chef Flambé has gone crazy!" Blaine says urgently, dashing towards the man. "Please, you have to help before he hurts someone!"

"Shit!" the guard says, shouting down the corridor at the top of his lungs. "CODE F! CODE F! FLAMBÉ ON RAMPAGE, ALL HANDS ON DECK!"

From around the corner, about five more guards suddenly emerge, and wow. Artie was so not kidding about the ridiculous level of security here.

He hopes to let the guards sweep past him, but unfortunately, his luck is not quite that good. He is quickly caught up in the sweep and forced to run along with them back to the kitchen.

The sight that greets him when he gets there is more than worth the trip.

"Chef Flambé, please!" the already-present guards plead. "Let them go!"

Mister and Misses Angry cower in a corner with the Chef towering over them, wielding a ladle that could only look that dangerous in his hands, all parties slightly scorched. The other cooks seem to be hiding in cabinets and under counters, large chunks of which are missing and currently smoldering in various places throughout the room.

"Absolutely not!" the Chef says, lashing his ladle about unpredictably. "They accused me of purposefully sabotaging my own food, IN MY OWN KITCHEN!" A small burst of fire escapes from his mouth as he speaks, and Blaine subtly shifts to hide behind the guards. "My honor has been insulted! My professionalism has been insulted! My FOOD has been insulted! And I will have satisfaction." He turns to Mister Angry. "Come on, big boy, on your feet! You and me, Agni Kai, right now."

"B-b-but I'm not a firebender!" the man stammers.

The Chef rolls his eyes. "Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you accused me of attempted murder!"

"Chef, please—" one of the guards stammers.

"Toss off!" the Chef orders. "Unless you want to join the fun!"

"Chef Flambé!" one of the guards that game in with Blaine says. "Stand down immediately, or we will be forced to apprehend you!"

"Oh, come off it! Here, tell you what; apprehend this!" the Chef shouts, hurling his ladle at the guard. It bounces off of his helmet with a clang!

And, yet again, it is on.

Pot and pan clashes with sword and shield. Spoon and spear meet in combat as the Chef dishes out disaster to all who dare to defy him. As the battle rapidly escalates, the Chef climbs up on the counter, smears his face in some kind of red broth that looks a little too much like blood, rips off
his shirt and roars at the heavens.

Blaine decides that this is an excellent time to leave.

The explosion that rocks the room shortly thereafter assures him that he made the right call.

"Okay," he says to himself. "Back to business…"

Mercedes is the one who decides to invite others to their depressing little table. She coyly waves at a few passersby, and soon, they are joined at their seats by a group of people that are brightly colored, loud, and very animated. They're like human sparrowkeets, and to his infinite shock, Kurt finds himself actually enjoying their company.

Much to the consternation of the prim and proper gentleman.

At least, Kurt thinks he is consternated. It's hard to tell with this guy. He's about as animated as your average ice sculpture. He seems to be eating slower but he still. Won't. Touch. His. Drink.

Mercedes converses with a couple about interesting vacations they have taken. Not like private beach houses or luxurious day spas—actual interesting vacations to actual interesting locations.

"Oh, yes!" says the Interesting Man. "It honestly looks like the trees are inlaid with thousands of tiny little crystals. I've never seen anything like it!"

"And as if that wasn't spectacular enough," the Interesting Woman adds, "it glows at night."

Mercedes's jaw drops. "You are kidding me."

"Not at all, dear," the Interesting Woman says with a smile. "If you ever get the chance, I recommend you and your husband visit the island yourself. It's just… magical."

"IF we get the chance," Mercedes sighs. "With all the travel restrictions laid down because of the quarantine, it's hard to get anywhere these days." "Oh, I know," the Interesting Man sighs. "And believe it or not, I hear the new Fire Lord plans to make them even worse."

The earthbender's eyebrows rise. This could be useful information. "Oh? Please, tell me more…"

Meanwhile, Kurt happily exchanges compliments with the more well-dressed members of the table.

"May I just say, Councilor, that your outfit is positively stunning!" says a woman in blue.

Kurt blushes and waves her off. "Oh, stop it. I am sure that were you and I to stand side by side, all eyes would drift to you, my dear. I would be as a frightened cranemeleon—all but invisible, unless you squint."

"Nonsense! I simply must know how you got that fit. Who is your tailor?" the blue woman asks.

Kurt looks up with no small amount of pride. "My tailor is me," he says.

"Get out!" she says, looking both scandalized and impressed, and as strange as it seems, Kurt could see himself being friends with her. Maybe even a few others.
So… not all rich people are boring, pompous windbags.

Only most of them.

"Do I have to wear this?" Finn says, eying the super-tight, weird, frilly robe-thing that is laid out in front of him.

"Of course you do!" Rachel says. "It would be ridiculous for only one of us to be in costume!"

"Well, yeah," Finn says, kind-of agreeing. "I mean, I know that, but… it's… well, it's obviously made for someone who is… ummm… very… not-me-sized," Finn says quietly, holding up the outfit for her to see. The pants stop several inches above his ankles, and the sleeves leave his forearm half-exposed. And the thing as a whole seems entirely unable to handle some of Finn's, err… bulkier parts.

Rachel finally gets it. "Oh. I see…" she trails off, trying to tilt her head like a different angle will magically make Finn shorter. "Alas! Nothing to be done about it now," she announces cheerfully after a few seconds. "Just try not to move too quickly or too far in any one direction, and I'm sure it will hold together. Most everyone will be looking at me anyway," she says, dismissing his concerns lightly.

Finn sighs. He doesn't want to wear the stupid tiny frilly robe. But he knows he's going to. He really does want to help Rachel.

Plus, he's pretty sure she'll freak out and cut him in half if he refuses.

"Now," Rachel says, opening the songbook. "Onto the actual number. Since you're a stand-in, you might be able to get away with having the score onstage, so you don't necessarily need to learn the words. Just the melody. Can you read music?"

Finn shakes his head.

"I'll sing it for you, then," Rachel says, and Finn can't help but grin at the fact that Rachel is singing for him. Her voice is amazing, and it kind of melts him every time he hears it. She takes a few deep breaths, hums a little to herself, and starts to sing.

Finn nearly passes out.

It's the song.

"I already know it," Finn whispers. He doesn't even mean to talk—the thought just kind of jumps out.

"What?" Rachel says, stopping in her tracks.

"The song," Finn says, looking at her, awed, confused, and a little frightened. "I know the melody."

Rachel actually looks a little scared. "How?" she whispers, like she knows she shouldn't believe him but she kind of does, which is… weird.

"I just… do," Finn says.

It's not much of an explanation, but he's pretty sure 'I got high on Frog Juice and heard it while I was dancing with midgets' wouldn't go over well.
Rachel blinks at him several times, and it looks like she doesn't know what to say. Which is weird, because for the whole time Finn has known her, Rachel has always had something to say. She kind of looks like she doesn't know how to feel, either—like she could laugh or cry or hit him or kiss him or all of those in any order and she doesn't know where to start or stop.

"Okay," she says, after what seems like forever. "Okay," she repeats, shaking her head again. She grabs him and pulls him over to a small couch, where they sit. "Let's go over it together," she says, opening the book between them.

After a couple of practice runs, Rachel feels they are ready. "Alright," she says. "I wish we had more time to go over the dance, but—"

"Dance?" Finn says, his happy thoughts packing suitcases and heading for the hills. "Umm… I'm really not a very good dancer. Like, at all…"

"Oh, don't worry," Rachel says. "The steps are incredibly simple. Just follow my lead, and we'll be fine."

Finn gulps.

"If you say so…"

Blaine sighs. He should have known.

There is apparently one guard left, just outside of the room where the artifact is. Apparently, he didn't get the 'hands on deck' memo.

There is no sneaking past him. He stands in one spot, blocking the door and making it impossible to enter the room unless you physically go through him. Which doesn't seem likely, as he is huge, and in full armor.

It looks like he has no other options. Reaching into his pocket, Blaine pulls out the wooden case and retrieves one of the shirshu-spit darts from within. He thinks about throwing it, but with all the armor, there is too much of a chance for Blaine to miss his mark from a distance. And he'll definitely be in trouble if he blows his shot.

No… best to handle this the gentlemanly way. Up close and personal.

"Sir!" he says, rounding the corner at a run and doing his best to seem out of breath. "Come quickly! The Chef is out of control! They need your help!"

The guard shakes his head, replying in a gruff voice. "Sorry, kiddo, no-can-do. My orders were very clear: I am not to move from this spot."

Blaine approaches him, wide-eyed and pleading. "But, sir… someone could be hurt!"

"And while I'm gone, someone could sneak into this room and steal the Councilor's whatchamacallit," the guard counters. "And then whose head would it be on? That would be mine!"

He shakes his head. "No sir-ree, I was told to stay right here, and here I shall remain."

"But sir…" Blaine says, stepping a little closer.

"Hey, now!" the guy warns, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword. "I'm gonna have to ask you to step back, little man. Nothing personal, but you have entered the Danger Zone. Ergo, you are in
danger and I cannot in good conscience allow you to stay."


"It's cool, it's cool," the guard says, becoming agreeable again. "Now run along back the way you came. I'm not one for reportin' folks, but others might not be so generous, and you ain't supposed to be here. Don't get in trouble, kid."

The Prince sighs. This guard seems to be a fairly nice guy—Blaine kind of hates that he has to do this to him.

Oh well…

He fakes turning away, brandishes the dart and strikes, aiming for the guard's head. Unfortunately, the guy's bulk is no impediment to his speed, and he catches Blaine's hand on its way down.

"Hey!" he shouts, glaring at Blaine.

Well, there's no explaining this. In for an inch, in for a mile.

"Sorry!" Blaine says. Before the guard has a chance to reply, Blaine drops the dart, catches it in mid-air with his other hand, and jams it into the side of the guard's neck.

"Gah!" he yelps, releasing the Prince and stumbling backwards. Blaine watches as he makes a few feeble grabs at his neck before finally yanking the dart out. It's useless, however—the payload has already been delivered. It should only be a matter of seconds before the guy topples over, stiff as a board and knocked-out cold.

Which is why it's really surprising to Blaine when the guy suddenly straightens up, glares at him, and growls, "Son, you just bought yourself a one-way ticket to Ass-Whoop City. I will be your conductor—you may call me Mr. Conductor—and I strongly advise you to strap in, because it will not be a pleasant trip."

"Oh… shit!" Blaine shouts, taking off.

"Hey, get back here!" the guard says, dashing after him. "These tickets are non-refundable!"

The chase begins…

The lights dim again, and the sharp-featured man comes onstage as the spotlight reignites to highlight him. "Once again, the Sho Fa Theater Guild is proud to present Miss Rhoda Burke, with a guest appearance by a Mister…" He squints at the page. "Fudd Houston."

Kurt sits up in his seat. Mercedes snaps her head around to look at the stage. There is no way that guy could possibly mean…

The curtain rises.

"Oh. My. La," Kurt whispers.

"Mountains have mercy on us all," Mercedes says in agreement.

Standing there, looking outlandishly uncomfortable in a costume that is clearly too small for him, is none other than Finn Hudson. Standing next to him and looking even smaller by contrast is none other than the smiling form of Rachel Berry.
"Are they going to…" Kurt starts.

The piano kicks in.

"Oh my La, they are," he answers his own question. "They're going to sing together!"

"Can Finn even sing?" Mercedes asks. "And where's that jerk-ass boyfriend of hers?"

Kurt starts to reply, but Rachel's voice cuts him off. He doesn't really know the answer to either question, so it hardly matters.

"So lost, and alone,
Never knowing where to go,
I searched and searched
And never found
A place to call my own,
But here in your arms, I feel
As if I could remain
Safe and warm, with you,
For all my days..."

Rachel looks at Finn with what is clearly supposed to be adoration, and Kurt still thinks her emotion is a bit flat.

And then it's Finn's turn to sing.

"So far, and away,
I was drifting on the sea,
I sailed around, but never found,
A care to anchor me,
But now that I'm holding you,
I never want to leave.
So let's stay, you and I,
And live as 'we.'"

"Kind of rough," Mercedes comments, "but at least he can carry a tune."

"He's like Reverse-Rachel," Kurt says. "Completely lacking in technique and training, but he actually feels what he's singing."

"Hmmm," Mercedes says. "He does seem sincere."

"They're complete opposites," Kurt says with a smile. "Like the Yin to each other's Yang, and oh… my… La…"

Suddenly, he realizes what he has just said. And that realization prompts a flood of others—the reason Finn sounds and looks so sincere despite being dressed like a buffoon. The reason he seems so distracted and confused lately, even moreso than usual. The reason he follows Rachel like a puppy, stands up for her at every opportunity, and is outraged that he has to keep secrets from her.

"He likes her," Kurt breathes. "He honestly likes her!"

Their voices join together for the pre-chorus, singing perfect harmony.

"Will you be my melody?
"QUIT MOVING SO DAMN FAST!" the guard shouts as he desperately tries to keep up with Blaine. "You're only… making it worse… for yourself!" he pants.

Blaine dashes on ahead, still brimming over with energy, unlike his pursuer. His main problem is a distinct lack of places to go—he can't run out into the party, or he'll blow the plan to shit and probably wind up caught anyway. But he can't keep leading the guy in circles through these hallways, either. The other guards are going to come back at some point, and then Blaine will be well and truly fucked.

Stupid dart. Why didn't it work? That move he pulled, with the dropping and catching… that was awesome. He deserves a prize for that kind of bravado, and all he got for it was an extended chase scene.

He passes a flowerpot as he rounds a corner, and considers calling Artie. Of course, he'd have to stop to do that, and stopping means getting caught.

Or does it?

"Hey!" the guard shouts. "You know what? I changed my mind! I don't want to hurt you. I just wanna give you a big ol' hug!" he says, and yeah. Like Blaine believes that. "So stop already!"

An idea pops into Blaine's head. Maybe the guy just didn't get enough of the Shirshu spit. Maybe he needs another dose because he's so large, or something.

Well, Blaine has three more darts and he has never felt a more urgent need to use them. Slowing down just enough to let the guard start to catch up with him, he pulls out the case and sticks the last three darts between his fingers.

They approach a corner. Instead of turning, Blaine runs up the wall and kicks off, flipping over the guard's head as he skids to a shocked stop. Before he has a chance to turn around, Blaine slams him into the wall from behind and jams the other three darts into his neck.

"Aw, come on, now!" the guard grumbles at him. "Why you gotta play so hard to get?"

"Sorry," Blaine replies. "I'm not very good at romance."

The guy is supposed to fall over. He doesn't. Instead, he shoves himself off the wall, knocking Blaine backwards and causing him to stumble. Before he can recover, the guard grabs him, pulls him close, and…

…wraps him in a hug.

A very, very powerful hug.

Blaine cannot even. "What…" he grunts. "What are you—ACK!"

The guy just squeezes him tighter. "Feel the love, little man. Feel it!"
He feels it, alright.

In fact, he's pretty sure that in a minute or so, he won't be able to feel anything else…

Rachel takes Finn's hand, and they start to move.

"Oh no," Kurt breathes. "There's… choreography."

Mercedes's eyes bug out, and she clutches a hand to her chest. "That poor girl. She had no warning...."

Unfortunately for everyone involved, it's already far too late.

Rachel pulls him towards the front of the stage. Finn immediately trips over his own two feet and stumbles forward, nearly falling off the stage and pulling her with him. He regains his balance at the last second through herculean effort, but it isn't without its price. The aforementioned effort puts Finn's body at sharp odds with the small costume he is forced into, and one of them has to give.

It's the costume. It tears with a resounding RRRRRRIP that can be heard even over the background music. The audience ripples with light laughter.

Finn looks horrified, but Rachel simply tightens her showface as they slowly dance together.

"A voice in my heart,
Calling out to yours
Holding us together in harmony...
Where will I go when you're gone?
 Burning on and on,
Fire within my soul that keeps me warm...
Please, stay with me forever."

Kurt watches with baited breath as they finish the chorus, hoping against hope that Finn's little stumble will not be repeated. Not that they aren't a useful distraction—they are—but the last thing they need is for Finn to have to be carted off for medical attention. Or Rachel, for that matter.

Sadly, Rachel does not take hints. As they dance, she guides Finn into letting her spin, and then tries to fall into his arms. With far too little warning, Finn accidentally fumbles her, but just as it seems she is about to hit the stage, he catches her by the front of her robes and pulls her up.

This, too, causes Finn's poor costume to rip under the strain.

Rachel's expression as Finn stands her back up and the somewhat disheveling effect this has on her immaculate costume combine to roll a wave of laughter across the audience.

Rachel keeps her showface on, but Kurt can tell she's starting to strain. Finn just looks apologetic and mortified, but Rachel turns to him and puts a gentle hand on his arm, and this seems to calm him down. He smiles at her, and Kurt can't help but think this is the sweetest disaster he has ever witnessed.

He hopes it's over soon.

"There, there," the guard says, squeezing and swinging Blaine back and forth like a ragdoll. "This
ain't so bad, is it?"

Yes, actually, it is, is what Blaine would say if he could get any air into his lungs. He's pretty sure he's going to pass out soon. Death will follow shortly after, and he can't help but wonder—really, the universe? Is this how you want me to die?

Because this is just embarrassing.

The guard sniffs as he dances down the hallway to music that only he can hear. He sniffs, and sniffles again, and… holy crap, is he crying? What the actual fuck?

As Blaine's limp legs swing haphazardly one of them impacts the flowerpot. Suddenly, Blaine has hope for the future, and begins furiously lashing his legs out in an effort to accomplish the secret knock. He can't really feel his toes, so he isn't sure how many times he makes contact—he just doesn't stop until he hears five total hits.

"Shhhh, shhh!" the guard says, patting the back of his head. "It's okay, you don't need to be scared! I might look mean, but I'm just a big ol' teddy bear. I just…" he sniffs. "I have so much love to give!"

"Hey, loverboy!" calls most wonderful voice in the world.

The guard spins around to spot what appears to be a planted person looking very cross at him.

"You are not permitted to touch," he says, crossing his arms. "Drop him. Now."

"Nuh-uh!" the guard says. "He's mine! I found him first. Only I have cuddle privileges. You'll have to sign up at the post office to be put on the waiting list."

Artie gives the guy a fish-eye, not quite able to come up with a verbal response. Fortunately, actions speak louder than words. Artie shoots off a glove, curls it into a fist in mid-air, and slams it into the guy's nose, knocking him flat on his back and freeing Blaine, who immediately begins gasping for air like he's trying to hoard it all for a coming apocalypse.

"Thanks," Blaine breathes.

"No problem," Artie says, looking about half as baffled as Blaine feels. "Making new friends?" he asks.

Blaine pants his answer. "I'm… just… that… charming."

What began as a sweet, heartwarming duet has now become the laugh riot of the year. It's one of those things that you tell yourself that you just cannot keep watching, even as your eyes remain unblinkingly glued on every moment.

Finn's unfortunate costume is barely holding together, and Rachel is probably going to need some serious dental work because of how teeth-clenchingly tight her smile is. But Finn never gives up, and Rachel is a human steamroller when it comes to performance. So they power through it, even as Finn continues to trip over himself, stub his toe on the stage and (in one notable instance) get tangled in the fracking curtains.

The song finally approaches a close, and Kurt almost lets out his breath until Rachel suddenly takes several steps away from Finn and turns towards him with a look of determination.
"Oh, Hills," Mercedes whispers. "What's she doing?"

"This is the big finish," Kurt sighs. "Rachel would never settle for less."

Finn stands center stage and sticks out his arms to catch her. The path of this disaster is so predictable that Kurt very nearly groans audibly. All he can do is watch and wait for the inevitable splat.

He very nearly gets it. But shockingly enough, this time, the screw-up isn't Finn's fault. This time, it's Rachel's.

She sprints towards him and takes an enthusiastic flying leap into the air. And it becomes obvious almost immediately that she is going to sail right over him. She jumped too hard. She seems to realize it, too, and almost immediately starts flailing in mid-air.

Finn sees this as quickly as the audience does, and reacts the only way he can—with arms outstretched, he dives to catch her. He goes a little further than intended as well, but basically gets what he was aiming for, managing to impose himself between Rachel and the ground at the last second, with her winding up on his chest.

Her gratitude momentarily overwhelms her, and she genuinely smiles at Finn, who smiles back.

The audience explodes into howls of laughter as the curtain closes.

"Ouch," Kurt winces.

"That poor girl," Mercedes sighs.

And then, something unexpected happens…

Finn keeps smiling at Rachel as the curtain closes.

Rachel, however, drops it almost immediately, suddenly bursting into tears. The roar of laughter from everyone outside carries well through the thick curtains.

"I have never," she weeps, "been so embarrassed in my life."

Finn feels like she just sat on his heart. Well, she kind of actually is sitting on his heart, and it doesn't hurt that much, but this is, like, metaphorical. "Rachel," Finn says, "I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't," she seethes, standing up. "Just… don't. I can never show my face in this town again. My career is over before it even started. So thank you, Finn Hudson. Thank you for ruining my life."

And then she breaks into full-blown sobs, running backstage.

"Rachel, wait!" Finn calls, starting to go after her, but tripping over a stray piece of costume (he seriously needs to get out of this thing before it gives out on him). He lands face down, turns to the side, and sees something incredible.

The laughter of the audience echoes through the backstage area. But Rachel was so focused on the laughter that she completely missed the applause. From under the curtain, Finn can see the audience is actually standing up as they clap (which he seems to remember is, like, a good thing).

They loved her.
And she totally missed it.

As the thunderous approval of Rachel and Finn's all-singing-all-dancing disaster special dies down, Kurt turns back to the others at his table.

"Oh, my goodness," the woman in blue says. "I haven't laughed that hard in ages." She wipes a tear out of the corner of her eye. "Oh, heavens! If the rest of the show is that good, I might have to go down and see it."

"Oh, I know," the Interesting Woman agrees. "It seems like every time they host a revival of The Orochi Cycle, it just gets drier and drier. This was actually funny! It's about time someone breathed new life into that dusty old thing."

"An interesting interpretation," Kurt says, "to be sure. Wouldn't you agree, Mister…?"

Kurt turns to the prim and proper gentleman, only to see that he is no longer there.

"Huh," he says, looking at the vacant seat. The food is still there. The glass of wine is still there. The man is not.

Curious.

He takes a closer look at the wine glass and notices that it is at a slightly lower level than it was before. D'oh! The guy drank it! He finally took a freaking sip and Kurt was so busy watching Finchel flailing around that he completely missed his moment of triumph!

The guy is probably off, wandering around, talking to fish and professing his love of everything to anyone who will listen. And he is missing the whole thing!

Except… well… Kurt would expect that kind of thing to draw a crowd. There is no crowd being drawn, no big event taking up the attentions of the party-goers. The guy seems to have just vanished.

And then Kurt leans over a little further to look at his vacant chair, and…

Oh.

Well, there he is. Lying limp on the floor, completely unconscious, and looking almost dead but for the tiny movements of his chest. Kurt experiences a brief moment of heart-stopping panic before he realizes…

No one actually seems to notice he is gone.

Not yet anyway.

With any luck, Kurt might be able to create another distraction and hide the guy before anyone spots him and cries—

"BAWWWWW-HAWW-HAWWW," the guard sobs, his sniffles echoing in the largely silent hallway.

"Is he crying?" Artie asks, unbelieving.

"YES," the guard says, sniffling loudly. "You… you hit me. In my face. With a rock thingy. In
"My face!"

"You were crushing me to death!" Blaine points out.

"I just..." he sniffs. "I just wanted you to know that I care. And I still care. Even though you're both big meanies."

"Where did they get this guy?" Artie asks.

"I don't know," Blaine says, turning back to the earthbender. "Maybe from the same place you got your crappy Shirshu poison!"

"What?" Artie asks.

"I hit this guy with all four darts," Blaine says. "And nothing happened! He just kept right on coming. I might as well have been poking him with... with... cheese crackers."

Artie tilts his head as he looks at the guy. "That's... weird. Shirshu venom is strong enough to bring down an air bison. There is no way this guy should be moving, let alone—"

An exceptionally loud sob tears out of the guard's throat as he flails on the ground.

"Oh, put a rock in it!" Artie says. "I didn't even hit you that hard!"

"It's not the physical pain," the guard weeps. "It's... it's the emotional torment." He pounds his chest plate. "You punched me in the heart!"

Artie gapes at the guy. "You... I... what?"

But the guard just starts crying again. "What do we do with him?" Blaine asks.

Suddenly, the guard sits up, and bursts into song. "III WANT TO LOVE YOOUUU..."

At this, Artie's eyes go wide. His face pales to a point where he actually looks slightly nauseas. "Oh... fuck. Oh, fuck."

"What?" Blaine asks.

Artie answers by slowly bringing his glove-covered hand up, forming a fist, and smacking himself in the forehead several times. "I am an idiot. Oh, fuck. I am so stupid."

"Dude, what? What happened? Tell me!" Blaine says.

"We're all listening, man," the guard says, sitting up to give Artie sympathetic eyes. "This is a safe zone. No judgment. We just want to help!"

"What he said," Blaine agrees, turning big, sympathetic eyes towards his friend.

Artie finally recovers from his momentary bout of self-flagellation, and looks at the guard. "What does your world look like right now? Just out of curiosity."

"It's real pretty!" the guard says. "Shapes, colors... lots of squiggles. Words have colors! You talk blue, by the way. Little man over here is a green talker. I like the green words best. They're crunchier!"

"As I thought," Artie sighs. "Okay, so... here's the deal. I had two poisons I wanted to use for this
job, and I kind of… got them… a little backwards. As a result, instead of knocking out our big buddy, all those darts did was make him high as an airbender orgy."

"I like you," the guard says. "You're funny, on account of your hair's made of butterflies."

"Case in point," Artie says.

"So… what should we do?" Blaine asks.

The earthbender takes a second to center himself, closing his eyes. He puts his gloved hands together, and when he opens his eyes again, he looks scarily focused.

"Okay," Artie says. "You, go. The room is unguarded now. You should be safe to slip in and get the artifact."

"What about the big guy?" Blaine asks.

"…YOUU NEED SOME LOVIN'... TENDER LOVIN' CARE..."

"I'll handle him," Artie nods. "Go!"

Blaine dashes off down the hallway.

"Heyyy!" the guard says. "Where's he going? I was just getting to the good part."

"He has a basket of sick puppies to rescue from a burning orphanage," Artie says. "You, on the other hand, have another job."

"I do?" the guard asks with wide eyes.

"Yes," Artie says. "You like love, don't you?"

"Love it!" the guard replies.

"Fantastic!" Artie smiles. "There is a closet just around the corner. It's full of love."

"Really?" the guard asks.

"Really," Artie nods. "You can't see it, but trust me; it's there. Now, I want you to go and sit in that closet and just… bask in the love. Let it sink into your skin. Do you think you can do that?"

"Do purple penguins make love on cotton-candy clouds?" the guard asks.

Artie decides to go with "yes."

"Damn straight!" the guard says, and dashes off around the corner. Artie waits until he hears the slamming of a closet door before heading back underground.

Kurt is going to kill him.

"MURDER!" the woman in blue cries hysterically. "MURRRRRRDERRRRR!"

Kurt rolls his eyes and sighs. Well, fuck.

There are loud gasps of outrage and horror as everyone backs away from Mr. Prim's 'corpse.' Kurt is sure to show the appropriate level of horror right along with 'Oh, I'm catching the vapors!'
Mercedes, and it's not too long before Lady Keros shows up, tailed by a slightly overcooked group of guards fresh from the kitchen.

The Lady is the first to break the perimeter around the dead guy, walking up to him, wine glass in hand, and poking him twice with her foot. "Croaked, did ya?" she slurs. "Lucky bastard. Alright!" she calls out. "Fun's over! Shut it down, call the City Watch, and let's find out whodunit. My money's on the butler. Sneaky-assed little…"

Crap. Crap, crap, crap. They can't do this, not yet! It isn't time yet!

Kurt leans over to Mercedes. "Find Artie, and tell him to get the antidote now. If there is no antidote, please snap his scrawny neck on my behalf. In the meantime… I'll handle this."

Leaving a slightly confused Mercedes in his wake, Kurt steps into the Circle of Death as the guards try to organize the guests. "Alright, people, line up!" one guard says. "Nobody leaves until we have the culprit! Each of you is a suspect at this point! I'd like you all to form into—"

Kurt leans over, puts two fingers on the gentleman's neck (for show, mostly) and announces, loud and proud; "This man is not dead!"

A gasp! Everyone turns to look at him.

"Then what is he, Mister Smarty-pants?" one guard asks.

"He is…” Kurt thinks for a moment. "…having an allergic reaction!"

Another gasp! Titters and murmurs of concern ripple through the onlookers.


"He lives," Kurt says urgently, "but only for the moment. His time is short, unless we act quickly!" He snaps his fingers, pointing at the guards. "You there! Do as I say, and we may save a man's life today."

"But—"

"DO NOT QUESTION ME!" Kurt roars. "We must perform the Ganterson Lifesaving Maneuver. Every second is vital! Quickly, lift him up on your shoulders."

The guards stare at him.

Kurt claps his hands. "Quickly!" he shouts, and (thank the universe) they actually start listening.

The limp form of Mr. Prim is lifted high.

Great. That's step one. Now all he has to do is… invent a step two.

"Shake him like an earthquake!" Kurt says. "We must prevent his… blood… from settling!"

The guards look at each other, shrug, and obey.

Kurt looks to the side, watching as Mercedes pushes through the crowd on her way to the flowers.

Please hurry, Kurt thinks.

For his sake, and for Mr. Prim's.
Rachel slams the door in his face. She almost slams it on his face, but Finn channels his inner ninja and dodges at the last second.

"Come on, Rachel!" Finn whines. "You can't keep me out forever."

"Go away!" she calls through the door.

"But all my clothes are in there!" Finn pleads. "This costume is really not covering a whole lot at this point. Can I please come in and get dressed?"

"No!" Rachel says. "This dressing room is an officially designated No-Finn Zone! I will be using the entirety of the space to expunge my angst and humiliation. If you have a problem with that, feel free to rewind time and erase that performance from existence!"

"Umm… I’d like to, but I really don’t know how," Finn says honestly.

"Oh, well then, I guess that’s not possible. Let's give you an easier task. What do you know how to do, Finn? Besides ruining my life, since we've clearly established your stunning natural ability in that area," Rachel grumbles.

Finn just sighs and looks down. "Rachel, I'm telling you, they liked it. They liked you!"

"They laughed at me! That song is not supposed to make people laugh. Finn! It is supposed to make them weep warm, heartfelt tears of melancholy and nostalgia!" Rachel counters.

"Okay, I don't know what those are, but they sound gross," Finn says. "I'm not lying, though. They were clapping!"

"Oh, sure they were!" Rachel snits. "I bet they were throwing flareblossoms and money at the stage, as well! That's the perfectly natural reaction to a couple of sad clowns butchering a beloved classic."

"Rachel…" Finn says, leaning his head against the door and trying to, like, beam his sadness through it. "I'm really sorry. I tried to tell you I wasn't a good dancer."

He hears her sigh. "I know…" she sniffs. "It's at least partially my fault for taking an amateur onstage and expecting him to perform up to my standards."

"Can I please come in now?" Finn asks.

Rachel seems to think about it for a second. "Fine," she says, and Finn hears the door unlatch. He scrambles to get into the room before anyone sees him in the leftovers of the stupid tiny skimpy almost not-costume.

He is not fast enough.

"Ah, there you are!" the really pointy stage manager guy says, running up to their dressing room before Finn can close the door.

"Hi," Finn says lamely, hiding himself behind the door.

"Hello indeed, young man," the pointy guy says. "And where is your stunning partner?"

"I'm not here!" Rachel whispers in a whisper that is louder than any whisper Finn has ever heard.
"Ah," the pointy guy says. "There she is! No need to be coy, my dear—I simply wanted to congratulate the two of you on a truly magnificent performance!"

"You what?" Rachel says, snatching the door from Finn and opening it the rest of the way (forcing Finn to grab a cushion to hide behind instead).

"Every time the blasted Orochi Cycle is revived, the role of Susano is further and further romanticized away from the source material. Modern directors like to paint him as some kind of dashing epic hero when the entire point of his character was that he seemed by all accounts a complete buffoon! His purpose was to show that anyone can do great things in the name of love," the pointy guy says, smiling at Rachel. "I'm thrilled to meet a couple of aspiring young acting students who actually understand their material! Your chemistry was fantastic; your comedic timing was impeccable. Everything was brilliant—your contrasted singing styles, the poised and charming against the clumsy and bumbling, the ill-fitting clothes hinting as Susano's humble origins… yet even as I laughed, I was moved by your love. You put a tear in this cynical old theater veteran's eye."

Rachel looks like she could, at any moment, explode into a second sun. "Thank you!" she says. "Thank you so much!"

"No, thank you… Miss Rachel Berry. You as well, Mister Finn Hudson," he says, nodding to Finn, who takes one hand off his pillow to wave shyly. "You deserved every inch of that standing ovation. And you may count me among your fans," he says with a wink. "I look forward to your next number."

"Thanks," Finn says, waving once again as the guy struts off down the hall and Rachel closes the door.

She turns to look at him, her expression strangely blank. Then she screams. "AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

And then she bounces up and down and flails everywhere and accidentally sends a few things flying around and does not even seem to care or notice.

And then she jumps up and wraps her arms and legs around Finn, very, very tightly. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thankyouthankyouthankyou! Oh, Finn, I'm sorry I ever doubted you I can't believe this is happening that was amazing you were amazing I was amazing WE WERE AMAZIIIIINNG!" she squeals.

Finn nods politely as he smiles painfully, his face bright red. "Well, I'm really glad you're feeling better. Now, ummm… if you don't mind, I would really like to be wearing clothes now."

And then, Rachel turns a matching shade of red, releasing Finn and dropping to the ground. "Oh my gosh, yes, I am so sorry! Yes, you should be dressed, and wearing clothes, lots of clothes—look at you, you're practically naked, you shouldn't be naked! Neither one of us should be naked, especially not in the same place at the same time! Why—what—who would even think of such a thing? I know I wouldn't! So… yes! You should get dressed!" she finishes as she heads outside and slams the door.

Finn makes sure to keep the pillow in place until she's gone.

Mercedes has to strike a balance.
She could just steamroll through the crowd, knocking everyone out of her way. But that kind of thing might raise a few eyebrows and make her look just a weensy bit suspicious.

At the same time, she really needs to get to the damn flowerpots.

"Now," she hears Kurt saying. "You must move him up and down, like a see-saw!"

One of the guards questions him. "How is that—?"

"THIS IS A DELICATE MEDICAL PROCEDURE!" Kurt bellows. "STOP WASTING TIME AND DO IT!"

…yeah. Her boo is kind of struggling out there.

So she sashays to her destination, letting her hips and booty do the talking. Oh, yes, Mercedes has plenty of booty to throw around, and this is as good a time to throw it as any. She cuts through the crowds like a hot knife through butter, and everyone is too busy paying attention to Dr. Kurt, Medicine Man to pay her much mind.

"His bile is pooling! Bring him down in front of you. Hold him across your body, like a guitar. Yes, like that! Now… umm… punch him in the stomach! But not too hard!"

Yikes, she thinks. She needs to hurry—for Kurt's sake, and for the poor bastard he accidentally drugged.

One flowerpot and five knocks later, and she's bagged one very contrite earthbender.

"Hi," Artie whispers. "Please don't kill me."

"You're making it very tempting!" she says. "How in the hills did you screw this up?"

"I don't know!" he says. "Maybe the labels were wrong. It doesn't matter now. Here!"

His hand pops up holding a dart. "Stick the guy with this, and he'll be fine in no time!"

"…no, no, no!" the sound of Kurt's voice bounces into her ears. "Roll him like a rug, not like a ball! Are you trying to kill him?"

"He'd better be!" Mercedes says. "If he turns purple or bursts into flames, me and Kurt will both be after your head!"


Mercedes huffs out a breath as he goes, turning her attention back to the spectacle on the floor.

"…he must be swung gently, like a hammock, not quickly like a jump rope! Show some finesse!" Kurt orders.

"Sir, no offense, but this is kinda dumb!" one of the guards complains, as two of them swing the unconscious man back and forth by his hands and feet in a gentle rocking motion. "How long do we have to do this?"

Kurt takes a second for an aside glance, trying to spot Mercedes in the crowd.

"There is but one step left in the Ganterson Lifesaving Maneuver. It is the most complex step of
all, but I have complete faith in you gentlemen to execute it flawlessly. Are you ready?" Kurt asks.

"Well, not reall—"

"BEGIN!" Kurt says. "Toss him into the air like uncooked pizza dough!"

Up he goes. Down he comes.

"Rotate him one thousand and eighty degrees!"

Round and round he goes.

"Roll him over."

Over he goes.

"Stand him on his head."

The man's world flips upside-down.

"And…" Kurt says finally as Mercedes breaks through the perimeter. "Give him to my wife."

"What?" the guards balk.

"Move!" Mercedes says, shoving them out of the way and catching the overturned gentleman before he has a chance to fall. She uses the close proximity to jam the antidote into the man without anyone seeing it, flipping him back over just as he regains consciousness.

"Wha… you… I… it… huh?" the man sputters.

Kurt sweeps a hand at the gentleman. "Voila! He is saved!"

The audience promptly bursts into thunderous applause, as the gobsmacked guards stare at the revived gentleman, who seems to be having a difficult time putting his head on straight.

"Wow, Councilor!" the guard says. "I kind of thought you were full of shit, but that really worked!"

"The Ganterson Lifesaving Maneuver is a powerful technique passed down through my family. Perhaps I will propose it to be taught publically at the next council meeting," Kurt says imperiously. "It could prove to be very helpful."

"Indeed," says the slightly traumatized-looking Mr. Prim, before shaking his head and blearily wandering off.

Artie pops up back in the hallway and is immediately greeted by a pair of Big, Sad, Blaine eyes.

"Artie, we have a problem…"

Blaine stalks into the artifact room, his mind scanning at all times for danger or potential threats.

He finds none. Instead, all he finds is a tombstone-shaped tablet on a wheeled pedestal in the center of the room. The Sun Warrior relic is before him at last, thousands of years of history at his fingertips, and all that is left is for him to reach up and grab it, relishing in the feel of…

…wet paint?
Blaine pulls his hands away, looking at the crusty-looking brown on his fingers, and then back up at the tablet. Sure enough, there are fingerprints where Blaine just touched it; the stone underneath the paint is pure white. Upon closer inspection, the thing doesn't look at all like the drawings that Sam showed them. The symbols don't look the same—they don't even look similar.

"It's a fake," Blaine whispers.

"Thank you!" a voice says from behind him.

Blaine wheels around to see a guy in paint-stained robes and an apron coming towards him.

"That woman clearly thinks you can just slap some magic marker on a rock and call it a Sun Warrior relic. Well, look at this! Even an uneducated serving boy can see that this thing is as fake as her teeth!"

"It's a fake," Blaine repeats, grinning to himself. Even though this technically means their whole plan was for nothing, he feels a little validated. Keros doesn't actually have a Sun Warrior artifact. He didn't betray the Father Lord—Fire Lord—whatever.

"I kept telling her that if she wanted a convincing replica, I needed to see the original. But nooooo! That paranoid, basket-case husband of hers won't let anyone near it. Keeps it locked up in a big, metal vault," the guy says, brushing past Blaine as his smile falters. Oh. So he does have an actual artifact. It just isn't here.

"Anyway, tell the Lady it'll be just a few more minutes before I finish. I need to slap on a little more 'rustic dirt brown,' maybe dust over it with some sand, give it that real ancient feel!" the guy says.

Blaine finally finds it in him to speak. "Yes, sir. I'll tell her," he says, slipping out of the room.

Artie rubs his temple as he listens to Blaine's story. "Well, that… just makes me feel like a jackass," he sighs. "So all of this was for nothing. Wonderful. I'll tell the others, and we can blow this—"

"No," Blaine says forcefully.

"…no?" Artie asks, side-eying the Prince.

"No," Blaine repeats. "It's here. Just because we got the wrong location doesn't mean we should give up."

"Blaine, dude," Artie says. "I admire your panache, but this plan is a bust. I've mapped out this whole estate; the only metal vault is on the second floor of the main house. No one is allowed in the main house. The party is contained entirely in the ballroom, which is a completely separate building. There's no way we could get in without getting caught."

"So we won't," Blaine says. "I will."

The earthbender gapes at him. "Bender, you are out your damn mind! There is no way Kurt would let you do that—"
"I don't plan on telling Kurt," Blaine says with a shrug. "There's no time. There's no time to come up with a complex new plan, either. It's now or never."

"Dude, you are talking about going alone into a place where none of us can support you. A place where the Admiral himself probably is at this very moment. Remember him? The guy who knows your family? The one who will recognize you on sight?"

Blaine nods. "I know. I'm counting on exactly that, actually."

Artie shakes his head, at a loss. "I don't like this," he says. "Can you at least... I don't know, talk to Kurt before you go running off all crazy?"

"There isn't time!" Blaine says. "I'm going to do this, Artie. The only question is whether I will do it with your help, or without."

The thief sends him a powerful glare, and promptly sinks underground again. Blaine is left feeling more than a little disappointed—he really thought he could count on the support of his friends in a time like this.

Oh well. He said he would do it with or without Artie's help, and that's exactly what he intends—"Roof-hopping," Artie says as he pops back up.

"What?" Blaine asks.

"The best way to get from here to the main house without getting caught is roof-hopping," Artie elaborates. "I just did a little more vibration-mapping. There are catwalks in the main party room—if you can get up there, you can get up to the roof. From there, there's one second-story balcony you can reach on the main house. The vault is on the North hall."

Blaine beams at Artie. "Thanks," he says. "Thanks for trusting me."

"Don't thank me," Artie says simply. "I'm telling Kurt as soon as you go. The way I see it, you've got about ten minutes to do whatever it is you need to do. If we don't hear from you in ten minutes—fuck the plan, we're storming that motherfucker, full-stop."

"Sounds perfectly reasonable to me," Blaine says. "How do I get up onto the catwalks?"

"Fastest way would probably be to climb the curtains, but we would need some kind of major distraction, for both the guards and the party guests, and I'm pretty sure we're just about out of options on that front," Artie sighs. "There's always the—"

"Howdy, fellas!" says a familiar voice.

Artie and Blaine, with a slight sense of dread, turn to greet it.

And then they start screaming.

Kurt and Mercedes retire to a small corner of the room to catch their breath. "Okay, I'm really not sure how much more of this we can handle without blowing our cover. What is taking them so long?"

"No idea," Mercedes says. "But I'm with you all the way. All this excitement is really starting to wear me down."
"Let's call Artie," Kurt says. They casually waltz over to the nearest flowerpot, and assume a slightly… *suggestive* position with Mercedes pressing Kurt against the wall next to it. They alternate tapping the pot until Artie shows up.

"Good," Artie says. "I was just about to try and flag you guys down."

"That eager for death, are we?" Kurt asks.

"Yeah, yeah," Artie brushes him off. "I screwed up the poisons, big whoop. We have a bigger concern right now; the artifact in the back room is a fake. Blaine is going after the real one. Alone."

"What?" Kurt whispers.

"Ow!" Mercedes says. "Watch them hands, boy! You trying to squeeze me in half?"

"Explain this. Now!" Kurt orders, ignoring her.

"The real artifact is in the main house. I told Blaine we'd give him ten minutes to get it and get back before we came in after him," Artie says.

"Why did you say that? That's a stupid thing to say!" Kurt says. "Take it back! Stop him!"

"I can't!" Artie whispers. "That's why I said it. He was going with or without our help, so I figured I could at least do my best to give him a shot!"

"This is insane!" Kurt says. "What is he going to do? How is he even going to get over there?"

"First question; don't know," Artie replies. "Second question; he's gonna hop across the roof."

"Fantastic," Kurt sighs. "How is he going to get up there?"

Artie grins. "The answer to that question should be coming in about… oh… 3, 2, 1…"

Suddenly, there is a burst of commotion from near the backrooms, louder and more chaotic than any Kurt has witnessed so far tonight. People actually seem to be screaming in genuine *horror* as opposed to outrage, slamming into each other and tripping over themselves as they desperately try to scramble away from whatever it is that's causing the ruckus.

As the crowd scrambles away, Kurt hears a loud, gruff voice bellowing: "**ATTENTION, PEOPLE OF THE FIRE NATION!**"

The source of the voice climbs up on a table to better address his audience, and Kurt's jaw drops.

"Artie, why is there a large, naked man standing on a table over there?" Kurt asks.

The earthbender shrugs. "Well…"

"Holy crap!" Blaine cries, shielding his eyes and turning his head.

"Agh! Dude! What the fuck?" Artie concurs, following suit. "I thought I told you to stay in the closet and soak up the love!"

The very large, very muscular, very naked, very high guard smiles at them. "I finished! Absorbed it
all. I figured since love soaks through your skin, I could soak it up faster if I took off all my clothes. And it worked!” he says proudly.

Artie looks at Blaine.

Blaine looks at Artie.

An idea is born.

“Well, congratulations!” Artie says. “You are now chock-full of love! Overflowing with the stuff.”

“And you know what you do with love, right?” Blaine asks.

The guard shakes his head.

The Prince grins at him. "You share it…"

"But why is he naked?” Kurt asks.

Artie shrugs. "That's where your dragon frog juice went."

Kurt nods. "Ah. That explains everything." He's not even being sarcastic. It really does.

"Stay sharp," Artie says. "Call if you need me!" And then he's back underground.

"I JUST WANT TO ANNOUNCE," the naked man says. "THAT I HAVE… MORE LOVE… IN MY BODY, THAN ANYBODY."

Lady Keros just stands with her mouth slightly open, her eyes slightly closed in a dictionary-worthy expression of 'are you fucking kidding me?'

"AND THAT'S NOT FAIR!” the guard says. "SO I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE IT WITH ALL OF YOU, BECAUSE YOU MEAN SO MUCH TO ME. I LOVE YOU ALL! NOW COME ON AND FEEL THE MAGIC!"

And with that, he jumps off the table, and begins the terrifying process of attempting to hug anyone he can get his hands on. The room erupts into chaos as everyone scrambles desperately to get away from the juiced-out cuddle bug.

Lady Keros tosses her wine glass over her shoulder and grabs a bottle, uncorking it with her bare hands and chugging it like a pro. "The bitch!" she yells at the stage in between gulps. "Where's the singing bitch? Get her out here! And dim the fucking lights! No one needs to see this!” The firebenders dim the glow of the lamps, which has the positive effect of making the naked man harder to see, but also the negative effect of making the naked man harder to see.

In other words, everyone just panics even worse.

In the midst of all the insanity, no one notices one of the serving boys quickly dashing to the stage, scrambling up the curtains, jumping off onto a catwalk, and disappearing up a ladder that leads to the roof…
The sun is just starting to set in earnest when Blaine reaches the rooftop. He knows he's kind of exposed out there, so he wastes no time. Just like Artie told him, the roof of the ballroom is just slightly lower than the second story balconies of the mansion itself. There is only one balcony within jumping distance from the ballroom, but it's an easy jump for Blaine with a running start.

Once he's there, the mansion itself is easy to break into. Taking a couple of seconds to make sure no one is around, he kicks the door open and dashes inside.

The place is deserted. Cavernous and creepily empty, especially in contrast with the crowded party going on next door. Not even guards seem to be allowed inside—they patrol the grounds around the mansion, walk around the courtyards, stalk across the outer walls of the estate… but no one sets foot inside the mansion.

As a result, everything therein is disturbingly still. Even as he tries to walk softly down the long hallways, his steps seem impossibly loud in the dead silence of the dead mansion. The setting sun casts long, thick shadows through the mansion's windows, and the contrast between the depth of the darkness and the brightness of the light makes it impossible for his eyes to adjust as he steps between them. It's astounding how cold the shadows feel, even as they share the same space with the warm, sunlit air.

As he reaches the northernmost corridor, the Admiral's study is very easy to find. It's the only door open on the hallway (just slightly ajar), and seems to hold the only thing in the mansion besides Blaine that is moving.

Not the Admiral himself, surprisingly. Just a single, flickering candle in an otherwise dark room.

Blaine enters slowly and carefully.

The room is somewhat of a mess. Papers are scattered haphazardly about, on desks, on shelves, crumpled up in wastebasket and on the floor. The shelves are lined with books, mostly on tactics and war theory, but with a few scholarly works on the Sun Warriors tossed in here and there. An assortment of ancient relics lies within a glass display case—Blaine can see a carved arrowhead, a genuine Sun Warrior sword, and even a scattered mix of idols and statues. For some odd reason, the idols and statues are turned backwards—instead of facing into the room, they all stare at the wall.

The vault takes up a corner of the room, the massive metal door daring a would-be thief to test his strength against its own. Blaine has no intention of breaking in with force, however. There is a simpler way.

Moving over to the desk, Blaine picks up the candle and attempts to shine light on some of Keros's paperwork. Much of it is fairly dull stuff; invoices for weapons and ship construction, dispatch orders, updates on the blockade…

There is one thing that catches his eye. It's a letter from Sue Sylvester (marked, of course, with the Fire Lord's seal), dated today. He leans closer to read it.

"To the Admiral:

It is with sorrow deeper than the volcanic crevice from which I spawned that I must inform you that Operation "Health and Wellness" must be temporarily postponed. Vandals have defaced the People's Monument to My Glory, and the delinquents must be found and purged. All it takes it one rotten sea cucumber, and suddenly, what was supposed to be a nutritious salad has turned into
worm-ridden compost fit only to be used as fertilizer or served in homeless shelters.

Even worse, some

**fiend**

has gotten my Chi-Ryu hooked on narcotics, and now they must be put through an intensive detoxification and rehabilitation program designed by yours truly. Oh, sure, only a handful was actually caught with drugs, but who knows how many of the smarter ones are still getting away with it? Better safe than strung-out, I always say.

Don't you worry, though. The triumph of this plan and the beginning of the Age of Sue is as certain and predictable as the sunrise. I'll keep you posted—stay toasty, Kerry-boy.

_Sue Sylvester_

Blaine feels the stirring of something dark within him at how cavalier, how careless she sounds, even on paper. The woman just seized control of an entire Nation via a secret coup, and she's more worried about building monuments than she is about... well, _anything that matters_.

A short distance away from the letter is an unfinished reply by the Admiral.

"To the Fire Lord:

It is very likely that we would have needed to delay anyway. My men need more time to perfect the 'dance' to the degree of precision you require. Fortunately, I can report to you that the survivor relocation is finished. All living people who were exposed to the plague have been relocated to Etna Island, as you requested, and—"

There, it ends.

Blaine shakes his head. Etna Island? There's nothing on that island besides a dormant volcano. Why would she send everyone there? And what is—

A candlestick careens through the air towards his head.

"**DIE, THIEF!**"

"Quickly, quickly!" Mr. Pointy says, pushing Rachel towards the stage. Finn trails helplessly behind them, dressed in his normal (well, _Fire Nation normal_) clothes again.

"But I haven't even changed costumes!" Rachel protests. "I can't possibly perform this song without wearing the sacrificial robes! It won't make any sense! 'Why is she singing a song about being sacrificed when she is wearing such non-sacrificial robes?' The sense of cognitive dissonance will make it impossible for them to enjoy the song!"

"I apologize, Miss Berry, I truly do, but this is an emergency. The atmosphere is decaying at an alarming pace, and the crowd is quickly degenerating into savagery! You must inject some sophistication into the proceedings, or I fear all is lost!" Mr. Pointy says.

As they near the stage, Finn hears screams and shouts of horror, along with lots of yelling and moving. One really loud voice kind of rises above everyone, shouting "YOU CANNOT STOP MY LOVE! MY LOVE RUNS FREE LIKE THE GAZELLEBRA HERDS OF THE
Another loud voice joins in, one Finn recognizes as the scary plastic lady. "TACKLE HIM, YOU BOOBS! GET AROUND—OH FOR AGNI'S SAKE, THERE'S EIGHT OF YOU! WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF, TOUCHING HIS JUNK? IT'S NOTHING SPECIAL; I DO IT ALL THE TIME!"

"Oh, my," Rachel says. "You're right, we simply *must* do something."

"I'll introduce you. Break a leg, my dear!" Mr. Pointy says, stepping out onstage. "Curtain up!" he shouts.

When the curtain goes up, the crazy noise level makes total sense—people are going *nuts* trying to get away from some *HOLY SHIT IT'S A NAKED DUDE!* EWWWWWWW.

Finn holds up his hand to try and block the naked guy out and concentrate on the rest of the crowd. It's kind of hard to pick anybody out because of how dark it is, but he's pretty sure he sees Kurt and Mercedes hiding behind plants in a corner. The scary plastic lady is standing on a table, shouting at everyone.

"Where's the bitch?" she shouts as Mr. Pointy comes onstage.

"And now," Mr. Pointy says. "The Sho Fa theater guild is proud to pres—"

A full bottle of wine misses his head by about an inch, shattering somewhere backstage. "Get off the stage! Start the damn music!" shouts scary plastic lady.

Mr. Pointy doesn't need to be told twice. He ducks out of the way as Rachel puts on her brightest smile and skips onstage. Brad, the piano player, starts up her music, but this time it's just not enough. Apparently, Giant Naked Guy is a much more pressing concern than Pretty Singing Girl. And even though it might make Rachel mad, Finn kind of thinks these people have their priorities in the right order.

After a couple of lines, Rachel breaks from the song. "Excuse me!" she says.

Everybody ignores her.

"EXCUSE ME!" she tries again.

Nobody even turns their heads.

So Rachel takes a super deep breath, and—

"HEYYYYYYYYYYY!" she bellows, and *holy shit.*

Her voice completely overrides every other sound, like, *ever.* Finn is pretty sure she actually knocks a few things off of some tables. The windows rattled, for crying out loud. Like it or not, everybody suddenly finds their attention forcibly captured by Rachel Berry.

Even Giant Naked Guy. "HEY!" he yells back, waving at her like she was just greeting him or something.

This seems to clue in the guards to the fact that he is distracted, and suddenly, he is tackled right next to a flowerpot by no less than five guards, with a few more standing around just in case.

_Huh, Finn thinks. Five... flowerpot... there's something that I'm supposed to remember about_
His train of thought is derailed by Rachel. "Thank you!" she says. "Now, if you don't mind, I would like to start the song agai—"

Apparently, someone does mind, because all of a sudden, there's another burst of commotion from around Naked Guy.

"What the—"

"Oh, snap!"

"Who are—HEY! Grab him!"

"Ow, let me—"

"Pull him out!"

"I'm trying!"

"HNNNNGAAAAH!" one of the guards shouts, and suddenly, someone is body-slammed onto a table.

Somebody Finn knows.

Blaine ducks out of the way just in time.

"Think you can sneak in here and steal my secrets!" the Admiral says, and Blaine is momentarily struck speechless at the sight of him. He is thin—even moreso than usual, and that's saying something. He looks haggard and worn, his beard and hair unkempt, still wearing his night robes even though it's only just sunset. There is something frightening and wild in his eyes, and Blaine suddenly isn't feeling so sure about his plan. "Taste bronze, sneak!" the Admiral yells.

Blaine backs up and raises his hands. "Admiral, wait, wait! Stop! Mr. Keros! It's me!" Blaine says.

The Admiral halts his assault just in time, more out of shock than out of mercy. His face is haunted as he looks at the Prince, as if he was his father's ghost. "Blaine?" the Admiral says.

Blaine steps forward. "Yes," he says. "It's me."

Keros shakes his head, blinks. "You're… alive," he says, his voice strangely flat.

He nods. "I am," he says. "Not for lack of effort on the part of some people, but… I'm alive."

"I… I don't believe it," the Admiral says, staring at him and swallowing. "It's a miracle."

Blaine smiles just a bit. "Something like that." He quickly grows sober again. "I… I need your help. Sue Sylvester is a usurper—she killed my father, and tried to have the same done to me. She sits on a stolen throne, and you're the only one left I can trust. We have to stop her."

"Yes…" the Admiral says somewhat blankly, staring off to the side.

"The only one… you can trust…"
Well, it had to happen sooner or later.

Ever since they arrived at the party, things have been getting crazier and crazier. They've managed to cover for or cover up everything they've been doing so far, but deep down, Kurt knew it was only a matter of time before something happened that there was no hiding. Something that would completely blow their cover, that even their best lies could not reasonably explain.

He sees it coming, to a degree where it almost seems to play out in slow motion. The naked man stops to look at Rachel. It just so happens that exactly five guards tackle him in perfect sequence, each one slamming into the flowerpot as they dive.

A slightly frantic Artie answers the call a little too enthusiastically. Another guard spots him as he pops out, and grabs him before he can retreat. He tries to bend himself back underground, but other guards join in and soon, the poor boy is hoisted from his roots, pulled in an almost graceful arc through the air, and slammed rather painfully onto the top of a table.

The commotion and impact are *just* loud enough in the silence caused by Rachel's outburst to draw every eye in the room. And as if that weren't enough, the *friggin' spotlight operator* decides to join in on the act by pointing the beam directly at Artie, who is lying wide-eyed at spear point on top of someone's dinner.

It had to happen sooner or later, and now that it has, there is just one thing to say.

"Oh, crap," Kurt says.

"Oh, Hills," Mercedes whispers.

"Oh, my," Rachel breathes.

"Oh, *shit,*" Finn curses.

"Oh, *balls,*" Artie says, raising his hands in the universally accepted gesture for 'please don't stab me.'

"Oh, *[forget it,]*" Lady Keros spits, stomping into the kitchen. "I quit."

Kurt only wishes he could join her.

"Are you okay, Mr. Keros?" Blaine asks. "You look kind of sick."

The Admiral sighs. "I'm fine. This is just… a lot to take in," he says calmly.

"It is kind of overwhelming," Blaine says with a nod. "I can… hardly believe it myself some days. We have a lot to talk about."

The Admiral nods, and turns away from Blaine. "Yes..." he says, moving over to the only door in the study. Away from the Prince's eyes, he sticks his head out for just a second, looking up and down the halls for any signs of further intruders. When he finds none, he looks down at the candlestick in his hands, staring at his reflection in the smooth, high-quality metalwork as if wondering how well it will hold together upon impact.

"Well... you can trust me," he says after a few seconds, turning around. The echo of the door as he closes it resounds throughout every inch of the silent, empty mansion, disturbing the immaculate stillness for just a second. And then, the echo fades, and the House of Keros is once again
unmoving and unmoved.

Like a tomb.

"Let's talk."

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: While the words are my own, the 'song' in this chapter was basically written to the tune of 'Melodies of Life' from Final Fantasy 9. No, I don't really know why.
The crowd circles around him, breathless in anticipation. They don't know who he is or what he is here for, and they don't care. He is an Interesting Thing. A subject of gossip and speculation. He's a beacon of excitement in their otherwise dull lives, and for the time being, they love him for that alone. Unfortunately, under the blinding spotlight, surrounded by armed guards, and (literally) without a leg to stand on, Artie, much like a small terrier in heat trapped in a room with a horny Rottweiler, knows it is just a matter of time before he is extravagantly, painfully screwed.

"Well, well, well," the Head Guard sneers. "Look what we have here!"

_Play it cool, Artie_, he tells himself. _Play it cool._

"What up, G?" he smiles.

"Don't sass me, filth!" the Head Guard growls, bringing his spear a little close for Artie's comfort.
"I'll turn you into a kebab and hand you over to the Chef."

"Okay, okay, relax, my brother," Artie says gently. "Let's all just chill. There's no need to resort to violence. Or cannibalism." He keeps his eyes open, always looking around for a way out or an opening to escape.

Not that he can go anywhere right now, but still. It's instinct.

"We'll be the ones to decide that," the HG says. He taps one of his subordinates on the shoulder, and gives him the spear. "Here, hold this." When the weapon is out of his hands, the guy promptly adopts a superior posture; hands behind the back, nose in the air, as he stalks in a circle around Artie. "You see, I knew something had to be amiss at this party. So many things going so wrong, so quickly… it could not possibly be coincidence! And lo and behold, I was right!"

Kurt and Mercedes manage to push their way through the crowds, standing at the perimeter of the circle and watching with cautious eyes. Rachel looks concerned onstage, and he can just barely make out the outline of Finn standing off to the side, wanting to do something, but not knowing what. Artie is gratified for friends who are ready and willing to interfere, and mortified that they might have to.

"It was you!" HG says, pointing his finger at Artie. The crowd sputters in shock, and Artie doesn't even bother to hide his eye rolls. These people don't even know what he's being accused of! "You are the one who poisoned the Governor! You are the one who drugged poor Rick!"

"I CAN SEE MY HOUSE FROM HERE!" Rick the Naked Guard calls from the ground.

"You are the one who planted the insect in an attempt to assassinate the Marquis!" the HG continues. "You are the one who has been… causing all of these fights and mishaps! The Councilor told us to expect a thief to show up and try to steal the artifact, and, ladies and gentlemen, we have found our thief!"

There is a collective gasp of shock and a loud cry of anger, and Artie is pretty sure this can only end in public execution. They're going to hang his ass from the nearest tree, if he even makes it that far with his head on his shoulders.

Granted, most of those, if not exactly his direct doing, were his ideas. Except for the bug. That was all Blaine. Good thinking, B-money! Artie thinks with a smile.

"You smile?" the red-faced Head shouts in a fit of moral outrage. "You are caught red-handed—a dirtbender, daring to bring his filth into the presence of the Fire Nation Elite—and you have the audacity to smile?"

Artie shrugs. "Don't worry, be happy?"

The crowd crescendos in offense. 'Not helping yourself, Artie!' he scolds himself.

"Well, I suppose I agree with you there," HG says, stroking his chin and staring down at him. "Life is indeed short. Especially for no-good, scum-of-the-earth robbers like you!"

And then, he reaches out and grabs Artie, pulling him close enough to get a good whiff of the guy's bad case of stank-breath.

"Have you nothing to say for yourself?" he roars, shaking the earthbender like a sack of potato-peas. "Have you no defense? Have you no shame? No remorse?"
"Well, now that you mention it—" Artie starts.

But HG is having none of Artie's mess. "You worthless speck of dust! Dishonorable rat-viper!" he says, upping the magnitude on the man-quake he is inducing.

Then, things really take a turn for the worse.

Kurt knows that trouble is coming the second the HG utters "Well, don't just lie there like a dog! Stand up and face your crimes!" He and the others can only watch and wince as the HG picks Artie up and tries to force him to do just that.

Repeatedly.

Let us follow Artie's expression through this series of unfortunate flops.

Flop 1. The fearful, wide-eyes and clenched jaw of Oh, crap.

"I said stand up!"

Flop 2. The heavenward gaze and longsuffering frown of Why me?

"Blast it, boy, I said stand!"

Flop 3. The raised eyebrows and tilted mouth of Really, dude?

"Do you have mud in your ears? Stand up!"

Flop 4. The half-lidded, rolling eyes and straight-set lips of Fuck my life.

"For the love of Agni, boy, I said—"

Finally—FINALLY—Mercedes manages to stop wincing long enough to collect some sense and put an end to the madness. "Stop that!" she shouts.

"Nah, keep it going," Artie deadpans from the floor. "Maybe the next one will stick."

Everyone turns to look at Mercedes in befuddlement. "It's perfectly clear that he cannot walk!" she says, as if it is the most obvious thing in the world (and really, after that display, who can blame her?).

"Is this true?" the HG says, looking down at Artie.

The thief casually props his head on its elbows. "Nope," he says flatly. "I enjoy being picked up and thrown around by smelly, sweaty rental soldiers."

"It's true, sir!" a guard says from behind Artie. "Look, I'm stepping on him right now, and he hasn't even noticed!"

Artie turns around to see the guard repeatedly dropping his boot on Artie's foot. "Hey!" he says, grabbing his leg and jerking it out of harm's way. "Not cool, dude. Just because I don't use them doesn't mean I don't want them!" He pats his leg sympathetically. "Poor little guys. It's okay, daddy still loves you."

The HG is struck speechless. "Could it be?"

The earthbender groans. "Not this again…"
The HG looks at him, astonished. "It is, isn't it?"

Artie rolls his eyes, propping his head on his hands. "Here it comes…"

The voice of the guard seems to quiver with anticipation. "It's really you! The legendary Earth Kingdom thief…"

Artie can only bury his head in his arms and plead. "Don't say it…"

HG's excitement finally overwhelms him, and he cries out to the entire room. "…the Brokeback Bandit!"

Shock and awe ripple through the room, the sound of people gasping and whispering amongst themselves augmented by the oddly consistent rhythm of Artie bashing his head against the floor.

"I. Hate. That. Name," he groans.

"By Agni, what an incredible stroke of fortune! The fifth highest bounty in Earth Kingdom history! And he's right in front of me!" the HG says, positively giddy over his shiny new human trophy. "Men, cuff him! Make sure he can't get away."

As the guards approach him with the metal shackles, Artie rolls himself over onto his back and sits up. "Hey, now," he says, ungloved hands ready to lash out and backhand any bitch dumb enough to pop his personal bubble. Metal shackles are a big no-no. Metal shackles make life much, much more difficult for earthbenders—metal is one of the few unbendable materials strong enough to keep earthbenders in check. Even if he comes within range of some earth, those cuffs will make lots of tricks considerably more difficult. He's ready and willing to employ his rock'em-sock'em pimp hand for as long as necessary to keep that particular bit of unattractive bling off his body.

Sadly, several very sharp weapons are in prime position to turn him into a filet-o-fool, discouraging him from any kind of violent reaction. A quick look around the crowd reveals Kurt looking at him and very, very subtly shaking his head. The message is clear. Don't fight them.

"Oh, drop the act," the HG sneers, looking down at him. "It's over. What are you gonna do, " he snickers, "kick my ass?"

Oh, we're going that route.

"I could do that," Artie says, holding up a finger. "Or—or… I could punch you in the face so hard, your skull would look like a fuzzy bowl of lumpy, pink potatoes."

This seems to throw the HG just a bit. "Oh yeah?" he says after quietly backing up a step. "And then what? You've got nowhere to go. Face it, kid, you're boned."

And there's the crux of it, really. Artie could fight. He could probably fight for a while. But separated from the earth and surrounded by this many people, there's just no escape for him, and he can't fight forever. Eventually, he would go down—and nothing about his bounty says he has to be alive when he's brought in (though it'd probably be hard to get him back to the Earth Kingdom before he starts getting all freaknasty and putrefied).

So... you know, extravagantly fucked. He raises his hands together. "Fine, you got me," he says as the guards shackle them. "It's true. I did all of the above and then some. I've been trying to sabotage the party so I could steal the artifact. And you… found me by complete accident! Give yourself a pat on the back." He figures the least he can do is take the fall so no one else is implicated. Plus,
given his rather… *impressive* escape record, they'll probably wind up sending a good chunk of the security detail with him to keep him on lockdown, making Kurt and the gang's jobs that much easier.

"I can't believe it," the HG says with delight, jumping up and down like he just got the bestest present ever. "I've hit the jackpot. I've caught the big one! I'm going to be rich!" he laughs. "Rich, rich, RICH!"

Kurt watches with gritted teeth as Artie seems to shrink right in front of him. This is the moment of truth. He can see perfectly well that Artie is willing to go quietly if it means keeping their cover intact. Now the only question is; what are they willing to do for him so he doesn't have to?

And will their cover survive?

"…she sent assassins after me, and now she's got everyone convinced that I'm some criminal in cahoots with the Avatar. That's why I need your help—you can vouch for me, and people will believe you. No one besides the people who worked at the Palace would even recognize me, and I wouldn't be surprised if Sue got to them already. The whole country is against me, and since I lost my firebending, I can't even—"

"You lost your firebending?" Keros asks. The conversation has the Admiral's complete attention, though not quite for the reasons Blaine expects. He watches, arms crossed, hands empty, as the young Prince sits in his study and spills his woes.

Blaine nods, a slight tinge of shame to his expression. "Ever since my father died."

"That… complicates things," the Admiral says, scratching his chin. "I've known your father longer than anyone else on the council… but even I would have difficulty convincing them to accept a Fire Prince who cannot firebend, let alone a Fire Lord."

"I'd get my bending back if I could, but I just… I don't know how," Blaine sighs.

"I wish I could help you, but alas, I, too, am without the gift of flame," the Admiral says. "I'm sorry, Blaine, but I just don't know if I can help you."

"But… we can't just sit around and do nothing!" Blaine says. "I can't just wait for my bending to come back while Sue executes her… her… evil plans or whatever—"

"Plans?" the Admiral says sharply. "What plans?"

A scrunched look falls across Blaine's face as he attempts to remember. "Operation… Health and something."

Keros raises his eyebrows at Blaine. "You've… you've read my correspondence," he says quietly.

The Prince smiles sheepishly, and nods. "Sorry. I tend to get into places—and things—that I really shouldn't. It's kind of a habit of mine."

"Yes," the Admiral says quietly. "You really should be more careful. Sometimes knowledge can be just as dangerous as any material weapon…"

"Noted," Blaine nods. "So… what should I do?"

A few seconds pass as Keros appears deep in thought. His bloodshot eyes stare unblinking at the
ground, his hand cupped around his chin. "For now," he says after a moment. "I think you should
remain in hiding. Just until you recover your 'spark' as it were."

"But what are we going to do about Sue?" Blaine asks. "We can't just let her keep ruling the
country. She's going to do something awful, I just—"

"Well," the Admiral says. "There is one thing… something that you and your friends could do to
slow her down. I would like to discuss it with them in person, if possible."

"Really?" Blaine asks, his eyes lighting up.

"Really," the Admiral nods. "The matter is urgent, so I would advise you to go get them right this
second. Besides…" he smiles. "It would be an honor to meet the ones who saved the son of my
oldest friend. Especially the Avatar."

The tiniest, most wistful smile graces Blaine's face. "The Avatar is… truly amazing. It has been my
honor to help him in what few ways I can."

"Perhaps I shall be similarly honored," Keros says, with a small smile of his own. "Now, go. Get
your friends. They shall be… my honored guests, for however long they are here."

"Yes, sir!" Blaine says, rising from his seat and bowing to the Admiral.

The Admiral nods and moves deeper into the room as Blaine exits. But just as he reaches the door,
he stops and addresses Keros once more.

"Thank you, for helping me," Blaine says sincerely.

Keros only looks slightly annoyed as he turns to Blaine and smiles. "Think nothing of it."

"I can't tell you how glad I am that my friends were wrong about you," the Prince continues.

This piques the Admiral's interest. "Oh?" he asks. "What were they wrong about?"

"They thought you betrayed my father, helped Sue seize the throne," he says casually. "And that
she'd given you a Sun Warrior artifact as payment."

It is a good thing for the Admiral that the Prince cannot see how deeply his fingernails begin to dig
into his palm when that accusation is made. "They think that?" he asks, tilting his head.

"Ridiculous, right?" Blaine asks, smiling at him in perfect innocence, before uttering words that
could spell his undoing.

"Incidentally… where did you get your newest piece?"

The Admiral answers him after a moment, in a slightly terse manner. "It was… a gift," he says,
"from the New Fire Lord. A 'condolence' present, which I suppose is a more polite way of saying
'bribe.'"

"Ah," Blaine says, looking at him oddly. "And you took it?"

"Knowledge is knowledge," Keros says, shrugging him off. "This sort of thing must be kept safe,
regardless of its source. I am obligated to be this artifact's keeper, even if I abhor it. That's why I
keep it locked away."

This answer seems to satisfy the Prince. "Alright," he says. "Just wondering."
He leaves.

Keros immediately bolts to his desk, scrambling to write on a piece of parchment. He shoves open his desk drawer, finds a specially marked scroll canister, and pops the note inside. In a flurry of motion, he uncovers his hawk's cage, inserts the message into its holder, ties it with a top-priority black ribbon, and releases the bird through a small, reinforced window.

Having satisfactorily covered his bases, he grabs the long candlestick, gripping it tightly and sticking his head out into the hallway.

"Blaine!" he calls to the back of the retreating Prince.

"Yes, sir?" Blaine replies.

"Come back for a second," he calls. "There's something I forgot to tell you."

When he hears the footsteps coming back towards the room, he slinks back inside, taking up his position behind the door.

He needs to get this right. The first strike's failure taught him a valuable lesson; the brat is fast. He can't make the same mistake again.

"Yes?" Blaine says, lightly stepping through the door. "Admiral? What is it?"

He waits until Blaine is in the perfect position… and then he strikes.

The brat is fast.

This time, he's not quite fast enough.

"...I am so luck-y, I am so awe-some, la la la-la la!" the HG sings, dancing and prancing and generally acting a fool. He steps close enough for Artie to briefly consider lashing out and tripping him with his cuffs—shutting him up would almost be worth the price of a little police brutality.

"I am so RI-ICH!" he sings, spreading his arms wide.

"No," a forceful voice interjects. "I am so rich!"

The crowd gasps in shock as Kurt steps into the circle, head held high, posture picture perfect. The Avatar smiles coyly. "Well, richer than before, I should say."

"What?" the HG sputters, outraged. "You can't possibly claim this bounty! I'm the one who caught him!"

"Ah," Kurt says. "But I am the one who tracked him here!"

Another gasp! If these people take in too much more air, Artie's fairly sure they're all gonna float away.

"Indeed," the Avatar continues, stalking around Artie in a circle the way the HG did. "My true reason for leaving my private island paradise and coming to the mainland was nothing less than to track down this insidious sneak-fink, who stole the priceless… err… Ganterson Family Jeweled Cookware from my estate!"

The crowd bubbles with resentment and righteous fury on Kurt's behalf. "Yes, you little greedy-
fingered monkeybird, I have pursued you all the way here! I lured you into this clever trap, knowing you could not resist the bait of a valuable Sun Warrior Artifact. Little did you know… it is a fake!"

A cry of complete surprise leaps up from the audience. Out of the corner of his eye, Artie sees a couple of women (and one dude) faint into the arms of their spouses and begin fanning themselves.

"I have fooled, outwitted, and humiliated you!" Kurt says loudly. "And now, I shall turn you in and retrieve your bounty, and my vengeance shall be complete. AH-HA-HA-HA-HAAA!" he laughs diabolically.

"Hey, now!" the HG says. "That's not fair! I'm the one what actually pulled him out! I deserve this bounty way more than you!"

He draws his weapon, and aims it at Kurt, who seems more than a little surprised at this sudden turn of events.

"Back me up, men, and I'll split the bounty with you, 50-50!" the HG orders.

"But, sir, there's more than two of us," a guard points out.

"Well, duh! I'm the leader here—I get fifty percent, and you guys split the rest amongst yourselves," the HG replies simply. He shrugs. "Hey, it's better than nothing!"

The other guards shrug and start for their weapons.

And then Mercedes steps in. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that," she drawls lazily, stepping into the circle with the casual poise of a true predator. "Things might get messy, and I wouldn't want anything to happen… to my bounty!"

The crowd begins to murmur in confusion.

An exquisitely overdramatic gasp erupts from Kurt. "Desiree! You would betray me?"

"I was never on your side, darling," she says casually, waving him off. "Because the truth is… I am an agent of the Earth Kingdom!"

The appalling and offense generated by that statement explodes from the crowd in a roar of protest that reaches straight to the ceiling. So loud is the noise that it actually draws attention from those outside. Slowly but surely, some familiar faces begin to filter back into the room…

Kurt looks wounded. "You… you lied to me!" he says melodramatically. "Filthy spy! Traitorous harlot! You played my heart like a beating drum!"

"Indeed," Mercedes says. "I knew the Bandit was after the Ganterson Family Cookware, so I infiltrated your household and grew close to you! I knew I could find the bandit for myself if I simply stayed around long enough. Like the wise snapping bearturtle, I waited patiently until my prey exposed itself, and now, I shall sink my teeth in and claim the prize for myself! HAAAAAA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HAAA!" she cackles wickedly. Her evil laugh is pretty impressive.

"Hey!" the HG says. "I'll stick you too, Missy! I ain't afraid of no dirtbenders!"

"Well, maybe you should be afraid of me!" another familiar voice shouts. This is where it starts to get a little ridiculous.
Lady Keros stands just outside the kitchen doors, her hair an insane mess and her clothes extremely disheveled. Beside her, looking slightly awed and slightly flushed, stands Chef Flambé, with clothes similarly ruffled and… *ahem* fly undone. The Lady speaks again.

"All this crazy bullshit has been horrible for my skin!" she slurs, still more than a little drunk. "I've been bouncing around like crazy trying to get this party in order, sacrificing Agni-only-knows how many years off my life! My wrinkle ratio has doubled in the past few hours! This little shit," she says, jamming her finger towards Artie, "owes me a new face, and he's gonna pay for it!"

More gasps and sputters of outrage, but now, Artie is starting to notice the crowd seems less unified than before.

"Besides," the Lady says. "All this shit went down on my property, so it's mine anyway. All you people are trespassers!" she slurs, waving her finger at the crowd. "Party's over! Get out!"

The audience balks at her.

"I'm afraid you're wrong, sweet cheeks," Chef Flambé says, stepping in front of her. "If anybody is collecting on this little twerp, it's me! I have been insulted, accosted, assaulted, and humiliated throughout the course of this evening, and I demand satisfaction! You," he says, pointing at Artie, "are going to finance my next restaurant, big boy!"

The crowd has all sorts of reactions to this, and Artie can't help but smile at his friends' excellent troll tactics. The audience is splitting, their loyalties divided, no one quite knowing who to cheer for. There is a hero, an antihero, a villainess, and a couple of wronged bystanders, and the ins, outs, and plot twists are getting hard to keep track of.

Rachel, never one to miss a monologue, throws in her two cents. "No! This good fortune should be mine!" A look of great sorrow falls across her face as she spills forth her angst. "For all my life I have struggled to belong, struggled to claw my way up from the depths of despair and claim my moment in the sun! I have wanted only to bring the joy of true art to all who beheld my performances, and my painful life path has taught me many harsh lessons. Here, finally, destiny has deposited a boon to my fortune, a beam of sunlight in the endlessly stormy skies of my bleak existence! Should he not be mine? Can I receive no reprieve from my sorrow?"

'Semi-sympathetic' is the best Artie can come up with to describe the crowd's general response.

It's Finn, strangely enough, who really breaks the ice.

"NO!" he shouts, stepping out onto the stage. "I will be the one who claims this bounty!"

The crowd cries out and turns to look at him. If he had any crazy story ideas, they seem to fly out of his head under the combined attention of the crowd, and he shrugs. "Hey, I just want the money!" he says.

It is a moment of unintentional genius. Because once Finn goes there, everyone wants to follow.

"I could buy my own theater!" the sharp-featured stage manager cries out.

"I could by all the beauty products I could ever need!" shouts the rather battle-worn Duchess, having wandered back in with the rest of the detainees.

"Oh, shut up, dear, you look beautiful!" says the chrome-domed Countess from right next to her. The Duchess is oddly touched by this gesture, putting a hand to her chest. "…why, thank you,
"Countess!" she says sincerely.

"It's no problem, dearie," the Countess says gently. "Besides, I'm the one who needs beautification. Can you imagine the wigs I could buy? I could have one for every day of the year!"

And soon, everyone has joined the party.

"I could finance my own Kuai Ball team!" says the Duke.

"I could finance my own Kuai Ball team that would be way better than yours!" says the Chancellor.

"I could never have to work again!" says the sad tea-boy.

"We could do whatever we wanted!" says the Angry Couple.

"Indeed," Mr. Prim concurs.

"THE PUPPIES ARE STABBING EACH OTHER!" Rick the Naked Guard cries. "CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?"

"Now see here—" Lady Keros sputters.

"You can't just—" the HG says despairingly.

"Satisfaction!" Flambé roars.

Kurt and Mercedes look at each other, silently communicating their plan.

And then it happens.

The Avatar walks up to Mercedes and throws wine in her face. Mercedes sputters and delivers a shockingly convincing slap to Kurt, who spins around dramatically. He hurls a fireball that goes wide and high, exploding against a wall and drawing everyone's attention. As they are distracted, Kurt demonstrates his mastery of waterbending, spinning around and seizing control of every wine glass in the room. He puts his hands together, thrusts them as if parting the crowd, and forcefully splits them apart, causing a bidirectional wave of wine to splash out upon the partygoers.

The dripping wet patrons stare at each other in shock and betrayal, each believing their neighbor has assaulted them.

And thus, the party reaches its natural conclusion.

Feet are stomped on. Head meets swung purse. Faces are slapped, shins are kicked, hair is pulled, and for the final (and most spectacular) time that evening…

It. Is. On.

This time, the brat isn't quite fast enough.

Fortunately for him, neither is Keros.

The Admiral swings the candlestick with enough force to crack Blaine's skull, but the Prince's natural reflexes turn what could've been a killing blow into a painful glance off the back of his head. Blaine stumbles forward with a yelp, clutching at the back of his head, momentarily stunned.
Keros tries to finish him quickly, but again, Blaine outpaces him. As Keros steps forth and raises his weapon for the final blow, Blaine launches into him shoulder-first and slams him painfully into his desk. The Admiral just barely manages to throw the Prince off.

The look of betrayal in Blaine's eyes as he stumbles against a shelf is almost enough to make the Admiral regret what he has done, and what he must do.

Almost.

"You..." Blaine breathes, shaking his head. "You... son of a bitch!" he shouts, switching quickly from sadness to anger. "It's all true, isn't it? You allied with Sue. You betrayed my father!"

"If you must call it that," Keros says quietly, brandishing his makeshift weapon, "then yes, I suppose I did."

"Why?" Blaine asks.

"Because your father was a danger to himself and his people!" Keros replies, quiet but forceful. "Ending the quarantine would have been disastrous. Thousands of lives could have been lost!"

"And you couldn't just tell him that?" Blaine asks.

"I tried. For weeks before that fateful Council meeting, we sent letters to each other concerning his plans. There was no convincing him. He was already set on his course—the meeting was only a matter of formality," the Admiral spits.

"That's not true!" Blaine says. "My father was perfectly reasonable. He would've listened to you if you'd had any valid points."

At this, Keros just starts laughing. "Oh, my boy. My dear, sweet little Blaine. You really didn't know the man at all, did you?"

The Prince stands a little taller. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The smile on the Admiral's face sends chills up and down Blaine's spine. "I've known your father longer than you've been alive, boy. He was not always the broken, listless shell of a man that you knew. He lost himself long ago—truth be told, your father was the first to betray. He betrayed himself, his legacy, and his Nation. And the results are before me now. Weak, sniveling, pathetic little Blaine, trusting big strong Uncle Keros to make everything better."

The Prince shakes his head as tears stream down his face. "Shut up," he whispers.

"Am I wrong?" Keros laughs mockingly. "You were about to lead your friends to the slaughter, you know. You would've brought them right to me, I would've welcomed them, given them my finest guest rooms, and then, when the night came, I would have killed each and every one of them in their sleep."

"Shut up!" Blaine seethes, clenching his eyes shut.

"But then you told me that they suspected me—that they actually had some sense. And I realized it was simply too risky to allow you to leave here. Your caretakers might have carted you off again, and we simply can't have that. You are a loose end—one final, miserable ember of a dying flame that must be snuffed."

The Prince clutches at the bookshelf for support. "Shut up," he whispers.
"Not that your friends are any safer, mind you. They are, in fact, all going to die, just as soon as—"

In a flash, Blaine's hand on the bookshelf finds a book and hurls it at Keros mid-speech. The Admiral leans to the side, dodging it by a hair's breadth, and looking back just in time to see Blaine grab another book, hurling it at the glass display case.

The Admiral sees what is coming and races to stop it, but as ever, the Prince is one jump ahead: Blaine leaps to the case and in a single swift movement, withdraws the curved Sun Warrior shortsword and brandishes it at Keros.

"Shut up," he says, his voice low, his expression a picture of calm fury.

Keros can only chuckle at him. "Really, boy?" he says. "You have no training in swordsmanship. And you are without your precious bending. Do you think you can outfight an Admiral?"

"I'll tell you what I think," Blaine says, raising the sword. His voice is still thick with emotion, but his words are clear and precise. "I think you're no warrior at all. I think you're a coward who betrayed his friends and his country because he was afraid. And yes," he adds. "I think I can outfight you."

"Well, why don't we put you to the test then?" Keros says, altering his grip on the candlestick and wielding it as he would a sword. "Come then, little Prince. Show me how brave you are."

'Clusterfuck' is pretty much the perfect word to describe what's happening in the ballroom at the moment.

Everyone is fighting everyone. The room has erupted into an all-out brawl, and poor Artie is nowhere to be seen. Kurt is honestly afraid he's going to get trampled to death, and immediately sets out towards the spot where he was last seen, using his firebending to warn anyone in his way to get out of said way as quickly as possible.

When he reaches the spot, all he finds are the guards brandishing weapons at the crowds. "Stay back!" the HG warns. "We will strike in self-defense!"

"Where is he?" another guard asks.

"Find him!" a third shouts.

"Yes," Kurt says. "Please do. I would like to leave with him as soon as possible."

The HG glares at him. "You! Now listen here," he says, walking towards Kurt with a spear pointed at all the wrong places.

He most certainly does not listen. Instead, he dashes forward, grabs the spear, high-kicks the HG in the face and wrenches the weapon from his grasp. As a final insult, he smacks him in the face again with the spear's handle, knocking him out. Kurt then turns the spear around and aims it at the other guards. "Would anyone else like to challenge my authority?"

They shake their heads.

"Good!" Kurt says. "As a Councilor of the Fire Nation, I hereby dismiss you. Leave this place at once!"

He doesn't need to tell them twice.
Mercedes, on the other hand, finds herself accosted by a group of women who, on top of their anger at her being an 'Earth Kingdom spy,' also seem to be under the impression that she was flirting with their husbands. All of them. "Hussy!" "Mud-monkey!" "Whore!" "Spy!" they shout, lashing out at her with surprisingly painful slaps and sharp-heeled kicks. She tries to give them a chance to get out their anger and move on—she doesn't like to unleash her wild side unless the people in question really deserve it.

Then one of the bitches lands a solid right hook to her jaw.

"Oh, Hills no," Mercedes growls. "Lady, you have just crossed the line. Taste my fist!"

And then Mercedes steps forward and unleashes a vicious counterpunch that turns Little Miss Whack-a-face into a human cannonball, blasting her into one of her allies and flattening the pair of them. Another one tries to whack Mercedes with her purse, but Mercedes catches it with one hand and pushes the lady to the ground with the other. Stepping aside for a moment, she reaches into one of the potted plants, gathering a sizeable chunk of dirt on her hands, concentrating it into rocks and dropping it into the purse.

"Earth Kingdom filth! The Fire Nation will not stand for your kind!" a man roars, charging at her.

Mercedes's new purse sends him back the way he came at about twice the speed. She spins her makeshift flail around. "Who else wants some?" she challenges.

This time, nobody answers.

"Thought so," she smirks, and starts smashing a path through the crowd to look for her friend.

Finn is frantic on stage. "Oh crap, oh crap," he says. "Rachel… I… you… I have to… Artie's out there somewhere, and I have no idea where. He could be hurt."

"Go," Rachel says gently. "Find him!"

"But… will you be okay?" he asks.

"I'll just… stay up here," Rachel says, looking at the roiling ocean of human chaos no small amount of trepidation. "I'm really not a fan of violence."

"Okay," Finn says, nodding to her. "Be careful."

With that, the giant takes a few steps back, runs forward and belly-flops into the crowd, taking out quite a few people on his way down. "Artie!" he shouts, standing up and trying to just muscle his way through the crowds. People smack into him from various angles with various things, but if there is one thing Finn Hudson can do better than anyone else in the gang, it's take a beating. He keeps right on charging, using his height and extra mass to bulldoze anyone who blocks him.

"Artie!" he shouts.

Meanwhile, Rachel remains on stage, looking a little frantic. She sees someone attempting to climb up beside her, and finds herself running over and kicking at him until he falls back into the crowd.

"No, no!" she says. "This is my stage. This is my safe place. My happy place. You are not allowed!" she says angrily.

It is at this point that she notices that Brad the Piano Player has started plinking out a rather lively and frantic fight song. "You are not helping!" she yells at him.

Brad shrugs, and keeps right on playing.
And the fight keeps right on going.

Their weapons clash again, and Keros trips Blaine, sending him stumbling forward.

"Pathetic," he taunts.

Blaine brandishes the sword again. "I'm just getting warmed up," he says, his eyes fixed on the Admiral. He dashes forward again, going for a diagonal slice which Keros parries with relative ease.

"You can't win, boy," Keros says casually. "Firebending and swordplay are a far cry from one another. You have no idea what you're doing."

"I'm a fast learner," Blaine says cryptically as he continues to stare at the Admiral in a way that feels just slightly unsettling.

Then, something unexpected happens.

The Prince changes his stance.

"What are you—" Keros starts, interrupted by several surprisingly quick slices from the Prince. All of which he manages to either parry or dodge, of course, but they still manage to catch him somewhat off guard. The Admiral recognizes that stance. It's a mirror of his own. "Were you holding back?" he says, stricken.

Blaine shakes his head and smiles. "No," he says. "I told you. I'm a fast learner. I've just been watching how you do it."

"Please," the Admiral says. "You can't have learned my technique just by watching me."

The Prince smirks at him. "How do you think I learned firebending so fast? Or did you not know? My dad once told me I picked up bending faster than anyone he'd ever seen. I figure swordplay can't be too much harder."

"You're bluffing," Keros says.

But Blaine proceeds to prove otherwise. They fight for just a few seconds more, and every time Blaine moves, the Admiral sees an improvement in his form. It's the strangest thing he's ever seen. The boy is like some kind of twisted prodigy!

This calls for a change in tactics. "Enough!" Keros says. "I'm through playing around."

Blaine tries to strike again, but this time, the Admiral holds nothing back. He sidesteps the blow and swings the candlestick upwards with perfect timing. One moment, Blaine has a sword. The next, his sword is stuck in the ceiling, and he is sucking painfully on one of his fingers.

"Oh, dear," Keros says. "Does little Blaine have a boo-boo?"

The Prince looks around for another weapon, feeling trapped.

"Face it, boy," the Admiral says. "It's over."

The boy looks uncertain for just a second… and then he gets into a firebending stance.

"What are you doing now?" Keros says, rolling his eyes. "You just told me—you have no flame!"
Firebending won't do you any good."

"Firebending is a martial art," Blaine says. "With or without fire."

And now, the Admiral has had enough. "That's it. This nonsense stops now. Die!"

He approaches Blaine, intending to hit him low to stun him, and finish him off with another blow to the head. That's not what happens. Instead, as he approaches Blaine and swings, the brat feints into a dodge and then springs into a forward kick, knocking him backwards. Before the Admiral can recover, Blaine is on him in mad flurry of precise punches. Keros tries a wild swing of the candlestick to knock him away, but the Prince catches his weapon. With an ironclad grip and a powerful kick, he wrenches the bludgeon from the Admiral's grasp and knocks him against the back wall of the room.

When Keros recovers, Blaine stands with the candlestick, looking triumphant. It's such a rich picture that he can't help but laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" the Prince asks, baffled.

"Poor, naïve little boy," Keros says. "Do you know what got me promoted to Admiral?"

"Friends in high places?" Blaine snipes.

"Strategy," Keros replies blithely.

The Prince's head tilts at this.

"Think about it," Keros says calmly. "Go on. I'll wait."

That second statement is what finally clues him in. "…this whole fight," he says quietly. "You've just be stalling, haven't you?"

A slow clap is Keros's response to that question. He saunters over the glass case. "Well done! He finally gets it."

Blaine brandishes the candlestick at him.

"I wouldn't," Keros says. "You see, before this little dust-up even started, I sent a messenger hawk to the City Guard. I'm guessing every soldier in the Sho Fa is on his way here at this very moment, if they aren't here already. You lost the battle before it even started."

The Prince is visibly shaken by the news. "You're lying," he says.

"I've no need to lie to you anymore, Blaine. I told you—this battle was over before it began. There is no victory for you. But…" Keros says, holding up a finger. "If you make this easy, and surrender, I'll make sure your friends are merely imprisoned, as opposed to executed on sight."

Blaine's conflicted eyes flicker back and forth as he tries to think.

"Tick tock, my boy," Keros says. "The cavalry is on the way. You'll likely want me to change my orders before they arrive. So what will it be?"

The Prince looks at Keros with all the hate he can muster for several long moments… and then, he sighs, closing his eyes and looking down as he drops the candlestick. "Fine," he says. "You win."

The Admiral grins in triumph, wrapping his hand around a jagged piece of glass behind his back.
Blaine isn't the only one who can learn from other people's tricks. "There, there," Keros says calmly as he moves towards Blaine. "Chin up, dear boy. You made the right decision..." He smirks. "I'll make this quick."

He pulls out his glass dagger and slices it at the Prince.

And then he sees that the brat is also smirking.

Blaine leans backwards, dodging the Admiral's slice at his throat by such a narrow margin that it's practically a shave. The force and speed of the swing make it impossible to recover before Blaine counterattacks. The boy plants a foot into Keros's stomach, and runs up his body, jumping off of his shoulders and kicking him to the ground in the process.

Before he can even think of standing back up, Blaine stands over him, holding the Sun Warrior sword at his throat. It appears that little stunt was arranged so he could retrieve it from the ceiling. Clever little boy... he thinks.

"Open the vault," Blaine commands, and suddenly, Keros's brief moment of grudging admiration goes up in a puff of fear.

"You wouldn't—"

The sword brushes against his neck, and the cold metal feels like a promise. "Open the vault," the Prince seethes. "Now."

Kurt does his best to blaze a path through the crowd without actually incinerating anyone. The people, past a certain point, become shockingly unresponsive to fire licking at their heels, far too busy slapping and kicking at each other to worry about much else at the moment. They claw at each other's faces, they snatch cufflinks and jewelry and run off with them, and the Avatar swears it's almost like venting—like they've wanted to attack each other for years, but never had a good excuse.

"Artie!" Kurt shouts. "Artie, where are you?" He's perilously close to being past the point of caring whether or not he keeps his cover. He hasn't seen the little sneak-thief since this ridiculous melee started, and 'worried' is beginning to sound like an understatement.

"...here!" he hears a voice shout from nearby, and stops dead in his tracks.

"Artie?" Kurt shouts again. "Is that you?"

"I'm down here!" the voice says again. Kurt can't seem to figure out where it's coming from. He wanders around looking at the ground, trying to find a hole or something that Artie might have crawled into.

"Where? I don't see you," Kurt says, stopping next to a table.

Something pokes at his leg.

He kneels down and lifts up the tablecloth, and has to physically put his hand on his mouth to keep from laughing at what he sees.

"Help," Artie deadpans, looking traumatized and more than a little squicked in the warm, loving arms of Rick the Naked Guard.
"There, there, little buddy," Rick says, running fingers through Artie's hair and increasing his horror ten-fold. "It's alright. You're safe with me. Big papa'll take good care of you."

The boy's eyes beg for Kurt's assistance. "Please help," he says flatly.

The Avatar crams his cackles back down his throat and decides to help his friend. "Umm, excuse me, sir," Kurt says to Rick.

Rick, unfortunately, seems to recognize Kurt, and clutches Artie even tighter, prompting a round of light flailing from the unfortunate earthbender. "Hey, I know you!" Rick says. "You're trying to steal my little buddy. You want to feed him to the golden lion-turtle and make it poop money!"

Kurt decides to take the gentle route in reasoning with the fellow. "No, I'm not," he says calmly. "That was just a story I told so people wouldn't take him away from me. We're actually really good friends—I want to help him escape!"

"Liar!" Rick says. "Liar, liar, horn's on fire!"

"What?" Kurt says.

"Your horn," he says, pointing to Kurt's forehead. "It's on fire. Might want a Unicorn Doctor to check that for ya."

"Ah," Kurt says, shrugging that off. "Well, I'm not lying. Really, ask Artie."

Rick stops squeezing Artie to death and holds him up. "Is he telling the truth?" he asks.

Artie nods emphatically. "We're super-tight," he says, holding up his hands and crossing his fingers. "Like this."

"Well..." Rick says, sounding miserable. "Okay, I guess he can go with you. Just... be careful with him. He needs lots of love."

"Oh, I know," Kurt says. "Thanks for taking such good care of him for me."

Rick nods, and gives Artie a final farewell squeeze. "Goodbye little buddy!" he says. "I'll miss you."

"Don't worry," Artie says in slightly higher register than usual. "I'm sure we'll meet again in my nightmares."

With that, the thief is handed over to Kurt, who isn't quite sure how to carry him. He settles on cradling him.

"Kurt! My buddy, my pal," Artie sighs, doing the best he can with shackled hands to wrap himself around his friend. "Have I ever told you that you are the best person ever?"

"No, but now would be a lovely time to start," Kurt says, rising up. "Are you alright?"

"In a physical sense? Yes," Artie replies.

"What do you say we get Blaine and get out of here?" the Avatar asks.

"Short, simple, to the point," Artie replies. "I like your style!"

With that, the Avatar proceeds to carry his friend through the crowds towards the exit. "Well,"
Kurt says. "This was an interesting social experiment. Going through all that trouble with disguises and espionage and sabotage when really, all we needed to do was throw you in the middle of the room and tell everyone how expensive you are."

Artie squints and tilts his head in thought, slowly starting to grin. "...holy crap. You're right. I'm the most valuable thing here," he laughs. "I don't wear bling. I am bling."

The Avatar doesn't get a chance to reply to that outlandish assertion, as he is suddenly blindsided by Chef Flambé, who shoulder-checks him, snatches Artie, tucks him under his arm and runs in the other direction.

"What is this, Artieball?" the earthbender asks, looking at his newest carrier. "I call a foul! Penalty shot!"

"Victory is mine!" the Chef shouts. "I'm going to use you to finance a worldwide franchise, big boy! All over the Four Nations, people will be able to eat my food and pay homage to my delicious cooking. Everywhere you look, people will be saying—"

"KIIIIIAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIII!"

A mighty martial scream precedes a surprise attack on the Chef as a full wine bottle shatters over his head. Artie spills onto the floor, and Lady Keros steps over the knocked out Cordon Flambé, licking the spilt alcohol off of her fingers as she pins him down with predatory eyes.

"Whoa!" Artie says, raising his hands. "Uhhh... don't get me wrong, now, I'm sure you are a fine-ass specimen of someone in your age bracket, but I'm just not into cougars..."

She grabs him and hoists him up on her shoulder. "Oh, don't worry. I'm not gonna do anything to you," she says. "I'm just getting all hot and bothered at the thought of all that money. You are going to pay for my divorce lawyer!" she grins. "And once I've taken my husband for every last copper piece, I'll buy a private island and sleep naked every night in a giant bathtub full of money."

"Okay, one; that sounds hilla uncomfortable. And two; you crazy!" Artie says simply.

"Crazy like a cheetah fox!" she says.

And then Mercedes sacks her for a 15 yard loss, catching Artie before he can even hit the ground. "Lion Lady 1, Cheetah Fox, 0," she says, before turning into a human wrecking ball and dashing through the crowds.

"Mercedes, have I ever told you that you are the best person ever?" Artie sighs happily as she carries him to safety.

"Maybe once or twice," she says, pleased. "I could always stand to hear it more often."

He's preparing to shower her with praises when he feels this strange tug from above. Suddenly, he is lifted off of Mercedes's shoulders, and flying through the freaking air. It isn't until he looks up that he sees the firebenders on the catwalk, using a rope and harness to dangle the sharp-featured stage manager down to just above crowd level so he can fish Artie out and reel him in.

"Well, well," the sharp-featured man says as they dangle together. "What have we here?"

"A crazy-ass old man on a rope?" Artie guesses.

"Wrong!" Mr. Pointy says. "What we have here is the rebirth of classical theater in Sho Fa! I will
found a school with the money from your bounty. A school where we can study and create true theater! Theater that is... organic! Passionate! Raw! Unfettered! Unsimulated!"

"So... a porn school?" Artie guesses again.

Mr. Pointy glares at him, appalled.

The earthbender shrugs. "I'm just working with the clues you're giving me."

As they speak, Artie and his current captor swing just over the heads of the clamoring crowds. Several hands reach up to try and grab the prize for themselves, but they just don't quite have the height or the reach for it.

Fortunately, there is one person in the crowd who is, literally, head-and-shoulders above the rest in those aspects.

"Gotcha!"

Artie feels a tug on the back of his robe. "Oh, great. And who is the next contestant in this exciting game of Pass the Bandit?"

Another tug, and Artie is dangling upside down and face-to-face with...

"Finn!" the earthbender grins. "My homeboy! What up?"

"Uhhh, you, I think," Finn replies, trying to pull Artie out of the surprisingly firm grip of Mr. Pointy, who still has him by the waist. Artie reaches out so Finn can grab his arms, and the two of them join together in a concerted effort to pry him from Point Man's bony clutches.

"Mr. Hudson!" the sharp-featured man says as Artie slips a little from his grasp, forcing him to grab him by his unfeeling legs. "I am... shocked at you!" he grunts. "I thought you were a true patron of the arts! Would you really betray the theater so readily?"

Finn looks up at the old man as he continues to pull. "Sorry, dude," he grunts. "But I'm not really the star. I'm just the undercarriage!"

This throws the man for a loop. "What?"

And provides Finn and Artie with the perfect moment to combine their efforts and wrench the boy free of his flying captor. Artie falls onto Finn, who just barely stays standing, while Mister Pointy goes flying off in the other direction, swinging right smack into a wall and knocking himself out.

"Finn!" Artie smiles. "Have I ever told you that you are the best person ever?"

"Dude," Finn smiles back at him. "You really think so?"

"At the moment? Hills yes!" Artie nods, looping his shackled hands over Finn's head, as Finn kicks away a few grabby patrons and pulls Artie's legs around his waist.

"Thanks, man," Finn says, charging through the crowds. "Hey... dude. We're pretty much in the perfect position. Think it's time to pull out all the stops, and...?"

"Not yet," Artie answers, looking around the room. "I've got a better idea. There's a flowerpot right over there. Plant me in it."

"Why?" Finn asks.
"Just trust me," Artie says, pulling himself up.

With a nod, Finn redoubles his efforts to mow down anyone in front of him in an effort to escape the grabby hands from behind. He is mere feet from the flowerpot when the old Hudson clogs do their typical thing and slip on a plate of turducken pasta that fell on the floor. Finn pitches forward, he realizes what's happening just in time to gather his sense and... well, grab his best friend and hurl him with all his might.

"What the f—" is all Artie manages to get out before sailing over the flowerpot, slamming into the wall and landing in the space between them. Finn is dogpiled by the collective crowd of crazies, who don't quite seem to realize that he no longer has the ball—err, bandit.

In the perfect position, Artie takes a second to shake off the impact and slams both of his fists into the flowerpot, using his bending to shatter the clay and spill the dirt. Pulling himself onto the pile, he pauses for a second to consider whether or not he should help Finn before he goes.

From beneath the dogpile, Finn gives him the thumbs up sign.

Well, that takes care of that. Artie returns his thumbs up, and commences to burrowing.

He's on terra firma now, and he's ready to dish out some payback.

Blaine remains cool and steady, holding the sword level as Keros works the vault door, spinning the massive combination lock back and forth.

"Tick tock," Blaine says, only slightly mocking. "If the door isn't open by the time the guards get here, I'll just have to cut my losses."

The same cannot be said for Keros.

"Don't hold it so close!" the Admiral says testily. "I can't concentrate with a sword right next to my neck."

"Ignore it," Blaine says flatly. "As long as you do your job, it won't hurt you."

Keros pauses his twisting for a second. "You can't kill me," he growls. "You can't. If I die, you don't get what you want."

"Oh, I get what I want either way," Blaine assures him. "At this point, cutting your traitorous head off would be a more-than-worthy consolation prize."

His confident façade isn't particularly sturdy, and Keros once again finds himself miserably twisting the vault's locks in fear of the boy.

"You have no idea…" the Admiral says as he works, breaking out into a sweat. "No idea why I did what I did."

"Frankly, I don't think I care," Blaine says, casual as you please.

"The plague…" Keros says, breathing heavily. "Do you know what it does? What it really does?"

The Prince says nothing.

"It… takes people," the Admiral whispers, like the disease itself could be listening to him.
"What?" Blaine asks.

"It takes them. People fall ill with it, then they fall unconscious, and then... they leave," Keros says, pausing to look back at Blaine. "Just... get up and walk away. No one knows where they end up, or why. At some point, they just seem to vanish."

The Prince keeps his mind focused, gently using the sword to turn Keros's head back to the lock. "Focus," he says.

The Admiral's hands begin to work again. "Your father... was going to expose the Fire Nation to that threat!" he says, nigh-frantic. "Entire Earth Kingdom villages have been found empty. Abandoned to the last house!"

"Why didn't you say that in the Council meeting?" Blaine asks.

"I didn't want to cause a panic," Keros says. "I tried to talk to your father but he wouldn't see reason! I didn't want to betray him, but he left me no choice! I was only trying to keep the people safe!"

Blaine blinks at him, slightly awed. "By Agni..." he says quietly. "You're actually scared, aren't you?"

"Only a fool wouldn't be!" Keros spits, sourly.

"Maybe. It does sound pretty scary," the Prince says softly. "But closing yourself off and hiding from the world doesn't solve anything, it doesn't help anything. There's a way to fight this plague, and Kurt will find it."

"Stupid boy," the Admiral says snidely. "Fire Lord Sue already has a plan to fight the plague."

"Oh?" Blaine asks. "What might that be?"

The final combination to the vault clicks into place audibly, and the door is released. "Wouldn't you like to know?" Keros says cryptically, opening the door and gesturing inside like a gracious host inviting a guest to come in for a cup of tea.

There within the chamber, on a pedestal, is another tombstone-shaped slab of rock. The symbols on the surface are ones that Blaine recognizes, even from a distance. The ancientness of the piece is almost palpable, and looking at it is like staring across a thousand years.

"Well," the Admiral says impatiently. "There's your prize. Go and claim it."

Blaine takes a single step forward, before catching the anticipatory expression on the Admiral's face and thinking better of it. "You go get it," he says, brandishing the Sun Warrior blade. "Get it and put it on your desk."

Keros glares at him.

"Now," Blaine demands.

The Admiral complies testily, walking into the vault. And of course, he can't resist talking as he goes. "Do you know exactly what I did, Blaine?" he asks. "Do you know what my great contribution to Lady Sylvester's plan was?"

The Prince remains silent. He's had about enough of this guy's voice to last him a lifetime.
"I was with a few of my men at a bar one evening in the Capital City, when on my way out, I noticed a strangely familiar face among the passersby outside," he says as he pulls the tablet from its pedestal, sneering all the while.

Suddenly, Blaine finds himself clenching involuntarily, bracing for impact. He knows what's coming.

"I thought 'surely that couldn't be who it appeared to be,'" Keros continues, bringing the stone out of the vault. "So I decided to follow him for a bit, out of sheer, morbid curiosity, and who should I find? Mischievous, adventurous little Blaine, out for a night on the town without daddy's supervision."

The grief and guilt that seemed to have only just stilled within him suddenly begin to stir again, and tears well up in the Prince's eyes. He suppresses them forcefully, refusing to give in.

"I kept your little secret," Keros says as he lays the stone on the desk, "because I didn't see the harm in it. Little did I know how valuable it would turn out to be." He turns to Blaine with a smile, his voice mockingly gracious. "You see, all I gave Lady Sylvester was you. My contribution to your father's demise pales in comparison to your own. It was you who made this all possible, Blaine."

It almost takes him. It truly does. His grip on the sword feels loose; his knees feel weak and wobbly. His throat feels swollen and constricted; his eyes are itchy and wet. But he holds on. With all the heart he can muster, he holds on to the sword and refuses to give an inch.

Then, he hears a voice, and the grief retreats back into its lair, frightened away by harsh reality.

"Admiral!" a rough voice shouts from somewhere in the mansion. "Admiral, can you hear me? This is the Sho Fa City Guard!"

Keros starts to reply, but Blaine is at his throat with the sword before he utters even so much as a squeak. "Shut up," he says. "You talk too much. It's quiet time now."

"Admiral!" the voice says again, sounding slightly closer.

Blaine does some quick thinking. "Get in the vault," he says.

"What?" Keros says, aghast.

"Get in the vault!" Blaine whispers intently, grabbing Keros with his free hand and bodily shoving him towards the huge metal apparatus.

"What are you… you can't—"

His words are drowned out by the sound of Blaine slamming the door in his face, twisting the lock to latch it shut.

The study echoes with Keros's pounding on the metal walls as Blaine retrieves the stone and makes his exit.

"Blaine! Stop this at once!" Keros says, his shouts just barely audible through the thick metal. "You can't just… leave me here!"

With the tablet tucked under his arm and the sword in his hand, Blaine utters his farewell to Keros on his way out.
"Why not?" he says flatly. "I thought you'd like it. It's nice and **safe** in there."

The Admiral continues to pound on the walls of his prison as Blaine closes the door behind him.

After the door closes, Blaine has to take a moment—just a moment—to collect himself. Fear and guilt and grief and **anger** swirl violently in the pit of his stomach, a stormy sea of uncertainty that makes him feel off-balance and unsteady as it churns.

Keros was so fucking smug. He had no idea that Blaine was holding back. That the sheer **rage** the Admiral inspired within him could have fueled his firebending easily if he'd been inclined to use it. That he could have burnt that traitorous piece of trash to cinders at a moment's notice if he had wanted to.

But he didn't. He **refused**. Out of respect for his father, his friends, and himself, he resisted the fire of anger. And though it by no means settles the matter forever, he feels a tiny sense of triumph blooming inside him as the fury flame recedes and leaves him cold once more. He feels like that room was a test.

He passed.

Unfortunately, the universe isn't quite through testing him yet.

"**Admiral, are you**—hey!" a voice calls out from behind Blaine. He turns to see a group of armored guards running towards him.

Him, who is standing outside of the Admiral's study with **two** Sun Warrior artifacts, one of which is a deadly weapon.

**Whoops.** Well, so much for keeping his cover intact…

"Sorry!" Blaine calls out, and runs.

He generally tries to apologize to the guards he inconveniences. After all, they're just doing their jobs.

"Come back here!" the guards shout. "STOP, IN THE NAME OF THE FIRE LORD!"

That was the **wrong** thing to invoke, and it just makes Blaine run faster. He rounds the corner, keeping his grip on the ancient stone tablet steady and hoping that surviving for hundreds upon hundreds of years means it's sturdy enough to take a little more punishment. It would **really** suck if it broke after all the trouble they went through to get it.

He just **barely** manages to sidestep a fireball coming from in **front** of him as he turns down the Western Hall. Another group of guards is coming from that direction, meaning that unless he does some quick thinking, he is about to get caught in a human pincer.

With nowhere else to go, he runs into one of the guest rooms and kicks the door shut.

"Hey!" the guards shout. "Come out of there right now!" An impact rattles the door, its sturdy frame barely resisting being kicked in.

Knowing that his hiding place won't be safe for much longer, Blaine heads out onto the balcony to look for another means of escape. He finds it.
The door shatters in a burst of flame, and the guards step into the room. It's empty.

"What?" one of them says. "Where'd he go?"

A few of them fan out and search the room. One of them heads to the balcony, and... "There he is! He's jumping across the balconies!"

And so he is. Running full tilt from one end to the other, Blaine hops up, kicks off the railing and makes a flying leap between the balconies to each of the guest bedrooms. The guards throw a couple of fireballs at him. They consider trying the jump themselves for all of two seconds before heading back inside and using the hallway.

Blaine reaches the last bedroom feeling a little winded, but there is one more jump he needs to make. The roof of the ballroom is a little lower than the balcony he's currently on—if he wants to land safely, he'll need to land in a roll. Unfortunately, the large stone tablet and small sharp sword he is carrying might make that maneuver a little tricky.

"Stop right where you are!"

But not nearly as tricky as fighting off a legion of guards by himself.

He runs to the edge and jumps, a fireball sailing past him as he soars through the air and braces for impact. The landing is only slightly off—the tablet slams into his ribcage at an awkward angle and knocks the wind out of him for a second. But the important thing is that the tablet did not break. Oh, and that Blaine didn't stab himself.

"STOP DOING THAT!" a guard cries at him from the balcony, frustrated beyond all measure.

"I didn't stop for my dad," Blaine calls back as he heads hatch that leads indoors. "What makes you think I'll do it for you?"

He tucks his sword into his belt and opens the hatch, climbing down into the room to find a scene of complete pandemonium. An out-and-out riot seems to have broken out among the party-goers, and Blaine can't help but notice that this is the second riot he's been involved with in as many weeks. Are they following him around?

Down on the event floor, Rachel is standing on the stage, trying desperately to plead with the party-goers. "Can't you see the senselessness in all of this violence? The madness has to stop! We are only hurting ourselves! And each other!"

Mercedes is using her purse-flail as kind of a makeshift nunchaku, twirling it around her in and creating a radius of instant agony for anyone who steps too close.

Finn is pushing through the crowds while unwillingly providing a handful of people with a piggyback ride.

And Kurt is standing on a table, kicking entrées at anyone who tries to join him on his perch.

"Guys!" Blaine calls out, but no one hears him.

"HEEEEEEEEYYYYYY!" he shouts at the top of his lungs, holding the tablet over his head so everyone can see it. "I've got it! We can GO NOW!"

This gets everyone's attention.
Blaine's friends all look up and see the Prince holding the hard-won prize in a triumphant pose. Kurt feels a massive flood of relief break through his dam of worry, washing over him and sweeping him away so thoroughly that he feels close to collapse. Finn smiles and gives him a thumbs up sign. Mercedes nods at him and motions for him to come on down. Rachel gives him rapidfire applause.

All of this positive attention completely distracts Blaine from the guard sneaking up from behind.

"GOT YOU!" she says, tackling him from behind without much thought to the consequences. Blaine can only watch helplessly as the tablet flies from his fingers and heads to the ground below.

It's one of those moments that seems to last a lifetime. Mercedes can do nothing but gape as the very objective of this stupid, overly-complicated plan spins through the air towards its inevitable demise. Finn's jaw drops, and he shouts an exceptionally long "Nooooo!" as he reaches uselessly towards the falling stone. Kurt is torn between watching the entire day slam into the ground and shatter to pieces, and watching Blaine struggle with the guard as she tries to pin him down. Either way, he is in no position to help. None of them are.

Except for her.

Rachel sees the trajectory of the tablet as it flies through the air. She knows instinctively the path it will take to the ground. And she knows that if she chooses to, she can intercede on her friends' behalf and stop it. But that's not all she knows. She also knows that in doing this, she will be publically identified with the tablet-takers. She will be branded as an accomplice, a criminal. Her life and career in Sho Fa will be over. If she does this, there is a good chance that she will never, ever achieve the dreams that she has held to like a life raft for so long. And she wonders; is it worth it? Can she do that to herself? Can she sacrifice her dreams for the sake of doing the right thing? Can she—

Oh, well, would you look at that. She's already flying through the air. Apparently, she started running and jumping as soon as she figured out she could help. She went through that whole big dramatic inner monologue when she had already gone and answered her own question. How silly of her!

Her arc through the ballroom air is graceful and precise. Her delicate fingers wrap around the ancient stone, and she clutches it tightly to her chest as she falls, landing with only a slight stumble in the midst of the crowd.

Kurt gapes at her.

Mercedes looks mildly impressed.

Finn looks awed.

Blaine's face is pure relief.

Rachel grins with pride.

Then, reality sets in.

"GET HER!" Lady Keros shouts. "That's MY priceless whatchamacallit!"

Rachel shrieks as the crowd surrounds her, trying to pull the tablet from her grasp. The countless hands clutching at her suddenly find themselves unable to reach her as her world turns sideways. Finn has bodily lifted her and is currently carrying her, tablet and all, over his head as he heads
towards the exit.

Distracted by the spectacle below, the guard leaves herself open, and Blaine elbows her right in the face ("Sorry!") and dashes towards the curtain. Drawing his shiny new/super ancient sword, he jumps out and stabs the drapery, cutting a line down the curtain to slow his fall. He lands on the stage and immediately starts stepping on toes by stepping on heads, bouncing across the crowd like they're all stepping stones in a game of 'the floor is lava.' He quickly makes his way to the edge of the room, towards where Finn is carrying Rachel while Mercedes and Kurt use a rock-flail and lines of fire to keep the crowd at bay.

Bouncing off the last patron, he lands next to Kurt. The two of them share a brief smile, before they get back to business. "We have to go, now!" he says.

"We can't," Kurt replies. "Not without Artie!"

"Artie's fine, bro!" Finn says. "He's safe! We can go!"

"Let's blow this wine gallery!" Mercedes concurs, releasing her stone-purse into the crowd and knocking over a few would-be pursuers.

With all of them in agreement, they promptly dash through the large, open ballroom doors, the entirety of the party crowd hot on their heels.

"Where is Artie?" Blaine asks.

Kurt is about to reply with some form of 'who knows?' when the question is very emphatically answered for them. As the crowd chases them across the Keros's immaculately groomed lawn, the ground beneath them suddenly and dramatically gives way, crumbling into a massive rectangular trench large enough to contain pretty much the whole of the party.

None other than the Smooth Criminal himself pops up from the ground at the edge of the trench, looking down at his handiwork as the greedy guests groan from their sudden fall.

"And that's how we do it where I come from," Artie says, throwing his hands (which now have a pair of broken shackles on them) towards them and making some kind of odd sign. "Earth Kingdom represent! Who's caught now, bitches?"

"Umm, Artie," Blaine says quickly. "I hate to interrupt your gloating, but—"

"They're over here! Get 'em!"

"—I think every guard in the City kind of knows we're here, so we should probably leave," Blaine finishes in a hurry as a small squadron runs at them from the south.

Mercedes stomps into the ground and pulls up her hands, raising a wall of earth between the guards and the gang.

"That probably won't hold them for long," Kurt says. "Artie! What's the quickest way out of here?"

The other earthbender slides over to Kurt and points to the North. "This way!" he says, sliding off. The rest of them follow along just as Mercedes's earth wall explodes in a massive fireburst, and the guards step through.

"Finn!" Rachel says.
"Yeah?" Finn replies as he runs.

"You can put me down now!" the girl says plainly.

"Oh," Finn says, wincing. "Sorry."

Without even waiting for him, Rachel wrests herself from his grip and dashes along beside him, somehow managing to run even faster than him despite her comparatively short legs.

The six of them follow a cobblestone pathway to the back of the mansion where the carriages are parked, only to find a lot full of carriages, a few confused valets, and no exit. Mercedes and Kurt both turn around and commence to earthbending, stomping up and kicking and punching as many huge rocks as possible to keep the guards at bay.

"Artie," Kurt says as he attacks. "This isn't a way out! This is a massive freaking wall!"

"Are you kidding me?" Artie says. "Of course it's a way out! We're earthbenders! When there is no door…” he says, taking a moment to center himself, rubbing his hands together and kissing his knuckles before sliding full-speed into the stone wall and jamming his fists into it. "…we make one!"

With that, a huge, square section of wall cracks open and crumbles to dust revealing the pristine, clean streets of Sho Fa's upper level.

Kurt and Mercedes share a conspiratorial look before combining their bending efforts, jumping up and stomping towards the guards to kick up a massive wall of sand and dirt, blinding and choking them. "Come on!" Kurt shouts.

Blaine dashes to the newly-opened gate along with all the others.

Well, all except Finn.

"What are you doing?" Mercedes yells at the waterbender.

Finn is darting around the carriages, his eyes desperately searching for something in particular. Fortunately, it doesn't take him long to find it.

"I'll miss you, buddy," Finn says tearfully as he bends the water out of his pouch. With a few quick, decisive movements, the water whips out and neatly severs the leather reins keeping Drizzle the Dragon Moose attached to their stolen cart.

The moose stares at him, confused.

"Forget about me!" Finn cries, bending the water back into its holder. "Go! Be free! Live the best moose life you can! I love you!"

"Finn!" Kurt shouts. "Come on!"

The sad waterbender has no time left. With great sorrow, he turns his back on his animal companion and heads to the exit just as another group of guards appears through the falling sand cloud. He ducks under a fireball as Kurt squares his stance and creates a thick stone wall to replace the one they just crushed.

"Now what?" Mercedes asks, pausing to catch her breath.
"We need to get out of the City, fast," Artie says.

"Wait," Finn says. "Is Rachel coming with us?"

"Oh, crap," Kurt moans. "I forgot about Rachel."

"Hey!" Rachel says, offended. "I just risked my life to save your... your... stupid stone thingy! And you forgot about me?"

"I think he means he forgot about the consequences this might have for you," Blaine says diplomatically.

"Sure," Kurt nods. "Let's go with that."

"I am willing to face the consequences of my actions," Rachel says primly.

"Oh, so you'll turn yourself in to the fuzz?" Artie says.

"...I meant by going on the run with you guys," Rachel clarifies testily.

Kurt shuts his eyes and shakes his head. "Of course you did," he sighs. "Alright, fine. Let's just figure out how to get out of here for now. What's the fastest way out of Sho Fa?"

The high, powerful whine of a train whistle echoes overhead.

The gang shares a look.

"...take a train?" Blaine asks.

"Take a train," Kurt replies, grinning fiendishly.

"Alright then, start chugging!" Mercedes says.

"Which way's the station?" Finn asks.

"Follow me!" Artie says, once again acting as their navigator and taking off down the street. "All aboard!"

Meanwhile, filtering amongst the high, fancy walls, beautiful stone streets, fancy avant-garde architecture, and paid moose-poo sweepers, the Sho Fa City Guard quickly begins to surround the group.

"Whoa!" Artie says on a side street, sliding to a halt as a group of guards comes into view.

"Reverse, reverse!"

The group turns around and heads back to the main road, only to get chased down it by another group of guards. Every time they look down a potential escape, they see another set of soldiers pour in.

"There's too many of them!" Blaine says. "We can't avoid them all."

"Well, then," Kurt says as he runs. "I guess that leaves us only one option..."

Closing his eyes for a second, he searches the surrounding area with his senses, and smiles when he finds a storm drain.
"Okay, I think we're cornered," Artie says as they come to the end of the street, and find themselves backed into a very high wall.

Guards approach them from three sides. "We know who you are!" they shout. "Surrender!"

"Fat chance," Finn says.

"Rachel, get in the middle of the group," Kurt tells her. When she complies, clutching the tablet as if it were her own child, he turns to the others. "Alright, my friends. It has been an honor to party with you this evening, but it's time to get serious."

With that, he grabs his flashy, outer robe, and with a single swift movement, throws it off, leaving only the thin bottom layer of his outfit.

Mercedes kicks off her shoes and lets her hair down, relishing in the contact with the earth.

Artie throws his hands out, the tiles that form his gloves sliding down his arms and slotting into place on his hands (though a few of them have trouble getting around the broken shackles still fastened to his wrists).

Finn bends the water out of his pouch and holds steady in the air near him, his hands a little steadier and little surer than they were two weeks ago.

With nothing else to do, Blaine draws his small, curved blade and holds it at the ready.

"It's over!" the guards shout as they surround them.

"Couldn't agree with you more," Kurt says, thrusting his hand towards the sky. The metal lid of a storm drain explodes towards the heavens as a geyser of water erupts from beneath it. With a quick circular sweep, Kurt guides the water into a circle around the group, knocking over several guards in the process. Fluid hand movements guide the water into a set of eight liquid tentacles, forming a protective barrier around the gang, which stands poised and ready to fight.

The Avatar smiles.

"Party's over."

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A/N: COMING UP NEXT – The party may be done, but the fun has just begun! With their cover blown wide open, Kurt and friends aim to take the quickest ride out of town; by force, if necessary. But the City Guard and a familiar trio of baddies have other plans for our heroes. Will their escape plan roll along smoothly? Or will they crash and burn? Trainwreck Extravaganza, Part 1 is next! ;) In the meantime, reviews and comments are always appreciated! :3
"Stop!" Blaine shouts. "We don't want to hurt you!"

"Well, what if we want to hurt you?" one of the guards shouts back.

"Yeah!" another one chimes in. "Avatar-backing scum! No one kills the Fire Lord and gets away with it! I'm pretty sure that's a law!"

"AVATARRRRRR!" another one howls, beating his chest.

"Yes?" Kurt responds.

This takes the guard… well, off-guard. "Oh, uhhh… I didn't really have anything to say, I was
just… you know… psyching myself up." He pauses to think for a second. "If I did have something to say, it'd probably be along the lines of 'we're gonna make you pay!'"

"Duly noted, thanks for the memo," Kurt nods, lashing a few of his water tentacles for show, even splashing some light rain on the guards, making them flinch.

"Last chance!" shouts a guard with a slightly spikier helmet. "Surrender or die!"

"Neither," is Kurt's succinct reply.

"Fine then! CHARGE! FOR THE FIRE LORD!" shouts Spiky Helmet, drawing his sword and thrusting it ahead.

Spiky and his brigade barrel towards the gang from the left, bellowing a battle cry, brandishing their weapons, fury and grief at the fall of their leader providing them with ample fuel for a knock-down, drag-out fight to the finish.

Kurt sprawls them out whence they came with a single sweep of his liquid limbs.

"Damn, that was dumb," Artie observes.

"They're city guards. Fighting the Avatar isn't exactly something they're trained for," Blaine comments.

Unfortunately, the other two groups of guards aren't quite as straightforward. The front group's firebenders start pumping out fireballs to keep Kurt busy while the melee users wait for an opening. The group on the right starts a similar strategy… except their firebenders are primarily used as cover so their archers can draw their bows.

Kurt skillfully maneuvers his tendrils to block the fireballs that look like they might be a danger, letting the others fly past them. "Artie! Mercedes!" he says. "Get the guys to the right!"

"On it!" Mercedes says. She and Artie both move to the edge of the waterline. Mercedes stomps up a stack of boulders. Artie raises a single rectangular stone block that sits just lower than his head.

"Ready?" Kurt says, blocking a couple more fireballs.

"Ready!" Artie and Mercedes chime back.

Kurt waits for a moment between fireballs, and…

"GO!" he shouts.

At that point, the Avatocopus opens up on the right side, allowing Artie and Mercedes to attack. Artie begins to demolish his stone block with rapid punches, breaking it into bits and sending a chaotic stream of shrapnel at the guards. This is mainly to keep them off-balance while Mercedes actually aims her stones, punching and kicking several hefty boulders at her opponents and taking them down one-by-one.

Meanwhile, Kurt draws all the water in his octopus into the front tentacle, quadrupling its size. The guards don't quite have time to react to Kurt's newly extended range, and are summarily flattened when it falls and floods the street.

The guards on the right (the ones left standing anyway), finally get tired of being peppered with pebbles and bashed with boulders, and call a tactical retreat. "SEND FOR REINFORCEMENTS!"
they cry as they run.

Kurt smirks. "Are we clear?"

"Yeah," Finn says, looking around. The only guards around are in no condition to fight.

"For now," Blaine adds. "There are lots more where this came from."

Even as he speaks, more guards begin to filter into the roads around them.

"Oh gosh," Rachel says, sounding slightly nauseas. "I'm going to die. They're going to poke holes in me!"

"No, you're not," Kurt says emphatically. "Alright, everyone, pop quiz! What's the shortest distance between two points?"

"Oh!" Finn says. "Ummm… I know this one… it's… you have to take the square of the first number, and…"

"A straight line," Mercedes sighs.

Finn glares at her. "I was getting there!"

Kurt rolls his eyes, lifting some up of the spilt water in the area, bending it into tiny, sharp icicles, and hurling them at the guards to keep them at bay. "Settle down, children! Yes, Mercedes, a straight line is correct. Artie!"

"Yo!" Artie says.

"You're our navigator. Take us in a straight line to the train station. Anything we have to go through, we'll go through it. You just keep us pointed in the right direction. Rachel, stay in the middle and hold on to that rock for dear life. Blaine… you look after Rachel. Everyone else—you know your jobs. Ready?"

"Ready!" Finn, Artie and Mercedes chorus.

"What about you? What's your job?" Blaine asks.

With the smile of a satisfied housecat and the grace of a crane, Kurt gathers as much water as he can around his arms, swirling it and compacting it until a massive amount of fluid only takes up enough space to encompass Kurt's arms.

"I'm the Avatar. My job is to be wherever I'm needed the most," he says proudly.

"They're over here!"

"We've got them surrounded!"

"Alright, no more talking. Let's go!" Kurt shouts.

The guards reach them just as Mercedes and Artie turn to the wall behind them. Combining their efforts and unifying their hand motions, they carve open a door just large enough for them to file through. Kurts tentacles move through the air like hungry snakes, striking out at any fireball or guard that comes too close for comfort, expanding and contracting as needed.

What an amazing element, Blaine finds himself thinking as he watches Kurt move.
"Come on, Blaine!" Finn shouts, as everyone else has already gone through the hole.

The Prince dashes through watching Kurt cover their escape like a pro. Once everyone else is through, Kurt spends an arm's worth of water to lash out and flatten every guard on the front lines with a single sweep. He dashes through the door as they fall, keeping the water on his other arm nice and compact.

"Mercedes!" Kurt says as he steps through.

The lady earthbender nods at him, stepping forward and slamming up a stone slab to plug the hole.

"We're polite guests," Mercedes says simply. "We never leave a door open if we can help it."

"I approve of your manners," Blaine smiles.

The wall is rocked with an explosion even as he grins.

"Still moving, people, focus!" Kurt says.

The yard they've barged into is a pretty posh affair, with an elaborate hedge maze, and several fountains spewing water into the air. Finn and Kurt are inordinately pleased at the fountains, taking a second to refill their water pouches to augment the water they keep 'on hand.' (Better to have water and not need it, than to need water and not have it, Kurt says.)

Meanwhile, Artie has taken the liberty of helping everyone solve the puzzle of the hedge maze by wrapping himself in a sizeable ball of solid rock, and rolling straight through it. Literally, straight through. The leafy walls barely slow him down at all as he flattens them. The roly-poly earthbender breaks open like an egg at the end of the maze, and seems only slightly dizzy from the effort.

As Blaine runs, he finds himself next to Rachel, who appears to be teetering on the verge of outright panic. "Ohmygosh, ohmygosh, ohmygosh, I have no idea what I'm doing here. BLAINE!" she yells. "WHAT AM I DOING HERE?"

The Prince knows he need to answer carefully. "...helping a righteous cause because you are a brave, talented and honorable young woman?"

It works like a dream. "Oh," Rachel says, looking a little calmer. "Of course! Thank you for reminding me."

Another explosion rocks the yard, and a look back reveals a smoking hole in the wall, leaking a steady stream of guards to chase after them. Mercedes, at the rear of their group train, raises a quick wall or two to slow them down.

As they pass the house, Blaine spots young boy and girl having a tea party on a porch. The boy is sitting between a stuffed gopherbear and camelephant, each with their own pretty pink cup. The girl stands bent over the table with the teapot, pouring it dutifully. Both parties stare gape-mouthed at the intruders, which probably explains why the girl is pouring tea all over the boy's lap and neither seems to have noticed.

"Hi!" Blaine waves cheerfully. "Hello there! Sorry about your yard! Umm… be nice to each other!"

"Blaine!" Kurt shouts back at him. "Please focus!"
"Sorry," he says sheepishly.

They move single file—Artie in the lead as navigator, Kurt right behind him as chief offense, Blaine and Rachel in the middle, with Finn behind him and Mercedes bringing up the rear. It's essentially a sandwich—earthen buns, with water sauce on both sides of a delicious Fire Nation patty.

…okay, he probably should've eaten before he left the party. Focus, Blaine!

Artie cuts through the yard with ease, slamming into the wall near a corner and carving open another door. The earthbender is not the first through, however—that honor is reserved for Kurt, who boldly steps through the door before the dust has even settled.

"Hey, there he is!"

"FOR THE FIRE LORD!"

Blaine can only watch through the hole as Kurt deflects two more fireballs with his water tendrils, countering with a powerful spray. Artie quickly slides out to join him.

His pace quickens as the fight outside continues. Both Kurt and Artie step out of view, and for a few seconds, Blaine can only hear the battle. He does spot one guard as he sails through the air past the hole from Artie's direction.

Then he hears Kurt cry out in pain. And suddenly, Blaine Anderson never knew he could run that fast. Impulse overrides common sense by a factor of twenty, and he bursts out onto the street just in time to duck another flying guard (this one courtesy of Kurt).

They're on a fairly narrow side street, and it looks like all the opposition is down for the moment. Artie sets about to slamming open the next wall, while Kurt clutches his arm to his chest and breathes.

"Kurt!" Blaine shouts. "Are you okay?"

"Just a little singe," he says lightly. "I'll be fine."

"Let me see," Blaine says, trying to get a look at the burnt limb. Kurt's right sleeve is burnt off, and the elbow is blackened.

"I said I'll be fine!" Kurt snaps. "Now get going, before someone else spots us!"

He knows that Kurt doesn't mean to snap at him, and that he definitely didn't mean for it to hurt, but that really doesn't take much of the sting out of it. He doesn't let it show, however—he simply complies. Rachel makes a mad dash across the road just in time to join Blaine in entering the next yard. Kurt follows behind him, Finn behind Kurt, and Mercedes last of all, closing the way behind.

"Medic!" Kurt calls out.

Finn snaps to attention immediately, sprinting to his brother's aid. Kurt, without even being asked, shows him the reddened skin on his arm, and Finn gently works his water over it, the familiar blue glow settling onto the broken flesh as it repairs itself. When Finn pulls the water away, Kurt looks good as new, and Blaine feels as useless as ever. He tucks his sword into his belt, seeing no point in keeping it out. It's not like he'll get a chance to use it.

"Better?" Finn asks.
"Much," Kurt says with a grin. Yet another explosion rattles dust off the stone wall, which is apparently now thin enough for them to hear the chattering guards on the other side.

"...keep chasing them like this!"

"...get that one guy... with the hand thing..."

"They're not talking about who I think they are, are they?" Blaine asks, looking at Kurt.

"I don't suggest we stick around to find out," the Avatar replies. "Onwards!"

Their next foray into the lifestyles of the rich and famous has them in a yard full of animals. Or at least, things that look like animals. Clipped hedges, statues, fountains, and other things in varied shapes. There are gazellebra bushes, platypus bear statues, flamingo fountains... there's even a dragon, sculpted with alarming realism out of a multitude of colorful flowers.

And there's at least one real animal, as well—a small yappy dog that takes loud offense to their presence and seeks to drive them away.

Its bravery falters, however, when a cacophonous blast from just ahead of them heralds the crumbling of another wall. This one isn't Artie's doing; in fact, Artie is steadily backing away from the hole with wide eyes, having just missed being taken out by the blast wave.

Through the swirling cloud of dust steps an enormous beast, combining the best and worst features of lizard and rhinoceros. It bears three riders—two females in identical sets of light, white-and-red armor, and a male with a sickeningly familiar face.

The six of them skid to a halt as the rider blocks their path.

"'sup?" Puck says, smirking. "Long time, no smash."

"You!" Blaine hisses.

"Hey!" Puck says, like he's happy to see him. "Didn't I kill you once?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," Kurt counters icily.

"Please. You can't keep the Puckasaurus down. And now I've got two lovely ladies and my buddy Kilgore here to help me out," he smiles, patting the komodo rhino a few times. "So who's up for round two?"

"Bring it," Blaine says, stepping forward with his hand on his sword, but Kurt pushes him back.

"No," Kurt says. "You can't fight him."

"We have to fight him!" Blaine says. "We can't run. His rhino is faster than we are, and he can smash through any barriers we put up!"

"No, Blaine," Kurt sighs. "I meant you can't fight him."

"Kurt," Blaine sighs. "I'm not a baby, okay? I can still fight!"

"We don't have time for this, Blaine!" Kurt says. "We need to get out of here before the whole freaking city surrounds us. Stop arguing with me and just go!" he says, pushing Blaine ahead. This time, the Prince balks at the contact, opening his mouth to argue some more. The roar of a rhino distracts him, however, and before he knows it, Puck is charging at them.
Kurt squares his stance and softens the earth the beast is charging on, sinking its claws into the ground.

"Hey, no fair!" Puck shouts. "You can't do that Kilgore! That's like… that's just… mean!"

"Seriously? Seriously? You are lecturing me about being mean?" Kurt scoffs.

"Hey, I can… you should… shut up. Ladies, toast this mother!" Puck orders. With that, the two Chi-Ryu lean out from behind Puck and begin buffeting Kurt with a steady stream of fireballs.

"Come on," Blaine says as he grabs Rachel, who seems somewhat distracted by the spectacle of the Avatar's battle with the assassin. "We have to go."

"But, Kurt is…"

"Kurt is fine," Blaine says, leading her around the fight.

Meanwhile, Kurt has pulled up a rock wall to block the Chi-Ryu's fiery fury. "Artie, Finn, go on ahead and take care of Blaine and Rachel. Mercedes, you're with me on pest control."

"Done, and done," Mercedes says simply.

"On it!" Artie confirms.

"Be careful," Finn says.

With that, Artie proceeds to burrow underground as Mercedes and Kurt get into position, lift up the rock wall and punch the whole thing at Puck as a counterattack.

Finn ducks and scrambles to get to the other side of Puck and his ride without getting roasted—fortunately for him, the Chi-Ryus are pretty much ignoring him entirely. Strangely enough, they're paying lots of attention to Blaine as he runs towards Artie near the wall, to the point of stopping their attack on Kurt.

Meanwhile, Puck easily shatters the rock wall with one of his megaton punches, sending its remains back at Kurt and Mercedes much faster than it came. The earthbender kicks up a rock wall just in time to avoid most of it, but still finds that both she and Kurt have a few scrapes from the shrapnel storm.

"Damn," she says. "Was not expecting that."

"Puck is kind of a pain, but I think we can manage," Kurt says, shaking off the light battle damage. "You bring the pain, and I'll bring the heat. He can't punch in two directions at once."

"Got it!" Mercedes says.

Kurt leaps from behind cover, using a spring-loaded piston of earth to launch himself into the air and punching several fireballs at Puck. The Chi-Ryus have his number, however, and counter by forming an expanding fire screen which absorbs the attack. Mercedes tries to kick another boulder at Puck, but he just punches it into gravel again, forcing her to duck and cover to avoid being shredded.

As Kurt lands, the Chi-Ryu begin laying down another rapid fireball assault. The two time their strikes—in the small space between one's fiery punches, the other attacks. His attempts strafe them are quickly thwarted when the girls actually lead their shots. He nearly eats an explosion for his
trouble, and has to note that whoever they are, these ladies clearly have more training than the
average Fire Nation rabble. Turning back to offense again, he punches a few fireballs to put them
on defense, and stomps up another earth shield so he can think.

"Kurt!" Blaine shouts from near the wall, where Artie is currently boring another hole. "Try to
keep him off balance! Keep the pressure on! Puck sucks under pressure!"

The next doorway crumbles open, and Artie and Finn share a look and a nod before heading out
into the street together. Rachel clutches at her mouth and looks close to passing out, but Blaine
seems relatively sure about his advice.

"Okay!" Kurt says with a nod.

The Prince nods back, and exits.

As he goes, the two Chi-Ryu share a look. One of them forms a fireball between her hands, taking a
second to charge it up and hurling it into the sky. The second thrusts two fingers at it when it
reaches its apex, piercing it with a line of fire and detonating it in mid-air.

And at that moment, Kilgore gives a mighty roar of frustration and shatters the ground around him,
freeing himself from his prison.

"Good boy," Puck says, patting Kilgore approvingly as the rhino gives an angry snort.

Kurt and Mercedes share a short look of 'oh, crap,' from behind their respective shelters.

"HYAH!"

And Kilgore charges.

The street is mostly empty when Finn and Artie make their entrance. The only person around is a
poofy woman in a poofy dress, and her skinny attendant, who shelters her with a parasol with one
hand and pushes a stroller with the other.

The pair gasps in shock as assorted ruffians pour through into the street before them. The woman
whispers something to her attendant, who nods gravely as they both stare.

"Hey!" Artie says, challenging them with a glare. "You got something to say?"

The two immediately perform a wide-eyed about face, and march away.

The woman's baby gives Artie a stink-eye from the stroller. Artie, bastion of maturity that he is,
makes a mean face, and the baby starts crying.

"Thought so," he says, crossing his arms and sliding to the other side of the street.

"How much further?" Finn asks as he gives Rachel and Blaine the all clear.

"This is the last house between us and where we need to be," Artie says. He slides to a stop on the
sidewalk, staring up at thick, black metal bars. "Unfortunately, we seem to have hit a wall here."

"That is not a wall," Rachel points out. "That is, in fact, a fence."

Artie rolls his eyes. "It's a metaphorical wall. It's metal. I can't bend it. And it's huge, so I can't just
knock it out of the way."
"We could go over it," Blaine suggests.

"*You* could go over it. I'm not much of a climber, and a jump that high would *not* end well for me."

Artie says flatly.

"No way I could do it," Finn agrees. "I'd probably just stab myself on the sharp, pointy things at the top."

As the others ponder the mystery of the fence, Artie watches the woman and her attendant reach the end of the street, whereupon the woman lets out a spectacularly melodramatic wail, and faints. The attendant shouts urgently and points to them. Even the baby gets in on the act, wailing loudly and thrusting his pudgy little fingers in their direction.

"Tattle tale," Artie grouses.

"Guys, whatever we're gonna do, we need to do it now," Finn says.

"Oh!" Rachel snaps. "Earthbender! Can we go under?"

Artie thrusts his hands at the ground and scoops them apart, bending just enough of a hole for Rachel to see that the fence has fairly deep roots.

"Ah, that is a 'no,'" she says.

"Maybe we should just wait for Kurt," Blaine suggests.

"Oh yeah," a familiar voice says. "Stick around. I've got *lots* of fun things for us to do."

The recognizable snort and heavy footsteps of a komodo rhino fill Blaine with dread. Turning around, he spots two more Chi-Ryus, riding with another old foe.

"Hola, Principe," Santana says with a smirk. "How's it hanging?"

Blaine is stuck between exploding with rage and imploding with grief. Being confronted with these two is *not* good for his calm. "You killed my friends," he growls.

"Did I?" Santana says with a casual shrug. "Must not have been too hard. I barely even remember them."

"You *bitch,*" Blaine seethes, drawing his sword.

"Dude, no!" Finn says, grabbing Blaine by his shoulders and holding him back.

"Let me *go!"* he roars, straining against even the considerable strength of Finn.

Artie slides up to block him as well. "She's just baiting you, dude. Don't fall for it!"

"Oh, *now* I remember!" Santana says with a snap. "The chocolate one and his buddy, duck sauce? Yeah, they were a barrel of laughs. Screamed the whole time."

A primal roar tears out of Blaine's throat as he breaks Finn's grip and tries to charge Santana. Artie betrays him in this moment, tripping him, grabbing him by the ankle, and sliding him along the ground so that he skids to a stop behind Finn.

"I said *don't* fall for it!" Artie shouts. "You and Rachel go over the fence. Me and Finn? We *got* this."
Blaine punches the ground in frustration, feeling as useless as ever as Finn bends his water supply out of its pouch, and Artie readies his hands. He grinds his teeth the entire way over to Rachel.


"Problem?" Artie asks.

"Oh, no-no-no," she says with a grin, reaching for her weapon. "Total opposite, actually—you just made my day!"

She lashes the whip at Artie. The earthbender is just as fast as her weapon, and raises a gloved hand to block it.

The crack echoes through the street.

Santana smirks as Artie curses and clutches his hand. The earthbender succeeded, more or less, in blocking the attack, but the cost was fairly high—the palm of his glove was shattered, and his hand is now bleeding like a motherfucker.

"Medic!" Artie grunts.

"On it!" Finn shouts, kneeling next to him and using his water to close the cut.

Artie glares at Santana. "...damn crazy bitch," he grumbles.

"Oh, it ain't even close to crazy up in here," she smirks. "Ladies! Demolish these losers."

The Chi-Ryu at the reins takes lashes the rhino forward, prompting it to charge Finn and Artie. Finn has a minor freak out, but Artie keeps his wits about him. His vengeance is swift and merciless—taking advantage of his low ground clearance, Artie waits for just the right moment, charges between its legs, and quickly confirms its (male) gender with a devastating punch where the sun don't shine.

That's right. Artie cock-punched a freakin' rhino. He's never been more thankful for his gloves.

The rhino groans, wobbles, and falls to the side mid-charge, spilling its riders onto the street.

Blaine takes advantage of the scuffle. "Can you climb?" he whispers.

"What?" Rachel says, trying to look around him to see the fight.

"Can you climb that fence?" Blaine repeats, pointing to it.

"I... I don't think so, especially not with this," Rachel says, nodding to the tablet.

"Alright then," Blaine says. Without even asking, he snatches the tablet and shoves it through the bars of the fence, letting it fall on the soft grass.

"Hey!" Rachel complains. "What are you—"

Blaine cups his hands and crouches in front of her. "Step on," he says. "I'll throw you up as high as I can, and you can climb the rest of the way."

The girl seems hesitant even as she complies. "I'm really not sure if this is the best..." she squeals as Blaine launches her without warning, heaving her
up with all his might.

He expects her to make it to least 3/4ths of the way up. He is completely shocked when she—
flailing and squealing—sails clean over the fence by a fair margin and flops on the other side.

"Owwww," she whines as she picks herself up. "Why did you throw me so hard?"

"I… umm… didn't mean to," Blaine says, taking a second to examine his arms to see if he has
suddenly grown much more muscular. He hasn't. Rachel must just be really light.

Santana and company don't take long to recover, so Blaine quickly starts climbing the fence
himself. Unfortunately, the assassin spots him. "Oh, no," she says. "Uh-uh, we are not doing that
chase scene shit again."

She tries to toss a rope trap at him, but Finn comes to his rescue. "Back off!" he shouts, lashing a
water whip and forcing her to dodge, throwing off her aim.

The Chi-Ryus look to pick up where she left off, getting ready to throw some fire at the Prince,
when Artie slams their legs right out from under them with rock-covered arms. Blaine scrambles
the rest of the way up the fence, swings over the sharp spires at the top, and lands in the perfect roll
next to Rachel, who has the tablet safe in her arms once more.

"Come on!" Blaine shouts, grabbing Rachel's hand and leading her forward.

"But Finn," she says, straining to look back.

"Finn is fine. He can take care of himself," Blaine says.

Incidentally, Finn chooses this exact moment to strike at Santana with another whip attack. The
assassin tries to dodge, but in this case, Finn's lack of coordination actually helps him—she dodges
where the attack was supposed to go, and winds up leaning right into it. She reels from the assault.

This satisfies Rachel. "Okay," she says, smiling at Finn's heroics. "We'll keep going."

It's a good thing she misses Santana's response to that little offense. Finn's attack hit her face,
resulting in a sizeable red welt. Blaine can tell you from experience—Santana does not fuck around
when it comes to her face.

Her glare would make most men wet themselves. "Waterboy, you are fixing to sprout several
leaks."

Finn gulps.

As Blaine escapes, the Chi-Ryus again take notice in a big way. In a surprisingly smart move, they
begin spreading fires on the ground near Artie, forcing him to flee or get fricasseed. With the
earthbender occupied, the Chi-Ryus set off another mid-air explosion, conjuring up a fireball,
hurling it over the fence and detonating it.

Artie is about to take advantage of their distraction when he notices Finn getting the crap beaten
out of him.

"Uh-oh," Artie says. He starts to slide over to help his buddy, but another fireball blasts the ground
in front of him, and he has no choice but to turn and face the Chi-Ryu.

"I always wind up on the wrong end of hot chicks," he sighs.


A short distance away, the third rhino rider marks the second mid-air explosion of the day, knowing exactly what it means.

She lashes her rhino onwards, driving it faster and harder than ever.

The Prince has been found, and he is escaping.

That simply will not do.

As Blaine and Rachel charge across the latest yard—an expanse of immaculately maintained grass—Rachel starts panting and heaving in a manner so dramatic that Blaine almost accuses her of acting. Then, he notices he's feeling a little winded himself. This yard goes uphill until the house, so it's a bit more taxing than most.

"Can we…" Rachel gasps, "please stop… for some water…?"

"Well, I am kind of tired. And we don't want to go too far from the others," Blaine says.

They head for the house. Blaine is all for politeness under most circumstances, but this is life or death, and he is really thirsty. He resolves to leave his manners at the door the second he kicks it open.

"Oh, my!" the middle-aged maid on the other side of the door says. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Sorry!" Blaine cries immediately. So much for the manner-drop. "I'm so sorry, I'm just… we were just…"

Rachel stalks in behind him. She assesses the situation, makes a decision, and cries, "He's holding me hostage!"

"He is?" the maid gasps.

"I am?" Blaine whispers.

"YES!" Rachel says emphatically to both questions. She immediately wraps Blaine's arms around her, drawing his sword with his own hand and holding it to her throat. Blaine is horrified.

So is the maid. "Scoundrel!" she cries. "Fiend!"

"Umm… yes!" Blaine shouts. "Yes, I am both of those things," he says, attempting to scowl and looking about as threatening as a baby moose-lion with a bow on its head.

Fortunately, the maid is very much inexperienced in these matters, and finds him to be quite intimidating indeed. "Agni protect me!" she cries.

"Water," Rachel says.

"What?" Blaine asks.

"Ask for water!" Rachel whispers.

"May I have some water, please?" Blaine asks.

A stomp on his foot makes him reword that.
"OW! I mean… get me some water, right now, or the girl gets it!" he growls, pressing the sword against her throat.

The maid wails in exquisite horror and dashes into the kitchen. "Oh, please! I'll do anything you want, please, just… not on the carpet. I just shampooed!"

Blaine holds Rachel steady, keeping the sword at her throat as he follows the maid. "I'm not hurting you, am I? Is the sword too close?"

"No," Rachel assures him. "The blade is actually quite dull."

"Huh," Blaine says thoughtfully. "It is pretty old…"

The poor maid scrambles to pour a glass of water for him, setting it down on the counter with shaking hands.

"Thank you," Blaine says automatically, prompting another Rachel-stomp. "OW—I mean… ummm… pour another glass! I'm really thirsty!"

She does as ordered, wailing the whole way.

"Thank you—and GET OUT!" Blaine shouts, adding the second part when Rachel raises her foot threateningly.

The woman flails and wails and cries "OHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH" all the way out.

When she is gone, Blaine releases Rachel and finally takes a moment to breathe. "Whew," he says. "This is hard work."

Rachel nods in agreement as she sets down the tablet and hands him a glass of water. "It's one thing to watch other people perform these epic adventure stories. It's quite another to live through them yourself," she comments. She takes several deep gulps. "I never imagined falling in love with a Prince would be so much work."

The aforementioned Prince gives a wince. "Rachel… I am so sorry. About… everything. Dragging you into this, getting you in trouble, not even… not even realizing you were in love with me." He takes a long drink of his own, mostly to plug his mouth before something stupid comes out.

"Oh, psh," she says, waving him off. "Water under the proverbial bridge. Most of what you mentioned isn't even really your fault."

Blaine sighs. "Still…"

"If it makes you feel better," Rachel says quietly, "I'll forgive you. But really, you've nothing to be sorry for."

He can't help but smile at her. "Thank you. I really do appreciate that."

They drink in silence for a few seconds, resting, wondering how their friends are doing, wondering if they should go back and try to help. Wondering if they could help—if they could even make a difference in the battles being waged. Rachel, the Unbending Actress, and Blaine, the Fireless Prince.

"Are you always oblivious?" Rachel asks suddenly.
"What do you mean?" Blaine counter-questions.

"When people are in love with you," she elaborates.

He thinks back to that morning, that wonderful, horrifying moment when he awoke with Kurt as his pillow, safe and loved in his arms.

"Not always," he whispers.

Rachel nods. "What about when it hurts them?"

"What are you trying to say?" Blaine asks.

The young actress looks at him with gentle eyes. "I'm trying to say... I think that Kurt... might be —"

She is cut off when an explosion rattles the house from roof to foundation. A bloom of fire engulfs the living room, and Blaine shields his face from the heat.

"Ohmygosh," Rachel breathes, grabbing the tablet.

The Prince draws his sword. "Go!" he says, pointing. "Out the back! Find the others!"

Without even waiting for a reply, he dashes into the burning room, feeling ready to face whoever he finds there.

His feelings betray him when he sees her standing in the flames, casual as you please. She saunters towards him, arms crossed, lips in a smirk, long blonde hair flowing behind her as the heated air rushes out of the room.

"Hello, Blaine," she says. "It's been a while."

"Not long enough," Blaine growls. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"My name is Quinn Fabray," the girl says haughtily. "And I want you."

"Well, here I am," he says, brandishing his sword. "Now what?"

"Let's step outside," Quinn says simply, pointing to the backdoor.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Blaine growls. "If you want to do this, we're going to do it right here, right now."

The blonde girl whistles. From the kitchen, two Chi-Ryus step into view, and Blaine's heart sinks when he sees Rachel held tightly in their arms. Two fingers point at her neck, ready to end her at any moment.

He was her last line of defense. He had one job. One job, and he couldn't even do that correctly.

Quinn nods to the backdoor. "Let's step outside," she repeats.

Like a kicked dog, Blaine follows her.

The backyard is comprised of a small stone courtyard, a rather nice collection of plants, and a sizeable swimming pool. Quinn steps into the courtyard, takes a deep breath, whips her arms around and thrusts her hands to the sky, creating a huge, whirling pillar of flame streaming to the
"What was that?" Blaine asks.

"Just calling some associates," Quinn says simply.

"To help you with the execution?" Blaine asks.

The Chi-Ryu Captain shakes her head. "No, Blaine," she says. "This isn't an execution."

The Prince is baffled. "If you aren't going to kill me, then what are you going to do?"

"I never said I wasn't going to kill you," Quinn says with a shrug. "I am. But not execution-style."

Blaine narrows his eyes, and says nothing.

"Ah," Quinn says. "Right on time, Chi-Ryus. You'll be my witnesses."

Out of the corner of his eye, he spots a flash of the Chi-Ryu's light, white and red armor. Without him even noticing, four more of them have appeared. The six of them form a perfect hexagon, with Blaine and Quinn in the middle.

Suddenly, Blaine understands what's about to happen, and his heart begins to pound even before he hears the words.

"Blaine Anderson… I challenge you to an Agni Kai."

Kurt dives out of the way of yet another charge from Kilgore, jumping up to avoid another fireball assault and panting like a marathon runner as he dives behind another of Mercedes's earth walls.

"This is insane!" Kurt shouts, annoyed. "We can't keep the pressure on because of the fire ladies, we can't just haul off and wreck them because Puck just punches everything back at us, and we can't stand still because of that stupid rhino—what can we do?"

Mercedes thinks for a second. "What if we blind them with a dust cloud?"

"Pretty sure Puck can punch the air if he needs to, but I don't have any better ideas," Kurt sighs. "On three, ready? One… two… three!"

They leap up and stomp the earth together, thrusting their hands towards Puck and the girls, kicking up a huge dust storm. Kilgore seems mildly distraught, but Puck, sure enough, punches the air itself in front of his rhino, blasting a hole in their smoke screen with a gust of wind.

"See?" Kurt says. "I told you."

"Don't give up yet," Mercedes says. "We just need more coverage."

With that, she jumps up and stomps up another dust cloud. Kurt catches on quickly and follows suit, and soon, the entire yard is more ensconced in a minor sand storm.

"The fuck?" Puck shouts, blinded by the cloud. "Hey, if you think a little dirt's gonna slow me down, you don't know Puckzilla. I love playing dirty."

Kurt crouches near Mercedes, tearing off part of his sleeve. With extra water from his pouch, he wets it and ties it around his mouth. "There was a fountain back there somewhere," he says. "I'm
"Gotcha," Mercedes says, tearing off a piece of cloth herself and letting him dampen it. "I'll keep you covered."

As Kurt runs off, Mercedes ties the cloth around her mouth, and puts her hunting skills to good use. She might not be as good as vibro-sight as Artie, but she doesn't really need to be. After all, it's not like something as huge as Kilgore steps lightly. Every so often, when the rhino puts its foot down, Mercedes punches a rock at it. Puck can't see it coming, so he can't stop it. Instead, he guides Kilgore into charging wherever the rock came from. By the time he gets there, however, Mercedes has dodged into the cloud, ready to attack again. Puck coughs and sputters, punching at the air every few seconds to try and clear the cloud away.

"Hey!" Puck shouts between coughs. "Lay off my rhino!"

"Tell your damn rhino to quit trying to ram me, and I'll think about it!" Mercedes counters. Puck charges at her again, but Mercedes once again dashes into the dust, missing him by a mile. She's so focused on Kilgore that she almost runs smack into a platypus bear statue. "Huh," she says, staring up at it as an idea begins to form in her mind…

With the assassin occupied for the moment, Kurt dashes through the dusty yard, looking for that darned flamingo fountain. He stumbles into a gazellebra-shaped bush, nearly trips over a long flower pot in the shape of a rat-viper, stubs his toe on a stone dragon frog, and winds up setting the lovely flower dragon on fire out of sheer frustration.

It burns enthusiastically. Very enthusiastically.

Kurt watches it burn for just a second before bending it out. His mind flashes back to his little adventure in infiltrating the Fire Nation fortress, and suddenly, he, too, has an idea.

Water first, though. Taking a second to calm himself, he stretches out his senses, tuning out the sounds of battle and the rest of the world.

There it is.

Stifling a shout of triumph, he follows his inner divining rod to the bird-shaped waterspout, taking just a second to admire the fine craftsmanship. Then he blasts it apart with a fireball and gathers all the water on one arm. He then heads back, uses the water to chop the head off the dragon, and convenes with Mercedes to discuss strategy.

Kilgore doesn't deserve this shit, Puck thinks. He tries to shield his eyes, his mouth, and everywhere else the damn sand can get, but it's no use. The shit's everywhere and there's not a damn thing he can do about it. The fact that the Chi-Ryus barely seem bothered by it just pisses him off even more. He's looking around for signs of the Avatard and Big Sassy, when another rock smacks into Kilgore's hide.

"Stop it!" Puck shouts, frustrated beyond all measure.

"Make me!" Mercedes shouts back.

Puck drives Kilgore towards the sound of the voice, but he still misses Mercedes by a longshot.

"This is animal cruelty!" Puck cries as another boulder bounces off his buddy. "You're gonna pay for this!"
"I'm standing right here!" Mercedes calls out. The dust is finally starting to settle, and Puck has a plan. This time, he punches towards her, and then charges. The path clears just enough for him to see her outline, and the assassin smiles.

"Got you now!" he says, ready to give his buddy their first combined kill.

He should've known from the fact that she wasn't even moving that it was a trap. Kilgore slams his head full-force into the hard, compacted stone of a Big Sassy-shaped statue, and the impact is enough to daze even his super-tough buddy. Kilgore stumbles, and Puck struggles to keep him from hitting anything.

At that moment, Kurt strikes. The Avatar leaps at them from behind, taking even the Chi-Ryus off-guard, kicking all three of Kilgore's riders off with a watery tentacle around his leg.

When Puck picks himself up off the ground, the dust has cleared enough for him to see the Avatar jamm some kind of weird flower thingy onto Kilgore's horns. He has no idea what the dude is thinking. Kilgore is a *manly* rhino. He doesn't like girly shit like flowers and rainbows. Puck knows the dude is so gay he probably has glitter poop, but seriously, decorating his rhino is taking it a little too far.

He's just getting ready to tell him that when suddenly, dude sets the flowers on fire.

Which, while much cooler than non-flaming flowers, is *totally not cool at all.*

Kilgore panics like crazy and starts charging all over the place. He demolishes three statues, four rows of a really nice garden, part of a porch, a small pagoda, and the rest of the flower dragon (which incidentally just makes things worse, as it also catches on fire).

"Shit!" Puck shouts, running after him. "Kilgore, stop! *Whoa, boy!* You're just making it worse!"

The Chi-Ryus pick themselves up and dust themselves off.

"Hey!" Puck says. "Give me a hand, here! Put it out!"

Eying the flaming rhino, the girls seem poised to act when suddenly, a large, whirling pillar of flame streams up into the evening sky from a little ways away. The girls share a significant look, and promptly abandon Puck and Kilgore to their fates. Kicking off of the ground and propelling themselves via *explosion*, they sail to the top of the wall and run to where they saw the pillar.

"FINE! FUCK YOU GUYS! SEE IF I LET YOU RIDE HIM AGAIN!" Puck shouts as he tries to chase Kilgore down. The rhino soon finds the hole it came in through, and leaves the same way. Puck charges right after him, forgetting the mission completely. "COME BACK, BUDDY! I'M TRYING TO HELP!"

"Well," Kurt breathes as the dust settles. "That was entertaining and educational. Now we know if we want to get rid of Puck, all we need to do is go for his pet."

"When a boy loves his rhino, it's best not to come between them," Mercedes comments, taking off her mouth covering as they walk to the wall.

Kurt nods in agreement. "Let's catch up with the others. The spirits alone know what kind of debacle they've gotten themselves into…"

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Finn Hudson is getting the crap beaten out of him by someone who is about half his size.
Nothing new, all things considered.

He wasn't lying when he said he kind of sucks at fighting. Maybe he should get more practice.

Santana lays into him with a furious flurry of punches. She slams him, jams him, and rocks his world, driving him against the wall. All he can do is hide his face behind his arms—any attempt to shield his torso just results in her punching him in the face, which hurts even more.

"You never…"

\textit{Wham.}

"…ever…"

\textit{Bam!}

"…touch…"

\textit{WHUM...}

"…my \textbf{FACE}!!"

At this, she hauls off jams her fist into his stomach, squeezing the breath out of him like a squeaky toy. He falls to his hands and knees, in so much pain that he actually throws up a little on the ground. Fortunately, it isn't too gross, ’cause it's mostly water, and…

…

Huh.

Could he…?

Santana backs off like she's about to punt his head off. When she charges forward, Finn lashes out, bending the nastiness that just burbled up from inside of him and splashing it \textit{right in her face}.

Finn scrambles to his feet, takes one look at the shocked, horrified, disgusted, \textit{homicidally enraged} expression on Santana’s face, and decides that she needs a hug.

So before starts kicking his ass again, he runs up and gives her the biggest, tightest bear hug he can manage.

"You are \textit{disgusting}!" she spits, kicking and squirming in his arms like crazy. "I am going to \textit{rip your nipples off}!" That just makes him squeeze her tighter (mostly because he's afraid of her arms getting free enough to actually try that). Sure she's kicking the crap out of his shins and her head comes dangerously close to smashing his nose in, but at least she's working new areas now. Finn can take a beating, but you have to spread it out. Even he has his limits.

Meanwhile, Artie is having troubles of his own with the hot chicks, who are annoying the crap out of him by spreading fire \textit{allover} the ground, making it harder and harder for him to move around effectively. He can put it out by burying it in dirt or occasionally just flipping the earth over, but he can't put it out \textit{nearly} as fast as they can set it, so it's kind of pointless.

So, he decides to stop fighting fires and start fighting firebenders. With all the speed he can muster, he punches up two rocks and socks them at the ladies. It's very little trouble for them to shatter the rocks with fireballs, but they fail to realize that the rocks are just a diversion for Artie's \textit{real} attack
—no sooner than the stones take flight, Artie crosses his hands and shoots off his gloves, both of which are purposely aimed to go wide of their targets.

By the time the Chi-Ryus have shattered the rocks, the gloves are right where Artie wants them. Curling his open palms into fists, he uncrosses his arms and thrusts his hands out to the side. The gloves follow his path on a wider scale, curling into powerful stone fists and flying in from the sides. The Chi-Ryus have no idea what's coming, so both take full hits. One girl is hit in the face—the other is smacked right in the gut.

They glare at him as Artie smiles and beckons them forward. "Come on, girls," he says. "Wanna dance?"

The Chi-Ryu look ready to oblige, when suddenly, their attention is called to a giant fire pillar behind the house where Blaine went. The two nod at each other, kick off the ground with downright explosive force, and sail over the fence. Shortly thereafter, two more Chi-Ryu jump across the street, having abandoned the fight with Kurt and Mercedes to join their sisters. "That's… probably not a good sign," Artie says, watching them go before turning back to the fight.

Finn is having serious trouble with Santana, who is kicking his shins with what sounds like bone-splintering force, and trying desperately to cave his nose in with her forehead.

"Hey!" he says. "Quit bullying my buddy!"

Most of the ground between him and Finn is still on fire, so Artie slides back, back, and back. As a true earthbender, he waits for the right moment, when Finn turns his back, and then, he strikes.

Santana is so caught up in the midst of her furious flailing that she doesn't see Artie. She doesn't see him sliding towards them at full speed, bending a ramp into the ground right in front of the fire. She doesn't see him until he sails over the fire, over the downed rhino, and lands on Finn's back.

"Back off, hoe!" he cries, socking her hard enough to make Finn let go. She stumbles backwards, her world a little swimmy from that hit and from slight oxygen deprivation, giving Finn time get himself together.

"Hey," Artie says softly, gently wrapping his arms around Finn's shoulders. "You okay, big buddy?"

"Yeah," Finn grunts with a wince, "I've definitely been worse."

The earthbender chuckles. "Well, I'm sick of watching you get beat up. What do you say we pull out all the stops?"

Suddenly, Finn's day brightens up. "Really?"

"Really," Artie says.

"Alright!" Finn says, pumping his fist. "Let's do it!"

And then it just gets ridiculous.

"LET OUR POWERS COMBINE!" Artie shouts with a matching fist-pump.

"WATER!" Finn shouts, reaching behind him to grab Artie's legs and loop them around his waist.

"EARTH!" Artie shouts, raising his hands to levitate some rock fragments from the ground. As
Finn puts his feet together, Artie molds the rocks into a single stone cast, fastening his feet to each other like a belt loop.

The end result, essentially, is that Finn is wearing Artie like a friggin’ backpack.

"Together," Finn says, his voice low.

"We form…" Artie adds seriously.

And then it gets **FUCKING ridiculous**.

The two of them strike a dramatic pose, finishing in unison.

"**THE MAGNIFICENT, MULTI-ARMED MUDBENDER!**"

Santana cannot **even**. She is physically incapable of such. "You're joking," she says flatly. "You are **fucking kidding me.**"

"Oh, **Hills**, no," Artie says, leaning forward. "She did **not** just call the Mudbender a joke."

Finn crosses his arms, shaking his head sadly. "The Mudbender is not a joke. He is not funny at all."

"Laughter makes him angry," Artie says.

"You wouldn't like him when he's angry," Finn adds.

Santana honestly cannot help it. She starts laughing. Cackling. **Howling.** She laughs so hard she can barely stand.

Artie and Finn look at each other sadly. Artie shrugs. "Well, she can't say we didn't warn her…"

Before she can recover, his rock gloves fly out, grab her by her top, and pull her forward. As she flies towards them, Finn and Artie shift their weight together and rear back their fists. The second she is close enough, **both** of them haul off and give her a single unified punch with enough force to send her **flying**.

It hurts like a **motherfucker**, but rage and the sheer humiliation of actually being **hit** by this… **conglomeration of goofiness** makes her land on her feet.

"Fuck this shit. I've had enough. It's about to get **real** messy up in here," she says, pulling out her whip.

"The Mudbender loves messy!" Finn says brightly.

"He **is** mess," Artie adds, philosophically.

Finn leans over just enough so that Artie can see and attack over him, and they prepare for combat. It's about two seconds from being **on 'til the break of dawn**, when suddenly, the wall behind Santana crumbles. When she turns to see who comes through it, Artie rock-fists her in the back of the head.

"**OW!**" she shouts. "**Motherfucker, you do not** strike a bitch when she's not looki—"

And then someone **else** hits her from behind. She finds herself slammed into a wall in front of the
Avatar, who breathes some kind of weird mist that encases her in ice, pinning her there.

"Bitches!" she cries, enraged. "You are all bitches! Let me out, I'll take you all on!"

"Oh, you're here too?" Kurt says casually as Mercedes walks behind him. "It's like a family reunion! Only we all hate each other. Although depending on your family, that might not be much of a distinction."

"I will claw your eyes out!" Santana shrieks.

"Yes, yes, it's nice to see you too," Kurt replies, not even looking at her. "Lovely chatting with you, dear. Ta!"

And he just leaves her there.

"Hey, we were just getting worried about you guys!" Finn says.

"We were wondering if you needed our help, seeing as we clearly have it on lock down in our neck of the woods," Artie says cockily.

Mercedes gives them a weird look. "Y'all doing that again? Seriously?"

They look at each other and shrug. "Why do people hate what they don't understand?" Finn sighs sadly.

Mercedes is about to respond when Kurt steps between them.

"Where's Blaine?" he asks.

"He and Rachel climbed over the fence and went to… that… house…” Finn trails off, pointing at the house.

Kurt gapes at the sight. "That house. The house that I am looking at now. The one that's on fire. That house."

Finn gulps. "Yeah, that house."

Without even looking, Kurt immediately calls up all the available water on the street, using it to slice clean through the bars of the metal fence. It only takes him a few swipes to cut a hole large enough to fit through. He starts to gather the water around his hands, but abruptly drops it and makes a face. "Ewww. Finn, this water stinks. Where did you get it?"

"You… really don't want to know," Finn replies sheepishly.

Kurt sighs in frustration. "Whatever. Come on, let's go!"

With that, he dashes through the fence.

Mercedes continues to give Artie and Finn the stink-eye. Unable to come up with any other way to respond, she finally settles on saying "Y'all are weird," and heads through the hole behind Kurt.

"She envies the power of the Mudbender," Artie says, shaking his head at her.

Finn shrugs, walking through the hole. "Honestly, who can blame her?"

Artie holds out his open hands, and Finn gives them both a high five.
"No. Fucking. **Way.**" Santana shouts. "There is **no way** that I just lost to that!"

As he walks, Finn turns around and blows her a kiss. From his back, Artie bites his lip and proudly flicks her a double-deuce.

"**COWARDS!**" she shouts. "Get back here!"

But they're already heading to the top of the hill, no longer paying her any attention. Because now that he thinks about it, that's a **lot** of fire, and Rachel was with Blaine.

Whatever's happening here, he hopes he isn't too late…

The violent, angry crackling of the burning mansion behind them sets the mood perfectly.

"What if I refuse?" the Prince asks, trying and failing to stare down his enemy.

Quinn flicks her head towards Rachel. "Then we light a fire under your friend."

"You don't even know who she is!" Blaine shouts, outraged.

"**You do,**" Quinn says. "That's all that matters."

"I can't firebend!" Blaine says, near desperation. "I lost my bending."

"So **find** it again," Quinn grinds out, stepping into firebending stance. "Now stop stalling. I have challenged you to an Agni Kai. Do you accept?"

The Prince takes a deep breath, and closes his eyes.

A moment of silence hangs over the courtyard.

"Yes," Blaine says, getting into his own stance.

"**Ready?**" the Chi-Ryu near the edge shouts.

Blaine and Quinn nod.

"**KAI!**" the Chi-Ryu shouts.

Quinn wastes **no** time, punching a fireball at him right away. Unable to block it, he sidesteps and tries to rush her. She kicks a crescent wave of flame at him, forcing him to jump to clear it. He lands next to her, but she is ready. With two fingers extended, she slices a thin line of flame towards his chest. He raises his arms to block it instinctively, his father having taught him well, but all this succeeds in doing is getting the **crap** burned out of his arms. Quinn cuts a second slice into his shoulder, and he cries out, staggering backwards.

Rachel looks flatly horrified, and near tears.

"Come on, Prince," Quinn says. "All you need is a little drive. A little **motivation.** Do you **want** your little friend here to watch you **embarrass** yourself before you die?"

Blaine charges her again, adrenaline driving off the pain from his burns. Quinn thrusts out a stream of flame towards his torso, but Blaine goes into a slide, slipping under it and kicking Quinn in the sternum before she can react. The attack knocks her back a few steps, but Blaine's victory is short lived. As Blaine kicks to his feet, Quinn sweeps a fire-wave along the ground. He tries to jump, but
only one leg makes it in time; the other one takes the attack full on, burning him and knocking him on his back. He scrambles to his feet before she can finish him, but his legs and arms are both starting to throb a little louder, clamoring for attention even as he desperately tries to ignore them. His steps are unsteady, his stance is broken, and even worse, the head wound from Keros is starting to ache as well.

"This is pathetic," Quinn spits. "Come on! Don't you hate me? Don't you want revenge? Get mad! Use all that anger! Do something!"

He won't. He can't. He would never, ever, and yet… desperate times call for desperate measures. Someone's life is at stake here, someone's besides his own. Is it really right for him to ignore a weapon at his disposal because of his little moral hang-up? Would it be better for him to just… do it? To do what must be done?

He is distracted from answering this question by the sight of a swimming pool's worth of water floating into the air behind Quinn and her minions. The shock on his face must be fairly obvious, as Quinn quickly turns around as well. She sees it just in time to watch it surge forwards, sweeping the lot of them off of their feet while mysteriously flowing around Blaine and Rachel.

Kurt steps into the courtyard, his face all business as he washes Quinn and her minions to the edge of the yard before freezing them to the ground. "Seven on one? Really?" Kurt says. "You guys are such bullies."

"Kurt!" Blaine shouts, overjoyed, taking a step towards him before his leg suddenly reminds him that it is still too hot to eat, having just recently been cooked. "Ah!" he hisses, stumbling forward. The Avatar runs to the kneeling Prince as quickly as he can as the rest of the gang spills into the yard.

"Blaine!" he shouts. "Oh La, what happened to you?"

"Fire," he says with a wince. "Apparently, it burns."

"Medic!" Kurt shouts. "Get over here!"

The tall waterbender dashes over, seeming slightly more cumbersome than usual. The reason for this becomes clear very quickly. Blaine squints at the sight. "Is that… is he… is Artie…?"

"It's this… thing they do. I wouldn't question it," Kurt says quietly as Finn reaches and kneels down.

"Whoa," he says, getting a look at Blaine's rather crispy leg. "Dude. You've got to stop this," he says, bending up some water and applying it to the peeling, swollen skin.

"Seriously," Artie says from his back. "You're like an injury magnet."

"Always have been," Blaine says lightly, hissing as his leg tingles at Finn's fingertips. "You'll get used to it."

"I'd really rather not," Kurt says, soberly. "I don't like seeing you hurt. Can you please leave the fighting to us from now on?"

"I didn't have a choice!" Blaine insists.

"Is he okay?" Rachel asks, running over. "Are you okay? Oh Blaine, you were so brave…"
"Hey!" Mercedes says. "I hate to break up your game of 'Ring Around the Royal,' but we've got trouble."

She gestures over to the Chi-Ryus and Quinn, who are marching towards them in a V-formation with Quinn as the spearhead. Where a large patch of ice once held them to the ground, there is now only a wide column of steam rising into the air.

"So," Quinn says, annoyed. "Tweedle Dick and Tweedle Dominatrix couldn't even slow you down. Why am I not surprised?"

"Look lady," Kurt says, standing up and stalking towards her. "Banter is fun, and all, but I am fresh out of patience for the evening. Stand down, or get smacked down. Your choice."

"Ah… no," Quinn says flatly. "We're not like the usual morons you deal with. This is a whole new ball game."

"You wanna play?" Mercedes asks, stepping into stance next to Kurt. "Let's play."

Finn finishes healing Blaine's leg and arms. "There," he says, "your leg shouldn't give you too much more trouble. We've gotta go help Kurt."

"Stay back, man. This could get ugly," Artie says from Finn's back as the two of them head over to stand beside Kurt.

Blaine almost mentions his throbbing head, but since it's mostly just an annoyance, he decides to keep silent. With nowhere else to be, he stands between Rachel and the impending fight.

"Oh, for the love of—what is that supposed to be?" Quinn says, skeptically eying the Finn-Artie combo.

"We're the Magnificent Multi-Armed Mudbender!" Finn and Artie say together, as though they've rehearsed it a thousand times.

"I am so embarrassed to know you right now…" Kurt sighs, shaking his head.

"This just gets more ridiculous by the minute," Quinn says, exasperated. "This joke is no longer funny. I've had enough." She raises her hand. "CHI-RYU!" And she thrusts it towards them.

"ATTACK!"

With that, all seven girls move in perfect unison, cupping their hands, looping them around, and thrusting them at the gang.

Kurt, Artie, and Mercedes all combine their efforts into raising a rock wall. Then, the three of them (well, Artie via Finn) step forward and slam the stone slab at the girls.

They respond by crouching and sending a unified fire wave at the bottom of the wall, flipping it over them and crashing it into the fence at the edge of the estate.

"AERIAL ASSAULT!" Quinn commands.

Four of the Chi-Ryus act as spotters, hurling Quinn and two of her compatriots into the air, where they proceed to rain a punishing barrage of fireballs down on the gang. The Chi-Ryus on the ground join in the fun, assaulting them from two directions at once.

Finn raises his water to shield them from above, while Artie conjures up another earth wall to
protect their front. Mercedes creates a curved earth shield to intercept both attacks. Kurt tries to respond with a higher rock wall, but it's not structurally sound, and is quickly blasted in half, with the top part nearly landing on him.

"KURT!" Blaine shouts. "You can block them!"

"That's what I'm trying to do," he says as the Chi-Ryus land.

"No," Blaine says. "I mean you can block them! You can bend their fire just like they can! Like this!"

The Prince demonstrates, whirling his forearms as though intercepting an attack.

"Oh," Kurt nods. "Gotch—"

At that point, all seven firebenders throw a charged fireball towards Kurt's wall, blasting it to bits and sending the Avatar flying backwards.

"KURT!" Blaine and Finn shout in unison.

The Avatar flies directly at him, so Blaine does the only thing he can—he shoves Rachel out of the way, and catches the boy.

Of course, by 'catches' he means he stands there and acts as a slight cushion when Kurt slams into him and they both slam into the wall of the burning house.

Mercedes responds with the swiftness and fury of a slighted badgermole, stomping forward and looping both fists in the air. The earth splits in a line from Mercedes outwards, and a huge rock wall rises from the ground, splitting the Chi-Ryu group in half. Three on one side, three-plus Quinn on the other.

The Finn-Artie fusion surfs along an Artie-fueled wave of earth until they reach striking distance of the three firebenders. Finn handles the defense, skillfully bending his water supply into a variety of shapes to intercept the oncoming fire attacks while Artie levitates rocks and decks them at the agile warriors.

Mercedes, on the other hand, covers her entire body in a thick layer of rock, and propels herself along the ground towards Quinn and the others. She tanks their fire blasts as best she can, but Quinn coordinates their attacks. "All together!" she shouts. "FIREBOMB!"

Knowing what's coming, Mercedes breaks open the back of her earth armor and stops herself, letting the armor slide right on. The girls blast it to smithereens, thinking they've got Mercedes. She takes advantage of their presumption, and slams some rock spikes underneath them.

Meanwhile, Rachel attends to the Avatar and the Fire Prince, who are both stunned from the impact. "Oh my gosh, are you okay? Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, all of this violence is just tearing me apart. Why can't we all be friends?"

Her prattling annoys Kurt to full awareness much faster than he would like. "I'm pretty sure I've been asking myself since the very first Avatar cycle," he says, picking himself up. He turns around to see Blaine weakly trying to sit up. "Oh La," he breathes, kneeling next to him. "Blaine, are you okay?"

He hit the spot.
When Kurt slammed into him, and Blaine hit the wall, he wound up slamming the same spot Keros hit with the stupid candlestick, blinding him with pain and momentarily making him black out. Even now, his journey to full consciousness is slow. Kurt's voice sounds like a distant echo from some far-off mountain, and his concerned face looks like it's being filtered through the surface of the ocean. "...aiiine… you understand? Please sayyyyyy... anything..."


Kurt squeezes him tight. "Stay with Rachel. Please, Blaine. Just... stay out of this. I can't lose you again."

He wants to hug him back, but his arms are too slow. Kurt is off again to join the fight, and Rachel is helping him stand up, providing him with a shoulder to lean on, looking at him with tears in her eyes. Her voice echoes loudly in his ears. "...such horrible things... happen... to such nice..."

The young actress leads him away from the burning mansion, to the lawn at the side of the house. "Need..." Blaine starts, still trying to put his jumbled thoughts into an order than makes sense. "We need... to go..."

"We can't," Rachel says. "Not without the others."

"No," Blaine says, shaking his head, unscrambling himself. "We all need to go. Need to leave... quickly."

"Oh. We need to escape," Rachel says, nodding sagely. "I understand now." Her eyes scan the yard for a bit, and she spots something very interesting. "Blaine."

"Mmmm?" he says, looking up at her and being immensely thrilled that her face remains mostly the same shape as she speaks.

"Hold this please," she says, handing him the slab. "I have a spectacular idea..."

Meanwhile, the Magnificent Mudbender has realized something awesome.

Namely, that Kurt's big swimming pool washout created a rather large amount of mud for the two of them to play with.

"Mudshield!" Artie shouts. The two of them move their arms in unison, pulling up a large glob of mud and spreading it in front of them to intercept the Chi-Ryu's fireballs.

"Mudslide!" Finn shouts, and the two of them work together to whip up a wave of mud for Finn to ride on, Artie shifting his weight carefully to make sure Finn keeps his balance. The pair slides around the Chi-Ryus with shocking speed, making it almost impossible to track them. They skid to a stop on the other side of the Chi-Ryu's, being sure to splash a little mud at them just for kicks.

"MUDBATH!" they shout together, putting their entire bodies into motion. They crouch low, perform a smooth scoop to lift the mud into the air, dangle it for a second like puppeteers holding strings, and then blast it apart in all directions.

The Chi-Ryus go flying. Most people don't realize how dense mud is. It carries a lot of weight—hence why actual mudslides are so dangerous.

With the downed Chi-Ryus covered from head to toe in mud, Finn draws the water out of the water/dirt mixture, while Artie hardens the dirt into a thick shell. "Try melting your way out of
"this," the earthbender says as he finishes casting them in place.

"The Magnificent Mudbender strikes again!" Finn says with a grin, and the bros perform another two-handed high five.

On the other side of the fence, Mercedes has her hands full with Quinn and the Chi-Ryus. It's all she can do to defend against them once they get into a rhythm, let alone strike back. She'll raise a boulder only to have it smoldered. She'll lift up a wall only to watch it fall. She'll kick up a spire only to lose it to fire. They're steadily pushing her back towards the house, and help is nowhere in sight.

Until Kurt sprints along her rock wall, jumps off, lands in front of her, and starts dispelling all of their fireballs with shocking ease.

She smiles. It's just like the earthbending lesson she gave him. He doesn't have to block or deflect things with strength alone. When fighting a bender of the same element, it's usually easier just to bend their attacks apart. And Kurt is the same element as everyone.

"Get 'em, baby!" she says. "Bend that fire!"

Kurt responds by dashing straight up to Quinn and engaging her up close and personal.

The Chi-Ryus no longer have their leader coordinating them, but they're still a force to be reckoned with. But Mercedes is a force herself, and now that she has a chance to breathe, she's ready to start her counterattack. She jumps high and slams into the ground with hands and feet together, causing the ground to ripple towards the girls like the stricken surface of a waterbed. The rolling wave of earth prompts the Chi-Ryus to leap into the air to avoid being knocked over, but Mercedes has their number. Pulling her hands out of the ground as hard as she can, she lifts them into the sky, causing a column of earth to jump up and smack into each girl's bottom. Then she pushes her hands down, causing the columns to sink back into the ground, and leaving the stunned girls at the mercy of gravity.

Which, as we all know, is not merciful.

Finally, the Avatar himself engages the Chi-Ryu captain in a fearful display of bending prowess. The two strike rapidly, and strike hard. Quinn's fiery punches, chops and kicks are blocked, parried, and detonated against Kurt's own. The two shoot fire over, under and around each other, both taking advantage of their close range to deflect limbs and misguide the others' attacks. The ground around them quickly becomes dried and blackened from the combustive combat. Kurt keeps up admirably, but Quinn has far more firebending training, and she is dedicated, focused, and determined.

But just as it becomes obvious that Kurt is outmatched in terms of sheer firebending, he starts switching it up. One of his fists is suddenly encased in rock, making it much more difficult to block. The earth shifts beneath Quinn's feet, breaking her stance and putting her on the defensive. As she tries a counter-kick, Kurt responds with a kick of his own—but his leg is encased in water drawn from the mud. As their feet meet, the water moves to engulf Quinn's leg, thwarting her firebending attempt and trapping it. He lifts her into the air with the tendril, and she just barely manages to cut the watery cord with a slice of fire before being slammed back down again.

She lands a short distance away from him, and is just getting ready for a counterattack when a ball of mud slams into her face. She starts to wipe it off, when suddenly it hardens into a clay mask, sticking to her face. Thoroughly blinded, she doesn't even see Mercedes's boulder until it slams into her, knocking her aside.
The mud mask is broken, but Quinn is reeling from the hit. She picks herself up slowly, taking a survey of the battlefield. Her Chi-Ryus are all trapped or downed. There are four combat-ready benders in front of her, three of which are surrounded by abundant amounts of their native elements, and one of which is the gods-damned Avatar. This would be troubling, if it weren't for one little thing...

"Never," Kurt hisses, "ever come near Blaine again."

"Oh," Quinn says with a smirk. "You're making demands now? You think you have leverage?"

"I think you just got your pretty little ass kicked," Kurt says cattily. "And unless you want an encore, you will back off."

"Fine," Quinn says, holding her hands up. "I know when I'm beat. A warrior surrenders with honor. I'll back off." She flicks her head to the side. "But they might be a little more difficult to convince."

At this, Kurt looks past Quinn, through the see-through fence to the streets outside. It's positively swimming with guards. All of whom stand ready to attack at a moment's notice. All of whom can see exactly where they are, thanks to the aforementioned stupid see-through fence.

"Surrender! You are completely surrounded! There is no escape!" shouts a guard with a metal megaphone.

"Yeah, surrender!"

"Murdering scum!"

"FOR THE FIRE LORD!"

"Shut up, Phil, you didn't even like him."

"DID TOO!"

"You won the battle," Quinn says, "but you've lost the war. Not even you can fight this many at once."

The Avatar and his friends stare out at the clamoring throngs of guards surrounding them.

"She's right," Artie says quietly. "We're screwed."

"We can't be screwed," Finn says. "We were awesome! We fought so hard to get here…"

"Doesn't matter," Mercedes sighs. "None of that means a damn thing right now."

"Well, I'm not giving up without a fight," Kurt says. "If I have to go down, I am going to make it an historic event. It will be the subject of horror stories told for centuries."

"As much as I love a good story," Rachel says, "I hope that won't be necessary."

The gang turns around to see Rachel and a slightly less delirious-looking Blaine at the reins of a large komodo rhino.

Kurt grins, delighted. "I might just grow to like you," he says, jumping up onto the saddle and securing the wobbling Prince to himself.

"Thanks," Blaine says. "I was starting to feel a little woozy from everything going back and forth."
"It wasn't everything, Blaine," Kurt says, holding him tight. "Just you."

"Oh. Well, thanks anyway," he says with a smile.

Finn and Artie remain attached for the time being as they rise on a column of mud and jump onto the mount.

"What are you doing?" megaphone man shouts. "Stop that! Whatever you're planning, I assure you, it will not work!"

"People once said the same thing about cross-gender fashion and… well, I think we all know how that went," Kurt says with a smile.

Quinn's triumphant smirk has melted into a scowl, and she looks ready to attack when Mercedes encases her in a tight cone of earth, with only her head sticking out.

"Stay sweet, honeybuns," she says as she climbs onboard. "Don't hawk us. We'll hawk you."

"It's not over," Quinn warns.

Rachel lashes the reins, and the rhino trots around and heads through the yard towards the gate Quinn left open when she came in.

"Do you really know how to drive this thing?" Kurt asks Rachel from atop the speeding rhino.

"Yes!" she insists loudly. "I learned by… sitting on top of it and doing things with the reins until it moved. I feel very confident in my ability to guide this mighty beast to our destination."

"We're dead," Artie deadpans.

"Everybody hold on!" Rachel says as they head through the gate, into the streets, encountering their first contingent of guards. Fortunately, they encounter shockingly little resistance. Most of them are smart enough to move out of the way when they see a huge, horned animal charging at them. The ones that are not, well…

"Sorry!" Blaine says as they fly over head and smack into the ground behind them.

"It's their own fault, really," Mercedes says, shaking her head sadly.

She is infuriated. Outraged. Incensed. Boiling over with contempt and anger. She needs to vent. So she takes her own advice, grabbing onto all of that anger and doing something with it.

The explosion that shatters her prison can be heard all across the city.

"Are we going the right way?" Rachel asks.

Artie pulls himself higher on Finn's shoulders to look at their surroundings. "Ummm… yes and no."
"What's that supposed to mean?" Kurt sighs.

The earthbender points at a long building directly ahead of them. "That's the train station," he says. "Unfortunately, it looks like they knew we were coming," he adds, shifting his finger over slightly to indicate a large throng of guards surrounding some horrifying giant metal contraption.

"What is that?" Finn asks, horrified but also intrigued.

"A firebending tank," Blaine says. "The tank doesn't firebend, but the people inside of it do, so it's pretty dangerous."

"Of course it is," Kurt sighs. "Could this day get any longer?"

She moves with purpose and determination. If a Chi-Ryu is knocked out, she forces them awake. If they are entrapped, she blasts them free.

Her warriors will not so easily be silenced.

She will not be so lightly thrown off.

"I guess we'll just have to go through it," Rachel says with determination.

Artie looks at her aghast. "Fuck that noise! We'll go around it."

"There's nowhere to go, Artie!" Rachel cries.

"You're not thinking like an earthbender," he counters, leaning around Finn to grab at the reins. "Here, give me those—"

"You can't just take the—"

"Give me the freakin'—"

"Stop shoving me—"

"Give me the damn—"

"If you can't ask nicely—"

"WATCH OUT!" Kurt says, pointing to the wall that their squabbling has just guided them towards.
There is a rhino in the street near the house. It seems to be in pain.

She does not care. She isn't allowed to care. She lights a fire under it and gets it on its feet.

The female assassin frees herself from her icy prison just as Quinn is getting ready to do the job for her.

They ride out into the city, their minds on one thing and one thing only.

Mercedes shatters the stone wall with earthbending just as they are about to slam into it. The wall separates the train yard from the Upper Level, so now their rhino is dashing along a set of four parallel tracks, heading towards the train station from behind the engines.

"Great!" Finn says. "Now all we need to do is steal a train."

"Show of hands—who knows how to drive one of those?" Kurt says.

No one raises their hand.

"I thought so," he sighs. "This was a stupid idea…"

The sound of a much louder whistle makes several of them cringe. It seems to give Blaine an idea, however. "What if we just jump on one that's already moving?" he says, pointing to a freight train on the leftmost track. It's pretty far ahead, but it's just started moving.

"If we can get to it before it picks up too much speed, we'll be golden," Mercedes says.

"But wait! Don't we need to know where it takes us? Shouldn't we figure out where we're going beforehand?" Rachel asks.

Kurt puts a gentle hand on her shoulder. "If there is one thing you must learn before traveling with us, sweetie, it's this; the answer to that question is 'no.'"

"Always?" she asks.

"Ninety-nine percent of the time," Kurt says with a shrug. "Now let's go!"

The male assassin finds them shortly.

He guides his own komodo rhino into step beside theirs.

The beast is scorched and blackened.

The assassin himself carries a few wounds from the flames, but his eyes do not betray his pain.

His eyes hunger only for revenge.

He joins them in all ways.

They barrel through the guards just as easily as their foes.
As they approach the platform, they can see a passenger train boarding on the rightmost track, with all sorts of people on the boarding platforms watching them as they pass. A few guards make a cursory attempt at fire-blasting them, but their rhino is a regular speed demon, and they miss by a longshot. The gang catches up with the freight train just past the station, pulling right behind the caboose, which only has a few mechanics and maintenance workers inside of it.

"Alright," Kurt says. "This is where we get off. Or... where we get on. You know what? It's the end of the day, and I'm tired. Screw the quips. Just get on the damn train."

The Finn-Artie fusion makes the jump first, with Artie having to reach out and grab railing to keep them from falling backwards due to his added weight. Once steady, they move to the side and wait for the others.

Mercedes is next. She makes the leap without too much trouble, though Finn and Artie still reach out to make sure she's steady once she's onboard.

Kurt helps Blaine to his feet. "We're next, Blaine."

Blaine smiles at him, clutching the tablet. "I might need your help. But then... I always need your help. You're so helpful. Why are you so nice to me?"

The Avatar doesn't think he can answer that question without breaking someone's heart, so he doesn't. Instead, he looks to the three already onboard. "Ready?" he asks.

"Ready," they say.

And then he bodily lifts Blaine and tosses him to them. They catch him and sit him down behind them. "Thank you," Blaine says.

Kurt jumps over next, and needs no help to steady himself.

"All aboard!" the conductor shouts. "ALL ABOA—ack!"

He is yanked of the train with casual disregard.

"Out," she commands.

The passengers stare at her, uncertain.

A window explodes as her fireball slams into it.

"OUT," she repeats.

They do not need to be told again.

She finds the driver easily.

"What is the meaning of—"

The heat of the flame tickles his ear as she holds it steady at his neck.

"Drive."
Finally, it's Rachel's turn. "Hurry, Rachel!" Finn shouts. "The train's getting faster!"

He's right. The rhino is steadily losing pace. The gap between the beast and the train gets wider and wider. Lashing it a little to try and give it a final boost of speed, Rachel stands up, gathers all the courage she can, and makes a flying leap towards the train.

Or, at least, she tries to. Her foot slips at the last second and, though she makes an admirable recovery, she still misses the end of the train car by a decent margin. Her hand clutches towards the cart in vain as she falls short.

Fortunately, hers isn't the only hand available for clutching.

"RACHEL!" Finn shouts, reaching out and grabbing onto her, taking advantage of his lengthy arms. Artie grips the overhang to keep Finn from falling out, and Kurt starts pulling at Finn's waist to help him reel the girl in.

"!" Rachel scream at the very top of her lungs.

For the record, Rachel's lungs have a very high top.

With Kurt, Finn, Artie, and finally Mercedes joining in, they manage to pull the girl onboard as the train rounds a bend, the lot of them nearly squishing Blaine as they fall backwards.

The six of them take a second to look at each other.

"Well," Kurt says. "That was… harrowing."

"That is an excellent word to describe it," Rachel says, breathing heavily.

A mechanic sticks his head out of the back of the car. "What in the blazes is going on back here?"

The gang gives him a pained look.

"Sorry," Blaine apologizes in advance.

"For what?" the mechanic asks.

Ten seconds later, the car is two mechanics lighter.

"Hey," Kurt shrugs. "Look at it this way. At least we got them off before the train reached full speed."

"They'll be alright," Artie agrees. "Mostly."

*Back in the lower levels of Sho Fa, a familiar warrior is waging a pitched battle of his own. He deflects several more fire blasts with a well-placed gust of air, and is getting ready to counterattack, when…*

"!"

*The warrior looks to the sky, his spirits falling almost immediately. His heart constricts, and he remembers a broken promise.*

"Rachel..." he says.
He abandons the fight.

He has to get to her...

now

And so the six of them watch as Sho Fa fades into the setting sun, heading east on an outbound train to La-Only-Knows where. They each take a moment to breathe and collect their bearings.

Finn detaches Artie and sits him in a comfy-looking chair towards the front of the car. Rachel fans herself near the front doorway while Mercedes sprawls out across two seats and catches her breath. Kurt guides a still-slightly woozy Blaine to a seat near the back of the car.

"My head hurts," Blaine complains.

"Did you hit it?" Kurt asks. "Is that why you're a little… off-kilter right now?"

"You would look good in a kilter," Blaine says, which is pretty much all the answer Kurt needs.

"Right," the Avatar says. "Medic!"

Finn bounds over to his brother, pulling out his water supply before he even gets there. "What's up now?"

"Pretty sure Blaine's got a head wound," Kurt says.

Finn moves around to get a better look at Blaine's head. "Dude," he says, taken aback. "This is gnarly. How are you even still awake?"

"Don't question miracles, Finn," Kurt says, teasing. "Just heal him."

The waterbender smiles and gets to work.

"You always take care of me," Blaine says with a hazy smile.

A smile that fades as he quietly adds, "I wish you didn't have to."

"Oh, Blaine," Kurt sighs. "I know how you feel. I love… having you here with us, but the cost has been so high… for both of us. I wish it didn't have to be that way."

His eyes are so sad when he looks up at Kurt, at a momentary loss for words.

But Finn's healing seems to relax him a bit. Soon, he finds himself smiling again, staring at Kurt with soft, warm, firelight eyes.

And then, he says it.

"I love you."

And everything stops.

Kurt kneels in front of Blaine, mouth in the perfect fly-catching position, eyes filling with water far faster than he can drain it.
Finn stands above Blaine, looking down at him in awe, the water around his hands glowing softly.

Mercedes sits up, staring wide-eyed at the boys, the tension in the air making it hard for her to breathe.

Artie leans over in his chair to get a better view of the action, his expression anxious as he steadies himself with his hands.

Rachel clutches her hand to her chest with a small, tearful smile on her face.

"What," Kurt says, his voice cracking and forcing him to repeat himself. "What did you say?"

And Blaine…

Blaine looks amazed. Shocked, even at his own words, like he had no idea what he was saying until he said it. Like that was what it took to bring him to full awareness. "Kurt…” he breathes.

It's a beautiful moment. Quiet, but powerful, so peaceful, and yet so earthshattering. It's gravity is impossible to deny—none of them can look away from it.

Which is why no one notices what's coming to break it, until it shatters right in front of their eyes.

Blaine's eyes lock on Kurt. "I—"

And the back of the car explodes.

Kurt, Finn, and Blaine go flying towards the front of the car as Rachel, Artie and Mercedes shield themselves from the heat and debris. The Avatar, the Prince, and the Healer all slam into the back wall, two of them falling stunned to their hands and knees.

For the third, however, it's just too much. Finn hadn't quite finished healing Blaine when the blast hit, so when he slams into the wall and hits his head for the second time that day, his mind and senses are overwhelmed, and he has no choice in the matter. As Kurt and Finn fall to their hands and knees, Blaine stumbles forward, his limbs beyond his conscious control, grasping at nothing in particular, as his eyes roll back into his skull, and he falls.

And another little piece of Kurt dies as he watches it.

From the hole blasted in the end of the cart, a second train can be seen, chugging fast along a track parallel to their own. A handful of passenger cars with the windows knocked out are its only cargo. A collection of guards and Chi-Ryus lean out from the windows, taking aim at them from afar.

Standing on top of the frontmost car, framed by the light of the setting sun, are the dark outlines of Santana, Puck, and Quinn.

The blonde-haired girl's expression is a stone mask as she fixes her eyes on her target.

"It's not over."

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: COMING UP NEXT: They don't give up, do they? With Blaine down for the count, Kurt and friends must face their pursuers in a hostile environment: surrounded by metal, with precious little water to spare. The high-speed showdown takes quite a few unexpected turns—truths are revealed, wildcards make their triumphant returns, love is lost, love is fought for and won… and help from
an unexpected source leads to an ending that will *blow your mind*.

The extravaganza continues in *Part 2: Battle of the Eastern Line*. 
Trainwreck Extravaganza, Part 2

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 49/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: None for this chapter.
Word Count: ~17500
Summary: When a usurper sets eyes on the Fire Nation throne, Avatar Kurt and friends find themselves on the run with the deposed Prince Blaine in a country gone mad. Can they escape Lady Sylvester's wrath? Or will her minions snuff them out for good? Fusion fic!

Author's Note: So, I did some research on real-world trains, and I'm quite aware that some of the things in this chapter aren't possible with real trains. But these aren't real trains. They're Avatar!Verse trains, so we can forgive them for being a little less advanced than ours. :P In this chapter: a glorious movie cliché, the traintop battle! Oh, and incredibly important plot developments that I've been building towards for months. Those too. ;D

CHAPTER 49 – Trainwreck Extravaganza, Part 2: Battle of the Eastern Line

Freddy and his buddy Don drive trains for a living.

Freddy keeps his eye on the gauges and doohickeys and watchamabobbits and flips switches and turns dials that keep them from exploding. It's important work.

Don mostly just shovels coal, takes care of water refills and other manual labor, and pretty much just does what Freddy tells him to.

It's a decent living, but it's not their dream.

See, Freddy and Don are also in a band. They and their two mechanics, Charlie and Lou, form The Chuggas on their off days. They dream of a life where they can forget the trains and just get by on the music. And like all good musicians, they know the key to greatness is practice, practice,
practice.

And what better time to practice than on a long train ride (you know, in between doing their actual jobs and whatnot)?

"I'M A ROLLIN' ON DOWN THE LINE, GONNA LEAVE MY WORRIES BEHIND," Freddy sings.

"HIS WORRIES BEHIND!" Don echoes, playing his shovel like a guitar (no freakin' way he'd bring his real guitar onto the filthy cab of a Fire Nation Steam Engine).

The thing is, trains, by default, are loud. So in order to hear yourself sing over the sound of a chugging engine, you have to be even louder. You've gotta give it all you got, let the passion flow up out of your mouth in its raw form. That's real music. It's a trip, man.

So, you know, just in case you were wondering why the guys in charge didn't notice their train being blasted into scrap metal… this would be the reason.

"…CAUSE YOU GOT NO TIME, WHEN YOU MAKE YOUR LIVING ON THE LINE!"

"ON THE LIIIIIIINE! Shovel solo!"

"…inn! Finn, can you hear me?"


If he eats cotton candy that's already inside of him, will he still be hungry?

Whoa. Mind blown.

"FINN!"

Someone is being loud. And insistent. Loud and insistent… equals… Rachel! Finn shakes his head, eats some cotton candy, and looks up at the concerned face of the girl in front of him.

"Finn!" Rachel says, wrapping him in a slightly painful death-hug. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"Huh…?" Finn tries another headshake, hoping to jostle some memories loose. It doesn't work.

So instead, he tries to look at where he is now. He is… on the ground. On the shaky, move-y ground, with lots of noise and wind around. The ground is moving. He is moving… they are moving.

They're on a train! A train that, from the looks of the shredded walls and flames all around them, exploded.

HOLY SHIT. The train exploded!

"Kurt!" he says, sitting up. "Blaine! Where are you? Are you okay?"

His eyes and ears are still a little iffy. Everything is hazy, and there's a whoosh in his ears, like somebody is sitting beside him and blowing in them to annoy him and he can't smack them away.
He has to squint to see anything. When he does squint, he kind of wishes he hadn't.

A short ways in front of him, Kurt is cradling Blaine in his lap, trying so hard not to cry, just rocking back and forth.

"I can't," he says. "I can't keep doing this. I can't."

Finn crawls over, completely forgetting the fuzz in his brain and ignoring the little spikes of pain from all the bruises he forgot to heal. (Oh, and now he remembers Santana beating the crap out of him. He could have done without that one, thanks).

"Let me see him," Finn says softly.

Kurt really doesn't want to let go, but he does it anyway. Soon, Finn has an armful of Blaine, and another important job to do.

"Boys, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but they're gaining on us. They're gonna start shooting again," Mercedes says.

Oh. That's why the train exploded. "Who hit us?" Finn asks.

"Who do you think?" Kurt spits, standing up with a clenched fist. If he is hurt at all, he doesn't show it—he just steps over to open-air end of the car and starts letting loose with the biggest fireballs Finn has ever seen from him. A few fireballs fly back at him, but he takes them apart with ease, and they're piddly in comparison to the monsters Kurt is tossing out.

"Finn!" Artie says. "Hey, focus, dude."

The weight in his arms comes back to him, and Finn looks down at Blaine. Suddenly, his own chest is clenching super tight. It's just like before—they were all at the Palace and Blaine was hurt and Kurt was pissed and nobody knew what was going to happen, if he would live or die. It's the same damn thing only… not at all. Because back then, Blaine was just Kurt's. Kurt's teacher, Kurt's friend, Kurt's potential de-virtue-izer. But now… now he's everybody's. He belongs to all of them, and it shows. Mercedes is trying to glare him into waking up while trying not to cry at the same time. Artie can't keep his eyes on Blaine for more than a second, but he can't completely look away, either, so he just looks back and forth a lot. Rachel hasn't even known him for that long and she looks like she's about to melt into a puddle of tears.

"Is he going to be okay?" she asks.

Finn pulls out his water and starts putting his glow-fingers to good use, running through Blaine's hair, rinsing away the gel whether he means to or not. He can feel the way Blaine's energy is moving inside of him, and it spikes in a big way around the wound. He lends some of his own energy to give it a hand.

"It's not as bad as it could be," Finn says. "He won't die. I can definitely fix it, it's just…"

A fireball slams into the wall over their heads, blowing debris all over them.

"…I need a less death-threatening place to heal him in," Finn finishes.

"Kurt, they're still gaining on us!" Artie says.

"I noticed!" Kurt shouts back at them. "Would you be a dear and run up to the front of the train and kindly ask the driver to pick up the fucking pace?"
Artie has a pretty good bitchface when he needs it. "Funny."

"Ooh!" Rachel says, raising her hand. "I'll go!"

"I was being sarcastic, Rachel!" Kurt sighs, hopping on one foot as a fireball explodes on the ground near him. He tosses back another blast, but it's smaller than it was earlier, while the bad guys' looks like they're getting bigger.

"Wait..." Artie says. "That's actually not a bad idea."

"Say what now?" Mercedes asks.

"We can't stay here," Artie elaborates. "If we do, they'll either blow us up or capture us. So why not go further up?"

Mercedes gets the picture. "Oh... good point."

"If we're going to go, we should probably do it soon!" Kurt says. His face is all shiny and his hair is all stringy and wet. He's super sweaty and tired and Finn knows he can't keep this up for much longer.

"Okay, I've got Blaine. Who's got Artie?" Finn asks.

A bunch more fireballs suddenly slam into the walls, raining rubble and blasting more holes in their already hole-y car.

"I do!" Mercedes says. "No more talking. Let's go!"

With that, Mercedes heaves a surprised Artie over her shoulders, while Finn stands up, cradling Blaine like a baby. Rachel looks ready to split when she suddenly remembers something. She dashes over to a corner and picks up the Sun Warrior tablet again, and Finn is super glad they trusted her with it, because he's pretty sure the rest of them would've left it behind.

"Come on, Kurt!" Finn shouts.

Kurt nods. He doesn't have the breath for words. Instead, he just runs to them as fast as he can while fire slams into the floor behind him.

The door to the caboose pretty much collapses when they try to open it. The next car in line is a big metal box car. Finn can't see a way around or through it, but there is a ladder for them to climb up top.

"Guess we're going over," he says.

Rachel scrambles up the ladder and starts to stand up when a fireball whizzes past her head, putting her on her stomach with a frightened squeak.

Mercedes outright hurls Artie on top of the car and jumps up the ladder after him. When she's in place, she reaches down, and Finn hands her Blaine so he can climb up himself.

Kurt comes last, but his brain gets hung on something. He pauses halfway up the ladder, staring down.

"Kurt, what is it?" Finn says.

"Either a great or terrible idea!" Kurt shouts back. He pulls his hand up, and the water from his
pouch jumps out like a beardedog ready to do tricks for a treat. With one clean slice of his hand, the water arcs below him, and Finn hears something snap.

Suddenly, the destroyed caboose is drifting away from them, no longer attached to the train.

"Dude!" Artie says, watching the caboose slowly roll to a stop. "You're a genius!"

"I know," Kurt says, smiling as finishes climbing up.

"I don't get it," Finn says.

A fireball soars past his ear, and Kurt turns around to start bending them apart again. This time, he doesn't throw any back. "It's dropping dead weight, Finn," he says, still a little out-of-breath. "If we lighten the load by cutting loose the cars, our train goes faster."

"Plus," Artie adds, "if we cut the cars as we go, it's harder for them to jump onboard."

"But how do we know which cars are dead weight?" Finn asks.

"They all are, as far as I'm concerned!" Artie says.

"Wait!" Rachel says. "What if there are important things in there?"

"Like what?" Artie asks.

"Like bendables," Mercedes says.

Artie raises his eyebrows. "That's... a pretty good point."

"Okay," Kurt says. "Here's the plan, people. Rachel, you're in front. Keep your eyes ahead and warn us if anything dangerous is coming. Finn, you're behind Rachel on Blaine duty. Artie, Mercedes, you guys check every car for bendables. I'm on defense—firebending is exhausting to do, but relatively easy to undo, if that makes any sense. Everybody got it?"

"Got it!" replies everybody. Well, you know, except Blaine.

"Then let's go!"

---

The enemy train is composed of a mere three cars. Two passenger cars full of guards, and a caboose with... shall we say... other supplies.

"Keep up that suppressing fire!" Quinn shouts down to her Chi-Ryus the guards tagging along. She stands on the roof of the frontmost passenger car, watching the Avatar and friends through a spyglass.

"What are they doing?" she asks, shaking her head.

Santana snatches the scope, watching as the big black one lowers Mr. Duck by his legs. The cripple smashes the lock on the boxcar and slides the door open, peering inside. "Looking for loot?" she says with a shrug. "Fucked if I know."

Quinn snatches the spyglass back from Santana. "And you continue to be useless. How about you do something productive and tell the driver to speed up?"

Santana glares at her with her head cocked, but she complies anyway. A quick jump carries her
onto the edge of the tender. "HEY!" she shouts at the driver. "**Move this hunk of junk! Put some juice into it!**"

The nervous man sputters his acquiescence, and starts fiddling with his instruments.

"You're welcome," Santana says snottily as she jumps back up.

"Shut up," Quinn grinds out. "If you two and the other idiot weren't such... **idiots**, we wouldn't even be here."

"Hey!" Santana shouts. "I don't recall you doing much better."

"Well, I did," Quinn says flatly. "Because _you_ were too worried about your stupid rhino," she says, jamming a finger at Puck, "and _you_ were more concerned with venting your anger on the big dumb one than actually **capturing** him," she adds, accusing Santana, "**my** Chi-Ryus and I had to face his entire team. And we **still** held out better than you."

"Yeah, well we would've done a lot better if your dumb Chi-Ryu's hadn't bailed on us!" Puck grunts.

"Yeah," Santana says. "You forgot to mention the little part about them turning tail whenever you call. What the fuck did you even need them for, anyway?"

The Chi-Ryu Captain stiffens, bristling at the question. "It's none of your concern," she says quietly, pulling out her spyglass again.

Up ahead, Kurt detaches another car, and it slowly rolls away.

"**Now** I get it," she says quietly. "Smart. Tell the engineer to keep ramping up the speed!"

Santana gives her another challenging glare, but does as she is told.

"How many more shells do we have?" Quinn asks Puck.

"Enough," Puck says, crossing his arms.

"How many is enough? Did you get the tank's entire supply?" Quinn asks.

"There wasn't time to get 'em all before you made us pull out, but we got a couple boxes," Puck says.

"Good," Quinn says. "I think it's time we gave them another shot."

Puck grins. "Hey," he calls back. "Get me another shell up here! The human cannon's ready to fire!"

"**How** are they still firebending?" Kurt asks as he shreds a few more fireballs in mid-air. "They should be passed out by now!"

And yet, the Chi-Ryus and the City Guards continue to toss out a steady stream of combustive fury.

"They're probably just better than you," Mercedes says casually.

Kurt pauses for a second to glare at her.
"At firebending," she clarifies testily. "Don't be gettin' all sensitive on me.


Mercedes dangles Artie like a fishhook down to the door of the next boxcar. Just like before, he punches the lock off and slides the door open, peering inside.

"Barrels!" he shouts.

"Of what?" Kurt asks, flinching back from a fireball that buzzed just a little too close to his face.

Artie's rock gloves punch a hole in a few barrels. "Seeds!"

"Friggin' useless," Kurt sighs. "Alright, move on!"

Mercedes hauls Artie back up and tosses him over her shoulder again.

"You know," Artie says from behind her. "I could put my arms around your shoulders..."

"After what happened last time?" Mercedes laughs as she jumps to the next cart. "I don't think so, Mr. Grabby Hands."

"That was an accident!" Artie cries.


"Hey," Artie says testily. "If I really wanted to, I could get a couple of juicy handfuls back here too, if you know what I—MMMM!

As Mercedes jumps to the next car, she accidentally sticks the landing so that Artie winds up smacking face first into her back.

When everybody is clear of the car, Kurt waits for a pause in the firestream to pull out his water, and cuts another car loose.

"Curve!" Rachel shouts.

"Everybody down!" Kurt orders.

The gang crouches to steady themselves and keep from sliding off the roof as the train rounds a curve. Centrifugal force is kind of a bitch.

From this position, Kurt notices that the Chi-Ryus have stopped firing, which instantly makes him wary. On the roof of the enemy train, Quinn and Santana step back, while Puck steps forward with something in his super-hand. Kurt can't quite make out what it is before Puck rears back and hurls it at them.

He hears a strange whistle.

And suddenly, the seed boxcar is blown apart in a violent, flaming cloud of shrapnel. The so-called seed scatters through the air, much of it popping from the heat as it flies.

"What was that?" Finn shouts. He's healing Blaine as he does it, taking every opportunity to work the water over the Prince's abused scalp.
"Popcorn!" Artie says excitedly.

"No, I mean... the big explosion!" Finn clarifies.

"That was Puck!" Kurt shouts. "They've got heavy artillery!"

"Damn!" Mercedes curses. "We'll be smitherens if we don't do something quick!"

"The only thing I can throw back at them is fire," Kurt says. "So I guess I'm back on offense until we find some decent bendables." He sighs. "What I wouldn't give for a car full of rocks, or sand, or —"

"Coal!" Rachel shouts suddenly. "Coal and water!"

"Yes, Rachel, those are excellent examples of things we can bend," Kurt says.

"No," Rachel says. "Well, I mean, yes, but also—both of those are things that Fire Nation trains run on! Coal is used everywhere in the Fire Nation; I bet there are cars full of it!"

Kurt snaps. "And I can draw the water from the train!" he says with a grin.

"Oh, no, silly," Rachel says. "That might cause an explosion."

"...oh," Kurt says.

"But you can get some from the refill towers! There are some on the sides of the tracks, just in case a train needs an emergency refill," Rachel says brightly. "I'll keep my eyes open."

"Great!" Kurt says. "And we'll be looking for coal."

The curve finally evens out, enabling them to stand up again. "Alright, let's go!"

He stands up and takes aim. Puck is in the process of being handed another shell, but Kurt sends some fierce flames his way. The shots come close enough to his face to send him flailing back, accidentally tossing the shell into the air behind them, where it demolishes a sizeable section of track.

Kurt smirks in satisfaction. "Okay, so," he says, keeping the heat on as best he can. "What's inside car number three?"

Once again, Artie is lowered to examine their latest foray into the wide world of train robbing.

The lock on this car is already broken, so Artie is immediately leery of the contents. He slides the door open, only to find...

"Barrels and bums!" he shouts up at Kurt.

"Barrels of buns?" Kurt shouts back.

"No!" Artie yells again. "BARRELS, AND—"

"We prefer the term 'hobos,'" says a rather helpful dirt-crusted man in tatters.

"Oh, cool," Artie says. "BARRELS AND HOBOS!"

"That is a highly derogatory term!" Rachel says. "How can you be so insensitive?"
"Their word, not mine!" Artie counters.

Kurt rolls his eyes. "Okay; barrels of what?"

"What y'all shippin', my brothers?" Artie asks.

"The good stuff," one of the hobos winks, raising a dirty mug and taking a swig. "It'll cure what ales ya."

"Score!" Artie shouts. "Hummel, we have bendables! Alcohol on deck!"

"Fantastic," Kurt cries. "Open one for me!"

"Blazes yeah!" a hobo shouts. "Drinks all around! We'll make it a party!"

"Can't," Artie says sadly. "No drinking on the job. I'm glad you guys are willing to share though, because we have something else in mind for this brew…"

With that, he glove-smashes a hole in one of the thick barrels, and Kurt's grin widens.

"They're talking about… something, I have no idea. I can't lip-read," Quinn says, shaking her head. "Puck! What is taking you so long?"

"Look, I can't just use this thing non-stop, okay?" Puck says, holding up his hand. "It's like sex. I have to chill for a little bit, give the juice time to build up again—"

"Do not finish that sentence," Quinn seethes. "Just… hurry up. And try not to drop it this time."

"He shot fire at my face!" Puck sighs. "I'm not just gonna stand there and take it! I like this face."

"HEY!" Santana says, pointing ahead. "Hate to interrupt your little squabble, but we gots issues."

Up ahead, Kurt is drawing a massive amount of really murky-looking liquid from inside the train. A look through the spyglass reveals a bunch of dirty bums inside the car, shaking their fists and yelling at him.

"Damn it," Quinn says without thinking. "CHI-RYUS! BOIL AWAY THAT WATER!"

She gives the order just in time for the Avatar to fling the entire supply of liquid straight at them. She has to wonder what he's thinking; a little water is hardly going to slow down a Fire Nation Steamer.

It's when the first fireball hits the liquid that she realizes it isn't water.

"DUCK AND COVER!" Quinn shouts, diving off the roof as the mass of flaming napalm lands on the train. Huge flames billow out from the engine on all sides, draping over the windows, making it impossible to see or counterattack.

The Chi-Ryu Captain grinds her teeth. Fine. If he wants to play it hot and heavy, Quinn will so bring the heat…

"YEAH, BOY!" Artie shouts, giving a fist-pump as the alcoholic napalm hits home, driving everyone into the cars.
"Awesome!" Finn says as he watches brilliant flames barreling out from all sides of the train.

"Good thinking," Mercedes says.

"All that ale," a hobo weeps. "Gone to waste!"

"Oh, get over it," Kurt sighs, shooing his friends to the next car. "There's plenty of beer in the sea… or… you know, a similar metaphor."

He cuts the tramp trolley, having spent its useful contents. "Farewell, gentle vagrants!" he says, waving at them as they drift off like the drifters they are. "May you live to drink another day!"

It's as he's waving to the angry hobos that he notices the ale-fire swiftly and violently extinguish itself.

"Well, crap!" he curses. With no small amount of reluctance, he abuses his aching muscles into more fire tossing. "Okay, that was short-lived. We need more bendables, fast."

"Come on, y'all," Mercedes says. "Think! What do we know about coal?"

"Ummm…" Finn thinks. "It's black."

"It's dusty!" Rachel contributes.

"It burns," Artie says.

And suddenly, Kurt wants to perform a fiery facepalm. "Of course," he says quietly. "Why didn't I think of that?"

With that, he promptly turns around, and starts firebending at the train.

"Okay, far be it from me to question your authority or anything, but what the hills are you doing?" Mercedes asks, pointing at the Quicktana Express. "Bad guys are that way!"

"I'm not worried about them. Come on!" Kurt says. "Follow me! Don't worry about anything, just keep running until I tell you to stop." He bounces over onto the next car, laying down some more scorched marks and not liking what he sees.

They're not quite sure what he's doing, but he is the Avatar, so they follow him, running from car to car. On each one, Kurt does the same thing—light a fire, make a face, keep going. They're making quick progress, but unfortunately, Kurt's absence on offense has invited the baddies to bring out their big guns again.

It isn't long before the cars start blowing up behind them.

"MOTHERFUCKER!" Artie says from Mercedes's back, shielding his face from the heat as one of the closer cars is blasted apart. "Uhh, Kurt, I think you might do something. Unless your master plan involves us getting blasted to the moon!"

Kurt ignores him. It's his privilege as Avatar. He knows what he's going for—at least, he thinks he does.

"Dude, seriously!" Finn says. "What are you doing?"

"Coal is dusty, black, and flammable," he says, finally deigning to explain. "Pretty much any car that has it should have some residue on the outside, meaning it will react to fire. We figure out
what's inside by what's outside."

"Damn, dude," Artie says, impressed. "You are a genius!"

Another explosion rocks the train, but this one wasn't even an actual hit. The shot went high, and slammed into a cliff a short distance away.

"Is it just me, or is he getting worse?" Mercedes asks.

"Look behind you!" Artie says, pointing out what he can already see. All the flaming cars that Puck has detonated are still burning, and the combined effect of which has created a pretty effective smokescreen.

"They can't see us!" Finn says brightly.

"Yes, but we can't see them, either," Kurt says, keeping them on track. "Plus, with Puck throwing unpredictably like that, you never know when he might get a lucky shot and actually hit us. Or the engine, for that matter."

"...oh," Finn says. "Good thinking."

"Come on..." Kurt says, jumping over and tossing a fireball onto another car.

He almost runs past it before he notices it flare up beautifully, and skids to a stop.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he says with a serene smile, "here, we make our stand."

"Stop it!" Santana says.

"I can still hit them!" Puck insists, beckoning for another shell.

"Yes," Quinn says, trying to stare through the smoke with the spyglass. It isn't working. "You could also accidentally take out the track in front of us, derailing us so we can die horrible, bloody deaths."

This halts Puck's throwing arm mid toss. "...oh."

"I don't know what they're up to," Quinn says, "but for now, we just need to be patient. Our train is faster than theirs. It's only a matter of time before this smokescreen is behind us and we have a clear shot at victory."

That time comes much sooner than Quinn anticipates. One minute, they're flying blind—the next, they're in the clear, with the entirety of the smoking cars having been cut from the Avatar Steamer. She's just getting ready to order Puck to start shelling them again, when she sees something unusual.

An open-top car, full of black rocks, with two earthbenders and a pissed-looking Avatar inside.

Oh.

Crap.

"EVERYBODY DOWN!" Quinn shouts, diving off the roof and slipping into the first car.

Puck and Santana jump down into the second car just in time to avoid being buffeted with a
hailstorm of coal. Hundreds of tiny briquettes slam into every part of the train, smashing any windows that aren't already broken, bouncing off the engine, and rebounding inside the cars causing all manner of havoc.

"Shit. Shit!" Quinn curses. "BACK OFF!" she yells to the driver. "WE NEED MORE DISTANCE!"

As she shouts this, she notices several Chi-Ryus and guards yelping and dancing around like lunatics. A quick look at the ground.

Oh, how cute.

They've started setting the coal on fire.

Well… two can play that game.

"Keep 'em coming!" Kurt says happily. Artie raises himself up on a pile of coal as Kurt kneels in front of him. The Avatar holds a steady flame for the earthbender as he sends a rapid stream of coal screaming at their adversaries. Attacking from upwind is a tremendous advantage here, as it effectively doubles the speed of their projectiles, making even the tiny bricks a painful hit for anyone in the way.

Behind them, Mercedes crushes bricks into boulders, making huge chunks for extra devastation. She hurls one overhead, and grins as it slams into the top of the second car, making a dent in the roof.

For the first time, Kurt feels like they might actually win this.

"They're backing off!" Artie says as he thrusts his hands out, forcing another series of black nuggets through Kurt's fire.

"Alright," Kurt says, extinguishing the flame. "Keep shooting. I'll be right back."

Artie nods, and Kurt leaps out of coal pit. He's already got black stains on his feet, hands, and clothes. (Though he isn't nearly as bad as Artie, who is practically black actually burrowing through the coal). "Finn!" Kurt shouts.

"Yeah?" Finn answers. He's sitting with Blaine in his lap, continuing to work the glow-water over the poor boy's head wound. Kurt wants to hug him for being so dedicated, but he can't. Not right now, anyway. He has other plans.

"You and Rachel take Blaine to the front of the train," he orders. "Things might get hairy back here, and I don't want him to get hurt again."

Finn tilts his head. "What about you guys? What if you need a medic?"

"Blaine is your job right now," Kurt says. "When he's safe, Rachel can look after him, and you can come back."

The waterbender nods. "Got it," he says, adjusting the floppy Prince and standing up again. "Come on, buddy, let's get you somewhere safe."

"Oh, and… thank you, Finn," Kurt says softly.
Finn gives him a crooked smile and a nod as he walks off. "Hey, Rachel! We've got a job to do…"

Rachel bounces after him, ever-watchful of the track ahead.

"Kurt!" Mercedes shouts. "You better get down here. They're up to something…"

Tearing his eyes off of Blaine's shrinking form, he jumps back into the coal pit and prepares for whatever Quinn and company has in store for him.

He doesn't realize that it isn't him that they will soon be threatening…

Quinn, Puck, and Santana sit across from a nervous-looking Guardsman in the caboose, which is safely out of range of the coal barrage, for now.

"Ummm," the poor, hapless guard says. "Are… are you sure about—"

"Come on, dude," Puck says. "Relax! It'll be fine. I've got awesome aim."

"It's true," Santana says. "There's hardly ever pee on the seat when he uses the bathroom."

"I really don't see what that—" the guard starts, but Quinn interrupts him.

"Listen," she says. "This is a very important strategic mission. The fact that you are being trusted with it is a huge opportunity for you."

"It is?"

"Think about it," Quinn smiles. "You could go down in history. The Soldier who Saved the Fire Nation. Private First Class, Mister…"

"Scott," the guard says. "Scott Mitchellson."

"Scott Mitchellson; Avatar-Slayer!" Quinn says with reverence. "Your family would be honored for generations. Your children's children would be revered in the streets. Don't you want that for your family? Don't you want that for yourself?"

Scott considers the question carefully. "…yes," he says, nodding soberly and standing up. "I do. Not for me, but… for my country. I accept!"

Quinn stands as well, bowing to him. "Your bravery speaks volumes, Private Scott. You have my respect."

"That's the spirit, buddy!" Puck says, hopping up and clapping him on the back.

Santana looks close to laughing, but she gives him a shoulder pat nonetheless. "You've got some serious stones, Private."

Quinn steps up into the cupola—a small, platform in the caboose that affords a roof-level view of the train through a raised window. She blows out the window, and blasts the roof off, essentially making the cupola into a launching platform.

"Should I… maybe… write a letter or something, in case I don't make it?" Scott asks.

"You'll be fine, dude," Puck says, stepping up onto the platform and stick his head up to get a better look.
Scott follows him nervously. "What about my last words? Can you at least tell my family tha
—BWAAAAAAAAAAAA…"

His 'last words' are cut off as Puck grabs him and unceremoniously hurls him through the air as hard as he can.

"Godspeed, Private Scott," Quinn says with a smile and a salute.

"…AAAAAAAAAAAAAHBBBBBBBBB…"

Mercedes spots something unusual, and decides to bring it to the Avatar's attention. "…Kurt?"

"Yes?"

"Did some guy just fly over our heads?"

"Yes, I believe so," Kurt says.

"What the fuck," Artie comments.

"I could not agree with you more," Kurt says.

"They've gone crazy," Mercedes says. "They don't expect him to survive that, do they?"

Quinn watches through her spyglass as Private Scott soars through the air with the grace of an eagle. Well, maybe a dead eagle, fired out of a catapult…

"Come on…" she says quietly as he approaches his landing.

It's magnificent. He smacks into the second or third car from the actual cab of the train, flops long the roof for a bit, and winds up sprawled on his back.

"Did he make it?" Puck asks.

Quinn holds up a hand to silence him as she watches.

He lies unmoving for a couple of seconds, just long enough to make her wonder. Then, he flashes a thumbs up sign and starts to pull himself up.

"He survived," Quinn says, pleased.

"Unbe-fucking-lievable," Santana says. "I can't believe that worked."

"Looks like Operation Condor is officially a go," Quinn says with a smirk, collapsing her spyglass and turning to Santana.

"Get the other Guards. We'll attack them from two directions at once, split their attention enough long enough for a counterattack."

"Then… we'll show them how very unwise it is to fight firebenders while covered in fuel."

Rachel balances across the top of round tanker car, keeping watchful eyes fixed to her front, scanning for hazards. For the most part, this railroad is fairly clear, likely because it's well-
traveled. The only things she has seen worth warning anyone about were curves and the occasional tree.

"…AAAAAHBBBBBBBBBBBBB!"

Oh, and a man falling out of the sky.

…wait. That's not right.

"Holy shit," Finn says, adjusting the awkward weight of Blaine in his arms. "Did that dude just fall out of the sky?"

She replays the event in her mind.

"Yes," Rachel confirms. "Yes he did."

"Is he okay?" Finn asks.

The guy gives the thumbs-up sign and starts to get up.

"Oh, good," Finn smiles. "I was kind of worried for a second."

"Finn, I'm not quite sure you should stop worrying yet," Rachel says carefully. The guy is in a guard's uniform. And he is moving towards them with no small amount of menace.

"Halt, foreign scum!" he growls. "I am Private Scott Mitchellson, a living Fire Nation Legend! And in the name of the Fire Lord, I command you; surrender or die!"

"Technically, that isn't a command," Rachel points out. "More of an ultimatum."

Finn bounds across the tank to join her on the next box car. "Hey, back off, dude!" he says.

"I will not back off! I was trusted with a mission of utmost importance, and nothing will stop me from seeing it through!" the Private says, preparing for combat. "Surrender!"

Finn swallows thickly, but his expression is not one of dread. Instead, his eyes are fixed with determination. The gentle giant lays Blaine at her feet, catching her concerned gaze. "Stay with him," he says. "I'll take care of this."

And then he steps forward, drawing out his water and getting ready to fight.

Private Scott makes a few quick jabs in the air, creating small flames just for show.

The two combatants stare each other down. Finn, fighting to protect the girl he loves and a close friend. Private Scott, fighting for his country, his honor, and his legacy. Both of them are ready and willing to give their all. Their battle will be glorious.

"…AAAAAABBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB!"

"Wha—oomph!"

Or, at least it would've been, had Finn not been thoroughly flattened by another falling soldier before it even started.

"Nice shot!" Quinn comments as she watches the waterbender get laid out. "Softened our man's
landing, and hurt the enemy. I'm impressed."


Quinn quirks an eyebrow at him.

"Don't want to do it too much, though," Puck adds. "Might get predictable."

The Chi-Ryu Captain rolls her eyes. "Whatever. Just get the next guard ready."

---

"Finn's down!" Mercedes says.

"What?" Kurt shouts, jumping up to look back. Sure enough, Finn is face-down near the front of the train. One guard keeps him pinned with a foot on his back, while the other slowly walks towards Blaine and Rachel.

"Oh, no, no, no!" Kurt says, sprinting towards them. "You guys hold things down here! I have to help them!"

"Got it!" Artie calls out.

"Hurry!" Mercedes says, as if he wasn't already planning on it.

Kurt runs as fast as his legs will carry him. But even as he runs, he knows he isn't going to be fast enough. There is far too much train between himself and Blaine for him to cover it in time, and he doesn't trust his firebending not to hit Blaine or Rachel by accident.

And to make matter worse, a third guard lands on the train just behind the first two.

Rachel crouches near Blaine, placing the tablet under his limp arms and staying between him and the approaching guards. Finn weakly tries to push free of the boot holding him down, but he simply doesn't have it in him at the moment. Blaine, of course, lies limp in Rachel's arms, oblivious to the world, the danger he's in, and how badly Kurt is failing him right now.

He sucks. This sucks. Everything sucks.

And then, as if to make up for all the sucking, the universe blows him a couple of breaks.

"WATER!" Rachel cries, apparently still acting as lookout.

Kurt glances over, and sure enough a huge, elevated wooden tank is about to pass him on the left. With his spirits renewed, he hurls a two-handed fireblast at the tower, blowing it wide open and snatching every last drop out of the air. The sloshing sound is a sweet song to his senses as he wraps the water around his arms. He no longer has to worry about winning the fight with the guards when he gets to them. It will hardly be a fight at all.

Unfortunately, that still leaves the problem of getting to them. One is practically right on top of Rachel and Blaine. Kurt feels a spike of rage as Finn swipes weakly at his captors and they respond by kicking him, making him cry out. But no matter how he slices it, he's still too far away to stop them.

Cue break number two…

"Surrender!" the Private says to Rachel.
"Never!" Rachel spits at him. "I, as the great heroine Kushinada, bow not before the wicked, no matter how great their power!"

He flinches at the spit, actually looking a little uneasy.

"Look, lady," he says. "Work with me here. I really don't want to hurt anybody. You're pretty much caught here. Why don't you just make it easy yourself?"

Rachel glares at him. "Why don't you just… just… go away!" she shouts ineffectually.

The Private kneels in front of her. "Lady, please, I'm begging you here! I hate violence. Blood makes me all queasy, and I just know the guys'll never let me live it down if they see me—"

Suddenly, to Rachel's shock, the Private actually takes her advice and flies off the roof, landing on the ground and doing a fantastic interpretation of a human armadillo.

"Back, fiends!" shouts a wonderfully familiar voice. "Lay so much as one hand upon my maiden fair, and I will cut thee to the quick!"

"Jesse?" Rachel cries, looking over to the side.

Jesse soars through the air beside the train, perched proudly on top of A GIANT WHITE FLYING MONSTER THING.

"OH MY GOSH!" Rachel shouts.

"Oh my La," Kurt says, as an enormous air bison suddenly soars down from the heavens to fly alongside the train on their right. Jesse St. James stands proudly at the reins, along with some blonde girl Kurt has never seen before. The bison roars, its magnificent white… errr… braids flapping in the wind.

Well, this is unexpected.

"Jesse!" Rachel cries out. "What are you doing? What is that?"

"I have come to save you!" Jesse says proudly, posing dramatically as his hair flaps in the breeze. "Like the swallow-seals of the Sterling Sea, my return is ever certain! Come with me, my love, and we shall away together, ascending through the clouds, born by the buoyancy of our hearts, lifted to the very heights of—"

He pauses to deflect an oncoming fireball by whipping his arm into a wind shield. "Brittany," he says to the blonde girl. "Would you be a doll and kick the crap out of these plebeians while Rachel and I have a chat?"

"Sure!" Brittany smiles, from the bison to the train with ease. Another guard lands on the roof near her, but Brittany snap-kicks a gust at him and off he goes. Finn's tormentors abandon their captive and start firebending at her as she rushes them. But she dances easily and agilely around the flames, dodging over, under, and around them with barely a second thought. Then, she jumps forward, propeller-whipping her arms around her body and turning herself into a human missile. A shield of air surrounds her as she slams into the first guard, sending him flying.

The second guard tries to attack, but she is behind him so fast that he can't even follow. Before he knows it, she has him caught in a whirlwind, spinning him around so fast that most of his armor flies off, before tossing the mostly-naked man overboard. Finn looks up at her, confused, but grateful.
As all this happens, Jesse moves his bison closer to the train so Rachel can jump on.

"Help me with Blaine!" she says.

"Leave him," Jesse says.

"I can't!" she replies. "I need to get him somewhere safe!"

"Oh, fine," Jesse sighs, jumping onto the car, picking up the Prince and the tablet he is unknowingly holding, and bouncing back.

Rachel looks slightly leery of the flying beast, she follows him. And even though Kurt doesn't trust Jesse any further than he could punt him, he trusts Rachel, and he trusts that Jesse likes Rachel enough not to attack her friends. At least, not in her presence.

Another guard soars over his head, but this one actually misses the train (by this much). But all that makes Kurt think is: \textit{what if they start tossing shells like that?}

It's that thought that turns him around and sends him back to the end of the train. Now that Blaine is safe, there is one major threat to everyone else, and Kurt feels it's time for the train-on-train violence to end.

He's taking the fight to them.

"You missed!" Quinn shouts. "Puck, you idiot! You can't afford to miss. We only have so many people here!"

"Sorry!" Puck sighs. "My arm's getting tired! And you won't stop yelling at me!"

"Well, forgive me for trying to convey a little urgency!" Quinn yells. "It's not my fault a giant freaking \textit{air bison} came out of \textbf{NOWHERE} and started—"

"Air bison?" Santana says, jumping up onto the platform with them. She snatches the scope away from Quinn without even so much as a 'Captain, may I?' and takes a gander at the other train.

It takes her three seconds to spot Brittany.

"Throw me," Santana says.

"What?" Quinn balks. "You actually want to put your life in his hands?"

"Throw me," Santana repeats. "I've got a plan."

Quinn shakes her head and stares, but it's not like there's really any reason to stop her. "Your funeral…"

Puck and Santana seem to have done this before. Puck waits for her to jump up and put her foot against his fist, and then he just punches upwards, launching her off with perfect precision.

Santana flies with far better form than the flailing City Guards, landing in a perfect roll on the car right next to Brittany's.

The girl spots her instantly, and Santana plasters on her best bitchface.

"Santana!" Brittany shouts, immediately wrapping her in a hug.
The bitchface drops in an instant. This… she was not expecting.

Back on the train, Finn sits and hurts, finally getting enough sense to heal himself. The weird blonde girl who saved him gave him a pat on the head, told him to look both ways before crossing the river, and ran off. Finn would’ve followed her if he could… you know… stand. Being battered with Santana's vicious, vicious fists, blown up, and slammed by almost two hundred pounds worth of armored dude is just too fucking much. He can only take so much, and he's kind of surprised he's even still awake after that. He winces again as his healing water moves over another sensitive area.

It is during the healing that his fingers hit something hard inside his shirt. Pausing for just a second, he reaches in and pulls out the scroll canister. Holy crap, he almost forgot about this! He was totally going to show it to Rachel after they sang, but then the song sucked and he got distracted. He should show her now.

…oh crap.

Where is she?

And where is Blaine?

"So," Jesse says. "Are you ready to elope with me, my sweet? I'm sorry I'm late—I was accosted by hooligans back in the city. But the important thing is: I'm here now."

Rachel shakes her head, baffled at how he can be so cavalier about all this. "Jesse… what… who… What is this… thing we're riding on? Who is that girl you're with? Who are you?"

"This is Mr. Duck," Jesse says brightly, pointing down to fuzzy beast.

"That is most certainly not a duck," Rachel says emphatically.

"No, Mr. Duck. It's a surname. Like… your name is Rachel Berry, but you're not actually a delicious juicy fruit, are you?" Jesse asks teasingly

"Oh…" she says. "So… what is he?"

"He's an air bison," Jesse announces. "He belongs to girl I'm traveling with, Brittany. She's like my little sister, only much less annoying and high-maintenance."

"Okay…" Rachel says, nodding slowly as she tries to process all of this. "Why do you have an air bison? What was all that crazy dancing around that Brittany was doing? Was that…?"

"That was airbending," Jesse says, stepping closer to her. "Brittany is an Air Nomad."

He steps closer to her, taking her hands. "And so am I…"

Rachel gasps.

Finn abandons his healing in search of Rachel, ignoring his whiney body for the time being. When he spots her, he nearly falls off the train. She's riding on a freaking white arrow mouth monster—just like Sam said!—with Jesse St. James. He can just barely make out Blaine on the thing with her.

"Rach—" he starts to yell, but his chest is all like 'oh, hey, PAIN,' so instead of finishing, he falls
down, folds up, and tries not to die. He sees stars until he hears a plinking noise. Then he opens his eyes and sees the scroll. That he just dropped. Rolling away from him.

Holy shit, no!

Telling his chest to fuck off, he dives for the canister and slams down on it so hard that it actually pops open and spits out the scroll. He has to dive again to get that before it blows away, but he manages to snag it as it unfolds. Pulling both things back to him and experiencing the full vengeance of his aching organs, he finds himself looking at the scroll again.

Those poses are really weird. Like, they're kind of like dancing, but kind of not. At least, not any dancing Finn has ever seen. Or has he? He's trying to figure that out when suddenly, something weird happens.

As the paper flaps in the breeze, stuff appears on it where stuff was not before. Swirls and whirls and wavy lines, looping around and alongside the lady, moving with her. Like…

Like bending.

Holy crap. This is a bending scroll.

An airbending scroll.

Meant for Rachel.

Holy crap!

Jesse stares deep into her eyes with intensity like none she has ever seen before, and utters words that will change her life forever.

"…and so are you."

"How are we on the coal supplies?" Kurt asks as he finally returns to the coal miners' club.

"We're about 2/3rds down on this car," Mercedes says.

"But we've got two more cars full of the stuff right next to us," Artie says happily. He and Mercedes are working together to keep raining coal on the bad guys. It's harder to hit them now that they've wised up and backed off, but they manage. They pretty much have to keep up a constant stream of projectiles to keep Puck from shelling them, and to make sure the firebenders' counterattacks can't actually reach them.

Kurt nods, takes his water-arms, and smashes the lid off of the next car. "Get in," he says.

"We've still got plenty of ammo here," Artie says. "Why waste it?"

"I need this car," he says simply. "Come on. Jump to the fresh one."

They look a little wary, but the two comply fast enough, Artie sliding up a ramp he bends, and Mercedes launching herself over on a piston

"So what's your big idea?" Mercedes asks.
Kurt answers them by slicing the couplings to the abandoned coal car… and *jumping onboard.*

"Kurt!" Mercedes shouts. "What are you **doing**?"

"Taking out their big guns!" Kurt says. "No more flying guards, no more shells! Not when I'm done."

"Boy, are you crazy?" Mercedes asks.

"Maybe!" Kurt calls back.

"Hey!" Artie says. "Bend the dust off!"

"*What?*" Kurt says.

"**Bend the dust off!**" Artie says. "You're covered in black powder! One spark, and you'll go up in smoke!"

"*Oh!*" Kurt says, drawing his water into a swirling bubble to rinse himself off. "Thanks!" he says, turning his attention to the other train

Puck is their biggest threat at the moment. If Kurt can neutralize him, they'll all be a lot safer.

All he has to do is get through Quinn and her Chi-Ryus.

And he's got plenty of water to work with. How hard can it be?

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"*Hey…*" Santana says, tilting her head and carefully patting the girl on the back.

"*Hey!*" Brittany replies, smiling as she lets go. "I'm so glad to see you. I didn't want to leave you guys, but Mr. Duck was in peril. He needed me. I'm sorry."

"*Oh, it's cool,*" Santana says casually. "Well, except for the part where Mr. Duck is *attacking* us right now."

Brittany looks confused. Like, even more than usual. "Nuh-uh. He can't be. Mr. Duck is right there," she says, pointing.

She's pointing at the bison, of course, but Santana just sees Jesse. "*…oh,*" she says, feeling a little silly. "*But… then…*" What was she *doing* with that Artie guy? Santana looks down the train at the earthbender in question, barely able to see him against the coal because of how much of it he's wearing. A smile flits across her face as she feels the beginnings of a scheme…

"*Mr. Duck is a very gentle soul. He would never hurt you,*" Brittany says seriously. "*…unless you were a delicious fruit or plant. Then he would eat you, and absorb your power to become stronger.*"

"*Oh… kay…*" Santana says, shaking her head. "*Well… if you're really sorry about bailing on us—*"

*I really am!* Brittany nods emphatically.

Santana grins. "—then I know how you can make up for it. See, me, Puck, and Quinn are having some trouble right now. Bad people are attacking us."

"Really?" Brittany asks, looking horrified.
Santana puts on her best sad face. "Really. They're very bad, and they're on the back of this train right now. Help me kick their asses, and we can totally be BFFs again."

Brittany nods excitedly. "Okay, awesome! Let's do it!"

Santana can't help her delighted smirk as she and Brittany dash towards the earthbenders from behind. They'll never know what hit them. Brittany trusts her completely, and the bespectacled prick is covered in so much black that he's practically unrecognizable. One word from Santana, and Brittany will take him down without question.

And then Brittany will be hers, and hers alone.

"Alright, this is our first tandem launch," Quinn says to the four gathered Chi-Ryus. "Puck will send you into the air, where you will use your firebending to steer. Each and everyone one of you will land on that train. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Captain!" the Chi-Ryus shout.

"Fantastic," Quinn says. "Prepare for launch!"

The four Chi-Ryus leap into a large box.

"Ready?" she calls to Puck.

"Ready!" Puck answers.

"Fire!"

And the assassin hurls the container high into the air. Quinn watches with delight as the box bursts open mid-flight and all four girls emerge with perfect form, trailing streams of fire as they steer towards the train. They land just as Quinn notices another cut car drifting by them.

"Huh," she says. "That's strange. We're not gaining on them anymore, why would they need to cut—"

Her question is answered by a loud crash from the next car. She hears her two remaining Chi-Ryu give shouts of shocked outrage, and several loud slams. Quinn drops down from the launching platform to see what the commotion is about… just as Kurt jumps up on the roof of the caboose, lashes around Puck with a water tendril, and hauls him off the train and into the coal car he just rode over.

The Avatar then drops down into the caboose with her, pressurizing his water supply so that it takes up less space. "That's one jerkwad taken care of," he says calmly. "Now it's your turn."

Quinn grits her teeth. "Chi-Ryu!" she shouts, hoping her girls are still in fighting shape. Fortunately for her, they're just recovering from Kurt's attack, and promptly rush to her aid. "It's three-on-one," she says calmly as her soldiers back her up. "The odds are against you."

"Ah, but aren't that always?" Kurt says, adopting his waterbending stance.

The girls respond with stances of their own, but a thought suddenly occurs to Quinn. "Wait!" she says. "We can't firebend in here. We might set off the shells!"

Kurt smiles. "Sounds like the odds just shifted."
And he attacks.

Rachel gapes at him, the air that is supposed to be her friend seeming to leave her all at once. "I'm... I'm what?"

"You're an airbender, Rachel," Jesse says, smiling. "You've always felt like you didn't belong in the Fire Nation, because you don't. Your mother is an Air Nomad, one of the greatest who ever lived!"

"What... what do you mean? How do you know all this?" she asks.

"DON'T LISTEN TO HIM, RACHEL!" Finn shouts suddenly. "HE'S A LYING DOUCHEWEASEL!"

"Finn?" Rachel says, looking over at the train again.

"Oh, for the love of Heaven—shut up, you overlong human pratfall! We're trying to have a moment here!" Jesse shouts back at him.

"NO, YOU SHUT UP!" Finn counters wittily.

"As I was saying," Jesse grinds out, ignoring him. "I stopped by your house just before the show, hoping to surprise you. But you'd already left. I noticed you'd hardly packed anything for the trip, so I figured I would help you out by gathering a few of your favorite things. It was as I searched through some of your belongings that I found something hidden away at the bottom of a box..."

He reaches into his cloak for something, making a face when his hand comes up empty. "Huh," he says, sticking it back in for another go. "It's... ummm... just a second. I know it's here..."

"LOOKING FOR THIS?" Finn calls out, holding up the scroll canister.

Jesse's entire face opens wide in offended horror. "Where did you get that?" he growls.

"YOU DROPPED IT," Finn yells, "WHEN YOU BAILED ON US AT THE PARTY!"

"Well, thanks for taking care of it for me. Now give it back!" Jesse says.

"NOPE!" Finn says. "NOT UNTIL YOU ADMIT WHAT A LYIN—AHH!"

A fireball nearly burns his ear off, and Finn turns around just in time to see two Chi-Ryus running towards him with plenty of fire with his name on it.

"Oh Heavens," Rachel breathes, horrified.

"I know," Jesse says gently. "The poor fool. Alas, he is lost to us!" He blocks her eyes with his hand (remaining glued to the spectacle himself). "Don't look. It will probably be messy."

She smacks his hand away, appalled. "Don't just stand there! Help him!"

He's about to argue when he remembers that Finn has the scroll. And he can't afford for that thing to get burned up in the crossfire. "...of course!" he says, blinding her with a show smile. With catlike grace, he leaps from the bison and lands in front of Finn, gusting a flare into nonexistence. He waits patiently until the firebenders are close, and whips out his staff, slicing a horizontal burst of wind at them. They dodge by sliding underneath it, sending fire waves at his legs. Jesse jumps up, puts his staff below him and whirls it like a propeller, creating a powerful whirlwind that extinguishes the flames and keeps him aloft. Finn nearly gets blown off the train by it, so Jesse
redirects the twister, blowing the Chi-Ryus off the sides.

With that problem taken care of, he lands lightly in front of a dazed Finn.

"Thanks," Finn says, shocked by Jesse's act of kindness.

The airbender gives him a shit-eating grin, wrapping a hand around the scroll Finn is holding. "Don't mention it," he sneers, placing a hand on Finn's chest. The waterbender has just enough time to realize what's coming—and then he's flying.

"JESSE!" Rachel cries, horrified.

Finn sails end-over-end towards the front of the train, landing with a painful crunch in the coal tender and scaring the shit out of Freddy. His crash causes Don to snap an imaginary string on his shovel.

"What in the blazes!" Freddy shouts.

It hurts. Oh, oh, fuck, it hurts so bad Finn can barely see. Words aren't forming right, everything is fuzzy and weird, and his brain is trying super hard to pass out.

Screw his brain.

"Who in Agni's name are you?" Freddy asks.

"Just… some guy…" Finn grunts, sitting up (OWOWOWOWOW). "Umm… just so you know… we're being chased by psychopaths, and… if you stop the train, we'll probably all die. So… umm… keep it going. Seriously."

With all the stability of a nearly two hundred pound, 6 foot tall Jell-O mold, Finn crawls out of the coal and starts pulling himself up the ladder to get back on top of the train.

Jesse, in the meantime, has jumped back onto the bison with scroll in hand. He unfolds it and shows it to Rachel. "Look, Rachel!" he says. "This is your legacy. He had this the whole time and didn't tell you! He wanted to keep it from you!"

"He was… keeping it from me?" she asks, taking the scroll and looking at the woman in the drawings, so familiar, yet so utterly foreign.

"Yes!" Jesse insists. "Oh, Rachel, if only you knew. Finn is a spy, sent by your mother's enemies to make sure you are never reunited with her."

"My mother's enemies…" Rachel says, almost too overwhelmed to process it all. "Who is she, Jesse?"

"She goes by many names. Shelby Corcoran is the one she was born with. But that's not what people call her. They call her 'Corcoran the Conqueror.' 'The Stormbender.' 'Commodore of the Clouds.' 'The Heavenly Empress!'" His excitement bleeds onto his words, and he seems to grow more elated with each one. "After the Day of Broken Skies, there were as many Air Nomad Clans as there were clouds. We were divided and weak, but she wants to change that! She's incredible—the best airbender I've ever seen, and her leadership is going to change the world. She dreams of uniting all Air Nomads under one flag. One flag, one sky, one people."

"Don't… listen to him…"
The voice is weak, barely a grunt. She looks back at the train, and her heart feels like it could tear itself in two. Finn is crawling down the train, trying to get closer to them, clearly in agony the entire way. *He's... dangerous...*

"Only to no good, lying spies!" Jesse shouts. He swings his hand downwards, creating a downdraft that knocks Finn flat on his stomach. The painful sound that comes out of him can barely be considered a whine.

"Jesse, stop it!" she cries, grabbing his arm.

"But he's a liar, Rachel!" Jesse says. "He's trying to keep you from learning the truth!"

"No!" Finn grunts, picking himself up again. *Rachel, he's had that scroll... for DAYS. He's been keeping it from you this whole time!"

The girl turns shocked eyes towards the airbender. "Is this true?"

"No!" Jesse insists. "He's a spy! He is your enemy—they *all* are! The other clans fear your mother as if she were death itself. They've spent their entire lives trying to separate the two of you—to keep you apart! And everyone was in on it! They *all* knew! Finn, your so-called friends, even your *fathers!*" he cries. "They **forced** her to abandon you for your own safety, and now they'll do anything to keep you apart. It's only by the providence of fate that I learned the truth." He pulls her close. "Leave with me. I'm the only one you can trust—the only one who loves you enough to tell you the truth. Come with me, and find your family, your home, your destiny!"

"*Don't do it..."* Finn wheezes.

She needs to think... she can't... she can't _process_ all of this at once! She's never had to make a choice like this in her life, and everything Jesse is telling her is just so... so outrageous. And yet... it makes so much sense. She thinks about it all... how displaced she's felt all her life, how disappointed she was when she couldn't firebend, how the other kids laughed at her seemingly inborn quirks. She thinks of how wonderful the wind felt on her face as she ran from them, as she jogged in the mornings, as she climbed on the theater's roof to stare at the sky. She thinks of how she always seemed to jump a little further or higher than others, how her dramatic flourishes and flounces have always disturbed the world around her (which she took as a sign that she was exceptionally suited to melodrama). She thinks about all of this... about the world that seems unsuited for her, and the world above that awaits... and the man in front of her who wants to take her there.

And then she thinks about two other men. Two men who tirelessly, fearlessly, and selflessly worked to help her... to make her feel at home when she felt lost, to make her feel loved when she felt lonely, to make her feel strong when others scorned her out of jealousy. Two men who only ever lifted her up, who only wanted to see her shine, to see her _happy._

And suddenly, what she thought was the hardest choice she's ever had to make becomes very, very easy.

Her hand cuts neatly through the air, slamming into Jesse's face with a crack that echoes through the evening air. The airbender staggers backwards, clutching at his nose and gasping when he finds blood on his hands. "Shit, Rachel!" he shouts. "What was **that** for?"

Her eyes are colder than a mountain breeze as she glares at him. "Jesse..." she says, her voice low. "I thought you loved me. That you knew me, **understood** me... I thought I could trust you."
"Rachel, I do! You can!" Jesse insists.

Rachel shakes her head. "No," she hisses. "If you honestly thought—for one second—that I would believe such a twisted, awful lie about my fathers…" She sniffs, wiping her face with her sleeve, her icy eyes never leaving him. "…then you never knew me at all."

The airbender is stunned. "Rachel… I…"

"Enough, Jesse. Let me off this… thing," she commands. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"So that's it?" Jesse asks in a voice that it equal parts sadness and anger. "You're just going to throw it all away? Your mother, your destiny, everything you were meant to be—"

"No," she says. "I intend to find all of that. And I intend to do it without you."

From the train, Finn smiles so wide, you'd almost believe he didn't have mashed potatoes for guts at the moment. He stands up unsteadily on a momentary burst of energy, giving a little fist-pump of support. "Go Rachel!" he shouts.

"Shut up!" Jesse roars. His hand is cocked back and ready to blast Finn clear off the train, but Rachel is having none of that shit—she slaps him again, actually knocking him down this time.

"Stop!" Rachel shouts. "It's over. I don't want to see you, I don't want to be near you, and if you ever want me to even think of forgiving you, you will let me off this animal right now."

Jesse stares up at her, defiant, angry, wounded, ashamed, betrayed… his expressive face conveys so many emotions at once that it very nearly overwhelms her. He blew into town, all mystery and bad-boy charm, and she was only too happy to get caught up in his wake. But no more. She stands firm against him. He will not sweep her away again.

"Fine," Jesse spits, standing up again. He slips onto the bison's head and guides it adjacent to the train again. Rachel slips the scroll into her robes, and slides the Prince and his prize back onto the train (with a little help from Finn).

When they finish, Jesse stands up again, staring at Rachel with moist eyes. She can't tell if it's genuine regret, or if he's simply upset that she rejected him. "We could've had it all…" he says quietly.

She turns away from him.

In response, he lashes the reins, and the bison lifts away from them.

She does not watch him go. Instead, she runs to Finn, helping him sit down without hurting himself and wrapping him in the gentlest hug she can manage. "Thank you," she says.

"For what?" he asks quietly.

She just smiles at him, as genuine a smile as she has ever given. "For keeping me grounded."

Finn smiles and hugs her back.

"Aw, how touching," a snide voice says.

She looks up to see the Chi-Ryus that Jesse had just recently blown away, climbing up the sides of the cars like demented, evil spiders. They flip onto the top with casual ease, and begin stalking
towards their prey.

"Should've gone with Prince Smarming," a Chi-Ryu says. "Now you're in our hands."

Rachel glares at her. "I am exactly where I want to be, thank you very much."

The Chi-Ryu smirks. "We'll see if you change your mind…"

Suddenly, Finn takes a shuddering breath and stands up. His feet are unsteady as he steps forward, his hands wrapped around his bruised ribs. "Stay behind me," he says.

"Finn, no!" Rachel says. "You're hurt, you're…"

"Doesn't matter," he replies. "I'll protect you."

She is touched—she'd be lying if she said otherwise—but it's complete foolishness. One good hit from them will turn Finn into putty in his current condition.

But she knows she can't do much better. So in the end, she does get behind him, but only to protect Blaine and the tablet by moving them further out of harm's way.

She feels a pang of sorrow in her chest as she watches Finn weakly try to waterbend, holding the shifting, dripping mass of water as steady as his abused body will allow him to. Running her fingers through Blaine's hair, she whispers something that she feels he should know.

"We tried," she says. "We tried as hard as we could…"

Mercedes and Artie can only watch in awe as Kurt sinks Puck into the abandoned coal car. He is tossed like a pro; didn't even hit the rims. "Three points!" Artie shouts, raising his hands.

"Score for Team Avatar!" Mercedes calls out.

"Game's not over yet, chica," a saucy voice informs them.

That's all the warning that they get before a rope trap wraps around Mercedes from behind and pins her arms to her body. She's about to kick up some coal as a counterattack when a gust of wind knocks her on her back.

"Hey!" Artie shouts, burrowing into the coal and emerging on the other side. "You again?" he asks, glaring at Santana.

"Can't keep a good bitch down," she says casually. "Am I right, or am I right?"

The airbender steps out from behind her, getting into her stance. "The first one!" she calls out.

"Brittany?" Artie says, completely shocked. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping Santana," Brittany says happily, "by kicking your ass."

The earthbender shakes his head. "Don't you remember me?"

She thinks for a second. "Umm… nope. Sorry, I don't know any black people."

Before Artie can reply, she kicks a ball of wind towards his stomach. He raises a coal wall to block it, but the wall just winds up being blasted apart, smacking him with stray pieces. Santana tries to
rope him down, but he's too fast for her. He raises his arms as the rope wraps around him, and gets a nice new sash to wear. A couple of coal bricks lift up for him to punch at Santana, but Brittany breezily deflects them.

"Why are you helping her, Brittany?" Artie says, levitating a small wad of bricks.

"She's my friend!" Brittany says, swiping her foot at him and sweeping the coal overboard.

"Don't you see that Santana is bad?" Artie asks, burrowing into the coal to dodge another rope, and emerging a short distance away. "She hurts people—hunts people for a living!"

"Santana only hurts bad people," Brittany says, punching several powerful air fists at him. "She told me herself."

"Right," Artie says, doing his best to intercept the translucent wind blasts with his gloves. "And if she was bad, I'm sure she would tell the truth about it!"

He fires a glove towards Santana, but Brit catches it in an orb of air, forcing him to call it back. Santana's whip nearly snaps his glasses off his face, and Artie suddenly realizes there's no way he can fight them both. He couldn't hit Brittany if he wanted to (and he really doesn't), and Santana is damn dangerous on her own merits.

Even worse, he can see two Chi-Ryu running down the train to help out. And he is covered in highly flammable coal dust.

Wait!

"Duh," he says suddenly, realizing what Brittany meant. She doesn't recognize him because he's practically solid black from all this crap on him.

Raising the biggest wall he can, he shoves his hands down to compact it into something a little more wind-resistant. With that, he lifts his hands, holds his breath, and thrusts his arms out, blasting the dust off of him in one clean motion.

He slides over to Mercedes.

"Now, you're worried about helping me?" Mercedes says.

"I'm sorry!" Artie says, shifting the shape of one of his glove tiles into a sharp edge. "I kind of had my hands full over there."

"Well, four hands are better than two, I guess," she says. He's only just started sawing through the rope when Santana leaps clear over his wall.

"Gotcha!" she shouts, engaging Artie in close combat. His position pretty much forces her to kick him, and her feet are fast. His hands are faster, however, and they are covered in rock. She is blocked, deflected, and dodged in turn. She's in his world now—the coal she's standing on is his to bend, and he demonstrates this pretty quickly, shifting it beneath her to break her footing and send her stumbling.

The tide turns again, however, when Artie's coal wall is blasted apart by fire. He raises both hands to shield his face from shrapnel, and Santana has the perfect opportunity. In a flash, she has the last of her rope traps wrapped around his hands, binding them together. Another flash, and she has his face slammed into the coal again, painting it nice and black.
"We got 'em!" Brittany says, clapping. "Yay us! We should totally get ice cream to celebrate," she says to the Chi-Ryus.

"Oh, totally," Santana says. "Right after we boot them off the train."

"Brittany, please," Artie says desperately. "Don't you remember me at all?"

The airbender peers at him. "Hey, you changed colors."

Santana's eyes go wide. "No he didn't!" she says.

"Yes, I did!" Artie says. "I've got black dust on my face. Blow it off, and I bet you'll recognize me."

"Ah, no," Santana says, placing a foot on his chest and pinning him to the ground. "No more talking from the losing party. You go bye-bye now!"

She cocks her foot back to kick his lights out, when an air blast sails towards Artie and hits her just enough to throw her balance.

The gust clears some of the powder off of Artie's skin, and suddenly, Brittany's eyes light up. "Santana, no! Don't hurt the baby monkey!"

"What?" says Santana, Artie, Mercedes, and both Chi-Ryus, in perfect unison.

"He helped me save Mr. Duck! We can't hurt him. He's not bad—he's really sweet," Brittany says.

Santana looks annoyed. "No, he's not! He's bad. He's attacking me and Puck and Quinn. And the Chi-Ryus! Don't you like us?"

Brittany looks lost, pulling her hands together and twisting her fingers nervously.

"They're the bad ones!" Artie insists. "They're hunting us and trying to kill us for money!"

"He's lying!" Santana says, kicking some coal at him.

Brittany is deep in thought. "You… but he… he helped me," she says, her eyes widening. "He helped me, and he didn't even know me." She points at Santana, her eyes going from befuddlement to betrayal. "And you did know me but you wouldn't help me!"

"I… I wanted to," Santana insists. "But we had other things to worry about."

"Things like what?" Brittany asks, her face crumpling. "Like hunting people? You made me follow their scents! You didn't tell me you wanted to kill them!"

The Chi-Ryu behind Brittany give each other a look, and subtly turn towards her.

"Brittany!" Santana says. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? It never came up! I would've told you, I just… look, I really need your help, okay? Please! I thought you wanted to help me!"

"I don't want to help you be bad!" she shouts, throwing a gust at Santana and knocking her over the top of Mercedes. The Chi-Ryus start to strike, but Brittany spins around and creates a curved sheet of wind to deflect their fireballs. She keeps right on spinning, turning into a veritable human hurricane which sweeps the girls up and tosses them overboard.

"Go Brittany!" Artie says, elated.
Santana stands up, furious. "So I guess we're not friends after all," she seethes.

Brittany looks at her sourly. "I thought you were my friend. I liked you. And when you like somebody, you help them. But you didn't help me. I helped you and helped you and you just used me. That's mean, Santana. So no, I don't think we're friends. I don't think I like you anymore."

The words are like an icicle jammed into her chest. "Brittany… you… did you really…?" she stammers.

"Here," Artie says, holding up his tied hands. "Help me untie these. You're awesome, Brittany!"

The airbender gives him a smile and starts to walk towards him when suddenly, fate decides to fuck him over, and none other than Mr. Duck and Jesse St. Jack-off swoop down from the heavens.

"Come on, Brittany!" Jesse says sourly. "We're leaving!"

The beast grabs Brittany the same way it did him, and Artie can only watch helplessly as she is borne away.

"Bye!" Brittany calls out sadly. "Both of you should just be nice to each other!"

And then the air bison banks to the side, and she's gone. "Bye, Brittany…" Artie says quietly.

Santana shakes her head, her expression near tears, as she watches the one thing she maybe ever really cared about fly away after she said she hated her. She's never been this hurt in her life.

She fucking hates it.

So she takes all of that sadness, and turns it into anger.

And it takes her all of two seconds to find a target for it.

With a roar of anguish, she jumps over Mercedes, charges Artie. The earthbender has just enough time to turn around and shout "Oh, SHI—" before she kicks him hard enough to send him flying onto the next car.

She feels a little better, but she follows him up anyway.

It'll probably be quite a few kicks before she feels like herself again…

Meanwhile, Mercedes has been steadily working her bonds all through this little melodrama. Artie wasn't able to cut her loose before the Bondage Queen started whooping his ass, but he at least got the rope started on its way to fraying. She wiggles and wriggles and can feel it loosening as she continues, hear the tiny little fibers as they snap under her strength. She's about a minute from finishing the damn thing when something finishes it for her.

The coal car jolts with the force of a huge impact, like something just slammed into it from behind. The shock is enough to snap the rope in two, freeing her. She stands up just in time to see none other than fucking Puck jump up onto the train.

"How in the Hills did you get here?" she asks.

Puck shrugs, pointing a thumb at his backside with his gloved hand. Behind him, the same coal car Kurt tossed him into slowly drifts away from the train again, its front a little dented. "Found
something to push off of. Never underestimate the Puckster."

"Well, aren't you creative," she says, calling up plenty of coal to wrap around her fists and feet.

"That's not all," he smirks. "I also picked up a couple of hitch-hikers."

With that, the same damn Chi-Ryus that Brittany just blew away flip up from the car and stand beside him. It's her versus a trained assassin and two battle-ready firebenders.

And she's covered in coal dust.

This is heading nowhere good.

Kurt opens with a powerful spray from one arm. The Chi-Ryus dive to the side, but Quinn jumps up and wedges herself in a corner. Before Kurt can adjust his aim to his her, she kicks off the wall and pounces at him. He pivots out of the way, forcing Quinn to handspring off the ground and land on the other side of the car.

Quinn smirks as she turns around. As an attack, her pounce was a failure, but as a tactical maneuver, it went through flawlessly.

The Avatar is now surrounded.

Kurt turns to the side so that he has one arm aimed at the Chi-Ryus, the other at Quinn. He keeps the water steady around his hands, ready to whip out at a moment's notice. He watches them carefully, but try as he might, he can't watch them all.

Quinn nods at her Chi-Ryus when Kurt's eyes flick away from her.

They charge in tandem. Kurt intercepts one kick with his water tendril, slamming her foot into the wall and freezing it there. The other tries to claw at his throat, but he flinches back and sweeps her away as well. The first Chi-Ryu generates just enough heat to melt her ice bond and slams her foot into Kurt's back, only to have him take the hit, pick her up, and toss her at her friend.

It's another tactical move disguised as a failed attack. Because even though Kurt has an arm pointed at Quinn, his eyes are elsewhere, leaving him open. She is speedy and silent as she dashes towards him, deciding to employ one of her secret weapons.

The Avatar notices her just in time to swipe at her, but Quinn creates a tiny fire blade between her hands, neatly slicing the water tendril in two and sliding through the gap. Her hand finds his shoulder before he can recover.

And then, Kurt's world is replaced with pain.

Suddenly, it's as if every single individual cell in his arm is set on fire. The agony is enough to temporarily blind him, and it's only sheer reflex that enables him to slam her away with his other arm.

"What…" he grunts, trying to move his arm. The pain has grown quieter, but it hasn't vanished entirely, instead simply being replaced by the tell-tale tingling of a sleeping limb. He can't move it. *He can't move his arm.* "What did you do to me?"

Quinn grins at him. "I bent you," she says simply, before launching into a kick. He blocks her with his other arm, but his form is unsteady. The water is slowly dripping away from him as his pain-
addled mind tries to counter Quinn while keeping track of her minions and his water supply. Her feet and hands attack him furiously, driving him back even as he blocks their strikes. It isn't until it's already too late that he realizes what he is doing.

A Chi-Ryu grabs him from the side, chops his chest several times, and hurls him from the caboose to the passenger car.

"Oh, look," Quinn says, stepping through the door and closing it behind her. "No more explosives around. Guess that means the firebending's back on, right girls?"

Oh, shit.

The Chi-Ryus light up his world with gusto, dashing forward without fear, purposely baiting him into attacking them just so they can run fiery hands along his water-bearing arm, evaporating a bit more with each go. He tries several counters—pinning them with icicles, smashing them, throwing out some mist to blind them—but nothing works. The mist flies out the broken windows, the icicles are dodged or melted, and the smashes just plain miss. They're too fast for him to fight with one good arm!

And the worst thing is that Quinn isn't even helping them. She stands at the end of the car, arms crossed, with a proud smirk on her face, like a mother wolfshark watching her babies on their first hunt. She knows, and they know, and now he knows that it's only a matter of time before they defeat him…

Inside the passenger train, Kurt tries desperately to defend himself against expert firebenders with a disabled limb and dwindling liquid assistance.

At the end of the freight train, Mercedes contemplates whether she'd rather be flash-fried, or pulverized. Neither would be nice, but that's not in the cards, it seems.

A little further up, Santana slams her foot into Artie's ribs, knocking him further up the train. He wheezes and gasps and tries to crawl away, only for her to charge and kick him again.

Up at the front of the car, Finn slowly and weakly bends his water as best he can to shield himself from the Chi-Ryus' fireballs. They're playing with him, he knows it—every movement he makes hurts, and they can see it. They're not trying to actually fight him. They're just making him hurt himself until he can't take it anymore. And as much as he hates to admit it, he doesn't think that point is too far away.

Beyond him, Rachel watches him move, completely silent as tears stream down her cheeks. His bravery is inspiring, even if his pigheaded insistence on protecting her is essentially suicide. He can't win this fight. But then, neither can she. At this point, none of them can.

And finally, beside her, Blaine Anderson lies motionless, arms unknowingly wrapped around a tablet he does not know the meaning of, face turned towards a sky he cannot see, oblivious to the battle being fought over him. For at this moment, his mind is elsewhere.

To the waking eye, he seems as motionless as the grave.

But underneath, Blaine Anderson is very busy.

Blaine Anderson is dreaming.
"Welcome back," says a warm, wonderful voice.

Blaine opens his eyes to find himself in the midst of a burned, ashen world. The same place he was the last time he was here. The story hasn't gone forward, nothing has gotten better… nothing has changed. The only thing that's different is… his mother is here now.

He couldn't see her at first, but that's only because he woke up lying on her lap, feeling her fingers gently scratching his head in a gesture that is more soothing and intimate than he can possibly voice.

"Feeling any better?" she asks quietly, looking down at him. Her eyes sparkle with sweet, gentle warmth. "I'm giving you the standard boo-boo treatment," she says teasingly. "A little head-scratching always used to make you feel better.

He huffs out a single laugh. "I think this boo-boo is a little beyond a scalp massage," he says quietly.

She gasps in mock horror. "Oh, heavens. You must be in dire straits indeed. I might—heaven forbid—have to make soup."

Blaine gives a small chuckle, but his heart isn't in it. He doesn't feel like beating around the bush. "So this is it, I guess" he says softly.

"'It?'" she asks.

The Prince shrugs. "Death."

"You're not dead, Blaine," his mother says, looking at him flatly.

He squints up at her. "But… you said that this was it," he says, sitting up and gesturing to the dark world of ashes around them. "This is all there is."

"And it is," she says. "Right now."

The Prince shakes his head at her. "I don't get it."

With a gentle smile, she sits him up and turns him around to face her. "Hmmm…" she says, purposely looking thoughtful. "Maybe I could tell you something to help explain it. A tale or a yarn of some sort, a kind of recounting of an adventure or—"

"A story?" Blaine ventures, giving her a frank stare.

"That's the word," she grins. "I'll tell you a story, for old times' sake."

The Prince can't help the smile on his own face, even as he looks down. "I might be a little old for that now."

"Psh," she says, waving him off. "People are never too old for good stories. Stories reflect life, and everyone who lives has one of their own. This one… is the story of a little girl, who became a star."

His eyes snap back up to her, wondering if this is going where he thinks it is.

"The girl was happy enough, working in a music shop with her father, only singing when she needed to tune the instruments. One day, a man heard her singing, and told her she could be a star. 'Everybody wants to be a star!' he said. And since she was technically part of everybody, she
believed him. He wanted to make her a star, so he taught her all sorts of things. Music, dance, acting, singing, kung fu, cooking, animal husbandry…"

**Blaine fails to control his snickering.**

"…all the things she needed to be famous. He was a director, so he got her all sorts of great roles. Her pretty voice and pretty face drew lots of people to her performances, and she made lots of money. Her parents were happy. Her director was happy. The audiences were happy. Everyone was happy… except for her."

**He stares at her as she continues, watching as her expression becomes wistful.**

"'Everybody wants to be a star!' they told her. And she believed them. But nobody is really everybody. Nobody really does what everybody says everybody does. *Everybody* is everybody—'everybody' is made of lots of little parts. Part of her did enjoy being a star, but part of her wanted something else, and she had been so busy doing what everyone told her to that she never stopped to consider it. She wanted to make everyone happy, but she also wanted it for herself, and she knew that she couldn't have both. So she chose, one night, in the middle of a performance. She got up, and walked off the stage."

**He finds himself absorbed as always, wondering what she was thinking when she went.**

"She was living in a story written for her by everyone else. Always playing other people, rising to others’ expectations, never able to find *herself* in all the mess. So she walked off stage and went looking for herself…and eventually, she found it."

"But she came back," Blaine says softly. "She came back, and did the same thing again, didn't she?"

"Oh, you've heard this one?" his mother asks, winking at him. "Yes, eventually she did come back. But things were not the same. When she came back, there was no director to vouch for her. There was no good name to get her easy roles. There was no shortcut to the top. She had to work. She worked and worked and worked, and made a name for *herself*. She refused to have anyone else tell her story. You see… the girl, when she got right down to it, really did want to be a star. But not like most people—she didn't want to be a cold, blue light in the faraway night. She wanted to be warm, to make people's lives brighter, to make them smile and laugh and feel good. She wanted to be a sun. And it took her a lot of hard work, but eventually, she got exactly that. She brightened the lives of thousands, made them laugh and smile, and then she met an amazing man who had a dark life, and brightened him up as well. She had a family, and a sun," she smiles, pinching his cheek, "of her very own."

*And Blaine really does feel warmer, if only for a moment. "That's a great story," he says. "But I don't understand why you're telling it now."*

**His mother stands up, brushing the ashes off of her robes, and takes his hand, standing him up with her. "I'll tell you why," she says, putting her hands on his shoulders (he's almost as tall as she is now) and turning him around.**

*The ash piles are suddenly illuminated by spots of light from above. The Capital City appears as a flat painting on a backdrop. The floor is made of wood, and Blaine can see the shapes of things and people wandering around in the wings of…*

"A stage?" he asks. "We're on a stage?"
She nods. "Blaine, my baby boy… this is your story so far," she says, gesturing to everything before him. "It stops here, because this is where you've stopped."

The Prince blinks, completely confused. "I don’t…"

"You've always been a strong-willed kid, Blaine. Your father and I could never fence you in. You wanted to be everywhere, and you didn't care if you got hurt on the way there. You were my little wildfire, couldn't be tamed. At least…" she says softly, indicating the ashes. "Until all this happened."

His vision blurs as she softly rubs his shoulders. He doesn't know what to say, so he says nothing. He doesn't know what to do, so he does nothing. He doesn't know who to be, so he is nothing.

"It hurt you, sweetie," she says softly, "I know it did. It hurt your heart, because of how much you loved everything you lost." She wraps her arms around him from behind, hugging him as he leans into her. "You're scared… I know you are. Scared of wanting, of loving, of feeling, because you know what it's like to lose it all, and you don't want it to hurt like that again. But as scared as you are… you can't stay here forever."

And then she's letting him go, and walking away. Blaine pivots around, wanting to go after her. "Wait," he says. "Where are you going?"

"To my seat," she says as he walks off the stage. "Intermission's over, kiddo. It's time to get back to the show."

"The show?" Blaine asks.

And suddenly, the lights in the rest of the theater come up. The doors open, and countless people begin to file in. The lights shining on the stage reduce the people in the audience to vague shadows, almost indistinguishable from one-another, but somehow still familiar.

"What is this?" Blaine asks.

"This is your story, sweetie," the Fire Lady says. "We're all here to see you. I know you'll tell a good one."

He gapes at her. "What? That's—what am I—nobody told me I was going to be telling a story in front of all these people! I mean, I haven't… I don't even know how it ends!"

"I know," she says. "Nobody really does. But there's nobody left to tell it but you, baby."

"What do I say?" Blaine asks. "What do I do?"

"Whatever you want!" she shouts up at him, finally taking her seat. "That's the thing, Blaine. Fire? It wants. It needs. It's always burning after something. So start with what you want! Although… between you and me," she says, winking at him. "I think you know what you want. I think you know how you want this story to end."
Blaine starts to ask her another question, but he freezes up when his eyes land on the people beside his mother. His father is there, looking up at him with pride. His mother laces her fingers with his as they smile up at him. On her other side, Avatar freaking Groban sits in the audience, giving him a ridiculously exaggerated stage wink. He can’t make out any more faces, but every shadow filling a seat seems familiar to him, and a chorus of warm voices flies up to greet him.

"Tell us your story, Blaine!"

"Yeah, tell us!"

"Story! Story!"

"Oh, this is going to be good…"

He’s just starting to smile when the lights in the theater go out, leaving only Blaine. It’s as if the audience—the entire world—ceases to exist. All that’s left is him, the stage, the ashes, and his fire, burning gently a short distance away from him.

They’re all waiting for him to finish his story.

They’re all waiting for

him

So he closes his eyes, and thinks, very, very hard. About… well… everything, really. About so many things and people that he has come across in his life. Things he has loved and lost, things he has learned, new and old, good and bad. Everything inside of him… it’s all part of the narrative. It all flows into making him who he is, and yet it’s the very thing he’s spent so long running from.

The ending must follow the narrative. It’s the logical conclusion of what came before. Everything inside of him must go into it. And… there is one way he knows for sure that he can release what is within him to the world.

He opens his eyes, and his nervous voice echoes in the silent theater.

"He gave up on the fire," he starts. "But the fire never gave up on him. No matter how far or how hard he ran… it stayed with him. Never too close, never too far away. It burned patient and steady, waiting for the day that he was no longer afraid."

"That day never came. In some ways, he would always be afraid. Fear is a hard thing to be rid of. But… though there never came a day when the boy was fearless… there did come a day when he stopped running."

"He was tired, you see. He had been running for a long time, going only in circles, wasting so much energy for so little reward. He was tired of running and never moving. So one day… he stopped running. And instead of going away from his fire, he went towards it."

As he narrates, Blaine acts on his own words, about-facing to look at the little floating fireball, only to find that its shape has changed. Instead of a little floating fireball, there is a humanoid outline of flames, forming a sleek, lean body just a few inches taller than Blaine. The flickering makes it difficult to pin down an exact shape, but Blaine knows who it is. The flame is mostly orange, but for eyes, there are two little sparks of a very vivid crystal blue. It’s a blue he would recognize anywhere. There are no other eyes in the world quite that color.
The flame does not move as he approaches it. "He looked at what he had run from for so long, the fire that had burned him so badly. He fixed his eyes to it and even though he was afraid, he did not look away. And within those flames... he saw everything.

All of his memories, his loved ones, his stories and adventures... everything the fire consumed was reflected in its flame. It shaped the fire itself. But it wasn't just the past he saw. The future was there as well—countless possibilities stretched out in front of him, everything he could do, make, be. All he was and all he might become were contained in the blaze. The fire never left him because it couldn't. Even though he feared and fled from it, it stayed close because it was a part of him.

He stops in front of the flames, close enough for the heat to nearly be unbearable. But he doesn't flinch. He stares into those fixed, blue points of light, and continues to narrate. "So he looked long into his fire, and the fire looked back. It didn't promise not to burn him—fire is fire, and it is its nature to burn. It did not promise him safety, health, or happiness. All it promised... was itself. That it would burn with him, beside him and through him for as long as he lived."

He smiles. "And... that was enough."

"And so... there, in the endless ash fields, the boy reached out with trembling hands... and took it. It and everything that made it, both good and bad. He accepted it all—his wants and needs, his hopes and dreams... his longings and loves. He took his fire back."

With a trembling hand, he reaches out towards the fire.

"And it took him as well."

And suddenly, the fire raises its hand and grasps his own, scalding him. Even as he tries to resist the pain, the flames seem to sink into him through this connection, spreading into and over and through his arm, his chest, and eventually, his entire body. He cries out and falls to his knees as he burns alive.

It hurts. It's pain like nothing he's ever felt. He's being consumed from the inside out, and it's agonizing in ways there are no words for. As he continues to burn, he finds himself looking up into the plume of smoke rising from him. Within the cloud are countless moments and memories, images from his past. From those images, spring more—they are comparatively few and far between, but they exist. Images of a future. Of things he wants and wishes for, both large and small.

It's the ending he'd hoped for; the one sure way to release everything inside of something to the world at large... burn it. And it hurts, and he's scared, and he's nervous and uncertain and sad and lonely and healing and happy and he has so many wonderful friends and such good memories and so many hopes and he LOVES and it's beautiful. It's all there; it's been there the whole time—why had he ever rejected it? He wants it. He wants to want, to feel and move and live again. So he takes it. The good, the bad, the pain and the wonder—he takes it all and embraces it.

And as suddenly as it began, the burning stops, and the flames vanish. Sapped of his strength, he falls backwards into one of the ash piles, finding it to be a shockingly soft bed (if a little dusty). He's breathing like a beached whale, putting a hand on his chest to try and soothe it just a bit.

It feels... strange.
His eyes widen as he looks down to find that it isn't burnt at all. It's not blackened—it's not even a little red. If anything, his hand looks better than before he burned it. It looks like new. He runs his other hand (much the same) over it. It feels like new.

He feels like new.

It's a truly amazing feeling.

But it's nothing compared to the return of a feeling he hasn't had in what seems like forever.

Warmth. He feel warm, from the inside, as if the goodwill of the audience sank into him, becoming an internal sun, shining out and warming Blaine and everyone he can reach.

He smiles. The flames are gone, but he knows how to find them. He doubts he will forget again.

The story is not quite over. There's still a little left to tell. So Blaine finishes it out.

"The boy and his fire were reunited at last," he says, standing up. "Together, they arose…"

He scans the front row, his eyes pinning themselves on the proud faces of his parents and remaining fixed as he finishes.

"…and built a new world from the ashes."

He isn't sure when the audience starts clapping, but he knows that his mother is the first to stand up, her whistling almost as loud as a train whistle, as the roar of applause sounds almost like wind rushing past his ears…

And Blaine Anderson opens his eyes.

"AH!" Finn hisses, as another fireball slips through the cracks of his waterbending, burning his arm and shoulder. It's the straw that breaks the camelephant's nose. He can't hold it anymore. His arm gives out on him and his water slips away. All he has now is his big, stupid self to put between Rachel and hot fiery death.

"Give up. You'll live longer," the Chi-Ryu says. "Even better—when it is time to execute you, it'll be quick and painless. Two things I guarantee it will not be if you resist."

Finn shakes his head. "Rachel," he calls, keeping his eyes on the firebenders. "Take Blaine and get in the cab of the train. I'll cut off all the cars, and you guys can get away."

"Finn," Rachel gasps, totally offended. "I can't believe you think I would just leave you here!"

"Yeah," Blaine says, also offended. "Just what kind of coward do you take me for?"

Finn rolls his eyes. "Sorry, geez. Forgive me for—wait, what the fuck?"

The watebender turns his head back, and sees a shocked Rachel staring open mouthed a very definitely not-unconscious Blaine.

"When did he…?" Finn starts.
"I'm as surprised as you," Rachel says, gesturing at the Prince. He's staring down the Chi-Ryus like he could explode them with his mind if he really felt like it.

"Hey, guys!" Blaine says casually, walking up next to Finn. "Where's Kurt?"

Finn looks down the train. "Umm… I think he's near the end."

"Oh," Blaine says with a nod. "Cool. Well, I'm going to find him." He stares even more pointedly at the Chi-Ryus. "I suggest you not be in my way when I go. And by 'in my way,' I mean 'on this train.'"

The warrior chicks scoff at him. "Oh, please. We all saw your little fight with Quinn. What are you gonna do? Yell at us? Use your little sword? Yeah, we're real scared of the Fireless Prince."

Blaine blinks, squinting at them a little bit. "What did you just call me?" he says, stepping forward.

"Uhhh, dude, head injury, biting off more than you can chew, bad idea, abort—OW," Finn says, rubbing his arm where Rachel hit it.

"Like you can talk," she says.

"You heard me!" the Chi-Ryu says. "Poor little Blaine, all sad and lonely, no more daddy, no more throne, no more—"

As she talks, Blaine steps forward, closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, cocks his head, back opens his mouth…

…and shoots a fucking fifty-foot geyser of glowing orange fire into the sky.

"AIIIIIIIIEEE!!" Rachel squeaks, watching it rise and accidentally falling backwards.

"Holy Shit!" Finn shouts, flinching away from the heat.

"What the fuck?" Santana spits, completely halting her assault so she can stare.

"Daaaaaammmnn!" Artie breathes, the light from the flare reflecting off of his glasses.

"Oooh-wee!" Mercedes gasps, putting a hand on her chest as she watches the fire climb.

"Fuck me," Puck whispers, gaping and tilting his head like another angle will make it less awesome.

"What on earth…?" Quinn says quietly as a distant plume of brilliant orange catches her eye.

Kurt sees the orange light as it reflects off of her, looking out the window just in time to see the flame dissipating into the wind. There's no way for him to be certain.

And yet… he knows.

"That, my dear," he says lightly, "is a comeback. Let me show you how it works."

With that, he freezes all of his remaining water and shatters it violently, sending sharpened pieces flying all through the car. And then he starts firebending.

Mercedes sees Puck and the Chi-Ryu's distracted faces and wastes no time, holding her breath and blasting every speck of black powder off of her body and onto theirs.
As Santana watches the flame, Artie grins, takes his arms, and swipes her legs right out from beneath her.

Rachel and Finn reach out and grab each other as they stare at Blaine with tiny, awed smiles.

And Blaine… well, Blaine shifts into a familiar stance. "Now, tell me," he says with a smirk, "one more time…"

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On the tracks a short distance ahead, a signalman sees a signal flare from the Sho Fa station, and pulls a lever to switch the tracks.

And the fight takes a new direction…

"…what kind of Prince am I?"

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: COMING UP NEXT: It's been a long time coming, but ladies and gentlemen… Blaine is back! ;D Act 2 reaches its incendiary conclusion in Chapter 50: The Phoenix Prince.
The Phoenix Prince, Act 2 Finale

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 50/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: None for this chapter.
Word Count: ~26,000. I have a problem.
Summary: When a usurper sets eyes on the Fire Nation throne, Avatar Kurt and friends find themselves on the run with the deposed Prince Blaine in a country gone mad. Can they escape Lady Sylvester's wrath? Or will her minions snuff them out for good? Fusion fic!

Author's Note: Six months, fifty chapters, nearly four hundred thousand words, and it's all lead to this, the biggest and most climactic chapter of the story so far. I don't want to ruin any surprises that might be waiting within, but I think the following sums up things pretty nicely: Blaine is back. He gets shit done. ;) Enjoy!

CHAPTER 50 – The Phoenix Prince (Act 2 Finale)

"Oh, heavens," mutters the yardmaster, his eyes scanning over the clipboard's worth of numbers and figures that spell out his DOOM. "Oh Agni, oh Agni preserve me, Agni protect me, Agni spare me from the flame, turn me not into cinders, I beg of you."

There is so much to do, so much to explain, so much to compensate for. Other trains have to be redirected or delayed, other stations have to be warned, and lost/stolen cargo must be accounted for. Two—not one, but two trains stolen right out from under him on the same day! Granted, only one of them had any significant freight but still! This is a complete disaster, an utter clusterfuck, a catastrophic explosion of lost time, money, and possibly even personnel!

But he can't give up hope just yet!

There is the tiniest chance that the soldiers who stole—sorry, commandeered the other train will catch the Avatar and his foul brigade of brigands and the thousands of gold pieces worth of freight
Scuffle, scuffle. "Sir, please—"

"Get out of my—" CRASH.

"Sir, you can't just—AAGH, MY SPLEEN!"

Thud.

The door bursts open and a deranged-looking man in a dirty nightgown charges into the room. His hair is wild with sweat, his eyes twitchy with feral panic, the fight/flight instinct in its purest form.

The yardmaster dives towards his desk.

"Take it!" he says, holding up the tiny chest that contains his savings. "Take it all, just please, spare my life—"

"You idiot!" says the Crazy Man, looking around crazily, like a crazy person. "I'm not a robber. Don't you recognize a blazing Admiral when you see one?"

"A-Admiral?" the yardmaster says. He squints and adjusts his glasses. "Are you… Admiral Keros?"

"Yes, you simpering coward," Keros spits, still frantically scanning the room. "Confound it—where is the stupid—"

His eyes finally spot their prize, and the yardmaster is quickly dragged over to the large rail map pinned on a bulletin board.

"Show me where they are," he orders.

"Sir, I really can't tell you for sure, what with the—"

His face slams into the map, courtesy of the Admiral's hand. "Guess!" he commands.

Having little choice, the yardmaster fearfully adjusts his glasses and approximates. "Errr… w-well, based on the… c-current signal positions and time of d-day, with the track layout and c-c-construction taken—"

"GUESS FASTER!"

"There!" the yardmaster shrieks, pointing to his best estimate. "Heading southeast!"

Keros stares at the map, follows the line down until he sees something he apparently likes. His crazy smile is even crazier than his crazy panic.

"Change the signals. Switch all tracks on that line to head to the Wuji Bridge," he says.

The yardmaster's blood flees from his skin, hiding in his heart and barricading the door. "S-s-sir!" he stammers. "Surely you're joking! The bridge isn't—"

"I know."
"B-b-but thousands of gold pieces worth of—"

"I know."

"Sir, we have men on those train!"

"I KNOW!" the Admiral roars, and again, the yardmaster is forcibly acquainted with a wall. Keros's expression is so animalistic and unhinged that the yardmaster is half-afraid he's about to be eaten. "This is not a request!" he growls. "It is an order."

He can't do this. He can't! The yardmaster has had enough of being bullied. "You don't t-t-technically have any authority—"

The Admiral pulls out a very long, very sharp sword from beneath his robes.

"This," he seethes, pressing the sword against the yardmaster's neck, "is my authority."

Did he say he's had enough of being bullied? Because he lied.

"Do it," Keros says.

The yardmaster nods carefully, as if a wrong move will make his head fall off. As he goes at sword-point to the signal house, all he can do is hope the engineers realize where they're headed and stop in time.

Oh, wait. It's Freddy and Don on train one, isn't it?

Yep, they're dead.

Oh well.

Blaine and the Chi-Ryus lock eyes for a few tense moments. The Chi-Ryus are a picture of cold fury. Blaine is a picture of... some curly-haired goofball in a servant's outfit.

"BRIDGE!" Rachel resounds, diving down.

Finn goes down with her.

The Chi-Ryus go down shortly thereafter.

Blaine goes up. He takes a rocket jump off the train, backflipping over the bridge with flames trailing him the whole way.

It seems like showboating.

And let's not mince words: it is awesome.

But there's another reason.

The Fire Nation is full of hills, cliffs, and mountains. At sunset, the shadows get so deep and long that sometimes it seems like night comes early. That's the case here.

But Blaine knows better. The sun's on its way down, but it's not there yet.

And he wants to see it.
So he takes to the sky and finds it—the *barest* sliver of orange light peeking over the horizon. It doesn't seem like much, but to him, it's a tall glass of ice water after a two week hike through a desert. It fills him with energy and vitality. He was charged before. Now, he's *supercharged*.

Blaine gives the sun a farewell salute as he starts to fall, waving cheerfully to a passing merchant caravan as he goes.

The Chi-Ryus are on the attack as soon as the bridge passes. They punch fire blasts at Blaine, but twists and dodges them in *mid-air*. He doesn't even block them—he just *moves*. A split second before he hits the ground, he thrusts hands and feet down and firebends from all at once. The cushion of flame not only softens his landing, but creates a shockwave of fiery exhaust headed right at the Chi-Ryus.

They respond with a leap, but the speed and size of the attack catch them off guard, and they evade the wave by the skin of their teeth. They're prepared to counterattack as soon as they touch down, but Blaine gets one jump ahead of them—literally. Just before they land, he kicks off the train with a small explosion and a bright wave of sparks, blasting himself into their paths.

With the speed boost from his firebending, he shoulder-checks one right off the car as she touches down. The other lands and engages him in close-quarters combat. They're both good—but Blaine is better. There's a quick series of barely-dodged or deflected punches and kicks from each side. But where the Chi-Ryu is attacking with ferocity and power, Blaine more or less looks like he's dancing. And it's his fancy footwork that wins him the fight; he curls a leg around the Chi-Ryu's, breaking her stance and delivering an open-palm strike to her sternum as she stumbles. She flies off to join her partner.

Blaine adjusts his collar. "Well, that was fun," he grins.

Finn and Rachel are still gaping. They should probably close their mouths—something might fly in and choke them.

"*Dude,*" Finn says. "You just… that was…"

"Are you two okay?" Blaine interrupts.

"I'm… I'm fine…" Rachel says, still slightly wide-eyed.

"I'm… well, I'm pretty beat-up," Finn admits.

"Can you heal yourself?" Blaine asks.

Finn shakes his head. "I don't have any water. I used up the last of it fighting those girls."

The Prince looks thoughtful. "Where can we find more water…?"

"Refill towers!" Rachel says. "They'll be on the sides of the tracks. I'll keep a lookout and tell you if one's coming."

"And I'll break it open and you can patch yourself up!" Blaine says with a winning smile.

Finn doesn't return his grin. He's too busy looking a little nauseous at whatever he sees further down the train. "Man… those girls don't give *up,*" he says with a slight shudder.

As he turns around, Blaine reaches the same conclusion. Being thrown off the train is apparently little more than a temporary setback for the Chi-Ryus—they landed well, and immediately started
fire-skating alongside the train. They're not quite fast enough to keep pace, but they're fast enough to safely climb back on. They're several cars down and closing in fast.

"Oh, look," Blaine says, running to meet them. "They want an encore!"

With little else to do, Rachel picks up the tablet (and Finn) and they follow the re-ignited Prince.

Further down, Artie and Santana continue to have capital-I Issues with one another.

Mostly Santana with Artie.

Really, he'd have no problem with dropping the whole issue if only she would stop trying to pound him into burger meat.

"You stole her!" she growls from the ground. "She hates me, and it's your fault!"

The assassin pounces, pinning Artie on his back and doing all she can to pummel his face into human hummus. "I didn't steal anything!" Artie counters. "...for once." He raises his arms to block her hammerfists. "She decided—all by herself—that she didn't like who and what you were. And if you ask me, she had some damn good reasons!"

He pivots his head to dodge another whammy, and quickly comes up with a counter. As the next fist falls, instead of blocking or dodging, Artie catches it between his roped hands, holding onto it for dear life no matter how hard she yanks.

"Let me go!" Santana growls.

"You first!" Artie counters.

She tries to smack him a few more times, but Artie is a slippery little snake. So Santana changes strategies, just as Artie hoped she would—she fucking stands up, lifting his skinny ass off the ground and holding him up like the catch of the day.

"My, Santana," he grins at her. "What beefy, powerful arms you have."

"All the better to beat your ass with!" she growls back.

And then she starts swinging him around like a ragdoll.

Not what Artie had in mind, but it's cool, it's cool—he can work with this. As always, it's simply a matter of waiting for the right moment...

Mercedes is doing a little better in her fight. Puck punches at her, but she covers herself in solid coal armor and roots to the ground, taking the blast of air and being pushed back about a foot. When the gust subsides, she sheds the majority of the armor, keeping thick clumps on her forearms, hands, shins, and feet. Then she strikes back, stepping forward and hammering the armored jerk with her hands. His armor clangs with every blow, and it only takes a few hits to stagger him.

The Chi-Ryu pick up his slack, trying to drive her back with rapid strikes. She's having none of it—Mercedes blocks every blow with her rock-solid arm and shin guards, moving the heavy material like it weighs nothing at all. Earthbending rules.

"Yo!" Puck says from behind the Chi-Ryus. "Firebend much?"
"We can't," one Chi-Ryu says, ducking a horizontal swipe.

"The fuck? Why not?" Puck asks.

"Because we like being alive, dipshit," the Chi-Ryu spits, starting a counter-kick. "Coal dust explodes. And you're wearing it, too!"

"Oh, shit," Puck says. "Uhhh… carry on."

The Chi-Ryus start trying to coordinate their strikes, but Mercedes plays havoc with the coal at their feet and screws up their footing. With a little extra coal on her hands, she slams the girls down and starts to trap them in the coal, only to have them bounce back up before she finishes.

"What are we, retarded?" Puck growls. "We're fighting an earthbender in a car full of earth. Fuck that mess!"

He raises his fist like he's going to slam it down on the coal—which would almost definitely destroy the car and send them all flying off the train. She ain't having that. So Mercedes quickly grabs the rocks around Puck's feet and forces him into a split. His fist freezes mid-flight; he yelps, and falls on his face.

She wastes no time, raking her hands together and clenching her fingers like claws. A solid clump of coal forms around Puck's megafist, anchoring him to the ground.

"Shit. Shit!" Puck gripes, trying in vain to free his hand from the mineral manacle. It ain't budging, and Mercedes has had enough of his potty-mouth. She raises her coal boot to stomp his lights out.

Fortunately, the Chi-Ryus come through for him with flying colors.

Or, you know, flying kicks. Whatever works.

Blaine is… something else.

Finn has never seen the dude fight before. He kind of wasn't sure he could, mostly because Finn basically met him when he could barely stand up during a light breeze.

Yeah… no. Blaine can fight. Blaine is a freaking firebending monster.

The waterbender watches as he pushes the Chi-Ryus further and further down the train. Dude just never stops. He punches and kicks little fireballs and big fire blasts and wide, two-handed waves and little quarter-moon slices and it's all the Chi-Ryus can do to keep up with him, let alone fight back.

It's insane, and so is Blaine.

See, every other firebender Finn has seen looks either pissed or completely emotionless when they bend.

Blaine?

Blaine is having fun.

"Ladies," the Prince says, spreading his arms. "Call me crazy, but this relationship seems a little one-sided. You're all take and no give. We can't go on like this!"
Oh, great. Is he trying to piss them off? Because he is succeeding! The Chi-Ryus step towards each other, whirling their arms around and creating a massive, spinning fire wall.

"For me?" Blaine says with big, hopeful eyes. "Aww, than—"

Being pretty smart and pretty ruthless, the Chi-Ryus launch their attack while Blaine is yammering, but it doesn't do much good. Blaine just jumps to the side, claps his hands together and stabs the firewall, poking a hole in it and neatly bending it around him.

Even more impressive; the hole Blaine made in the shield? Finn fits right through it. So does Rachel. The only reason he moved at all was so he could bend a hole that would protect all of them.

"—thank you so much! You shouldn't have," Blaine grins, bouncing around on his feet even in his fighting stance, like he just can't stand to be still.

Finn now knows two things.

1: He is definitely trying to piss them off.

2: He's totally showing off.

"WATER!" Rachel shouts. "Blaine!"

The Prince pivots to peer at what Rachel pointed out. He doesn't seem to realize that this involves turning his back to his enemies.

The Chi-Ryus definitely realize this, and send two screaming fireballs at him.

"Dude, LOOK OUT!" Finn shouts.

Blaine doesn't even look back. He just kind of lowers his body and raises his arms like he's carrying something giant on his back.

The fireballs fly just above just arm, follow the curve of his shoulders, and ramp off of his other hand, soaring at water tower like he was holding an invisible fire chute for them to fly through.

"Thanks!" Blaine chirps as the tower starts gushing all over the train. It soaks Rachel (oh, holy crap Finn can totally almost see through her clothes; look away, Hudson!), it soaks Finn (who pretty much starts auto-healing), it soaks Blaine (who shakes the water out of his hair like a dog), and it soaks the Chi-Ryus (who start steaming).

It looks to keep right on gushing.

Everybody is about to get a little wet…

Like a gophermunk hanging on the tail of a tigerdillo, Artie is having the ride of his life with Santana. He's a little dizzy, and a little bruised, but he's managing. Teeth-grinding tenacity has gotten him pretty far in life, and he plans to stick with the strategy.

The opportune moment comes as suddenly and shockingly as a giant blast of cold water from freaking nowhere. Because that's basically what it is. In the midst of Santana's Slam-Down Superfest, a torrent from a busted tower washes over them, soaking them both and shocking the crap out of Santana. She's so busy shouting and cursing Artie that she winds up choking on water
and stumbling backwards.

The stumbling and flailing is exactly what Artie needs to succeed. As the hand he clings to flies up, Artie lets go, sailing over Santana's head, twisting around in mid-air, and looping his arms around her neck.

And suddenly, Santana has a stylish and functional Artie-shaped cape.

"Get off!" she shouts.

"Make me!" Artie challenges.

She clearly feels up to the challenge and starts throwing herself around, trying to heave him off. Artie grins at a sudden and unexpected mental image.

Brittany was right. He's totally a baby monkey here.

Time to hold on tight…

Over in Mercedes's neck of the woods, the Chi-Ryus are playing a defensive game, trying to break open Puck's coal shackle so he can fight again. They don't attack Mercedes unless she comes too close, but they fight like cornered animals—rapid, crazy strikes the second she gets too close. She has a few claw marks on her to prove it.

She's just getting ready to full-body armor herself and steamroll them all when the universe decides to give her another reason to hate the damn water element.

Splloosh.

A flash flood warning would have been nice.

The Chi-Ryus smile like the cat-owl that ate the canary jay. They may be wet, but they're powder-free and firebending-friendly once again. Before Mercedes even has a chance to shake the water out of her ears, the Chi-Ryus try to dry her by hand. By their hands, that is. Their sharp, angry, fire-spitting hands.

Before she knows it, her coal gloves are set on fire, and she has to shoot them off to avoid getting slow-cooked. The Chi-Ryus continue to blaze at her, and before she knows it, she's driven clean out of the coal car—and away from her element.

Puck watches them go, and smells opportunity. Now that Big Sassy and the Chi-Ryus are keeping each other busy, he can free himself. See, the lady's prison is pretty freakin' strong… but it's formed around his gauntlet, not his hand. And gauntlets, like all gloves, come off if you work them right.

All he needed was a little alone time. He… he doesn't like people to see it. It's not a pretty sight, and as he slides it out and looks it over… it's worse than ever.

It's splotchy and discolored, with veins that look like bolts of black lightning running up and down his fingers, past his palm, down to his wrist. He can't even deny it anymore—that nasty shit is spreading. It's getting worse.

Well, fuck it. Whatever. It doesn't matter. He fucking hates looking at this stupid thing anyway. He starts looking for his glove to cram it back into when he remembers the stupid thing is still stuck in the coal.
Fuck coal.

Puck slams his naked fist into the car.

The impact blows out the sides, shatters the frame, breaks the axels, destroys the couplings and sends coal flying everywhere. Fortunately, it sends Puck flying forward onto the next car, and his glove flies right along with him.

He catches it in mid-air, trying to shove his hand back in before anyone sees. Once it's in, he turns back to the fight and smirks.

It's payback time.

Back up the train, Finn gives himself a big, watery hug and lets the healing continue, still pretty fascinated by the Blaine show. It's entertaining, even if it's also a little scary.

Mostly because Finn is starting to think Blaine might be a little crazy.

"You are fucking kidding me with this bullshit," one of the Chi-Ryus says flatly as she watches Blaine play jumprope.

Finn is not even remotely kidding. He's jumping rope. With a fire rope (something Finn didn't even know existed).

The first girl starts to come at him, but Blaine scrapes the rope along the ground, sending a little firewave at her.

"Oh," Blaine says. "Do you want a turn?"

"Now he's just making fun of us," the other Chi-Ryu seethes.

"Not of you," Blaine says, crossing the rope and doing a couple of tricks. "Just making fun in general. It's fun! You should try it sometime."

The Chi-Ryu spit fire at him in rage. As the jumprope next comes around, Blaine sticks out his foot and cuts it in two, turning it into whips. Then he starts lashing at the Chi-Ryus, every lash sending sparks flying.

A soft muttering sound coming from Rachel has Finn tearing his eyes away from the Blaine Anderson Fireworks Spectacular and looking at the airbender. Her face is super-intense as she studies her mom's scroll (occasionally peeking up to check for oncoming danger).

"You okay, Rach?" Finn asks.

"Fine," she says, waving him off without even looking up. "Just… whetting my hunger for knowledge."

The waterbender tilts his head. Wetting hunger doesn't really help. You can't just drink stuff. You have to eat, too.

Well, whatever. Finn's not one to stop somebody from wetting themselves if that's what they want.

…

That didn't… that's not…
Oh, whatever.

Finn turns his head back to the Blaine show… now with special guest stars, Artie and Santana, just a few cars down.

Wait, what? He squints at them, trying to figure out if he's really seeing what he thinks.

"Holy crap!" Finn shouts.

His buddy's hands are tied together, and draped over Santana’s shoulder. She's trying to toss him off with the fury of a bucking broncosaurus, but Artie clings to her like a priceless treasure he intends to steal.

At that moment, Finn decides to stop hugging himself and spread the love. He bends the water into his pouch and stands up, ready for action.

…except that to get to Artie, he'd have to step between Blaine and the Chi-Ryus in the middle of their fight. He is so not ready for that action.

"Hey, Blaine!" Finn says. "I need to get past you guys. Can you, like, clear a path?"

"Sure!" Blaine pips. He lashes both whips up, and then slams them onto the train between the Chi-Ryus, creating two neat little parallel lines of fire, like a road for Finn travel.

Then he sucks in a breath through his nose, spreads his feet, and raises his hands. Suddenly, the lines of flame grow into walls—a nice, safe(ish) fiery hallway for Finn to run through. With the firebenders trapped outside, he covers his head and sprints through, trying not to accidentally burn himself on the walls.

He makes it through to the other side, and charges right towards Artie. He's pretty sure Blaine can take care of himself…

The Chi-Ryus start bending holes in his wall, and oh, no.

Blaine is having none of that.

He feels like being spoiled today, so he sucks in a deep breath, cups his hands and draws them back. All the fire in his fire walls is suddenly sucked into his hands, forming into a tightly packed, bright orange ball.

"Mine!" he says, mock-petulant. "Go make your own."

The Chi-Ryus take his advice, creating large firewall of their own to hide behind. They're expecting a pretty big attack from Blaine.

He does not disappoint them… but neither does he give what they expect. With the fire burning nice and bright, he pulls his hands apart, splitting the flame into two smaller balls and tossing them out to the sides.

The Chi-Ryus watch as the fireballs curve around their walls and come at them from outside. The girls quickly turn to try and block, and wind up pretty stunned when the balls curve upwards, fly right over their heads and slam into each other.

THOOM.
The blast sends them sailing off again, and Blaine waves as they go.

"Let's go, Rachel!" he says to the distracted girl as he continues on down the line.

Rachel looks up from her scroll, glances around like a nervous gophermunk, and scurries after him.

"You can't hold on forever!" Santana shouts at Artie as she tries to buck him off.

"You can't heave-ho forever!" Artie counters. "So I guess we just have to see who lasts longer."

At this point, Santana finally manages to look past pure fury and stop to think about her problem. She comes up with a decent solution pretty quick. Taking a second to wind herself up, she spins around as hard as she can, and then stops dead.

Artie's limp legs carry on her momentum, spinning the boy from her back to her front, with his hands still looped around her.

"Umm… hi," Artie gulps.

Santana smirks. "Aww, look at you, all nervous. Is this your first time with a lady like this? Don't worry…" she seethes, jamming her fist into his stomach and knocking his wind out.

"Nobody expects you to last long."

And she just keeps right on punching. Her fury returns in full force, and at no point in her assault does she even think of 'taking him off.' He goes limp pretty quick, but she doesn't care. This isn't about winning. This is about punishment.

So she bashes and smashes him, until suddenly, he's no longer there.

He's lying on the ground, gasping for air, the neatly sliced ropes still on his wrists.

She's in the process of turning around when a fucking water whip smacks her in the face.

"Hey!" Finn spits. "Quit bullying my buddy!"

Artie grins from the ground.

Finn cuts his whip at her again, and Santana sidesteps, only to find twin stone fists ramming her ankles out from under her. She lands on her face. What is it with these fuckers and her face?

While she's stunned, Finn runs over and gives Artie a lift, pulling his legs around while Artie fastens them together with coal. "You okay, little buddy?" Finn asks.

"Little?" Artie grunts. "Bite yo' tongue, bender!"

Santana scoffs as she gets back up. "The double-decker dumbass routine? Again?" she asks. "Well, fine. I love a two-for-one sale."

She pulls out her whip and lashes it, ready to send the giant tower of stupid tumbling down. She's so up for a rematch with these two.

Unfortunately for her, Blaine is a total show-stealer.

As far as she can tell, the Prince literally falls out of the freaking sky, landing between them. He
fixes Santana with eyes colder than any firebender should have a right to. "We didn't really get a chance to talk, did we?" he asks, cocking his head back as he looks at her. "It's been a while. I think we should catch up. So... tell me... in detail..."

He pulls his sword out of his belt and points it at her.

"What did you do to my friends?" he seethes.

And the fucking sword catches on fire.

_Fuck_ this noise.

She is not even slightly ashamed at how fast she runs. It's three benders versus one non-bender—those odds suck, and she has reinforcements further down the train. It's a purely tactical decision, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with any Princes or fires or swords or super-icy-death-eyes or any combination or permutation thereof and she will _smack_ any bitch who says otherwise.

Behind her, Blaine turns the heat off his weapon and sheathes it as Rachel catches up to them, still looking mostly at the scroll and making various scrunchy faces.

"I'm actually glad she ran off. I really don't know how to use this," he says, patting the sword. "It was just for show."

"Dude, your spark's back!" Artie says happily.

Blaine smiles and shrugs. "It never left. I just... misplaced it. Put it in the wrong pocket. You know how it goes."

The earthbender smiles right back. "Ready to light up the world?"

The Prince nods, and takes off running. "Come on! Winning is fun. I want to keep doing it!"

Finn looks back at Artie. "The Mudbender agrees with that assessment."

"So hard," Artie nods.

And they take off after him.

Back at the end of the train, the other earthbender is still having rotten luck with the girls and Puck. She's gathered a little cloud of coal-clumps to keep between her and harmful levels of thermal energy, but it's not enough to mount much of an offense, and as _defense_, they're burning through it in every sense of the word.

Her salvation, oddly enough, comes in the form of _more_ Chi-Ryus; two girls suddenly climb up onto the very last car on the train, looking ornery and a little crispy around the edges. Their armor is cracked in some places, _smoking_ in others.

"What happened to you?" one of the non-smoking Chi-Ryus asks.

"He did," says one of the smoldering Chi-Ryu, pointing up the train. "Come on! We need reinforcements!"

Without even so much as a look back at Puck, the Chi-Ryus sprint up the train and leave them both.

"What the _fuck_!" Puck shouts at them. "HEY! You bitches have serious commitment issues!"
"Guess it's just you and me, big boy," Mercedes says, forming all the coal she has left into gauntlets and greaves.

Puck glares at her. "Guess so," he grunts.

Predictably, he opens with a punch, sending a mighty gust of wind at her. She hunkers down and tries to tank it, and is more than a little shocked when it lifts her and throws her a couple cars up, landing her on her back.

She bounces back up as Puck catches up with her.

"How the Hills do you even do that?" she asks.

He smirks at her and flexes his fingers. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

That triggers something in her mind.

While she was fighting the Chi-Ryus, Puck went and broke out all by himself. And now that he's flaunting that gauntlet of his, she's pretty sure she knows how he did it. He just took the damn glove off.

So… why did he wait so long to do it? And why'd he even bother putting it back on again?

Unless…

"What's under that glove?" she asks pointedly.

"My hand," he says defensively. "What's it to you?"

"Take it off," she says.

"That's what she said," Puck smirks.

She rolls her eyes. "You don't want people to see it. There's something messed up about it, isn't there?"

His eyes flash, and she grins. She hit the nail on the head. His poker face is pretty good, but the eyes don't lie.

"What the fuck do you know?" he growls, punching at her again. This time, she tries to sidestep the blast, but it wings her just enough to send her spinning like a top. It's a damn good thing her stance is mountain-steady, she might have fallen over from how dizzy she wound up being.

"Did I hit a sore spot?" she asks the assassin as her world rocks on its axis.

"You're just jealous!" he says. "You wish you had my fist of fury."

"I've got a couple of my own, thanks," she counters. There are two Pucks at the moment, so she launches a coal fist at each of them, and one of them hits him in the chest, sending him staggering back. Before he regains his balance, she rushes him and throws him on the ground, slamming a coal boot on his hand before he can move it.

"Get off!" he growls.

"Nope," she says. "I think I'll just smash that little glove of yours and see what's inside." She's aiming to get a rise out of him.
She gets a little more than she bargained for. The naked fear in Puck's eyes is downright shocking. She's a damn stranger to him—why the fuck should he care what she thinks about his messed up hand or whatever's under there?

"You can't!" he growls, turning fear into anger. He tries to pull out from under her, but she's got weight and power on her side.

Puck, on the other hand, has allies.

A whip cracks close enough to her ear to make her stumble. Puck jerks his hand out from under her boot and tries to deck her with it, and just by the barest flinch on her part does he miss scoring a direct hit. The air around her takes the hit instead, and she goes flying, sailing up the train past Santana and two entire cars. This time, however, instead of landing on her back, she flips in mid-air and slams her coal boots into the ground, holding steady and grinding to a halt.

Finn and Artie (in Magic Mud Man Mode, or whatever) step up beside her. "'sup?" Finn asks.

Mercedes rolls her eyes. "Fighting assassins. You?"

"Same," Artie shrugs.

"Where's the other two?" Mercedes asks.

Finn nods up the train, where Rachel is running past Blaine and the group of no less than four Chi-Ryus attacking him.

Blaine seems to be doing fairly well. Mostly by not dying.

"Hey!" Mercedes calls out. "You okay over there?"

The Prince flashes a thumbs-up (with a little flame on his thumb, just for show). "I'm fine! Everything is—WHOA—under control!"

The earthbender tilts her head. "Should we help him?"

"In my honest opinion?" Artie says. "I think he's got this."

Finn nods. "Blaine is kind of crazy awesome. It's a little scary."

Mercedes shrugs. "Well, in that case, the 'asses' in 'assassin' are waiting for us." She grabs Finn's hand and yanks him forward.

"Awww," Finn whines. "I wanted to watch Blaine do more cool fire stuff…"

"We'll get him to give you a private show later," Mercedes says. "If you're into that kind of thing…"

"So," one of the Chi-Ryus grunts as she launches a series of flaming kicks. "Are you still having fun, little Prince?"

Blaine pivots and swerves and leaps around each of them, looking a little out-of-breath, but no less smug and self-assured. "Tons," he says, smiling like the little punkass he is.

The Chi-Ryus form a fire net and toss it at him, but he backs off, spins up a flaming buzzsaw, and cuts clean through it, nearly cutting through them as well.
"Alright, Chi-Ryus," one of them growls, taking the role of Temporary Captain. "I've had it with this punk. ROAST HIM!"

In perfect unison, they breathe in, gather their energy, and let fly with four of the biggest fire streams that can muster.

The Prince crosses his arms in front of him, bending up a little bubble of safety in the flaming river. He looks like he's holding out pretty well, but a closer look reveals otherwise. His stance is off, and his breathing is irregular. His feet are sliding backwards from the force of the flames.

_He's going to break._

"KEEP IT UP!" the TC yells, turning up the heat.

The other girls follow suit, and the flames brighten. Just as they get too intense to see through, the TC catches the Prince break his stance to step backwards. His sleeves catch on fire, and the glow engulfs him. His little safety bubble pops, and the flames wash over him.

She keeps the stream going for a few moments, just for _fun._

"Enough!" she calls out, letting her flames dissipate in the night air. The aftermath has left the tops of at least _three cars_ scorched and blackened beyond recognition.

"Look for remains!" the TC orders. They fan out, looking for any identifiable chunks of fried Prince they can take to her boss. All she needs is a meaty-enough chunk to prove he's gone.

One of her comrades shouts at her. "I don't see anyth—AHHH!"

She spins around just in time to watch the girl fall off the train.

The other three freeze in place.

"What the…"

"Did she trip?"

The TC is contemplating the question when she sees a hand reach up from the side of the car, grabbing another girl and yanking her off.

"Hey!" the TC shouts. She rushes over to the ledge and fireblasts down the side of the car, but there's nobody there. She has no idea what the fuck is going on until she turns around just in time to see a familiar little punkass flip up from between the cars, landing on her last girl's back and kicking her off the side.

"_How?_" she growls, pinning him with a death glare. The twerp is shirtless, and his pants look a little crispy around the ankles, but there's not a scorch mark on him besides that. It's like they never attacked him at all. "How did you survive that?"

Blaine grins, pointing a thumb at the gap between cars. "The same way I survive everything. While you weren't looking… I slipped through the cracks."

That's _it._

The TC charges the little brat with a primal roar, fire blazing out of her mouth and nostrils like a dragon train.
He waits until the very last second, feints to the side, and sticks out his ankle.

He fucking *trips* her off the train

His smug, 'helpful' voice is the last thing she hears before she smacks the ground.

"Watch your footing!

"Fuck," Puck says. "We can't run."

"I know," Santana replies, looking around for something, *anything* helpful.

"Fuck!" Puck says. "Those stupid bitches bailed on us! *Again!*"

"I KNOW!" Santana seethes. "Stop whining and help me figure out how to get out of this."

"Leaving so soon?" Mercedes asks as she steps onto their car.

"We were just about to start the afterparty!" Artie says from Finn's back, as he steps up as well.

"It's gonna be awesome," Finn says. "There will be dancing. And pain."

Puck and Santana look at each other. It's fight or flight. And neither of them can fly, so…

"You wanna party?" Puck growls, running at Finn and Artie. "I'll party all night long!"

He rears back for a punch, but a rock fist meets his own knocking him off balance. He stumbles, and Finn capitalizes on the moment by bending out his water and forming a sheet of ice under his feet. Fury and animal instinct are all that manage to push him up before Finn freezes him to the ground.

"Let's see how you dance," Santana says, whipping out her whip and taking a few lashes at Mercedes.

The earthbender's only remaining coal is on her feet, so she transfers it to her arms and starts blocking. Santana's whip is pretty fierce—she chips off little black chunks with every strike, every movement flowing easily into the next one. She'd have made a killer waterbender if she'd been born with the gift.

Meanwhile, Rachel continues to study the scroll with every ounce of her concentration. She has it unfurled against the tablet to keep it safe from being blown out of her hands, and it's nothing less than mesmerizing to her. The woman depicted in the diagrams looks so much like an older version of her, it's *uncanny*. She studies each step carefully, committing it to memory. She's always been an excellent student (when paired with a teacher who recognizes her excellence, at least). And since she's already so far behind in her airbender education, she is determined to master these steps in the shortest amount of time possible.

Ahead of her, Finn and Artie expertly time their attacks to keep Puck's powerfist out of play. Artie will toss out a glove or two to knock him back, and while the glove comes back, Finn will step in with a waterlash to smack him silly. The assassin's frustration is quickly mounting. Every time he tries to strike back, his punch is faster and wilder, making it harder and harder for them to keep him in check.

It's only a matter of time before one of them messes up, and surprisingly enough, it's not Finn. Artie
is a split-second late on one of his long distance counterpunches. As a result, his earthen fist meets Puck's glove at just the wrong moment. The intricately designed instrument is reduced to sand, and the resulting air blast topples the top-heavy Mudbender.

Puck has no idea what he's about to unleash.

The attack pushes Finn just far enough back. He loses his balance at just the right place, and falls backwards in just the right way. It takes about a second, all told, but it's amazing how far reaching the impact of a single second can be.

The waterbender falls just next to the gap, in just the right position for Artie to absorb the full brunt of the impact, as the hard, metal corner slams directly into the base of his spine.

Finn hears him gasp like he's suffocating.

"Dude!" Finn shouts, scrambling back up. "Artie, are you okay?"

Artie's eyes go wide as he feels a spike of white-hot agony that flashes through every single nerve ending below his waist in the space of a second, like lighting a match in a room full of natural gas; an explosion of pain that consumes every inch of him in a single destructive burst, and then...

Nothing.

He feels nothing.

Nothing from his feet as they give way to knees. Nothing from his knees as they slide apart uncontrollably, giving way to the cold, hard ground at his back.

Nothing.

Nothing

Half of him is

gone

And then he sees the shadow looming above him.

That is when the anger sets in.

And—

"Artie," Finn grunts. "Dude, you're hurting me!"

The waterbender managed to get back on his feet after Puck knocked him over, but it was kind of a challenge, because Artie, like, froze. And not like freezing in front of a crowd, either—he went, like, stone rigid, and his fingers are practically digging holes into Finn's shoulders.

"Artie!" Finn barks. "Dude, talk to me!"

This finally seems to get the Mudbender's other half back in the game. His fingers unclench (oh,
"sweet relief), and he relaxes slightly.

"I'm..." he says, his voice quiet and weirdly flat. "I'm fine, Finn."

Alarm bells go off in Finn's mind. That doesn't sound right. It doesn't sound like Artie.

"Dodge left!" the earthbender commands. Finn quickly pivots to the left just in time to avoid getting blasted off the train.

"Artie, are you sure you're—"

"Shut up, Finn," Artie says flatly. "Follow my lead. Do as I say, and we'll survive this."

Somehow, Finn knows it's useless to argue.

Meanwhile, Mercedes finds herself on the bad end of a whipping. Which is just wrong; she's not the one who's misbehaving, here! Santana and that damn whip are driving her clear up the train. Neither of them are really getting anywhere at this point, but Santana is pretty much all offense, with Mercedes on pure defense.

And now, she realizes that just ain't right.

She's an earthbender. She's supposed to stand firm against oppression, suppression, depression, and every other kind of pression she can think of. Her grandma taught her better than this! That whip might take a chunk out of Mercedes's hide, but Santana would be hard-pressed to kill her with it. And a little pain, Mercedes can deal with.

So she puts her foot down. She stops defending, and starts attacking, rushing Santana head-on. Sure enough, the girl manages to snap the whip against her shoulder, leaving a pretty heavy cut. And it hurts like a mother, but it's like taking out one stone in the middle of an avalanche. Santana's problem is much larger than she is truly equipped to deal with, and to her dismay, that problem is now aware of that fact.

Before she knows it, Mercedes slams into her, knocks her back, snatches the whip out of her hand and throws it off the train.

"Hey!" Santana growls, stepping back to avoid a few of Mercedes's punches. "I paid good money for that!"

Mercedes rolls her eyes. "Don't get mad at me. Might as well get mad at the ground for breaking shit when you drop it. I just do what I do, honey."

The tide turns, and now Mercedes is the one doing the pushing, her fists of fury keeping Santana on the move, lest she ruin her diet with a knuckle sandwich.

Meanwhile, Rachel sets the tablet down on top of the scroll and begins to stretch. Her studies have given her great insight, and she is now ready to take her performance to the public.

Her chosen venue? Mercedes vs Santana.

She hopes her audience will be appreciative of her hard work.

Over in the battle of Puckzilla vs. the Mudbender, Puck is a little thrown by a sudden change in his opponents' strategy.

Neither of them is doing anything.
Finn is just kind of standing there, moving whenever Puck attacks. And Artie is hanging around with his hands on Finn's shoulders, looking at Puck. Watching him. With, like, no expression at all.

"Dude, quit staring!" Puck says. "It's creepy."

Dude doesn't even blink at him. Just keeps right on looking.

"Fine," Puck growls. "I'll give you something to look at."

He raises his fist and slams it towards them.

The air blast misses completely. Finn dodges the second Puck raises his hand.

"Nice moves, wet willy," Puck grumbles. "But you won't get lucky twice."

He does.

He gets lucky three more times, actually. Puck can't catch him at all—Finn moves before Puck even really starts punching, like he just knows what Puck is going to do.

It's on the fourth punch that he figures it out.

Every time he attacks, Artie squeezes Finn's shoulder. And Finn moves in that direction. Little dude is driving big dude.

What the fuck.

"Come on!" Puck shouts. "Fucking do something! It takes two to tango, and I'm doing all the fucking work!"

"There's three of us," Artie deadpans.

Puck looks at him, and smirks. "Tch. More like two and a half," he spits.

Artie blinks at him, and smiles. Puck has no idea how badly he's already lost this fight.

The earthbender leans down and whispers into Finn's ear. "His hand has a cooldown time. The next time he punches..."

Finn seems a little uneasy, but he nods.

Puck growls. He's fucking sick of these losers. He throws his hand wild, just to fuck with them, but all that happens is that he misses, and Finn charges at him. Puck crouches down, ready for the dumbass train to bring the pain. He's completely thrown when Finn suddenly skids to a stop, and Artie is thrown at him.

He's basically got no time to react before the dude hooks an arm around his neck, swings around to his back, and gets him in a choke hold. Puck tries as hard as he can to wedge his fingers in there and break his grip, but dude is like, twisted strong.

"You're weak," Artie whispers into his ear.

"'scuse me?" Puck growls as best he can.

"You heard me," Artie says simply, and tightens his grip.
Meanwhile, Finn is in the middle of watching Artie's weirdly smart strategy when somebody squeals behind him. He turns around just in time to witness a nightmare.

Santana and Mercedes are embroiled in a fierce melee battle basically the entire time that Puck, Finn, and Artie are fighting. The saucy assassin and the sassy earthbender are pretty evenly matched in terms of hand-to-hand combat skill—Mercedes's powerful strikes and ironclad defense make for a nice contrast to Santana's quickness and agility. So while Santana dances around and tries hit and run tactics, Mercedes steadily advances on her, keeping her wits about her, striking when the moment presents itself and blocking when necessary without ever breaking her stride.

Things are looking up for the earthbender.

And then a wild Rachel appears.

The girl—out of freaking nowhere, she might add—steps in behind her and starts doing some kind of freaky twisting-hands dance, like spinning an invisible globe. While she flicks her hands around, a ball of pressurized, fast-moving air forms between them.

Mercedes is shocked. Just shocked enough to give Santana an opening to kick her right in the chest and knock her back.

"Gotcha!" the assassin says, moving in for the kill.

Rachel, having formed the air ball, seems oddly confused about what to do with it. But time is of the essence, and her friend is in trouble, so she does the best she could under the circumstances.

Which brings us back to the nightmare.

Finn hears Rachel squeal, and turns around just in time to witness her run between Santana and Mercedes and thrust her hands at the assassin.

There's, like, an airsplosion or something, and all three of them go flying. Rachel, naturally, flies the farthest, and Santana winds up closest to him, leaving Mercedes in the middle.

But that's not the nightmare part.

The nightmare part is that all three of them are hanging off the train by their fingers.

Oh, crap. Oh, crap. What does he—who does he—how does he—

"HELP!"

He doesn't have time to think.

Finn sprints forward, pulls Santana up one-handed and slams her onto the car. With his other hand (and skill he had no idea he possessed), he bends the water out of his pouch, loops it around her hands and feet, squeezes and freezes it, trapping her.

He runs to Mercedes next, and Finn has to use both hands to pull her up. Fortunately, he doesn't need to waterbend her into captivity.

"Watch it, waterboy!" she says. "Easy with the—"

Finn is off and running without even letting her finish. He doesn't have time for her crap right now.

Rachel is hanging off the side of the car, flapping in the wind like a human flag. She's having a
hard time hanging on, and even as Finn runs towards powered by pure desperation, he can see her fingers slipping. One hand flies off. Four fingers. Three. Two.

He isn't going to get to her in time.

There's no way he'll be able to reach her.

One.

So he waterbends.

There is little water on the train that hasn't evaporated, but what there is comes up to meet him. It combines with the water on his body, the water in the air, and every speck of moisture he can pull from anything nearby.

Rachel's last finger slips, and she falls.

Finn lashes his hand out and spins it around. A tether of water shoots out from him and wraps around Rachel's wrist, and he yanks her up as hard as he can.

It's a little harder than he needs, because she flies up and smacks him in the face, and they both wind up on the ground.

Rachel shakes her head as she peels herself off Finn's chest.

Finn looks at her with a crooked little smile. "Hey," he says. "Are you okay?"

She looks down at him, and her face is super-confused. "Stop it," she says.

"Stop… what?" Finn asks.

She smacks him.

"Ow!"

"That! Stop being so… so… infuriatingly adorable!" she shouts at him.

"Wait… what?" Finn asks. "I'm not even—"

Suddenly, her face is, like, super-close to his, and she looks more confused than ever. They're so close they can taste each other's breath, and Finn really hopes his doesn't taste gross or anything.

"Hey, uhh… guys?"

Rachel sits up like Finn's mouth hit her with a spring-loaded boxing glove. Finn looks over to see a half-naked Blaine giving them a pretty strong side-eye.

"Hi!" Rachel says. "Hello, Blaine. Hi. Nice to see you. Are you well?"

Blaine nods. "Are… you?" he asks.

"Yes," Rachel says primly. "I am very well. Thank you."

"Okay," Blaine says. "Well, I'm just… gonna… go…" He points down the train.

"We'll go with you!" Rachel says, picking Finn up and pushing him down the train. "Come along, Finn!"
Finn is very, very confused right now. Rachel seems almost mad at him and he doesn't know why. Maybe she just realized he saved her life with a water-rope made mostly of sweat.

Back in the danger zone, Mercedes is pulling some ropes off of Santana as the girl curses her loudly.

"Don't fucking touch me!" she says. "Those are mine. Buy your own, if you feel like getting kinky, bitch!"

Mercedes ignores her and continues disarming her, right up until Blaine steps up beside her.

"Well, look at you," she says, giving the Prince a once-over. "All fired up again."

He grins. "What can I say? I'm hot tonight."

"Is that why you decided to take your shirt off?" she teases.

He blushes a little. "Ah… no. It kind of caught on fire," he says, smiling. "I'll have to ask Kurt, but I'm pretty sure that 'being on fire' is not a good fashion statement." He looks around. "Where is Kurt? There's something I need to tell him."

She's about to answer when Finn and Rachel barge in. Mercedes is momentarily distracted by her unyielding need to chew out the latter.

"Girl, what the Hills was that shit you just pulled?" Mercedes asks. "You damn near killed me!"

"Umm…" Rachel says. "That was… supposed to be airbending."

The earthbender's jaw drops. "You're joking. You've been a bender this whole time and you didn't tell us?"

"To be fair," Rachel says. "I didn't know about it either. Jesse had this… this scroll, and—OH MY GOSH!" she yells. "The scroll! And the tablet! I left them behind!"

She is booking it back up the train before Mercedes can even get a word in.

She turns around, only to see Blaine running in the opposite direction. "Where's he going?" she asks.

"To find Kurt," Finn says. "He's got something to tell him, or something."

"He's not gonna find Kurt down there," Mercedes says. "He's not on this train."

"Where is he?" Finn asks.

Suddenly, Santana chimes in the conversation. "Hey! Assholes!" she says. "Pay attention to your little friend!"

The two benders glance over at the Puck and Artie fight.

"Oh, fuck," Finn says.

He's off and running in a second, and Mercedes is right behind him.

"I saw your every move before you made it," Artie says casually as Puck struggles. "You're
completely predictable. And you telegraph your attacks from a mile away. You don't use that hand to augment your skill—you use it to replace it."

Puck bucks as much as he can, but dude has him by the balls (figuratively), and he knows he can't hold out much longer.

"You make fun of me for only having use of half my body, but you don't even use that. You're nothing but a hand, Puck, and it's just... sad. You have the use of your entire body, and you neglect it in favor of one limb. Who is really more pathetic? The man weakened by circumstance who chooses strength? Or the man strengthened by circumstance, who chooses weakness?"

He's seeing spots. His body is giving out on him, and everything is starting to swirl.

Oh, fuck.

Oh, fuck.

He's going to die.

He's imagined it a thousand times, and he never thought... it'd be... like this...

His hands pat weakly at Artie's arms, unable to even grip them. His legs give out and he falls to his knees. His knees give out, and he falls backwards.

And Artie feels the cold, hard ground at his back.

Nothing.

Nothing

.

Half of him is
gone

.

And then he sees the shadow looming above him.

That is when the anger sets in.

"Artie."

And the betrayal.

"Artie, let go!"

And the shame.

"Artie, stop!"

And the seething, poisonous hatred—

"Dude, that's ENOUGH!"
Artie is brought back to the present by the shock of ice cold water splashing against his face. He unwraps his arms to wipe it off, and…

Puck slumps forward, his head—his entire body—limp and seemingly lifeless in Artie's lap.

"…what… what is he…?"

Artie stares at the unmoving assassin in complete horror. He tries desperately to move out from under him, but Puck's (dead?) weight pins him down.

Finn and Mercedes look at Artie like he's a stranger.

"Did—" Artie says, his voice leaving him for a moment. "D-did I…?"

He can't even to say it.

Finn retrieves the water he splashed Artie with and holds it on his fingers as he runs them around Puck's head (mainly his neck).

After a few seconds, sighs with relief. "No," Finn says. "He's just knocked out."

Artie kind of feels like crying. "Holy crap…"

"What were you thinking?" Mercedes says. "Were you trying to—"

"No!" Artie insists. "No, I swear I just…" He tries to think back, to remember what he felt at that moment. "I just wanted to make sure he was out. I wanted to make sure he couldn't hurt us…"

Ever again.

"...I just… wasn't thinking," he finishes quietly.

Finn and Mercedes stare at Artie. Artie stares at the ground.

From a short distance away, Santana stares at all of them, tied up with her own ropes. She takes everything in, and her fury goes from red hot to ice cold.

Finn is the one who breaks the silence. "...I believe you," he says, reaching down to pick up his friend.

Mercedes doesn't say anything. She just looks at him like she doesn't know what to think.

To be honest, Artie isn't quite sure what to think, either.

"Got it!" Rachel chirps, returning with the all-important tablet tucked into her side.

"Good," Mercedes says. "Let's go catch up with Blaine."

They all take off towards the errant Prince.

Rachel apparently has something to say along the way. "Incidentally, I've been thinking over the past few minutes that the group would do well to invest in some kind of knapsack or carrying case. Something to give my arms—or anyone's arms, really—a break."

Finn shrugs. "We kind of had one."

"Several, actually," Mercedes adds. "Somehow, we always manage to run off without them."

"Well," Rachel says flatly. "That will not do. I will be taking stock and keeping track of all of our supplies from now on."

Artie side-eyes her. "Ummm, excuse me, lady, but you've been here for like 5 minutes—"

"Where's Kurt?" Blaine cuts in, having run back up the train.

"I was just about to tell you," Mercedes says, nodding at the enemy train lagging behind them on the other track. "Kurt went to the other train. He hasn't come back yet."

"He went to the other train… alone?" Blaine asks. "But… Puck and Santana are here. The only ones not accounted for are… Quinn, and her Chi—"

A bone-rattling explosion shatters the night.

An explosion from the other train.

Before anyone else even thinks about reacting, Blaine sprints towards the end of the freight cars. He hops, skips, and BOOM—ends with an explosive jump that sends shockwaves through every single car and propels him skyward and forward with blinding burst of—

"HOLY CRAP!" Finn says, gaping at the sight. "Is it… is it supposed to look like that?"

Mercedes tilts her head. "I don't think so," she says.

The four of them watch as the blue flames slowly fade to yellow.

"Maybe he farted," Artie suggests.

That suggestion gets three side-eyes that it richly deserves.

"What?" Artie asks. "Gas changes fire's color!" he insists, petulantly crossing his arms. "I read it in a book."

Mercedes just shakes her head and sighs. "Speaking of things that stink… we have a couple of turds we need to finish cleaning up. Come on, y'all…"

She turns back up the train, walking away from Blaine and Kurt and hoping beyond hope that they can hold on long enough for them to finish this and get to them…

A bit earlier…

As the rest of his team is fighting for their lives on the freight train, Kurt is involved in a pitched battle of his own on the passenger train. His ice shard explosion actually managed to give the Chi-Ryus a few shallow cuts. Unfortunately, this did little more than piss them off, and apparently, pissing off firebenders runs a very real risk of making them stronger.

Lots of things are being set alight, both by Kurt, and the Chi-Ryus. The feeling in his arm is starting to come back, but it's still mostly useless, so he has to rely on fancy footwork and fierce one-armed strikes to keep pace with the elite firebenders. He kicks and sweeps, sending bursts and blooms of fire with each movement, occasionally stepping in for an arm-strike if he feels he has a sure hit.

It's tough, and he takes a few burns here and there, but he manages to keep the Chi-Ryus at bay.
"Your form is good for a beginner," Quinn comments idly. Since they got out of the caboose, the Chi-Ryu Captain has done nothing but watch. It's kind of irritating.

"Coming from you, that means so much," Kurt snarks, sliding his foot along the ground and sending a shower of sparks at a dark-haired Chi-Ryu.

"Are you trying to say something?" Quinn asks calmly.

Kurt shrugs, deflecting a red-haired Chi-Ryu's hand to the side just as she's about to give him a face full of flame. "I'm saying," he spits, "you're not even doing anything! What's the matter—afraid to face me one-on-one?"

Quinn smirks at him. "Nice try, but I'm not that easily baited," she says flatly.

Kurt leaps away from his enemies, simultaneously kicking both feet at the Chi-Ryus and launching a large fireball that sets much of the car ablaze. The attack is wide enough to force all three girls to shield themselves. And yet, Quinn still refuses to participate in the fight, simply dusting herself off and continuing to watch.

"Okay, seriously; why aren't you playing?" Kurt flat-out asks her.

She shrugs. "Just… keeping things fair," she says with a wink. "I wouldn't want you to feel overwhelmed and… oh… how can I put this…" She taps her chin thoughtfully, and smiles. "...freak out?"

Kurt gapes at her.

She knows.

Well, of course she knows about the Avatar State—she was kind of there the last time he went haywire. But more than that, she knows how the Avatar State is triggered—and she's purposely avoiding it.

"What… how did you… how did you know?" Kurt asks.

Quinn rolls her eyes. "Really, it doesn't take an engineer to notice the difference between two weeks ago and tonight. But honestly? I guessed. Thanks for confirming my answer."

Kurt glares at her. Oh, she's good. "I hate you so much right now."

"But not enough for it to matter," Quinn replies with a smug smile. "Girls?"

The Chi-Ryu step forward to fire blast him, and Kurt decides a change of strategy is in order.

He kicks the door open behind him and steps through, slamming it shut just in time to block a dangerous wave of combustion headed towards his face. Then he dashes into the frontmost passenger car. He needs a new strategy. He doesn't know what it is, but he knows that he really needs it, and fast.

He's thinking as hard as he can when it, quite literally, smacks him in the face.

Well, okay, it doesn't smack him in the face so much as get caught under his foot and cause him to trip and smack his face into it. Still. Facial contact is involved.

There's coal around from Artie and Mercedes's little assault, especially in this car, which seems to have been hit the hardest. He roots his stance and rakes his hand at the coal, drawing it towards
him. His other arm, while not quite 100% recovered, has enough feeling for him to move it now, so he gets it in on the action as well. Putting the coal on his body at this point would be an excellent recipe for cooked Avatar ala carte, so instead of wearing it, he clumps it all into a single large coal boulder, about the size of his torso.

And then he levitates the coal between himself and the Chi-Ryu.

The firebenders burst through the door and attack immediately, igniting the coal.

Kurt smirks. "Thanks for the light," he says lightly.

And then he starts slamming the thing around.

The enormous, burning brick is a dynamo of destruction. Kurt uses his earthbending to swing it around like a flail, crushing seats, destroying lamps, and sending the Chi-Ryus leaping for cover. The agile warriors are exceedingly difficult to hit with the slightly awkward weapon, but Kurt has them on the run at the moment, and that's what really matters.

The Chi-Ryus don't take long to start their counterattacks, however. They begin blasting large chunks out of Kurt's giant coal boulder, making it burn away faster with every opening they cut. It's this, however, that gives Kurt the unique idea for his next offensive maneuver.

He is the Avatar, after all. He can bend multiple elements, and he sees at least two of them right in front of him. Why not bend both?

So as he continues to use one hand to slam the boulder around, he starts using quick, fierce jabs with the other. The flames engulfing the brick respond well to this, lashing out in little firebursts at the Chi-Ryus. With firebending added to his earthbending, the tides of battle take a sudden turn. The Chi-Ryus no longer have time to get in any decent counterattacks. Kurt keeps them on the move constantly, smartly bending both the shape and size of the flame, as well as the position of the coalder itself, to keep them cornered, herded, and under control.

He is kicking ass and taking names.

Which is probably why Quinn finally decides to step in.

Suddenly, Kurt's burning rock of doom is split in twain by a razor-thin slice of fire. The two halves fly apart, revealing Quinn standing in the doorway with two outstretched fingers on each hand.

It's annoying and a little inconvenient, but Kurt can't help but feel just a little smug. "Oh, so now you've decided to play?" he smirks.

In response, Quinn slices her fingers horizontally, sending out another thin fire blade that cuts his two coal chunks into four. Kurt himself has to bend over backwards to dodge the crescent-shaped cutter, lest it split him as well.

"Chi-Ryus!" Quinn orders. "Get rid of these rocks!"

Kurt starts firebending from the rocks at them again, but Quinn grabs control of the flames and puts every single one of them out.

In time with her extinguishment, the Chi-Ryus dash in and deliver explosive kicks and punches to each of the four chunks, sending them sailing out the broken windows and forcing Kurt to release them from his bending.
"Well... fuck."

"If you really want me to play," Quinn says. "Then I guess I can oblige you."

The three-on-one assault that follows is not pretty.

Kurt fights like an animal, but he's just not skilled enough in firebending alone to match any of them, let alone three of them at once. It's all he can do to avoid getting cooked. His clothes are shredded, his skin is singed in several places, and the car, literally and figuratively, just becomes too hot for him to handle. He soon finds himself laying down a small wall of fire as he flees in desperation.

Hey, he said himself, nothing wrong with a little running when you're outmatched.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow," he says like a mantra as he clutches at his numerous burn marks and hobbles out of the car.

He is rapidly running out of places to run. All that's left of the train is the main engine, and that little car thingy right behind it that...

...holds all the coal.

"Monkeyfeathers," Kurt says, slamming his face into his palm. "Why did I not remember this sooner?"

He dashes around the tender, where he finds the nervous driver silently muttering prayers to Agni as he continues to shovel coal and do his job.

"Don't mind me," Kurt says. "Just need to borrow some of your fuel..."

He summons the coal to him and starts throwing suppressive fire immediately, driving back the Chi-Ryus as they try to follow him. The tiny bricks pepper the firebenders and send them flailing for cover. Quinn thinks she is being smart when she leaps over the rim of the tender and tries to attack Kurt from his coal supply, but the Avatar just shapes the coal into a piston and launches her backwards, sending her sailing to the caboose.

He's just about to follow after them when he hears a marvelously familiar sloshing sound coming from his right.

Looking over, he sees that another water tower has been busted, and is currently spewing a thick, beautiful torrent onto the other set of tracks.

He is all over this, reaching out and snatching as much of the water as he can, bending himself into a nice, happy bubble. The cool liquid not only soothes the burn marks on his skin, but his soul as well—water is just innately calming to him. His mind feels clearer. His heart feels less frantic.

There, standing in a massive pile of coal, with water rushing around him, Kurt finds a moment of peace in the middle of chaos. He knows he's supposed to be the Avatar and favor balance among the elements and all, but he just can't help that water is his favorite right now. Earth and fire would never make him feel like this if he were covered in them.

Kurt blinks.

...or would they?
Suddenly, he has a very, very interesting idea…

Quinn doesn't take long to recover from Kurt heaving her to the caboose. Her sifu has done worse things in the name of her training than the Avatar has done in their fight, and she can't help but be a little disappointed that he isn't more of a challenge.

Of course, she can hardly expect much from someone who relies so heavily on the outer elements to do his work. He just doesn't have the firebending prowess to keep up with them when he's separated from his precious earth and water.

Oh well. Sucks to be him.

She jumps up to the top of the car, dashing across it towards the engine again. She's been wearing him down as best she can—Sue's theory about his little glowing-eyed form of death proved pretty accurate. The killing blow will need to come as a surprise. It will need to be sudden, swift, and decisive, to prevent him from reacting to it until it is already too late.

Then, they won't have anything to worry about for at least 16 or so more years.

She drops down into the gap between the first and second cars, heading into the first, where her Chi-Ryus seem to be regrouping.

"What's the plan now, Captain?" the dark-haired Chi-Ryu asks.

"Same as before," Quinn says. "You girls engage him, I'll deal the final blow when he's distracted."

"But he's armed with the coal again," the red-headed Chi-Ryu says.

Quinn thinks for a few seconds. "I think I have an idea of how to dea—"

Her thoughts are interrupted when the front wall of the car is suddenly smashed in by a tremendous force. On pure reactionary instinct, Quinn and the Chi-Ryus send fireballs screaming towards the crash site.

Just as the Avatar hoped they would.

Quinn's jaw drops at the sight in front of her. The fire impacts an enormous collection of coal, slowly spreading through the entire supply of black rocks. She can only watch in fascination and slight horror as what initially appeared to be a pile of coal slowly unfolds into a monstrous humanoid golem that stretches from the floor to the ceiling.

There's a giant coal man in the car with her.

A giant flaming coal man.

The 'face' of the creature opens momentarily, and who should be smiling at her from within but the fucking Avatar himself.

"Again," Kurt says. "Thanks for the light."

"What are you doing?" Quinn gapes, staring at him. "What is that?"

"Oh, this?" Kurt says, shrugging his now-massive shoulders. "I call this the Triple Layer Kickass Cake. Three elements in one delicious entrée of terror. Care to taste?"

"How are you not being cooked alive right now?" she asks, gesturing to the flames.
In response, a layer of liquid rises up from within the creatures, surrounding Kurt's head and covering everything but his mouth and nose. "That's what this layer is for," he says lightly. "I control the temperature in here. Cool on the inside—hot on the outside. A delicious blend of contrasting flavors... eat your heart out, Chef Flambé, this is how you cook!"

With that, the face closes once again, leaving only Kurt's eyes visible to the world, protected by a layer of water. The massive golem punches towards the three girls, sending a tremendous fireball their way.

They scatter to avoid it. The Chi-Ryus throw a fast series of counter-fires, but they barely chip the Avatar's earthen armor as he stomps towards them. He holds out his 'hand,' and flaming coal bricks launch themselves in a rapid stream at the Chi-Ryus, forcing them into defensive maneuvers. Quinn dashes in from the side and launches a powerful fire slice at his outstretched hand. It's fairly effective at penetrating the coal, but it rapidly fizzes into nothing when it hits the water, not even slicing halfway through the limb before the 'wound' closes with barely any damage done. The Avatar tries to swipe her away, but Quinn is faster than the unwieldy armor, leaping to safety just before his hand connects. In response, it punches at them with its other hand. But where she expects a fireball to come out, she's rather shocked when she is greeted by a powerful outpouring of steam, blasting through the car and temporarily blinding them.

Before they can react, the Avatar rushes them, slamming all three of them through the wall and into the next car. Both walls of the first car have now been taken out, effectively making it a tunnel, and the second car is halfway there.

Quinn coughs as she picks herself up from the assault. The armored Avatar stalks towards them, the fierce fires on the coal slowly burning away the mist as it takes slow, plodding steps. The Chi-Ryu Captain grits her teeth. The game has changed yet again, and she sees now that she's let the Avatar live a little too long.

It's time to end it.

The Triple Layer Kickass Cake might look slow and somewhat lazy on the outside, but on the inside, Kurt is a flurry of motion. Floating in a bubble of water that gives him just enough room to move his limbs freely, he choreographs his attacks carefully. A flaming punch from the beast requires him to use waterbending (start the arm going), earthbending (hold the shell together), and firebending (actually launch the flame). It's quite a bit of work to pull it off, but seeing the stoic Chi-Ryus and their smug leader with actual panic on their faces is more than worth the effort.

And besides that, it's just awesome.

As he emerges from the mist, he sees Quinn aturn tail and run, leaving her Chi-Ryus to fight him by themselves. Ha! So much for 'keeping things fair.'

The Chi-Ryus step forward, combining their efforts into bending out the flames on his body. Kurt counteracts them as best he can, but they manage to extinguish the flames on his left arm. One of the girls leaps up onto the corresponding shoulder to try fireblast his head, but he forces her to rethink that action by bending sharp spires of ice through the coal at her feet, nearly skewering her.

This leads to another idea. Parting the coal at the end of his non-flaming arm, he bends some water through it, freezing it into a long, sharp blade of ice. He thrusts it at the Chi-Ryus (the car being a little too narrow for a slice), and watches with glee as they frantically backpedal away from him. Really, the benefit of this thing is at least as much psychological as physical. He looks terrifying, and most attacks aren't even going to make him flinch. He seems indestructible as far as the Chi-Ryus are concerned, and with every failed counterattack, he just becomes more and more
invincible in their eyes.

Thus, it comes as somewhat of a surprise when he is destroyed—suddenly, and violently.

Quinn catches him off-guard. He should've known better than to think she actually fled the fight. As he stalks through the second car chasing down the Chi-Ryus, Quinn hides behind the doorway. Kurt can't see her—his eyes might not be completely covered by coal, but the area around them is, thus his peripheral vision is somewhat limited. He only has eyes for the Chi-Ryu bugs he is trying to squash. His only indication of Quinn's strike is a sudden *thunk* as something sinks into his armor near the 'chest.'

He has exactly one second to look up and see Quinn give him a smirk before she and the Chi-Ryus dive for cover.

Then, the shell explodes.

It's far worse than the first time. The detonation tears the coal-golem apart, blasts out the walls of the car and even blows a hole in the roof. Kurt reflexively moves every inch of water and earth he can to absorb the force of the blast, but he's nowhere near fast enough. Heat and combustive force rip through Kurt's armor and slam into him like a freight train, blowing him out the back end of his costume, clear through the first car and slamming him violently against the metal tender, where he lands in a pained, steaming heap.

He's momentarily blind and deaf, but numbness sadly eludes him. His ears ring, his vision is black, and his entire body screams at him. He doesn't see or hear Quinn or the Chi-Ryus as they approach him, but he feels their hands against his skin. He feels his limp body sagging in accordance with gravity, completely beyond his control as they lift him and stand him against the cold metal wall. He feels the heat from the small spark Quinn lights in her hand as she prepares to finish him off.

And then he feels a lot *more* heat.

It blooms from somewhere above him, flies all around him, lashes out at everything except him. It's mesmerizing to feel how it moves, because fire is never this precise, never this careful. The heat flares up and pushes out. One set of hands leaves his body. Two, and he begins to fall. He does not finish—a third set of hands props him up instead. They're different. Slightly coarser skin, slightly wider fingers, much gentler touch. They're careful with him, like the fire was, curling around him, holding him, supporting him in just the right places as he is lifted and moved.

They hold him like he is precious. Breakable. Beloved.

His movement stops, and the capable hands manipulating him lie him down, cradling him gently. There are sounds around him, indistinguishable echoes and voices from across dimensions. He can't make out what they are saying until they start to move towards him.

"…Kurt…" calls a distant voice, from the peak of a high mountain.

"Kurt, wake up!" calls a closer one, from the top of a tree.

"Please," says an even closer one, right next to him. "Kurt, please. I need you to give me a sign. Do something. *Anything.* I need you to… to open your eyes…"

The next voice is closest of all, so close that it practically speaks from within him. The words are mumbled against his skin, and he feels them long before he hears them. "I need you."

Well, he can hardly say no to that. He's the Avatar. It's his job to wherever he is needed.
So Kurt opens his eyes.

And everything starts to come together…

He is barely even aware of himself as he attacks Quinn and her minions. His hands and feet and the flames thereof seem to move of their own accord as he desperately, frantically drives them back, clutching Kurt to himself and moving him to the relative safety of the train's cab. The driver cowers in a corner as Blaine collapses and cradles Kurt near the instruments.

Finn. They need Finn.

Finn's on the other train.

He needs to get to the other train.

"Sir," Blaine says to the cowering driver. "My friend is hurt. Can you make this train go any faster?"

The driver looks almost shocked that Blaine is actually asking. He nods and goes to pull some levers, leaving Blaine to turn his attention back to the boy in front of him.

The Prince feels like there are hooks in his chest, pulling him apart by the ribs, for every second that passes with Kurt still and silent in his arms. He counts the burns as he runs fingers over the pale skin exposed by Kurt's thin, shredded clothing, counting every one as a mark against him for not getting there sooner. Every laceration is another hook in his ribs, every spot of blood is another inch his bones are split. But a minute more, and he will fall apart.

When Kurt opens his eyes to look at Blaine, the burst of wordless joy from his heart nearly knocks him over. He can do nothing but bury his head in Kurt's chest and smile through his tears. "Kurt," he mumbles. "Oh, fuck… Kurt…"

"We've got to stop meeting like this," the Avatar says weakly.

Blaine can't help but laugh, picking Kurt up for a careful hug. "I think the other time we did this, our positions were reversed."

"Actually, we've done this twice before," Kurt says, wrapping his arms around Blaine's bare torso, ghosting fingers over his exposed scar. "You weren't awake for the last one."

"Well, in that case, I suppose I owe you at least one more rescue," Blaine grins. "But really, who's keeping score? Maybe we should just save each other on an as-needed basis."

"That is an arrangement I can get behind," Kurt says, smiling softly. "I don't always need rescuing, but when I do, I prefer a handsome Prince for the job."

He wants nothing more than to stay there and hold Kurt until he heals, but the demands of the world are unrelenting. Nothing pauses for them. A Chi-Ryu leaps out from beside the tender and tries to throw fire at them. Blaine completely overwhelms her stream with one of his own, and she retreats again.

"Hey," Kurt says proudly. "Your bending's back."

Blaine grins and looks at the ground, almost bashful. "I am. And I couldn't have done it without you."
The Avatar squints at him. "But… I didn't do anything."

"Yes you did," Blaine laughs. "You…” He sighs. "Kurt, there's something I need to tell y—"

He is forced to pause his speech as he kicks a fireball at a Chi-Ryu trying to sneak over the rim of the tender.

"Agni's butterballs, will you back off? Don't you have anything else to do?" Blaine yells.

"Considering who we're talking to, I highly doubt it," Kurt says, wincing slightly as he sits up. "Maybe we should just kick them off the train."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Blaine says. "Okay, you are not in a position to do any kind of kicking right now. You just need to sit here and… not move until Finn fixes you."

"Oh, how the tides have turned," Kurt says with a grin. "Blaine Anderson, you sound suspiciously like a certain overprotective busybody I used to know…"

Blaine blushes. "Yeah… well… that's… I just…"

"How sweet," says a flat, annoyed voice.

The poor driver has apparently reached his limit for the day. He takes one look at Quinn, runs to the side of the train and jumps off.

Blaine stands up in front of Kurt. "Get away," he growls.

"Well, since you asked nicely," Quinn snarks.

The Prince clenches his fists and flicks his wrists. Two blowtorch-like flames sprout from the ends of his fists, like daggers held backhanded. "I won't ask twice," he snarls.

"Look who's got his stuff back," Quinn remarks idly. "Finally took my advice? I can see you've got plenty of anger to spare—"

"No," Blaine says quietly, but intensely. "This isn't anger. This is pure will. This is me."

"I see," Quinn says. "And… you think you can take three expert-level firebenders at once?"

"I don't know," Blaine shrugs. "Do you think you can handle the personally-trained son of the Fire Lord?"


Blaine tilts his head at her, looking around to see if her Chi-Ryus are setting up anything just out of sight.

"I've told my girls to stand down," she says simply. "They're standing at attention on the other end of the train. They won't attack you or Kurt unless I give the word."

Suddenly, Blaine realizes where she's heading. "…oh yeah," he says. "We have a duel to finish, don't we?"

Quinn nods, an anticipatory smirk lighting up her face in the worst possible way. "We do. I'm glad you remembered."
He extinguishes the flames on his hands and steps forward. "Are you sure you actually want a fair fight? You strike me as the kind who prefers opponents who can't hit back," he spits.

The Chi-Ryu Captain regards him coldly. "A fair fight is exactly what I want from you," she says simply. "It isn't my fault you couldn't firebend. I'm hoping for a better performance this time."

"Fine," Blaine says. "Let's go."

Quinn nods to the first passenger car as she saunters off. "There's a little more breathing room in there." She looks back at him just before she walks out of sight. "Make sure he stays out of it. I can't be held responsible for what happens if the rules of engagement are broken."

With that, she stalks off, and Blaine turns back to Kurt.

"What is she talking about?" Kurt asks. "What are you doing? Is this some kind of macho Fire Nation thing?"

Blaine rolls his eyes, but concedes the point. "It's called an Agni Kai and… yes, it's a macho Fire Nation thing. It's an honor duel. Quinn feels that I have impugned her honor, and she wants to fight me to reclaim it."

"Honor?" Kurt scoffs. "Seriously? That bitch tried to blow us up. I don't think 'honor' is high on her priorities list."

"Be that as it may," Blaine says, "I agreed to fight her. Please don't interfere," he pleads.

"Blaine, I'm not just going to stand around and watch you get hurt!" Kurt says. "I'm a little wobbly, but I've always been a quick healer. We can fight them off together!"

"Kurt, please," Blaine says quietly. "Let me do this. If I beat her myself, no one else has to get hurt."

"And if she beats you?" Kurt asks pointedly.

Blaine shrugs. "Then she can do what she wants with me."

"Blaine, that is not okay!" Kurt hisses at him.

The Prince sighs. "Kurt, I'm asking you to trust me… trust that I can do this on my own," Blaine says quietly but intently. He cups Kurt's chin and looks him right in the eye as he asks the fatal question.

"Do you trust me?"

Kurt practically displays a full spectrum of emotion as he contemplates the question.

His answer is so raw with emotion that it comes out barely a whisper. But it comes out nonetheless.

"Yes."

Santana and Puck are deposited in a boxcar full of animal feed. As Mercedes dangles him over the side, Artie swings Puck onto a pile of bags that looks relatively soft.

Santana, he is less kind to, just sort of throwing her wherever. The tied-down girl lands with a flop, but doesn't seem bothered in the slightest. She stares daggers into his soul as she smirks up at him.
She's seriously weirding him out. Before, she couldn't shut up. But after Artie took down Puck, she just clammed up and stopped talking.

At least, until now.

"You think you're better than me?" she asks.

Artie rolls his eyes. "You'll have to be more specific. I'm better than you at so much."

She laughs. "Don't even play dumb. I saw what you did. I watched you. You were gonna kill him, and you know it."

The earthbender glares at her. "Shut up. You don't know anything about me."

"I know all I need to know," she says with a vicious smirk. "I saw your face, you little four-eyed monster. You didn't blink. You didn't flinch. You didn't give a single fuck. And there's only two ways to explain that… A: you're a sociopath…"

"Takes one to know one," Artie snarks.

"…or B: you've killed before," she finishes, cocking her head at him. "More than once, too—it takes a few to get as comfy with it as you were." She speaks as casually as though she were talking about the weather.

"I'm not a murderer," Artie spits. "I'm nothing like you."

"No," Santana simpers. "You're not like me. You're worse."

She just sounds so goddamn smug. He growls at her and raises the one glove he has left with every intention of swiping it across her stupid bitch face.

He stops just before he sends it at her. "Wh-what am I doing?" he says, shaking his head.

"Striking an unarmed, helpless prisoner?" Santana suggests.

He can't take it anymore. So he reaches over and slams the door shut, jamming it with a metal rod so it stays shut.

Then he pats the side three times, telling Mercedes to pull him up.

"Took you long enough," Mercedes says, a little breathless.

"Sorry," Artie apologizes. "Santana wouldn't shut up. I tried to be polite, but there's a point where you just have to cut and run."

"Well, I'm glad you got tired of listening," the other earthbender says, handing him back to Finn. "I'm big and strong, but even your skinny ass gets a little taxing to hold like that after a while."

"So… should we go help them now?" Finn asks, nodding to the other train.

"Probably," Mercedes says. "That Quinn girl and her little minions have all kinds of dirty tricks up their sleeves. Who knows what they'll try to pull next."

"Hey," Artie says, squinting at the other train. "Are they… are they gaining on us?"

Finn squints at the train. "I think so."
"Huh," Mercedes says. "They do have the faster train. Maybe we should get off this one and onto that one."

Rachel's trembling voice suddenly breaks into the conversation. "Ummm… that might not be the best idea right now."

The other three turn around to see what she is so scared of. A set of signal lamps flies by them, with a few of them lit in odd ways.

"What do you mean?" Mercedes asks.

"Well, I'm not an expert on railway matters, but I've ridden along a few times, and I believe I picked up enough through osmosis to—"

"The point, Rachel, get to it," Artie sighs.

Finn elbows him in the ribs. "Dude, be nice."

"I think those lamps mean that our train and their train are being rerouted to the same track!" Rachel says urgently.

Three sets of eyes go wide in terror. One un-widens and squints in confusion. "Wait," Finn says. "What does that mean?"

"They're going to crash into us!" Rachel cries.

And they're wide again. "Oh, crap. Oh crap! What do we do?"

"We have to stop their train!" Artie says.

"We can't get to them yet!" Mercedes counters.

"What do we do?" Finn repeats.

Mercedes thinks for a second. "Do we have time for them to get close enough?" she asks Rachel.

"I don't know!" Rachel says, becoming more panicked by the second.

"Well, we have to do something!" Artie says.

Mercedes nods, and finally decides on a plan of action. "We'll stop this train. Rachel you're the fastest. Give that tablet to Artie and run at the cab. Scream at the top of your lungs until those drivers put on the brakes. We'll be following as close as we can if you need us, but don't worry about us. Worry about that train. Now, book it!"

Rachel nods, and tosses Artie the tablet. Her fleet feet are blasting her up the cars before they know it, and the other three follow as fast as they can.

"STOP!" Rachel yells. "SLAM ON THE BRAKES!"

She's impressively loud, but not even she is quite loud enough to be heard over the roar of the engine from so far away.

But Rachel does not give up easily.

Finn, Artie, and Mercedes watch her as she rapidly puts cars between them, not quite able to
believe how quickly and easily she can move with all the wind blowing in her face, all the obstacles she has to jump over… not to mention how short her legs are.

"Damn, she can move," Artie says, impressed.

Finn shrugs. "Well, she is an airbender. Maybe all this wind doesn't bother her."

Artie balks at Finn. "Say what?" he asks.

Mercedes confirms it. "Oh, she's an airbender, alright. Damn near bent me off the train…"

"Well," Artie shrugs. "I guess that explains it, then. Elemental favoritism. The air likes her and hates us."

"It doesn't hate us," Finn says.

A glow-beetle smacks against Mercedes's face, splattering her with luminescent juice. "Yes, it does," she says flatly.

"WE'RE GOING TO CRASH!" Rachel calls out. "YOU HAVE TO STOP THE TRAIN!"

A thought occurs to Finn. "Ummm… if we're on this train when it stops," he says, "then how are we gonna catch up with Kurt and Blaine?"

Mercedes's eyes bug out a little. "…snap. I didn't think about that," she says.

"We'll have to jump on as they pass us," Artie says. "This thing is huge. It'll take a while for it to stop, even if they slam on the brakes."

"That's kind of… risky," Finn says. "What if we miss?"

"Then we hit the ground, peel ourselves off, and play catch-up," Artie says, turning around to look at the train. It's gaining speed a lot faster than it seemed to before. It's about to pass the last car at that very moment, and he kind of feels like an idiot for not waiting on it.

Ah, well. You do the best you can with the info you have.

He keeps his eyes glued to the train, trying to make out the details as it comes closer. The ends of the first car seem to have been knocked out, effectively making it a sort of tunnel. The second car has a giant hole blasted in roof and walls, and looks to be barely holding together. The caboose is the only car mostly intact, and even it has a giant hole in the roof.

There was a truly earthshaking fight that went down in there, that's for sure.

And from what Artie can tell, it's still going. Even here, with the wind all up in his grill, his ears start picking up the explosions that his eyes can already see. Fire blooms from windows and ends and holes in the walls of the car in a chaotic rhythm, countless pops and cracks and booms creating a frantic beat to drive them onwards.

"Is that what I think it is?" Mercedes yells at Artie as she picks up on the noise.

"Damn straight!" Artie says. "Whatever's going down in there, it is fierce. That is a shitton of fire. I wouldn't be surprised if K and B were up against Quinn and her whole squad from all that fire-tossing."
"Holy shit," Finn says quietly. "We have to get onboard that train. We have to make this jump."

Mercedes nods in agreement. "We will," she says with certainty. "Don't you worry about that."

She gets to test her assertion sooner than she expects.

"HEY!" Rachel bellows, practically splitting the air apart with the volume of her voice. "THERE'S ANOTHER TRAIN!"

This time, a head pops up from the cab, peering at Rachel in confusion.

"THERE'S ANOTHER TRAIN!" Rachel belts out again, pointing in the direction of the rapidly gaining engine. "WE'RE GOING TO CRASH! YOU HAVE TO BRAKE! STOOOP!"

The little shovel-wielding man gets the message at last. He has a minor freakout, flails, and disappears.

A couple of seconds pass, and then the screeching starts.

It's loud—louder even than Rachel, downright earsplitting to listen to. A high, unpleasant screech that pours into the early night air from the wheels of every car. The difference in momentum is slight, at first, but it's still enough to cause Finn and Mercedes to stumble slightly. Mercedes catches herself, and Artie leans back to help Finn regain his balance.

"IT WORKED! GET READY, YOU GUYS!" Artie shouts.

"SHOULD WE STOP?" Finn shouts back.

"NO!" Artie says. "WE NEED TO MAKE A RUNNING JUMP SO WE DON'T FALL OFF!"

"TELL US WHEN, WHITE BOY!" Mercedes yells up at him. Artie keeps his eyes on the rapidly approaching flamin' train, and as his training dictates… he waits for just the right moment.

"JUMP!"

Mercedes and Finn veer to the side and leap just as the engine passes them. They land on the roof of the first passenger car in a slightly painful tumble. The difference in speed makes it impossible not to fall.

It doesn't take them long to get back up. And suddenly, Finn realizes they're missing someone.

"RACHEL!" he calls out over the still-screeching brakes. "RACHEL! YOU HAVE TO JUMP ON!"

"WHAT?" she calls back, just a few cars ahead.

"JUMP!" he shouts as they start to pass her.

The girl gets it this time, a frantic expression befalling her as she starts to run alongside the train. She keeps pace pretty well, but her train is only getting slower while theirs seems to be gaining speed all the time. If she doesn't jump soon, she isn't going to make it.

"GO AHEAD AND JUMP!" Finn shouts.

She jumps.
As always, her arc is slow and graceful.

Two things she doesn't need right now, as the air drag she previously ignored catches up with a vengeance. She goes too high, loses too much momentum, and can only watch as the train passes underneath her before she even starts her descent.

"No…" Finn whispers as she starts to fall behind them.

Rachel has only one choice left.

With every fiber of her being that she can command, with all the feeling in her heart and soul powering her movements…

Rachel Berry panics like crazy.

"AIIIIIIIIEE!!" she squeals, closing her eyes, flailing her arms and kicking her legs wildly.

Finn watches with total jaw-droppage as she kicks so fast that her fall slows, as she spins her arms around so fast they turn into blurs and practically starts swimming in the sky.

"Holy crap…" Finn says.

Rachel freaking runs on air, pushing her arms and legs to move so fast they become indistinguishable. With eyes closed and face clenched the entire time, she doesn't even notice when she hits the roof of the last car, doesn't notice when she dashes over the hole in the caboose and the hole in the second car without even losing an inch of height. She doesn't notice much of anything until she slams headlong into Finn and knocks him on his back.

Even in the safe, warm arms of the waterbender, it takes a few seconds for Rachel to regain her senses. She opens her eyes, and looks around. "…I… I made it," she says, shocked.

Finn grins at her. "Yeah, you did. Are you okay?"

She smiles back. "I'm… I'm alright."

"I'm fine," Artie grunts to the side, his cheeks (and the rest of him) squished beneath them both. "Thanks for asking."

A small explosion rocks the car as they finally finish passing the freight train, leaving it in the dust.

There's only one train now, and they're ready to fight for it if they have to.

"Come on!" Mercedes says, jumping down into the gap between the first car and the engine.

Finn, Artie, and Rachel follow after her.

And the gang is reunited at last.

As the others scramble to avert disaster, Kurt feels like he is being forced to watch one unfold. He stands beside the tender, watching from the engine.

The Chi-Ryu stand at attention on the caboose, watching from the other end.

Blaine crouches at the front of the passenger car, facing Kurt.
Quinn crouches at the other end, facing the opposite. To make the fight more 'fair' (har-har), she's taken off the upper part of her armor, leaving her only in her form-fitting undergarments.

"READY!" one of the Chi-Ryus calls out.

Blaine and Quinn rise in unison and turn to face each other, stepping into stance.

"KAI!" the Chi-Ryu cries.

And it begins.

Quinn and Blaine launch into each other with ferocity like nothing Kurt has never seen before. Their limbs almost vanish as they strike, brilliant orange flames emerging from every movement. There is barely a defensive technique to be found—every motion is forward, every strike direct and powerful, offense upon offense upon offense upon powerful, destructive offense. Attacks are deflected by attacks; a fireball is sliced by a crescent, which breaks against a wall, which becomes a wave, which is pierced by a spear, which is shattered by whips.

Kurt can barely keep up with all the techniques Blaine lets loose, and it suddenly occurs to him that destiny did not pick him as Kurt's firebending teacher lightly. Blaine is good.

But so is Quinn. She matches him blow for blow, never missing a beat in this twisted duet.

The more he watches them, the more he starts to spot differences in their styles. Quinn moves with power and precision, wasting no energy. Her blows are measured and destructive, and her fire has tremendous heat. Blaine's style is wilder, his movements looser and seemingly less refined. Yet his firebending is more concentrated than Quinn's, and seems to pack just a bit more force. It could be because of his position relative to the two of them, but Kurt barely feels any excess heat from Blaine's attacks—everything seems to go exactly where he wants it to go, including the thermal energy he generates. It isn't until Kurt really focuses on Blaine that he realizes why Blaine's movements seem less careful than Quinn's.

Blaine's style is changing.

From moment to moment, he seems to move slightly differently. Where Quinn sticks rigidly to the techniques she was taught, Blaine treats his techniques and training as a firm foundation for him to launch from. He continuously refines his movements as he fights.

He adapts.

Kurt's shocked smile nearly splits his face. And the feeling of disaster lessens just so.

The fire daggers come out again as Blaine rushes Quinn, and their arms clash several times, ultimately winding up in a brief lock with one another.

"I don't get you," Blaine grunts. "Why fight fair? Your master certainly didn't."

She withdraws her arms and jabs her hand at his face like a spear, only for him to lock her again. "She did, actually. My master defeated yours in a fair fight. You are his greatest student, and I hers. When I defeat you, it will prove whose teachings are greater."

She wrenches her hand free of his, and he slices at her torso. "Is that what you think?" he says as she dodges backwards. "Because I was there, and I can tell you..."

Quinn sprouts short-range jet of fire from two fingers, and slices it at him like a sword. Blaine
slices through the sword with his dagger, breaking the flame enough for him to pass through unharmed.

"My father only lost," Blaine says, extinguishing his daggers. "...because of me. Because I distracted him, and he had to save me."

Quinn rolls her eyes. "Right," she says. "I totally believe that."

Blaine shrugs. "Believe what you want."

Suddenly, a horrific screeching rattles the car from end to end. Blaine flinches first, and Quinn is on him in a second, her hands striking like snakes. The Prince dodges her as best he can, but a few blows catch him in the stomach and the ribs. Blaine answers her assault with a surprise attack of his own—as he moves away from her blows, a small explosion propels his foot into the air with a loud POP. The kick is incredibly fast, and actually catches Quinn right in her ribs, sending her staggering.

"What was that?" Quinn asks, wincing.

"You like that?" Blaine replies, smarting a bit himself. "I call it a Firecracker Kick."

"What a stupid name. Did your daddy teach you that move?" Quinn asks mockingly.

"No," Blaine shrugs. "I invented it. Just now."

"Dragonshit," Quinn scoffs.

"Believe what you want," Blaine repeats.

Again, there is a sudden cacophonous noise—a couple THUDs, followed by a loud series of tumbles, like something heavy just slammed into the car. Blaine's somewhat easily distracted nature works against him; he looks up, and Quinn launches at him again. Kurt sees her fingers and thumb twist into a shape he recognizes.

He can't help it.

"Don't let her grab you!" Kurt shouts.

Blaine flinches away from her hand just in time, and Quinn roars in outrage, throwing a firebomb at Kurt (which he ducks) and leaping to the end of the car.

"Hey!" Blaine shouts, throwing a blast of his own. "Lay off of him!"

"What is wrong with you?" Kurt asks.

"Yeah," Finn says as he drops down into the gap. "What he said! Whatever it was!"

"Straight up," Artie nods.

Mercedes lands right beside him. "We ballin'?" she asks.

"Not now," Kurt says. "They're doing some kind of macho Fire Nation thing. Blaine and Quinn only."

"Oooh," Rachel says, landing next to Mercedes. "An Agni Kai! I've always wanted to watch one of these."
"Except the Avatar just violated the rules of engagement," Quinn says. "You were not supposed to interfere!"

"Wait, warning me when you're about to launch a sneak-attack counts as interference?" Blaine asks.

"YES!" Quinn says.

"Oh, screw you, lady," Kurt says. "Your idea of a fair fight is seriously skewed."

The Captain growls and draws in a tremendous breath. Blaine seems to realize what is coming, and pulls in a breath of his own. Quinn steps forward and lets loose with a tremendous two-handed stream of fire, easily large enough to fry all of them. But not a single flame touches them. Blaine releases a flame of his own just as her stream threatens to engulf him, his fire deflecting hers and shielding them all. Petals of orange light bloom out in every direction, and Kurt and the others have to shield their faces from both the light and the heat. The roar of the flames is nearly deafening, equaled only by a loud clanking, crinkling, and popping sound coming from the roof.

Artie lowers his hands to look at the fire blasts in awe. "Holy fuck," he breathes. "They're warping the roof!"

"What?" Kurt asks.

He points up at the ceiling, which is actually starting to contort and twist as the flames rise up, actually peeling off of the car in some places. Kurt's jaw drops. They're making so much heat that they're twisting metal.

Blaine draws in another breath, and his fire stream pushes Quinn's back. Blaine himself starts moving towards her, continuously pushing the explosive center of the colliding flames further away from them. As he moves forward, the flames actually seem to become more concentrated and contained. Soon, the fire wall recedes enough to see that Quinn is pushing her flames towards Blaine as well. It's as if both of them are reaching out to contain and concentrate the flames, pushing them only towards each other. Eventually, the flames stop escaping as they collide, becoming contained in a brilliant, swirling ellipses that the two continue to compact.

Blaine's face is completely focused. The muscles in his back and arms are hard at work with every step, his skin is literally dripping with sweat, and Kurt decides that this is both figuratively and literally the hottest thing he has ever seen.

As they draw closer and closer, the ellipse collapses into a ball about the size of their heads. The shape of the ball occasionally shifts violently, like the enormous power contained within is slamming against their containment field, trying desperately to escape. Blaine and Quinn's eyes are locked together in a battle of wills as fierce as any firebending.

And this time, it's Quinn who flinches. Her eyes catch something that distracts her, and her face widens in shock.

Blaine is baffled by her sudden change, and looks at her strangely, his own concentration lapsing.

They seem to have momentarily forgotten about the incredibly volatile and unstable fireball between them.

Big mistake.

The ball pulses once. Twice. And…
Kurt throws his arms out to shield everyone from the tremendous explosion, losing sight of Blaine amidst the flood of light and heat.

He manages to spot the smoking form of Quinn as sails through the air and lands on the caboose (with her Chi-Ryus immediately running inside to retrieve her). He has to assume that Blaine went flying as well, but Kurt has no idea where until he hears a loud clang from behind them. A short dash to the engine reveals Blaine to have slammed rather painfully onto the roof of the cab.

Finn stands on his tippy-toes so Artie can stretch up to pull him off, and they place the limp Prince in Mercedes and Rachel's arms as they look him over for injuries. Other than being stunned from the impact, literally steaming, and more than a little winded, Blaine seems largely okay. He's even mostly conscious.

"Lemme at'er," Blaine slurs. "I'll show'er furrribending."

"There is no such thing as furbending," Rachel says primly. "If there was, it would be highly immoral. Fur is murder."

"Oh, honey," Mercedes says, putting a hand on Rachel's back. "We are going to have fun with you."

Rachel tilts her head in confusion, and Kurt is getting ready to elaborate when Blaine suddenly shoves his way free of the ladies' grasp and starts towards the fight again.

"Whoa, there, slugger," Kurt says, stepping forward to restrain him. "I think we're gonna have to call this one a draw."

"I can't quit," Blaine says, pressing on anyway. "Not until…"

They reach the first passenger car, just in time to see a slightly unsteady Quinn and her Chi-Ryus slamming simultaneous firebombs into the middle of the already-damaged second car. The combustion is enough to sever the frail connection, and the caboose and half the second car slowly drift away from them. Quinn and company even let loose with powerful jet streams aimed backwards and down, providing a little thrust in the opposite direction to cancel their momentum. Soon, their car is left in the dust, and Blaine is left scratching his head.

"Did she just… quit?" he asks.

"Either that, or she expects to finish the fight by mail," Kurt says imperiously.

"Why?" Blaine asks.

Kurt rolls his eyes. "Isn't it obvious? She's a coward. She couldn't take the heat, so she got out of the kitchen."

The Prince shakes his head. "I don't think so. She… she saw something before. Just before the explosion. Something that was enough to shake her concentration. I wonder what…"

"Ohmygosh, ohmygosh, ohmygosh!" Rachel calls out. "Kurt!"

The urgency in her voice is like a lightning rod to Kurt. He's in the cab in a second, Blaine shortly thereafter.
"What is it?" he says to the slightly panicked Rachel.

"Oh, just that we're all gonna die," Artie says casually. "Look!"

Kurt sticks his head out the side of the cab to see that the track ahead goes underneath a large stone archway, after which it seems to go out onto a long bridge.

From the looks of the numerous barricades between here and there, Kurt is willing to guess that it's not quite long enough.

"Oh, crap!" Kurt says. "Bridge out. Or… bridge never in… I don't know! We need to stop!"

"Dragon dicks," Blaine breathes. "How do we stop?"

"Pull the brakes!" Mercedes orders.

"Which ones are the brakes?" Finn asks.

"Who cares? Pull everything!" Kurt orders.

A shitstorm of hands lash out to every knob, lever, and switch they can find. As the train smashes through the barricades, little wooden pieces go flying past the cab, completely ignored by its occupants, who are far too busy pushing, pulling, squeezing, twisting and cursing everything that moves. They have absolutely no idea what they are doing, of course, but eventually, amidst the steaming and dials going crazy, a high-pitched shriek tells them the wheels have locked down.

"We did it!" Kurt says.

Except they aren't stopping.

"Why aren't we stopping?" Finn asks.

"I don't know!" Kurt says.

"Screw it!" Blaine says. "Everybody into the first car!"

The crew makes a panicked sprint into the one-and-a-half train cars they have left.

"Kurt!" Blaine says. "Help me! We need to cut the couplings. Fire bomb on three, ready?"

Kurt runs beside him. "Ready!"

"One… fuck it. THREE!"

The two of them pull their hands back, creating a small spark and slamming it overhand into the couplings from above. The spark grows as they swing it, smashing into the metal with enough force to blast it apart.

A quick look outside reveals them to have passed the stone arch. They're now between two high cliffs with a large body of water underneath. To their right, Kurt can see the ocean. To their left, the cliffs turn slightly, and the water rounds the bend, jabbing into the Fire Nation like a knife.

The train goes chugging off ahead of them—and it only takes a few seconds for it to reach the end of the bridge. Kurt watches in horror as the massive engine sails off the end of the bridge, smashing into the cliff and detonating in a tremendous storm of smoke and flame.
And they still aren't stopping.

Actually, they aren't even squealing anymore. It's like the brakes have died.

"The brakes have died!" Rachel wails in exquisite terror.

"What is wrong with this thing?" Kurt asks. "The craftsmanship sucks!"

"I fucking hate this country!" Finn cries. "Uhhh… no offense, Blaine."

"None taken. Kurt! We'll do what Quinn did!" Blaine says. "Fire streams on three. Ready?"

"THREE!" Kurt replies, immediately launching into the attack. Blaine joins him, and soon, they're pushing as much fire as they can out the end of their car, trying desperately to get some momentum in the opposite direction before they roll to their rapidly approaching dooms.

"Aim down!" Blaine says. "We need to push against something!"

Kurt angles his stream downwards, and the fires fan out against the tracks, making a slightly more effective slowing effort, but still not being quite enough to stop them.

"We need more drag," Blaine says. "Do we have any—"

"The roof!" Kurt cries suddenly. "You warped the roof! It's already starting to come off! Pop it open, guys!"

Finn whips out his water and slices at one side of the roof. Mercedes picks up piece of rubble lying around and works on the other side. Together, they try to smash, slice, and destroy every part of the roof still holding onto the car, trying to get it to peel back from the front and catch more air to slow them down.

Meanwhile, the Avatar already feels his flame starting to wane. He wants to collapse, yet Blaine looks like he could keep going for hours. How does he do this?

"Breathe, Kurt!" Blaine orders. "Energy in firebending comes from the breath. If you don't breathe right, you use up all your energy. Remember what I taught you."

Kurt nods, and desperately searches his memory for their lessons together. He remembers the feel of Blaine’s chest against his back as it rose and fell, slow and measured, in perfect rhythm…

And he goes with that. Drawing in his breath despite his tired, aching body, he increases the power of his fire. They slow a little further.

But it's still not enough.

"We're not going to make it!" Kurt says. "We can't stop in time!"

At this, Mercedes and Finn finally manage to break the metal roof so that it peels upwards, catches the wind, slows them down… and promptly flies off the train, landing on the tracks behind them.

"Shit!" Finn says.

"Well, that sucked!" Mercedes grouses.

"We gon' die, y'all!" Artie cries.
"I'm too wonderful to die!" Rachel wails to the heavens.

Blaine turns up the heat as much as he can, but it still just isn't enough. The first set of wheels goes over, forcing the Avatar and the Prince to break their firestreams and lean against the walls to avoid falling out. The sudden shift in gravity prompts the others to do the same, and the metal-on-metal action as the car's base grinds against the unfinished tracks nearly splits his ears open.

It looks like the end.

But it isn't.

Not quite.

The car stops about a third of the way over, angled downwards, dangling precariously over the edge.

No one dares breathe for a few moments.

"…are we stopped? Are we safe?" Finn asks.

Kurt hears something pop. Loudiy.

"First one; yes. Second one; fuck no," Artie answers Finn.

"Nobody move," Mercedes orders, staying still and steady against her wall. "Just the tiniest shift could throw us all into the sea."

Another pop.

"If we don't move, we might go over anyway!" Kurt hisses. "We need to do something!"

POP.

Blaine's heartbroken eyes suddenly pin Kurt down from across the car. "Kurt…" he says. "There's something I need to—"

"Airbending!" Finn says, so loud and sudden that something else pops, and the car shifts slightly.

"Dude, shhhhh!" Artie hushes him.

"What are you talking about?" Kurt asks.

"Rachel," Finn says. "Do your airbending thing again!"

The girl in question is pressed flat against the wall in the middle of the car with her eyes entire face clenched shut. It pops back open quickly. "What?" she barks.

"What?" Kurt barks right along with her. "Do her what bending?"

"That thing!" Finn says. "The one where… the one with you…"

"The thing that almost killed us both!" Mercedes says excitedly. "Do that one!"

"But… but…” Rachel stammers. "I messed it up!"

"And you can do it again! You can blow us all out of the car and save us!" Finn says. "You can do
It, Rach."

She clenches her eyes shut again. "I'm scared," she says miserably, actually looking close to tears.

"Come on, Rachel," Blaine says gently. "We believe in you."

Kurt steps in right along with him. "You're a very talented young woman. You can do... anything that you put your mind to," he says. "...well, except earthbending and firebending and waterbending. Those are for me."

A loud crack. A snap. The metal whines.

"Whatever you're gonna do," Artie says. "Do it quick!"

With teeth clenched and eyes shut, Rachel slowly but surely divests herself from the wall. "Okay..." she says. "Okay..."

"Do it at the end of the car, near Kurt and Blaine," Finn says.

"Step lightly, girl," Mercedes advises.

With nervous, frantic movements, Rachel begins to swirl hands around each other, forming a translucent, spinning globe of concentrated air. With steps so slow a snail'sloth might get impatient, she makes her way towards Kurt and Blaine's end of the car.

"Careful," Kurt says. "Careful..."

And the camelephant's back breaks.

Something snaps, and the car pitches forward again. Rachel pitches right along with it, still clutching tightly to the ball of air. Finn loses his grip on the floor, tumbling down. Mercedes falls behind him. Just as Kurt and Blaine are about to lose it, Rachel sails past them and thrusts the ball out.

It bursts.

Kurt is pretty sure it isn't supposed to do that, but he doesn't care—the effect is exactly what they need. The violent outburst of air ejects them all from the upper end of the car, sending them sailing through the air and crash-landing onto the tracks just as it plunges over the edge. The wooden railroad ties make their landings more than a little painful—Kurt winds up with his head between two of them like he's vomiting into a trough after a particularly miserable bender. The others wind up splayed around in various positions—Rachel somehow ends up on top of Mercedes, Finn and Artie become detached at some point, landing a short distance from each other, and Blaine is sprawled out on the ground in front of Kurt.

The Avatar pulls his head out from the beams, and slowly stands to his feet, as Blaine does the same.

They lock eyes, and share the giddiest smile Kurt can remember giving in his entire life.

"We made it," Mercedes says, looking a little shocked as she pushes a slightly pale Rachel off of her. "That was close."


"I'm coo'," Artie says.
"Dandy," Blaine replies.

"Peachy," Kurt settles on.

Rachel wanders around, slightly dazed, a distant look on her face.

"Are… you okay?" Kurt asks.

"…I feel sick," Rachel says.

And then she proceeds to be sick. Right over the edge of the bridge.

"Oh, gross," Kurt says, averting his eyes.

"Well, there goes my appetite," Blaine says.

Mercedes and Finn head over to help her. Finn rubs her back, while Mercedes consoles her verbally. "There, there, sweetie. Let it all out. You did it! You saved us."

"You were awesome, Rach," Finn says proudly.

"I can't help but think experiences like this will do wonders for her acting range," Kurt says as an aside to Blaine. "Does that make me a horrible person?"

Blaine laughs slightly, but quickly clamps down on it. "Yes," he says frankly. "But I laughed at it, so we can be horrible together."

They laugh, and the moment feels, quite literally, too good to last.

"Oh, fuck me," Artie says, exasperated. "Does this shit ever stop?"

Kurt looks to the end of the track to see a flaming car slowly trundling towards them. It doesn't have nearly enough momentum to actually get to them, however, and stops about a third of the way over.

"Huh," Blaine says. "I'm guessing that's a present from Quinn. Was she trying to run us over?"

"Pretty crappy job, if she was," Mercedes says.

Kurt peers at the car carefully. There is something oddly familiar about it, though the shape is hard to distinguish through the flames…

Well, there was really only one car left intact on Quinn's train, and that was—

SHIIIIIT.

"GET DOWN!" Kurt commands, throwing himself on the ground.

Everyone else follows suit (save Artie, who is already down). They cover their heads and brace themselves as… nothing happens.

"Umm… okay?" Finn says, looking up. "What exactly were we getting down for?"

Kurt sticks his head up. "Huh. Well, I thought that car was filled with—"

POP.
The caboose is reduced to dust as the shells inside set each other in nigh-perfect unison, generating a massive fireball and a shockwave of air strong enough to push the metal roof left on the bridge from earlier several yards closer to them. The destructive force released by the blast causes the stone archway to collapse, forcing Quinn and her Chi-Ryus to stop watching and retreat.

It also demolishes a large section of the bridge, rapidly sending the rest on its way to collapse. The enormous metal structure screeches, groans, whines and wobbles as the shockwaves travel back and forth through the beams, popping rivets, snapping supports, and sending bits and pieces in a steady stream into the ocean.

The track beneath them shudders.

"Well, once again—we're all gonna die. Nice knowing you guys," Artie says optimistically.

Blaine is on the ground beside him. "Oh, no..." he says quietly. "Not again."

"We need a plan of action," Kurt says, standing up (and almost falling over as the bridge bends to the side beneath him).

"Kurt," Blaine says, standing up. "For Agni's sake—There is something I need to tell you!"

"Not a good time, Blaine!" Kurt says, taking stock of what they have on hand.

"But there might not be another time!" Blaine says desperately.

The bridge shudders beneath them again, and Kurt just has too much to concentrate on at once.

"Fine!" Kurt shouts. "Whatever, just make it quick!"

"Okay," Blaine says, looking a little anxious as he walks towards him. "Well... here's the abbreviated version—"

And suddenly, his hands wrap around Kurt's face, his body is flush against him, and he is shoving his tongue down Kurt's throat.

"WHOA!"

"DAMMMMMMNN!"

"Oh, my!"

"What the Hills?"

Kurt sees stars born in the heavens as Blaine's lips move against his, as Blaine's tongue probes Kurt's shocked, open mouth, as his greedy hands and warm, half-naked body press against him, making as much contact as possible in the brief moment.

The kiss lasts for all of two seconds before Blaine pulls away and looks at Kurt in a way that makes him feel like his legs have turned to jelly.

"...well put," Kurt says, momentarily breathless.
"Guys, focus! Seriously!" Finn says. Freaking Finn is telling him to focus now. What even is his life.

The bridge shudders with a massive moan, and a few beams give out beneath them. The track tilts downwards, and the metal roof starts sliding at them again. Blaine steps forward and catches it just before it hits them. Kurt continues to desperately search for a way out of the situation, but all they really have at the moment is the stupid metal roof.

…maybe that's enough.

It's large enough to hold all of them, and anything would be better than falling into the ocean from this height.

All he needs is a place to land. He scans the cliffside, and…

There.

At the bottom of the cliff, just as the land meets the ocean, there is a stretch of beach with a few trees. It's pretty much their only options.

"Everyone, listen!" Kurt orders. "We're going sledding!"

"What?" cry multiple voices.

"Just trust me. Come on, everyone get up here!"

The gang scrambles up to the metal roof as the bridge continues to bob and weave. The incline goes a little steeper, and Blaine suddenly has a much harder time keeping the roof still.

"When I give the signal, everyone jump onto the roof and hold on for your lives," Kurt orders.

He watches and waits as the bridge wobbles back and forth, back and forth…

Wait for it…

"NOW!"

Blaine flips over the front. Rachel and Mercedes leap onto the back, while Finn grabs Artie and dives onto the middle. Kurt jumps on just behind Blaine and they start their descent, sailing off the end of the bridge just as the unsteady structure tilts towards the beach. Everyone reflexively starts screaming the second they are in the air, approaching the ground at an alarming speed.

Cue phase 2 of the plan.

Kurt reaches to the ocean and shoves it upwards as hard as he can. A pillar of water blasts up from underneath them, slamming into the bottom of their makeshift sled and violently cancelling their downward momentum (while leaving their forward momentum largely intact). It more or less causes everyone but Kurt to face-fault into the steel, but it's a small price to pay.

There's still a ways to go, however, and they'll be landing badly if he doesn't do something.

So he does it again.

Wham.

And again.
Whump.

And again.

Thud.

Each pillar is a little lower and little easier to bend, and though the impacts are shaking the crap out of everyone involved, it's far better to have their fall stop in steps as opposed to all at once.

He's nearing the bottom on his makeshift staircase when suddenly, Kurt runs out of water as they fly over the beach.

And as it turns out, he slightly miscalculated their angle of entry.

"LOOK OUT!" he shouts, right before the 'sled' slams into a tree and sends everyone sailing and flailing gracelessly into the foliage.

Kurt gets a mouthful of leaves as he slams face-first through a bush, and then his brain takes a break for a few seconds.

When he comes back to himself, he's lying on the ground, hearing the wonderful sound of that particular kind of pained groaning that is more of a complaint to the world than any kind of urgent exclamation of agony. He's feeling a little achey himself, but he can deal for the moment.

He slowly picks himself up, spitting greens out of his mouth, looking around him for the source of the groans and spotting exactly no one.

"Okay, everybody," Kurt says blearily. "Roll call and status report. Finn?"

"I have twigs in all of my places," he whines, stumbling out of a bush.

"Good," Kurt says, smiling at him. "Mercedes?"

"Six out of ten. Work on that landing," she says, picking herself up from behind a pile of rocks that probably used to be a single large rock before it met her. She dusts herself off, and makes a face as something twinges.

"Will do," Kurt replies. "Artie?"

"Oh, no, I can't feel my legs," he deadpans, sprawled across a tree branch.

"Noted," Kurt grins. "Rachel?"

"I flew..." she says deliriously, swinging back and forth in a small tangle of vines. "The air embraced me, and for a single wonderful second, I soared with the grace of a bison!"

"...good for you," Kurt says lightly. "Blaine?"

No response.

His heart sinks an inch or so. "Blaine? Can you hear me?"

"Unnnnnhhh..." he moans.

Kurt turns around to see him limp and hanging upside down from a tree branch. His eyes are closed.
"Blaine!" Kurt shouts, running—okay, *ow, limping*—over as fast as he can. "Blaine, are you alright?" He stops just in front of the dangling Prince, who hasn't acknowledged him. "Blaine! Speak to me! Say some—"

Striking like the sneakiest of koala snakes, Blaine waits until Kurt is close enough before striking. He swings up and kisses him on the nose, opening his eyes and grinning like a fiend.

"…you!" Kurt hisses, punching him in the ribs.

"Ow!" Blaine laughs. "What? I wanted to surprise you!"

The Avatar can't contain his grin. "Well, you did. Let me *return the favor*!"

And with just as little warning, he yanks Blaine out of the tree, slamming him on the ground.

"Owwwwww," Blaine complains, clutching at his stomach.

Kurt immediately feels remorseful. "Oh my La, are you okay? I didn't exacerbate your inju—"

And then Blaine sweeps his feet out from under him, landing Kurt on his back.

"Oh, that is it!" Kurt growls, turning on his side to glare at Blaine. "You are so going… down…"

He trails off, because Blaine is now laying on his side mere inches from Kurt, still grinning from ear to ear, but with something… different about his expression. There's a light shining in his eyes that Kurt has never seen before, and he's staring at Kurt like he's the *only* thing in the world.

"So…" Blaine says. "About what I… err… *said*… up there on the bridge…"

"What about it?" Kurt asks, breath just slightly bated.

"Did you… get the message?" Blaine asks, actually looking a little *nervous* and making Kurt want to roll his eyes and slug him and hug him and kiss him senseless.

"I think I got the general idea," Kurt says airily. "But… I was a little unclear on the specifics."

"Oh?" Blaine says.

"Yes," Kurt says playfully. "I think you should… *clarify* a few things."

"Ah," Blaine says, leaning in a little closer. "Well… in that case… let me *elaborate.*"

And Blaine kisses him again.

Kurt likes the second account much better.

It's much more… *detailed.*

Blaine's lips are slow and strong, his kiss both hungry and patient, like a man who wants to savor his meal to spite his hunger. His hands are such a perfect blend of gentle force that they practically feel like a massage on Kurt's back, pressing into him, caressing him, squeezing him and melting the tension from his body. Blaine is so *physical*, so *hungry* for touch that kissing him is practically a full-body workout.

And Kurt can actually kiss him back now. He is the picture of the tides as Blaine moves against him, pulling and letting the Prince push, and then pushing right back, claiming Blaine's tongue and
manipulating his mouth in ways he's always dreamed of but never had the chance to put into practice. His own hands smooth over the bare skin on the Prince's back, tracing the outline of the scar and moving on like it's just another feature of Blaine, no more or less significant that his strong arms, his lean legs, his strong chin, his gorgeous, hazel eyes…

A squeal high enough to shatter glass forces the two of them to come up for air, and they break their kiss (with a marvelous, wet smooch that Kurt wants to hear more often), and find that they have an audience.

Rachel cups her hands over her mouth and looks like she wants to bounce to the moon. Mercedes looks amused at how red they are suddenly turning. Artie waggles his eyebrows and gives him two thumbs up. Finn looks like he is incredibly happy for his brother and seriously wishing he was not watching this. And yet, he turns not away.

"Ummm… hi?" Blaine says, turning bright red.

"Are we interrupting something?" Mercedes asks lightly.

Kurt thinks about it for a second. "Oh, I don't kno—YES!"

He stands up and slams his hands into the ground, causing a large slab of earth to sprout between them and the peanut gallery.

"I guess they want a little privacy," Mercedes says lasciviously.

"Oh my gosh," Rachel says. "That was the most adorable thing I've ever seen. I just want to jump in the middle and cuddle them both."

"I don't think they'd like that," Finn says carefully.

"Get it, son!" Artie says. "TAP THAT ASS—"

"Oh my La, if you all don't shut up and go away, I'm pulling out the fire!" Kurt says from behind the wall.

He does not hear any more commentary, though he does hear a few titters and giggles as they exit.

"Now," Kurt says, turning back to Blaine. "Shall we pick up where we left off?"

Blaine stands up and walks towards him, a contemplative look on his face. "Hmmm… I seem to have lost my place," he says with a smile. "Better start from the beginning."

He presses Kurt against the wall.

And Kurt discovers that Blaine Anderson is very much blessed with a silver tongue.

And the sun sets in the Fire Nation. The sunlight leaves each of them miles from where they started that day, in every sense.

In the dark interior of a boxcar, two assassins stew in their failure, and contemplate their life choices…
Puck wakes up gasping and flailing like a fucking lunatic. She kind of wishes she could see him flopping around, because she's pretty sure it's hilarious.

It gets old fast, though. "Puck, chill!" Santana says.

The other assassin's panic subsides, leaving only heavy breathing. "I'm not dead..." he says.

"No," Santana sighs. "They crammed us in a boxcar. They're probably miles away by now."

Puck just breathes for a few seconds. "Fuck," he says finally. She hears him slip from the pile of feedbags and start to grope around the place.

"The door is to your left," she says.

More groping.

"No, your other left."

Shuffle, shuffle.

"My left."

Clang.

"Getting warmer..."

Clank, clank, clank.

"Punch there."

The door is blasted clean off the car at the end of Puck's fist, and he looks so relieved to see the outside world that Santana almost feels bad for him.

"Get over here and untie me," she orders.

Puck nods, blinks, and nods again, jogging over to help her out of the ropes (HER ropes) that bind her.

His hands shake as he fumbles with the knots.

"Fuck," he curses.

Santana shakes her head. "Damn," she says. "They really did a number on you, didn't they?"

The armored assassin finally gets the knots on her hands undone. He doesn't answer, just walks back over to the door, leaving her to untie her feet.

"Are you gonna be okay?" she asks, watching him as he looks at his hand, flexing it a few times.

"Do you need to, like, lie down or something?"

"I thought I was dead," Puck says.

That's when it hits her. The last thing he probably remembers is that little shit choking him out. Combine that with waking up in a dark, smelly, silent box, and you've got a pretty good recipe for a panic attack.

"Shit," Santana says sympathetically.
"My entire fucking life flashed in front of my eyes," Puck says. "And it sucked."

She finishes undoing the rope and walks up beside him. He looks at her, and his eyes are so fucking lost that Santana actually does kind of feel bad for him. "You wanna… I don't know… talk, or something?"

She's got a few things she'd kind of like to get off her chest, too. And it's not like she has anybody else to talk with.

Puck crosses his arms and looks away. "No," he scoffs, jumping down from the unmoving car and stalking off.

She crosses her own arms. "Good," she spits at his back, jumping down to follow him. "Me neither."

"I'm gonna crush those losers," Puck says emphatically as he goes. "Especially the smug little earth-prick." He's silent for a few seconds, before he adds. "I'm not weak." She doesn't know who he's trying to convince, but she's pretty sure he fails.

She nods anyway, even though he can't see it. "I've got a reason to hate all of them now," she says, mentally counting off her various humiliations over the evening, ending with Brittany's heartbroken face, flying away from her.

"Oh, yeah," Santana says quietly. "They're gonna pay…"

Two forlorn airbenders soar over the sea on the back of their bison, their minds on those they left behind…

"You're sad," Brittany says.

"No, I'm not," Jesse says flatly, scrubbing his face to make sure there are no tear tracks left.

"Yes you are," Brittany says. "You're totally crying. And you only cry when you're sad, or when you hear the story of The Little Bison That Could. And Mr. Duck hasn't told that one since his brother died in the war."

"I'm fine, Brittany," Jesse insists, staring mournfully into the horizon, framing his boundless grief and mourning for his lost love in the fading purples and pinks of the evening sky.

"If it makes you feel better," Brittany says quietly, leaning forward. "I'm sad, too."

Jesse looks back at her, skeptically. "What do you have to be sad about?"

"I had to leave people I really liked," Brittany says. "And I didn't even get to meet Kurt."

Jesse nods in sympathy. "Perhaps it is the destiny of we airbenders never to be truly attached to anything, so that we may float freely in the winds…"

Brittany rolls over on her back and looks at the sky. "I don't think so. I don't think we can control who we attach to. We're like those little spiky balls in briar patches. Sometimes people walk through us and we get stuck on their pants."

The other airbender nods. "Oh, what I wouldn't give to once again be stuck on Rachel's pants… how could I have been so stupid?" he asks. "I just… I just wanted to make leaving her home easier. I thought… if she hated her parents… maybe she wouldn't miss them. And she wouldn't be sad… I
don't know."

"It's okay," Brittany says. "You'll see her again one day."

"I can only hope," Jesse sighs.

They fly in silence for a few more moments, before a thought occurs to Jesse.

"...if you didn't meet Kurt, then how do you know his name?" he asks.

Brittany shrugs. "Sometimes, things happen to me out-of-order," she says by way of explanation.

The other airbender tilts his head at her. He wants to inquire further, but something tells him that's the only explanation he's going to get, so he accepts it. His thoughts turn again to Rachel...

...and the woman who ordered him to find her...

---

A third airbender lets her thoughts fly into the winds, wondering where they will take her, while a waterbender does his best to keep her from getting carried away...

Rachel looks up at the heavens as she sits primly on a rock, holding the scroll canister in her hands and tracing the back of the Sun Warrior tablet. After their crash, it took them a couple of minutes to realize the tablet was missing. Fortunately, they found it lodged in the home of an extremely irate beaver squirrel after a few minutes of searching, and it now rests safe with her again.

"Hey," Finn says.

Rachel looks over at him and graces him with a small smile.

"So, uhhh..." he says, scratching the back of his neck. "A lot of... stuff... happened just now, and... well... I mean, not just now, cause some of it happened a few minutes ago, although, a few minutes seems like a lot of time, 'cause a lot of stuff can happen in a few minutes, but... I mean... it's a lot, don't you think?"

She grins at his rambling. "Yes, it's quite a lot, I agree," she says, turning back to look up at the sky. "There are so many things... so many things I want to know. Who is she, really? Did she choose to give me up, or was Jesse telling the truth? Is she really a... a conqueror? Some kind of bloodthirsty warlord? Is that what's inside of me?" She puts a hand on her heart. "Is that who I'm expected to become?"

"Hey," Finn says, gently. "That doesn't matter."

She gives him a warning glare.

He quickly backpedals. "No, I mean, it does matter, it matters a lot it's just... it doesn't mean what you think it means," he says quietly. "My uhhh... my dad was a great warrior. He pretty much won an entire war for the Northern Water Tribe. He was an awesome waterbender, and I'm... not."

"Oh, psh," Rachel says. "Of course you are."

"No, I'm really not," Finn says, with a slight grimace.

"You just need... more practice," Rachel says simply.

Finn shakes his head. "What I'm trying to say is... you're you. Like, the same way that I'm me.
We're not our parents. It doesn't matter what they do. We're our own people. We have our own destiny, you know?"

Rachel is flabbergasted. She can't help the expression on her face, staring at him like he's got purple pentapi stuck to his head.

"What?" Finn asks. "Did I say something dumb again? I mean, I know I kind of—"

"You said just the right thing," Rachel says, jumping down off the rock and hugging him for all he's worth. "Thank you, Finn."

He squeezes her back. "No problem. So… I guess you're kind of stuck with us for now, huh?"

"I don't want to impose," she says graciously, "but… at the same time, it would be ridiculous for me not to travel with you, considering that you're going to the Air Temples next and that is exactly where I need to be. Plus, I have an airbending scroll that I can barter with. I'm sure Kurt would love to get a head-start on his fourth element, and I can give him that."

"He's gonna be stoked to learn airbending," Finn says. "Even if it's just a little."

"As will I," Rachel says, adopting her dramatic voice. "I will venture bravely into the mountains, reach to the heavens with hungry hands and claim my destiny, my legacy, my heritage. And… I will do it on my own terms," she adds, with a nudge to Finn. "Because no matter who my mother turns out to be, her life is not mine. I am my own person."

Finn grins and nudges her back. "And you're amazing, just the way you are."

The heaviness of Jesse, and his ill-timed revelations are lifted from her, and Rachel steps lightly as she walks with Finn towards the others.

Finn, on the other hand, feels just a little heavier. He's glad he convinced Rachel that her parents' actions didn't matter.

He just wishes everyone was so easily convinced…

Two earthbenders are left alone with their thoughts. One relishes the chance to stop and sort herself out—the other fears his thoughts, and the stillness that brings them to bear…

Mercedes decides to take a moment to meditate after all the madness that went down just now. She centers herself on the ground, connects with the earth and lets the solid, stable element ground her flailing mind. Facing death isn't always as easy as she makes it look, and as the unofficial group caretaker, she's got a lot to deal with.

Blaine's got his fire back. That's gonna change things for him, and that's not even counting what's going on between him and Kurt. That's gonna change things for everybody.

Rachel's an airbender, apparently, and is now stuck with them. When Mercedes wished for female companionship, this really wasn't what she had in mind, but it could be worse, she supposes. Rachel has her moments, and Mercedes more or less likes the girl. They'll probably grow closer as time goes by.

If not, Mercedes can always threaten to bury her when she won't shut up.

Speaking of Rachel, Finn is over the moon for her, which is just a whole other can of beans. Call
her crazy, but she doesn't feel like touching *that* boarcupine with a twenty-foot pole.

And Artie…

She shakes her head, and opens her eyes. Speak of the badgermole…

"Hey," Artie says quietly, sliding up to her. "Everybody kind of… went off to do their own thing. I was wondering where you were."

"Just taking a little quiet time," Mercedes says. "Gotta air out my head and put it back on straight."

He chuckles. "That was some crazy-ass shit, you ain't lyin'," he says. He's silent for a little bit after that.

"Did you want something?" she asks.

He looks uncharacteristically nervous when he looks up at her. "You… you believe me, right? That I wasn't trying to kill him?"

Mercedes stares at him for a long moment, watching him as he shifts back and forth, looking sick. He's definitely nervous about something, but it strikes her as 'does she think I'm crazy?' nerves, not 'does she know I'm lying?' It takes her a few seconds to decide, but decide she does. "I believe you," she says at last.

His smile is a sigh of relief. "Thank you," he says. "I… I really appreciate that." He clears his throat, looking around. "We should probably get going soon, but… I'll, uhh, let you get back to your meditating."

As he starts to slide away from her, Mercedes voices one more thought. "Do you?" she asks.

He turns around. "Do I what?"

"Do you believe yourself when you say that?" she asks.

He seems to think for just a second. And then he scoffs, throwing out his hands to wave her off. "Of course," he says. "Why would I say something that I don't believe?"

He slides off before she can reply.

Bluster, bravado, casual dismissal. Oh, yeah. That time, he *was* afraid she would see through him.

"I have no idea," she says quietly, more to herself than anyone else. That boy is a mystery to everyone, including himself.

"Know yourself," Grandma Jones always told her. "You are the foundation, and if you don't know the foundation you're building on, you're just asking for disaster."

She's never been too hard on Artie, but now she's starting to worry. Because if her grandma is right (and she usually is), that boy is heading for disaster as sure as the world turns, and the only question is who is gonna get hurt in the inevitable collapse…

*A proud warrior watches her escaped enemy, cursing her own weakness in letting him go…*

Quinn stands on top of the collapsed archway, grinding her teeth under pursed lips as she stares
through her spyglass at the beach down below. Two figures, each with a small flame in his hand, stand side by side like tiny candles.

They survived.

She hears footsteps behind her, knowing immediately that it's her Chi-Ryus. "We have no time to lose," Quinn says. "They're across the fjord. We have to get down there, and—"

"Captain," the dark-haired Chi-Ryu says, stepping forward nervously. "Permission to speak freely?"

Quinn gives her an odd look. They've never done this before. "Granted. What is it?"

"We were just talking, actually," she says, indicated the red-haired Chi-Ryu, "and while we understand that time is of the essence… we think it's best if you stopped for tonight."

"You're hurt and exhausted from the Agni Kai," the red-head chimes in. "You should rest, so you're at your best the next time you face them."

The Captain's teeth clench even harder. How dare they tell her to ignore her mission! Don't they understand how important this is?

"We're… worried about you," the dark-haired girl says quietly.

This catches her off guard. Quinn unclenches her teeth and stares at the Chi-Ryus, looking for any sign of falsehood.

She finds none.

This is unexpected. This requires careful thought.

"You are right," Quinn says after a few moments, maintaining the air of command, but taking a little of the edge off. "A sword must be sharpened after battle, or the blunted blade will not cut. We will regroup with the others and take a brief moment to recover, before we resume the chase. Any questions?" she asks.

"No, Captain!" the Chi-Ryus nod.

"Then you are dismissed," she says, waving them off.

They start to leave, and without even really thinking about it, she adds, "and… thank you, for your perspective."

The girls nod at her, before marching off.

Quinn takes another look through her spyglass at the figures below. He calls himself a Prince, completely unaware of how wrong it is. "There shouldn't be a Fire Prince," Quinn says quietly.

And if she does her job, there won't be.

It's as simple as that.

She watches the candles burn for just a few seconds more, and finally forces herself to collapse the spyglass, turn around, and walk away.

There is no need to rush things. She has time.
They can't outrun her forever…

And the Avatar and the Fire Prince stand beside each other and find something to burn for…

Blaine stands on the shore, a dark shape against the rapidly darkening horizon, a small flame cupped in his hands to protect it from the wind.

Kurt walks up beside him and simply stands there, just happy to be near him.

The Prince looks lovingly at the flame in his hands. "It's amazing," he breathes. "You don't realize what you have until it's gone. And even then, you don't quite realize how much you miss it until it's back again."

The Avatar lets out a little 'hmm' of agreement, and bends up a flame of his own, holding it near his center just as Blaine is. "I'm glad to see you burning again."

"I couldn't have done it without you, you know," Blaine says softly.

"I still don't understand," Kurt says. "I didn't do anything."

"You didn't have to," Blaine says with a sweet smile. "Fire wants," he explains. "And for so long… after what happened… I was afraid to want anything. What you want can be denied. What you love can be lost. And I just… it hurt so much… I couldn't imagine hurting like that again. I was afraid."

Kurt nods. "I'm sorry," he says quietly.

"Don't be," Blaine says. "You're the main thing that helped me realize what I was missing. There are… some things in this world that are worth hurting for. Worth fighting for. And for me… you are one of them. Quite possibly the biggest one."

Much like room with a fire inside, Kurt finds that Blaine has sucked the oxygen right out of him.

"You amaze me, Kurt," the Prince says with a soft smile. "You move me, and it's… it's effortless. You don't have to think about it or even try, really. It just happens naturally. You move, and I move with you. I'm just another element in your hands. A part of your world. And I'm honored to be so close to you."

Kurt is speechless. "Blaine… that's… I..." He smiles. "Thank you. I can safely say that is the best compliment anyone has ever given me."

Blaine smiles, and they stand there together for a while, watching as the last vestiges of sunlight fade from the horizon, keeping their flames close to their hearts all the while.

Then, without warning, Blaine puts his flame out. He steps behind him, wraps his arms around Kurt, and places his hands beneath the Avatar's, cupping the little fire that burns at his center just as lovingly as he would his own.

It brightens immensely.

And suddenly, there are two flames burning as one.

Kurt can feel the difference between them, how the two energies intertwine and shift and dance together, expressions of a single element. So alike, and so different, separate, yet part of a whole greater than either part.
Blaine hooks his chin over Kurt's shoulder, and they just... are. For a wondrous moment more intimate than Kurt can voice, the two of them burn as one.

"Come on, boys!" Mercedes says. "We've got to get a move on."

"I guess that's our cue to leave," Blaine says.

"And yet, you aren't going anywhere," Kurt observes.

"Too comfy. Too warm," Blaine says, actually nuzzling him. "Can we walk like this?"

"Probably not a good idea," Kurt says, feeling bereft as he steps away from Blaine and extinguishes the flame. "But... I think we can try a compromise."

Kurt holds out his hand.

Blaine smiles like he's gotten double Solstice presents, and takes it, lacing their fingers together.

Hand-in-hand, they walk off to join the others.

It's far from a happy ending. The Avatar knows they have work to do—finding Sam, decoding the mystery of the Solar Winds and Sue's ultimate goal, not to mention learning airbending and eventually saving the world.

But as he walks away from that beach, the warmth inside of him could power a hundred suns. And he feels, for quite possibly the first time ever, that he might be up to the task.

That maybe he

*can*

save them all.

So, no, it isn't an ending.

Not for him, not for any of them...

...but it's a start.

**END OF ACT 2**

**A/N:** Yes, folks, it finally happened! :D And it only took **FIFTY CHAPTERS!** XD Thank you so much for your patience thus far. I've worked hard on this, and your support is what makes it all worthwhile. The story is far from over: Act 3 features tons of juicy backstory, more Sue (you know you love her), plenty of action and intrigue, some truly awesome surprises, and a finale that will blow your mind.

In the meantime, I'm taking a short break for about a week so that those who are so inclined may catch up on their reading/reviewing. Even if you're just posting to say you're reading the story, I'd love to hear from you. ;>) Thank you all so much! You've gotten me this far—I hope to have you onboard for the rest of the trip!
Walked Across an Empty Land

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 50/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: References to some of the more unfortunate aspects of male genitalia. :P
Word Count: 8500
Summary: When a usurper sets eyes on the Fire Nation throne, Avatar Kurt and friends find themselves on the run with the deposed Prince Blaine in a country gone mad. Can they escape Lady Sylvester's wrath? Or will her minions snuff them out for good? Fusion fic!

Author's Note: Welcome, one and all, to the third and final act of Solar Winds! The story's greatest surprises, both good and bad, are just ahead, and the first of them—the one that arguably defines this Act—is three chapters away. Be prepared. For now… enjoy Kurt and Blaine being adorable together. I know I certainly did. ;)

Act 3

~Fireworks~

CHAPTER 51 – Walked Across an Empty Land

Kurt's on the ground. Blaine's in the trees. Artie, Mercedes, Finn and Rachel trudge along behind them in the middle of a dense, rocky jungle. As they go, Kurt finds his mind wandering to odd places, and decides to give it something to do to keep it nailed down.

Dear Travelogue, he narrates to himself.

Day 4 lost in the rocky Fire Nation wilderness, and already I fear that madness is just around the corner.

"Mercedes, I'm hungry."
"Finn, we just ate."

"No, you just ate. I had, like, two super-stringy bites of lizard-thing that I'm pretty sure will be in my stomach three years from now."

"Well, if you don't like my cooking, you're welcome to eat some damn rocks. Maybe take a couple strips of tree bark and make a sandwich!"

**Madness for me, that is. These people are driving me crazy!**

The end of our train ride took us to the southeastern shore of the Fire Nation, and apparently, deep into the heart of no-man's land. We've moved inland in hopes of finding civilization, but the prospects are grim. All we've found is a shit-ton of rocky, cliify pseudo-jungle and a bunch of small, unappetizing critters that are deceptively difficult to catch.

We're tired, we're hot, we're

**completely**

filthy, and we're still wearing the same clothes we left in.

It sucks. And the situation is taking its toll on everyone in slightly different ways.

Finn, of course, constantly annoys Mercedes merely by existing. That's nothing new.

What is new is the belligerent dynamic that seems to have developed between...

"Artie!"

"...what is it now, Rachel?"

"Stop... juggling the tablet! You're going to break it."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are!"

"No, I'm not!"

"Yes, you are!"

"Okay, you know what? Fine!"

**Smash.**

**Gasp!**

"There! I broke it."

"Artie! You..."
Crackle crackle…

schlick!

"Oh, hey, look, I fixed it again. Because it's a stone tablet. And I'm an earthbender."

"Ugh! You… you're just… you can't just—"

"Sure I can. Watch."

Crack.

"Broke."

Schlick.

"Fixed!"

Crack.

"Broke."

Schlick.

"Fixed!"

Snatch!

"Just… stop it! You are just… so… URRRGGH."

It's been like this the entire time. They bicker like children any chance they get. To be fair, I should have seen this coming. Rachel is a very… how can I put this…

**tightly wound**

person when it comes to a lot of things. Artie, being a sneaky, cheating little con artist, is much looser. They have vastly different views on the world and how things should be. The occasional clash of personalities is to be expected.

But I didn't expect them to fight over **literally everything**.

"Hey, Finn! I was just thinking…"

"Artie! Could you be any ruder?"

"Could you be any more irritating?"

"We were having a conversation!"

"Oh, really? Finn, what were you guys talking about?"

"Ummmm… we were…"

"We were talking abo—"
"Let Finn answer."

"We were… we were talking about… ummmm…"

"That's what I thought. See, Finn wasn't actually paying attention to you, because you're boring. And your idea of a 'conversation' involves ninety nine percent of the words coming out of your mouth."

"That's not true!"

"Finn?"

"…you do kind of talk a lot."

_Gasp! Growl. Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp…_

"Rachel, wait! I didn't say it was bad! It's just… my brain gets kind of tired after a while, and…"

"Don't worry about her, buddy. Now, I was just thinking…"

_I have to admit, I found it mildly amusing at first, but it's getting old fast. Besides, Rachel kind of deserves a break. The wilderness has not been kind to her; a fact that she seems to find deeply ironic…_

In the shelter of a newly-bent cave…

"Why?" Rachel asks deliriously, reclining on a rock in front of Mercedes. "Why do you hate me, nature? I've always supported your causes. I stand up for you at every opportunity! Is it so much to ask that you return the favor?"

Mercedes pulls another boarcupine quill from her leg. Rachel shrieks and curses, and Finn moves in with the healing water.

Blaine winces sympathetically. Artie quietly titters in the background.

Kurt titters right along with him. Just a little bit.

_The poor girl has had it rough in her short time with us. Her insistence on a vegetarian diet when no one really knew the plants in the area led to a long, unfortunate night with her head over a vomit-hole that Mercedes was nice enough to bend before heading to bed. Even now, she insists upon apologizing to every poor creature that must die so that she may live._

_Her effect on the group dynamic is interesting, to say the least. Artie has already been discussed. Blaine gets along with her, of course, but Blaine could befriend a hungry gopherbear while covered in honey. Finn remains smitten, when not distracted by hunger or trying in vain to kill the many bugs that seem to find him delicious. Interestingly enough, I can't quite tell whether or not she returns his sentiments. It's something I'll need to investigate. As for Mercedes, she's a little put-off by her high-maintenance ways, but she seems glad for some female companionship, at least._

_Even I've managed to find some common ground with her, in the form of our mutual need to learn airbending._

_Though I have to say, that turned out to be a bit of an anticlimax…_
At the edge of a cliff overlooking a vine-covered valley…

"There!" Rachel says, handing off the scroll. Finn unfurls it and holds it up for the two benders. "This way, we can both see it. Now, I have a little experience with airbending, though I am by no means a professional… I will be more than happy to assist you with any difficulties you… may… have…"

Rachel turns around to find Kurt already in the middle of agilely flicking his hands around a swirling globe of air. The wind ball spins faster and tighter when Kurt does it, and even holds together long enough for Kurt to roll it around on his shoulders and pretend to spin it on his fingers.

"Huh," Kurt says. "I'm pretty good at this."

Her jaw drops.

The Avatar pulls the whirling orb back into his hands and expertly thrusts it outward, creating a breeze powerful enough to blast most of the leaves off of a nearby bush.

"I'm sorry, Rachel," Kurt says, turning to her. "I wasn't listening. Were you saying something?"

The girl keeps right on gaping, until awe turns to indignation, and she stomps over and starts trying to bend the air herself.

Only a timely intervention by Kurt stops her from sailing off the cliff.

"The key is in the wrist movement. You need to loosen up a bit. Airbending and waterbending are actually pretty simil—"

"Don't patronize me!" Rachel growls, stomping back over to snatch the scroll from Finn. "I can discover my heritage on my own, thank you very much! And since you've already mastered today's move, you clearly no longer need this. Now, I am very tired. From all the air I've bent. I am winded. So I bid you good day. Perhaps tomorrow we will both be ready to progress to the next move on the scroll."

And she stomps off to the earth-tent in an angry huff.

Kurt turns to the others. "I guess this would be a bad time to mention that I've already mastered the other moves."

"That fast?" Blaine asks in awe. "Really?"

Kurt shrugs. "Like I said—airbending and waterbending are shockingly close."

"Kurt, do you realize what this means?" Mercedes asks.

The Avatar looks at her. "That… I'm really good at everything? I already knew that."

"No, dude," Finn says brightly. "You know all four elements!"

Kurt's face lights up like a solstice fireworks show. "I know all four elements," he says, awed. "I know all four elements!" he says, bouncing up and down.

"Props, dude. Mad props," Artie says, bowing down as Kurt turns the revelation into a happy sing-song chant.
"I know all four elements!
I know all four elements!
I know all four elements!
I know all four elements!"

It quickly progresses into an outright song-and-dance number, as Kurt goes from bouncing around, to cartwheeling, to moonwalking, to booty-shaking, to body rolls, to pelvic thrusts...

_________________________________________________________________________

The others decried my dance skills, but Blaine certainly seemed to enjoy the show.

That, my dear travelogue, is the one bright spot in this heart of darkness. Where the others are tired, cranky, and full of ire, Blaine seems to have adjusted to the situation by more or less going native.

"Kurt!" Blaine says, dropping out of the trees to land in front of him. "I spotted something amazing. Come on, I think you'll like it!" He grabs Kurt's hand and starts pulling him forward, and Kurt is too busy smiling and blushing at the contact to really care where he's going.

Blaine started this journey shirtless, and shirtless he has remained. It's not like we've run into too many clothing stores out here in the wilds. This is not a complaint, mind you. I am all about seeing my boyfriend—

Kurt erupts into giggles.

—half-naked as much as possible. But he is making me just a teensy bit jealous.

Apparently, fire natives are categorically immune to sunburn. I take my shirt off for five minutes, and I turn tomato-red and blind everyone within eyesight. Blaine takes his off, and the sun cooks him to golden perfection.

Life just isn't fair.

But then again... when you think about it, Blaine might be the one getting cooked, but

I'm

the one who gets the meal.

Tee-hee.

Well, travelogue, it's been fun pretending to write in you to pass the time while I trudge through the neverending jungle of hate, but I've got a very real flesh-and-blood boyfriend—

Kurt giggles again.

—demanding my attention, so, for the time being, I must bid you farewell.

…incidentally, I'm starting to think that writing in an imaginary travelogue might mean that I am already crazy.

Oh well. Who cares? I have a boyfriend!

Love,
Kurt
Kurt's brain closes his imaginary travelogue as Blaine continues to pull him through the craggy rocks. "Blaine, what is this, what are we OH… MY… LA…"

The Prince skids to a stop in front of one of the most beautiful natural wonders Kurt has ever seen: a huge, vivid blue pond, surrounded low cliffs in a sort of squiggly U-shape, water flowing over each and every inch. It's an absolutely tremendous waterfall, surrounded by lush foliage. It's breathtaking, which probably explains why he feels so lightheaded.

Oh, wait, no, that's just Blaine's arm around his shoulder.

"So, by that grin on your face, I have to assume that you like it," Blaine says, smiling at Kurt, entirely too pleased with himself.

Kurt just grins back.

Is he always going to be this giddy? He can't possibly maintain this high forever. He feels like he's full of helium. The symptoms certainly fit. When Blaine is around, Kurt's voice seems just a touch higher, and he honestly feels like he could float away at any moment.

"I love it," Kurt says. "It's beautiful."

"It is," Blaine agrees. "So you'll fit right in."

Kurt blushes. He's got to stop that.

He can't keep making Kurt so gosh-darn happy. For good or ill, Kurt has grown to view his level of misery like the ocean tides. The further out it goes, the more all-consuming and destructive it's going to be when it comes rushing back. On the beach of happiness, Kurt can barely see the sea anymore, which is making him very, very nervous. At this point, he's expecting the friggin' moon to fall, or the sun to explode, or the continent to upheave itself and flip upside down in the ocean. The other foot must fall. The fact that it hasn't yet is just making him more and more anxious for the impending disaster.

"Mountains have mercy," Mercedes says as she catches up with them. "Look at this place!"

"Holy paradise," Artie says with a grin.

"This is wonderful!" Rachel says, awed.

"Oh, thank you," Finn breathes. "Thank you, Tui. This is the best thing ever."

"Hey!" Blaine says, slightly offended. "Credit where credit is due, Finn. The moon isn't even out right now. I'm the one who spotted this."

"Oh," Finn says. "Well, uhh… thank you too!"

And then he starts stripping.

"Finn, what are you doing?" Kurt asks.

"Ummm… getting in the water?" Finn says. "I kind of like the water."

"I kind of like the water," Artie echoes, taking off his own clothes. "And I can't even bend the stuff!"

"You can't get in there!" Kurt says. "We have no idea what's in that water. There could be a… a…"
a family of croctopusses living in this pond."

"Croctopi," Rachel corrects, looking like she's seriously considering taking the plunge herself.

"Whatever!" Kurt says. "This nation is full of carnivorous, poisonous, evil creatures—no offense, Blaine—and we have no idea when the next one could strike!"

"Isn't it like that everywhere?" Blaine asks.

"He's got a point, boo," Mercedes says. "At the very least, let us wash off in there. I don't know if you've noticed, but we are some stanky people right now."

Artie sniffs his armpit and makes a face. "Damn. That could kill a man! I am dangerous, Kurt. For the good of the world—you have to let me swim."

Kurt crosses his arms. "Fine. If you all want to jump in the mystery waters and get eaten—"

"Kurt," Blaine says, putting his hands on his shoulders (again with the touching! Always with the touching!). "Why don't you just… check? See what's in the water yourself?"

"Dude," Finn says, down to his underwear at this point, "that's an awesome idea."

The presence of Blaine's skillful fingers kneading his shoulders is just calming enough to make Kurt see the suggestion as reasonable. Damn him. "Oh, alright. Finn, help me out," Kurt says.

"Me?" Finn asks.

"Yes," Kurt says archly. "It's waterbending practice. You need it."

"Oh… okay," Finn says, gulping slightly.

He and Kurt step up to the edge of the water. "Just shift your weight through the stances. The water will follow."

"I've got a lot of weight, though," Finn says, self-consciously.

"All the more reason you should get used to shifting it around," Kurt says, getting into stance. "Waterbending is just like anything else. The more you do it, the better you get. You just don't practice enough, Finn. Now, follow me."

Finn gets into an approximation of Kurt's stance, and together, the two of them begin to bend up the water from various parts of the pond, taking a look at the various colorful fish and other critters therein. Kurt looks as natural as the day. Finn looks unsteady and nervous.

"See anything dangerous, Blaine?" Kurt asks.

"Nope," Blaine says, shaking his head at each giant water bubble the two of them lift. "Guys, it looks like we're in the clear."

Kurt sighs and concedes the point. "Okay… I guess we can stay here for now."

"Woo!" Artie shouts, backing away from the shore, sliding in and ramping into the water.

"What the—what is he—how is he—can he swim?" Rachel asks, sounding only slightly concerned.

"More or less," Artie replies, reclining on his back at the water's surface, spouting a little water
from his mouth. "I prefer floating."

"Come on in, Rachel!" Finn says, leaping into the pond in what appears to be a purposeful belly-flop. He sinks below the surface and comes back up grinning. "It's great!"

"I don't have my swimsuit," Rachel says primly.

"None of us do!" Blaine says cheerfully, bouncing up to the top of a rock and doing a cannonball. "WOO!"

"Just hop in with your underthings, sweetie," Mercedes says as she wades into the water wearing exactly that. "Ain't nobody gonna judge you!"

"Hop in!" Artie chimes in, joining the action. "Unwind yo'self. Fall apart, in my backyard."

"Well… alright," Rachel says, daintily shedding her outer garments and holding her nose as she plunges into the water.

Blaine has the marvelous sense to get into a splash fight with Finn of all people, and summarily winds up washed ashore, much to Kurt's amusement. The soggy Prince shakes his hair out and looks at the Avatar in confusion.

"Why aren't you getting in?" he asks.

Kurt regards him plainly. "Well, one of us has to keep their wits about them. We haven't heard from the Kink Patrol in four days and I know they haven't given up yet. I'm keeping watch in case they try anything."

"If they try anything while we're here," Blaine says, indicating their lush surroundings, "then they're idiots. They could not hand you a bigger advantage if they were to come into battle covered in foam rubber. Come on," he pouts, giving him painful puppy-dog eyes. "Swim with me."

"Well," Kurt says, feigning far more reluctance than he actually feels. "I guess I could take a break for a few minu—HEY! WHAT ARE YOU—" SPLOOSH.

As he speaks, Blaine sneaks up and tosses him in the water, fully clothed, laughing the entire time. His laughter turns to shock when Kurt pops back up, standing on the surface of the water dry as a bone.

"Oh, Blaine," Kurt says dangerously. "You poor, lost soul. I can see you need wisdom and guidance in your life, so allow me to be your teacher. Today's lesson; picking your battles carefully."

"Uhhhh," Blaine gulps, but it's already too late.

The others suddenly find themselves playing in a much shallower pond as Kurt raises up a wall of water large enough to make Blaine look (and feel) like a bug about to be squashed…

SMACK.

Quinn grumpily pulls her hand from the back of her neck to look for evidence of a kill.

There is none. The damn bug lives on.
"Ugh," she grunts. "Can I not even kill insects now? Have I slipped that much?"

"Umm," one of her Chi-Ryus pipes up.

"Don't answer that," Quinn snaps dangerously. The Chi-Ryu wisely decides to remain silent.

She, her squad, the two bozos she has been saddled with, and a few others are currently tracking through the many highs and lows of the Fire Nation wilderness on the backs of ostrich horses. The rhinos were all fine and good when sticking to the roads and flatlands, but in the rocky, craggy lowlands, they're just too big and cumbersome to get around effectively.

Much to Puck's consternation.

"You suck," he grumbles to his ostrich horse.

The beast largely ignores him.

"Yeah, that's right," Puck says sulkily. "Just stand there and take it. You know it's true. Kilgore would snap my fucking face off, but you're not gonna do anything, are you? No. Because you suck."

The avian mount continues to pay him little-to-no mind.

"UGH," Quinn growls, trying in vain to squish another insect that thinks she is a landing pad. "That's it! I've had it. Fuck the wilderness!"

She punctuates this by setting a nearby bush on fire. Fortunately, it doesn't burn particularly well, because of humidity and moisture in the area. One of the soldiers bends it out.

"Careful!" he says. "This area could be home to any number of endangered species. We don't want to cause unnecessary environmental damage."


A short beat.

"Except for my Chi-Ryus. You're exempt," she adds.

The Chi-Ryus smugly flaunt this fact on their expressions.

"Awww, cheer up, Quinny!" Santana preens to the girl's annoyance. "We're making great time, and we haven't lost the trail once. Honestly, they're so dependent on earthbending to get around; it's kind of embarrassing how easy it is to track them now."

"Don't call me 'Quinny,'" is Quinn's only response to that, before she is distracted swatting at another bug.

Up ahead of them, a couple of armored soldiers slice through a thick set of vines. One with dual dao swords, the other with a spear.

"We'd be making better time if it wasn't for these losers," Puck says, nodding at the soldiers. "Why'd we have to bring them along? It's not like they're gonna do any good."

"Not true," Santana says. "Even cannon fodder has its uses."
"We are not cannon fodder, miss," the leader of the soldiers grumbles. "We are the Fire Nation 57th Mounted! An—"

"—elite unit hand-picked to serve the Fire Lord. We know. You tell us constantly," Quinn sighs. "Puck, shut up. We wouldn't be making time at all if we didn't have their ostrich horses. And they are not cannon fodder. This isn't some rabble of guards trained to 'keep the peace.' This is an actual fighting unit. Ten soldiers, all firebenders, half of which are weapon specialists. They know what they are doing."

"Thank you," the leader says haughtily.

"Oh, shut up," Quinn grouses. "You'd better live up to your reputation, or my report to the Fire Lord won't be quite so complimentary."

"Errr… understood," the leader sighs, lashing his ostrich horse onwards.

"You certainly seem eager to put them to work," Santana says lightly. "What's the matter? Faith in your little Chi-Ryus starting to dwindle?"

"Not at all," Quinn says. "It just seems a little ridiculous to have a resource like this at my disposal and not to employ it. Besides, some of them are still recovering from injuries."

"We can still fight!" one of the injured Chi-Ryus grumbles.

"Of course you can," Quinn says diplomatically. "Lady Sylvester taught us to ignore pain like true champions. But just because you can doesn't mean you should have to."

Another bug lands on the back of her neck, and Quinn has quite simply had it. She slowly stands up on the saddle of her horse—keeping herself calm so as not to frighten the bug away. Once she is in the proper position, she puts her hands together in a Fire Nation salute, takes a deep breath, and turns into a pillar of flame.

The assorted souls gathered around stare in trepidation at her little eruption. One of the soldiers actually says 'meep.'

When she is satisfied, she dispels the flames around her and checks the ground near her horse. It is now littered with charred bug corpses.

"Much better," Quinn says, pleased. "Now, let's move on! We have bigger bugs to fry…"

Blaine coughs and sputters as Kurt washes him over a rock. "Okay!" he shouts, still grinning. "Okay, you win. I surrender." He sprawls himself across the rock in a way that should be positively illegal. "I am at your mercy," he says. "Have your way with me."

Kurt climbs on top of the rock and proceeds to do just that.

"Oh, Hills," Mercedes sighs, looking away. "Children, cover your eyes."

"Who you callin' 'children,' woman?" Artie balks, as Finn works on keeping him aloft at the top of a waterspout.

"All of y'all," Mercedes says plainly.

"I thought we were the same age," Rachel says, practicing her backstroke.
"Physically, yes. But I am the most mature. And the wisest. So I get to be the adult here," she says flatly.

"Tch," Artie says. "Whatever, trick."

Mercedes's face goes from zero to 'danger, Artie Abrams!' in a second flat. "Excuse me?" she says. Artie, for his part, seems to realize his mistake. "Sorry! Sorry. It slipped out," he says urgently.

"Well, you better watch that slippery tongue if you don't want me to snatch it out. I done warned you, boy—I don't tolerate that kind of language," Mercedes says.

"I'm sorry!" Artie says sincerely. "I just… nevermind," he sighs. "Finn, let me down. Put me on the shore."

With his face pinched in concentration, Finn manages to pull the waterspout over to the ground and drop his buddy off without actually dropping him. He then pulls most of the water off of him, freeing him to slide over and retrieve his clothes. "I'm going to take a nap. If anybody needs me, I'll be over there," he says, pointing to a small outcropping of rocks.

Mercedes watches him go, her brow creased with worry. "What's wrong with him?" she asks.

"He hasn't been sleeping," Finn says quietly. "I think he's having bad dreams."

"Oh," Rachel says. "That's why he's been so rude and dismissive and belligerent. And here I thought he was always like that."

"Oh, he is," Mercedes says. "But he's not usually this bad. I'm starting to get a little worried."

"Me too," Finn admits.

He and Mercedes share a brief, but tense look with one another, before Finn abruptly sighs and swims away.

Rachel watches the exchange carefully, her monstrous curiosity roaring to life inside of her as she suddenly realizes—she barely knows anything about these people.

That simply will not do. If she is to be traveling with them in search of a great destiny, she simply must get a feel for her new friends' backstories and respective upbringings. It will help her understand them better, and perhaps, give her a better idea of what to expect from them. They've all left something behind to come on this journey, and Rachel wants to know what that something is.

If she's lucky, maybe it'll make her feel less awful about her own 'something,' which she already misses terribly.

So she starts working on a plan…

Meanwhile, Kurt continues to play the siren to Blaine's sailor as the two of them make out on a rock in the middle of the pond.

"We should…" Blaine breathes from beneath Kurt, nipping at his lip.

"Go on," Kurt says, laying a line of kisses down Blaine's jaw. "I'm always open for suggestions."

"We should—oh, wow," Blaine moans as Kurt grinds against him. "We should—we should stop!"
Kurt *does* stop, but it's more out of shock than anything. "Say *what* now?"

"I mean," Blaine says. "We should be training."

"Training?" Kurt says incredulously. "We're in the middle of a make-out session and you're thinking about *training*?"

The red-faced Prince smiles up at him. "This," Blaine points out, "is exactly the reason we agreed to hold all future Firebending training sessions in the daylight. *Where others can see us.*"

Kurt thinks back to the night that prompted that suggestion. "True, we didn't seem to get much training done in the nighttime session. Though I don't remember any complaints from you about what we *did* do."

"Exactly," Blaine says. "We tend to get a little… *distracted* in the evenings. So we should train during the day, take advantage of the power of the sun, and save the night for other things."

"Mmmm," Kurt says neutrally.

"Besides," Blaine continues. "You've got a long way to go before you master firebending. You need some work."

The Avatar regards him with unimpressed eyes. "Well, you certainly know how to turn a guy *off.* Insult my bending, why don't you?" he says, whacking Blaine playfully in the chest as he slinks off the rock and into the water.

Blaine doesn't move.

"Aren't you coming?" Kurt asks.

"*Trying not to, actually,*" Blaine whispers.

"What?" Kurt says.

"Ummm…" Blaine says awkwardly. "In a minute! I need to… umm… be still. For a while."

If his flushed skin and breathless tone didn't clue Kurt in on exactly why Blaine wasn't comfortable moving, one good look at his pants would certainly do the job.

"Ah," Kurt says, turning red himself and sinking beneath the surface a little more, as if to hide from the thoughts that suddenly sprung into his mind. He's also hiding something else that is suddenly sprung. "Yes. You're right. We both could use a little… *cooling off.*"

"Yes, good, I'm glad we agree," Blaine says.

They look at each other for a few moments.

"We should probably *cool off* as far away from each other as possible," Kurt says.

Blaine nods seriously. "That would be helpful, I think."

Kurt swims away using mostly his arms.

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*A few minutes later*…
"Alright, everyone," Kurt announces. "We're camping here for now. Tomorrow, we'll follow the water upstream. Water almost inevitably leads to civilization. Right now, however, is training time."

In the aftermath of the train battle, Mercedes warned Kurt that he was falling behind on his earthbending training, and a heated bending-based discussion followed. The end result being that pretty much everyone decided they could do with some more training. So they all agreed to 'train on the go' as much as they could. Mercedes and Blaine would train Kurt, and train with Kurt to keep themselves sharp. Kurt would do the same with Finn, since he was better at waterbending. Kurt and Rachel initially intended to train together, but Kurt's lightning-quick grasp of airbending quickly put him in the position of teacher, which irked Rachel to no end. She insists on training by herself, as does Artie, for reasons that still escape the Avatar.

"Okay, so who's going first?" Kurt asks.

Mercedes finishes putting her clothes back on and heads over to the Avatar. "You and me, baby," she says. "We've got work to do."

"Alright," Kurt says. "Earthbending is up first. The rest of you, get warmed up. Rachel, my offer to help still stands."

"No thank you!" Rachel says, sticking her nose up as she goes to retrieve her own clothes. "I prefer the self-guided intuitive approach."

"Suit yourself," Kurt says.

With that, he and Mercedes bend up a circular island in the middle of the pond to practice on.

On the shore, Blaine and Finn promptly exit the pond to get dressed (well, Finn gets dressed, Blaine just does some kind of firebending thing to dry himself off instantly that leaves him, like, steamy, and makes his hair super-fluffy).

Artie tries to catch up on lost sleep a short distance away, but has little luck. He tries distracting himself by tapping out a quiet rhythm on the broken metal shackles that are still clasped on his wrists. Slowly but surely, the rhythmic tapping lulls him into a sort of trance, and he comes closer and closer to dreamland…

A little closer, Rachel spreads the scroll on top of the tablet and practices airbending. Or tries to, anyway; she succeeds mostly in blowing herself around, when she doesn't just drop the air altogether. Her frustration mounts quickly, but she is not about to ask for help. She's naturally gifted at so many other things—there is absolutely no reason she shouldn't be able to get this on her own. So she continues to toss herself around at random, reasoning that, if nothing else, she's getting a great deal of practice at being an aerodynamic projectile.

Meanwhile, Finn bends an unfortunate fish out of the water, and gets Blaine to flash-fry it for him.

"Dude, firebending is so cool," he says, taking his first bite of freshly-cooked fish. "Well," he says, swallowing. "Not like, literally cool. But… you know what I mean. Thanks, dude."

Blaine nods. "Think nothing of it. I'm just glad I can finally be of some use to you guys," he smiles.

The waterbender turns to watch his step-brother practice, when two giant walls of earth suddenly sprout up on the island, forming a narrow corridor. The smashing and crashing sounds coming from inside make Finn wince a little in sympathy.
Since he can't watch that show anymore, he turns back to Blaine as he warms up and practices his firebending, hoping he'll do some kind of cool super-move or something like he did on the train.

He's deeply disappointed when Blaine keeps doing the same punch over, and over, and over, and over, and over…

"Uhhh, I think you got it, dude," Finn says. "Seriously. You could not get any better at doing that punch."

"You can always get better," Blaine says, continuing to practice.

As he keeps going, the flames that come out of his hand get bigger and bigger, and he starts breathing harder.

"Shouldn't you save some for Kurt?" Finn asks, munching on his fish. "I mean, you don't want to get all tired before you two do your thing together."

Blaine raises an eyebrow at Finn.

It takes him a couple of seconds, but Finn gets the gist. "Oh, ewww! I don't mean—not like a… two-guys thing. I meant your training."

The Prince lets out a good-natured laugh at Finn's verbal diarrhea. "Don't worry. I'm far from tired. This is actually an endurance exercise. Firebending is very energy-intensive, so firebenders can do stuff like this to build up their endurance so they don't tire out."

"Oh," Finn says. "Cool."

Blaine tries a couple more punches. "Well… that's not entirely true. I mean, yes, this is an endurance exercise, but that's not why I'm doing it."

Finn just tilts his head.

"A couple weeks ago, on the night of the riots, I did something… incredible. Something that I'd only heard legends about before. I made blue fire," Blaine says, continuing to punch.

"Mmmmmmm!" Finn says, swallowing. "Oh, dude! You did it on the train, too!"

"I did?" Blaine asks, shocked.

"Yup," Finn says. "It was kind of cool. How'd you do it? Did you fart? Artie thinks you farted—"

"Ewww!" Blaine says, making a face. "No. That's not… that's… just… no." He sighs. "I really don't know how I did it. That's what I'm trying to figure out. Blue flame is incredibly powerful. It burns hotter, flies farther, and carries more concussive force than orange flame."

"…it gives people concussions?" Finn asks.

"It explodes better," Blaine clarifies.

"Oh, cool," Finn says. "So… why can't you do it now?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," Blaine says dejectedly, continuing to punch out orange flames to no avail whatsoever as the Kurtcedes training session shakes the world around them.

"Maybe it's like boiling water," Finn says, after a while. "Like… it doesn't happen when you're just
standing there looking at it. You have to look away and forget about it, and then it happens."

"I don't think that's how boiling water works," Blaine says casually, when suddenly, he remembers something. "When you're not looking at it… holy crap!"

"What?" Finn asks.

"I've done it three times. I had a training session with my dad just before… all the stuff happened. And he freaked out over something I did while I was blindfolded. I bet that's it!" Blaine says excitedly. "Maybe you're right! Maybe that'll help! Here," he says, tearing a strip off of his pants leg and handing it to Finn. "Blindfold me."

Finn, being Finn, does not spare a single thought to the ramifications of blindfolding a firebender and unleashing him on the world.

But let's not put too much of the blame on him.

Blaine apparently thinks this is a good idea, as well.

Kurt is covered in enough dirt for him to practically consider it an outfit.

Mercedes bends up another small army of rock soldiers for him to break through, and Kurt sighs.

"I don't get it. I've smashed through these guys ten times already. What, exactly, am I doing wrong?" Kurt asks.

"You're trying too hard," Mercedes says, and Kurt throws up his hands.

"Spectacular. That's a wonderful lesson that everyone seems to want to teach me lately. Stop trying! Trying is for losers!" he cries, exasperated.

Mercedes is unimpressed at his tantrum. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. What is today's lesson about?" she asks.

"Pressure points," Kurt parrots tiredly.

"And what are pressure points?" Mercedes asks.

"Exactly what they sound like—points where pressure is most concentrated," Kurt drones.

"What happens if you break a pressure point?" Mercedes asks.

"The whole thing goes tumbling down," Kurt says.

"Exactly. Kurt, this isn't just about breaking down rocks. This is about breaking down rocks the easy way. Just as much result at a fraction of the effort. You're already tired—why not do it the easy way?" she asks.

This is one point Kurt must concede. "Fair enough," he says, and gets to work. He stares hard at the shape of each rock-soldier, trying to figure out where best to strike. After a little staring, he lets out a series of little jabs—striking with just enough force to break a small part of the whole. The rocks are purposely shaped like humans, so the pressure points are relatively easy for him to divine—a knee, an ankle in an odd position, and occasionally, even the base of the spine. Each strike takes advantage of the weight distribution, as far as he can tell it, to send every soldier crumbling to the ground with a single hit.
"Huh," Kurt says. "That was easy."

"See?" Mercedes says. "There's more than one way to knock somebody down. Just because one way works for you, that doesn't mean you shouldn't learn about the others."

"Great," Kurt says, wiping his forehead. "Is that it for today's lesson?"

"Oh, fine. I'll let the tired little baby have his rest," she grins, slamming down the earth walls so the world is revealed to them again.

The two can only stare in fascination at the sight unfolding before them.

Things have… changed since they started training.

For one, several things are now on fire, not the least of which is—

"AIIIIIIIIEEE!" Rachel squeals, running around panicked as the trail of her robes burns brightly.

"Rachel!" Blaine shouts after her, trying in vain to chase her down and having a little trouble because of the blindfold that continually slips down over his eyes. "Stop! Just stop running! That only makes it worse!"

"Hold still!" Finn shouts, bending up some fairly powerful waves from the pond to try and douse her. He sloshes them over the land with a fair bit of enthusiasm, but Rachel is too fast for him. Fortunately, he winds up putting out most of the other fires during this process.

Unfortunately, he forgets about Artie sleeping in the rocks, and a wave tossed as Rachel runs past him winds up washing the poor, surprised boy right out of the beginnings of his nap.

"Rachel, you need to calm—" The blindfold slips down over Blaine's eyes again, and he slips and falls in a Finn-created mud puddle, landing on Artie.

"Motherf—" the earthbender curses before getting a face full of Blaine.

"AIIIIIIIIEEE!" Rachel squeals, unable to escape the flames that chase her. Finn continues to run after her in vain, and eventually, as they always do, his limbs betray him, sending him crashing down on the Blaine-Artie dogpile, just as they were beginning to pick themselves up.

"Should we help them?" Kurt asks.

"Probably," Mercedes says.

They continue to watch.

Rachel runs out of room to run and pivots, heading in the opposite direction. This time, as she passes Artie on the ground, the earthbender plays with the ground at her feet, tripping her up and causing her to land flat on her face, as the flaming trail of her robe flies up and over her head.

"Rachel, look out!" Blaine says.

"I've got it!" Finn shouts.

And with that, he bends up a tremendous wave of water that washes each and every one of them straight into the pond, fully clothed.

Kurt shakes his head in silent awe. "We can't take our eyes of them for a second, can we?"
"Our work is never done," Mercedes agrees quietly.

"Madam," the lead soldier says.

Quinn steadfastly ignores him.

"Madam? Can you hear me?" he repeats.

She continues to block him out as her ostrich horse trots steadily onwards.

"MADAM!" he shouts right next to her ear, and she very nearly blasts his stupid helmet off.

"What?" she growls.

"Oh, good, you heard me that time," the leader says cheerfully. "We really ought to be stopping now. It's nearly sunset."

"I fail to see how those two are connected," Quinn says flatly.

"Well..." the man says. "It's... just that..."

"I don't know of many places that aren't more dangerous at night," Santana says simply. "Especially wild places."

"Yes, exactly," the leader agrees. "Plus—these are horses, madam, not automatons. They require rest and replenishment, same as any other creature."

"Yeah," Puck grouses. "They're not like rhinos, who can go for freaking days on nothing but sheer manly power."

"Alright, that's it!" says a slightly heavier soldier with a staff. "I've just about had it with your attitude, okay? Rhinos are not the be-all-end-all of amazing creatures."

"Are too," Puck says.

"Are not!" Staff replies.

"Are too," Puck counters.

"Are not!" Staff retaliates.

"WILL YOU BOTH JUST SHUT UP?" Quinn bellows, sending a blast of flame dangerously close to both of them.

The two of them are successfully cowed.

"Ummm, madam, I hate to intrude, but—"

"FINE!" Quinn shouts, jumping off of her horse. She stomps over to a nearby clearing and vents her frustration by violently burning a massive circle in the vegetation. When she's done, there is a neat little perimeter of solid black separating them from the rest of the jungle. "We'll camp here! Just... everyone shut up. I'm tired of your voices," she growls, stomping off.

Santana, perhaps against her better judgment, jumps off of her horse and follows her as the Chi-Ryus and the 57th Mounted start setting up camp. "Hey," Santana says as she catches up. "If it
makes you feel any better, judging by this trail, we're less than a day behind. We'll catch them in no time. We've got horses and they don't, remember?"

"Oh, of course," Quinn says, mockingly joyous. "We're just a little bit behind. We're just a little bit off. We're just a hair shy of perfect. It's not like any of that matters. It's not like the Avatar and his stupid friends scrape past us by the merest skin of their teeth every time. Oh, no, we've got plenty of time. Kick back and relax! Throw a friggin' dance party!" she finishes, snorting a little fire from her nose.

"Okay…" Santana says, backing off a little. "I'm starting to think there is something else going on here. Not that I care, but seeing as how your level of crazy-psycho-bitch directly affects my well being, I have to ask—what the fuck is really going on here?"

Quinn cocks her head to the side to glare at Santana. A sudden cry from above, almost like a messenger hawk, makes her jump and completely ruins the effect. She sighs. "I got a messenger hawk from the Fire Lord just before we left Sho Fa," she said. "She's on her way to the eastern tip of the Fire Nation for some reason, and I am expected to rendezvous with her in a few days. With results."

"Oh," Santana says. "The clock is ticking."

"Yes, the fucking clock is ticking our lives away," Quinn says. "So glad you finally understand what's going on here."

The assassin sighs. "Look, Quinn, you just need to chill, okay? All this stress is bad for your skin. You'll get wrinkles."

The Captain looks suitably horrified.

"I know, right?" Santana says. "So just calm down. Relax. Have a little faith. We'll get 'em," she smiles.

"They have no idea what's coming…"

Kurt and Mercedes decide to take everyone's impromptu revisit to the pond as the perfect opportunity to wash and dry them, clothes and all. Mercedes bends off the dirt, Kurt sloshes around and bends off the water, and soon, everyone is clean as a whistle and fluffy as a cloud. Blaine, in particular, looks almost poodlesque when Kurt finishes drying him off, his crazy curls even crazier than usual without moisture to hold them down.

By the time he is finished, the sun is well on its way down, which means that sadly, his training for the day is done.

"Alright, people," Mercedes says. "Time to hunker down for the night."

It doesn't take them long to set up an earth-tent big enough for all of them. Finn works on camouflaging the tent with some vines, as a slightly traumatized Rachel sits inside.

"Maybe I should've just gone to prison," she says quietly as Kurt walks in. "There are no bugs in prison. No boarcupines. No one to set me on fire or wash me out to sea or constantly be mean to me," she growls at Artie as he slides past the tent. If he hears her, he doesn't show it.

Kurt sits down beside her. "Look, it's not going to be like this forever, okay?" he says. "I mean, yes, we do occasionally get stranded in the wilderness, but we have a river to follow now. We'll be back
in the comforts of civilization before you know it."

"Hmmm," she says quietly.

So he tries a different approach. "Besides," he says, nudging her gently. "At least you've got Finn, right?"

This, at least, garners a small smile from her, but it fades quickly. "Finn is… very sweet, and very kind. I'm happy to have him… as a friend," she says neutrally.

This throws him off just a little. "Okay," he says, "I'm not usually this forward, but I'm just going to come out and say it—you do know he is completely upside-down crazy for you, right?"

Rachel doesn't look terribly surprised. "I… am aware of his feelings. And of my own. I just… I don't know if this is really the proper time to begin a relationship."

Kurt raises his eyebrows at her.

"Not to take away from what you and Blaine have together!" she clarifies quickly. "But I'm just… uncertain, that's all."

His hand falls over hers. "Lots of things are uncertain. That doesn't mean we can't enjoy them while they're around."

To his infinite shock, she turns his 'infinite wisdom' right back around on him. "Is that how you feel about Blaine?" she asks.

He's taken aback. "What do you mean?"

Her voice is quiet and cautious as she continues. "If you knew—for a fact—that someday, you would have to let Blaine go… that it just wasn't possible for you to be together forever… would you still want to be with him like this?"

The question stuns him into outright silence. "I'm… I don't…"

"Food's on!" Mercedes calls from outside. "Hot damn, I love having a genuine firebender to work with. Boy, your sear is fierce."

Blaine's melodious laughter bounces off the walls of the tent, and Kurt finds his worries chased into dark corners of his mind like shadows before the dawn. "Come on," Kurt says plainly. "Let's go eat."

"Another innocent woodland creature whose only crime was existing in the face of our hunger… alas, gentle animal, I mourn your loss," Rachel says in a voice so maudlin that it kind of freaks Kurt out a little.

Fortunately, she seems to calm down after eating. Or maybe she's just so exhausted from the day's events that the second she gets some food in her, she drops off the face of the planet and into dreamland. Either way, Finn winds up carrying her inside the tent, grinning softly like the poor, lovestruck fool that he is.

"I'm bushed, too," Mercedes says. "The sooner we get this night over with, the sooner we can get up tomorrow and follow that river to somewhere nice." She wanders into the tent.

Blaine smiles at Kurt. "Shall we?" he says, offering his hand.
"You know the rules," Kurt says. "No funny business in Mercedes's tent."

"My hands will stay in the approved areas at all times, I promise," Blaine says with a grin. "Honestly, I think I like cuddling you just as much as anything else we do."

Kurt smiles like an idiot, laughs, and snorts. Oh, dear, sweet, merciful La, how does Blaine find him attractive? He embarrasses himself on a minute-by-minute basis when Blaine is around.

Whatever the reason, Blaine just smiles and heads into the tent.

Artie and Kurt are the only ones left by the fire.

"I'll take first watch," Artie says quietly.

"You took first watch last night," Kurt says carefully. "Aren't you tired?"

"Tch," Artie scoffs. "I'm a human dynamo. Don't worry about me."

A little late for that, Kurt thinks, looking at the boy across from him. The glasses make them a little harder to spot, but there are faint shadows under Artie's eyes. He hasn't been sleeping.

"I'm fine, Kurt," Artie says softly, adding a smile for emphasis. "Your boy-toy's waiting for you. Go on."

His instinct tells him that something is wrong, but the lure of Blaine is, at the moment, completely overpowering. "Don't forget to put out the fire," he says.

Artie nods, and Kurt leaves him there, staring into the flames.

Soon enough, he is lying on his side, with Blaine curled around him, unable to chase the smile off of his face.

"Sometimes I can't believe we're actually here," Kurt says as Blaine nuzzles into him. "I've spent so long dreaming of something like this that I just... I was starting to think it would only ever exist in my mind."

As an answer to that, Blaine wraps gentle arms around Kurt and pulls them both closer, so they are touching almost everywhere possible. "Do you feel that?" he asks.

"What?" Kurt asks. "Your half-mast—"

"No," Blaine says, a little embarrassed. "I mean... my heartbeat," he says, pressing his chest into Kurt's back.

*Thump thump. Thump thump.*

"Oh," Kurt says. "Yes, I feel that too."

"That can be your proof," Blaine says. "That this is real. I'm real. We're both here, and this is—let's be honest—far stranger than any fantasy we could come up with."

"I don't know about that," Kurt says. "I can be pretty creative when I put my mind to it."

Blaine chuckles and places a kiss on Kurt's neck. "We're really here. We can do this—" He kisses his neck again, a little harder. "—whenever we want. We can just... be together, and no one will care. You're right. I can see how that might seem a little unbelievable. But it's real." He's quiet for a
moment. "I can feel yours, too."

"That's not anatomically possible—"

"Your heartbeat, silly," Blaine says, smiling against his skin. Kurt's entire body feels like a molecule of positive energy—he practically tingles with the happiness that just comes from being close to Blaine. He is pure white light; one-hundred percent yang.

And as he falls asleep to the sound of Blaine's heartbeat, he is suddenly, painfully aware once again that it can't last. The sound of Blaine's heartbeat slowly shifts into a thudding reminder of the inevitable approaching.

The universe favors balance.

*Yang* cannot exist without *yin.*

The further the tide goes out, the more powerful its return.

Every shred of evidence points to the same crushing conclusion.

*Enjoy it while it lasts, Kurt.*

*The other foot must fall.*

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**A/N: COMING UP NEXT!** – A trip upstream leads them to an old house, full of mysteries. Rachel decides to have a group sharing and caring time, in which everyone will participate (whether they like it or not). But while the group explores the strange abode, Quinn and her cronies continue to close the distance between them. And don't forget about the Big Surprise—one chapter down, only two more to go! :D Reviews and comments are always appreciated. Thanks for reading!
18 days after the riots...

The sun rises on a partly cloudy sky the next morning, and the day quickly finds everyone rolling on the river.

Or, you know, up it. Whatever.

After everybody is up and reasonably fed, Kurt freezes a nice-sized chunk of ice from the pondwater, steps onboard with Finn, and invites the others to join them. It takes them a couple minutes to really get going—mostly because a sleep-deprived Finn has a tendency to forget which way to swing his arms to propel them forward. There's quite a log of zig-zagging and spinning in place before they finally find a groove and get to boogieing.

All told, ice rafting with waterbenders is a pretty decent way to get around. There's really only one
major downside.

After a few minutes, Kurt pulls them to the riverbank. "And… break!"

Everyone leaps off. It takes less than a second for Blaine to find the nearest flammable thing and set it alight, and shortly thereafter, several pairs of very cold feet (and one nigh-frozen butt) are steadily being thawed back into feeling again.

"Shoes," Rachel says. "Item number one on our list of things to buy—"

"Steal," Artie corrects.

"—buy," Rachel insists, "when we next get to civilization. Good, sturdy shoes to protect our feet from the elements. All of them."

There is a murmur of agreement among the many frostbitten toes in attendance. They're far from barefooted, but the fancy dress shoes of the various costumes they absconded in don't exactly provide much insulation.

After a short break to warm everyone up again, they're headed back upstream. A few hours of the freeze-thaw cycle sees them making pretty good time on their way up the river. It's about mid-morning when they spot it.

"Is that a house?" Blaine says, eyes to the starboard.

"STOP THE RAFT," Rachel orders.

Finn obeys instinctively. Kurt does not. The result is a minor skid-out that, to their credit, only throws off two people.

"Sorry, Artie," Finn says sheepishly. "Sorry, Blaine."

"We cool, we cool," Artie sighs, hanging upside down in some bamboo shoots.

"Don't worry about it!" Blaine says cheerfully, picking himself up out of the mud.

Kurt is just getting ready to tell Rachel off for back-ice driving, but she is already far out of hearing range, running towards the aforementioned house with the fervor of a madwoman.

"Whoa!" Mercedes says. "Hold up. We don't even know who lives in that house!"

"Who cares?" Rachel shouts back. "It's a house. People! Civilization! Salvation!"

"Hard to argue with that logic," Blaine shrugs.

Finn and Kurt melt the ice raft as Mercedes puts Artie on the ground again, and the rest of them steadily approach the two-story abode.

They find Rachel stopped just outside what appears to have once been the 'yard' or whatever passed for it. Her heartbroken face tells them a lot. The actual sight of the house tells them even more.

The 'yard' as it stands now, is overgrown almost beyond recognition. Weeds and vines of varying levels of thorniness choke out whatever grass might have once been there, and heaven only knows what kind of creatures live in the underbrush. The house itself isn't faring much better—vines creep up basically every wall, reaching into the broken windows like they're reaching for a lost loved one within. The front doors hang haphazardly off the hinges, broken and weighted down with years of
grime. The deep reds and rich golds that make up most Fire Nation homes are long faded to dingy browns and urine-stain yellows. Mold hangs thick on many surfaces, a sure reminder of nature's unwavering commitment to reclaim any and everything that human hands neglect.

"Well," Artie says, sliding forward. "I think it's safe to say that nobody lives here."

"Are there any other houses around?" Kurt asks, glancing at the wilderness.

"I don't see any," Finn says.

"I don't even see a pathway that leads to this place," Mercedes says.

"It looks like it's been abandoned for years," Blaine chimes in. "Maybe long enough for an untraveled road to disappear."

"This is a joke," Rachel says flatly. "An unbelievably cruel joke. The universe hates me."

"Welcome to the club," says everyone, in a moment of slightly disturbing unrehearsed synchronicity.

The six sets of eyes stare in trepidation at the old house for a few more moments.

"Well, we don't have all day," Kurt says. "Are we going in, or not?"

"I don't see what it would hurt," Blaine says. "At the very least, there might be some old clothes in there. I need a shirt."

"If you say so," Kurt sighs.

"What if it's dangerous?" Rachel asks bleakly. "There could be wild animals in there! Or it could be unstable! Or there could be a dead body! Or an evil spirit! Or… or…"

"Or shoes," Finn says helpfully.

This seems to perk her up. "…well, nothing worth having comes without its risks, I suppose," she says warily.

Artie put his hands on the ground and closes his eyes. "Whoa!" he says. "Okay, item number one—y'all better step back. There's barbed wire on the ground here."

"On the ground?" Finn asks.

"Probably from a fence that fell over a while ago," Blaine says.

"Item number two—the old place is mostly stable, far as I can tell. Not too clear on the insides—there's a lot of clutter that hinders my vibro-vision." He opens his eyes. "As for evil spirits… that's more Kurt's domain."

"How you feeling, bro?" Finn asks.

"Strange," Kurt says, peering at the house. "It isn't a threatening or evil feeling, just a heavy one. Like… spiritual stagnation. There's nothing… moving here, and it's odd. Not pleasant, but not particularly dangerous, either."

"Alright then," Blaine says. "I say we go in. Who's with me?"
Four sets of hands rise at varying speeds. Kurt is the first, Rachel is the last. Only one abstains.

"Artie?" Finn asks.

"I'll hang back here for now," the earthbender says with a shrug. "Just to make it easier on you guys."

"Okay, dude," Finn says. "Yell if you need us."

Artie nods, and bends aside the barbed wire to make way for everyone to go through without cutting their feet.

Blaine takes point, burning a path through the growth, going slow enough so that any unfortunate creatures in the way have plenty of warning to move before they get toasted. The great thing about fire is that animals are almost universally afraid of it, so clearing out critters is no trouble for him.

After that, they go step by creaking step up to the front door. The sun is fairly high in the sky, but the abundance of trees surrounding the place would make it seem dark no matter what time of day, so Blaine holds a small flame steady over his hand as he steps inside.

After accidentally lighting up a spider-web that nearly scares him off the porch, the Prince leads the way through the opened front doors, into a small living area, full of dusty, decaying furniture, and shockingly intact—

"Animals," Rachel says, her voice thick with dread. "Oh, heavens. There are dead animals everywhere…"

A moose-lion head mounted above the fireplace with massive antlers stretching almost from wall-to-wall; a snarling platypus bear on a pedestal; a komodo dingo acting as the legs to a side table… Everywhere they look, they find shudder-inducing examples of taxidermy done right (or wrong, depending on your point of view).

"A hunting lodge," Mercedes says quietly. "Well, at least now we know why it's so far out in the woods…"

"I'm going to be sick," Rachel says. "This is horrible."

"Hey, come on," Finn says, pulling her into a gentle hug. "Let's go outside. You don't have to be in here."

The airbender lets herself be pulled into Finn's arms as he quietly ushers her from the room. He gives a questioning look to Kurt, but Kurt nods him onwards.

"Wow," Mercedes says. "This really bothers her."

"I'm not exactly okay with it myself," Kurt says. "Look at this!" He kneels down to pick up what appears to be a pipe, made from the body of a salamander. "It's ridiculous. The Water Tribes depend on animals for survival, but we're always careful to kill only what is necessary and to use every part of the animal, out of respect for the life we're taking. There's no respect here. This is just killing for the sake of killing."

Blaine swallows thickly, a strange, unidentifiable feeling creeping up within his stomach. "I don't think I'd want to wear anything we find here."

"We're already this far," Kurt says. "We might as well keep going. Besides… even if we do find
some animal skin clothes, at this point I think it would be more respectful to use them than to just leave them as a trophy."

It's just as bad as they get deeper into the house. Fur rugs carpet the hallways, disgusting with years of mold and mildew on them. Bits and pieces of small animals can be identified here and there—probably from confused predators who wandered into the house and thought they'd found a meal, only to bite in and find stuffing where the meat should go.

When they find the staircase, the house goes from moderately creepy to seriously skeevy.

"Those are bones!" Mercedes says, pointing to the railing. The balusters that hold up the handrail are clearly large animal bones. At the bottom, the handrail ends in some kind of unidentifiable sharp-toothed skull.

"This is seriously messed up," Blaine says. "I'm not sure I want to know what horrors are waiting for us up there."

"If you want to go outside," Kurt says. "I won't hold it against you. Honestly, at this point, the only thing keeping me going is morbid curiosity."

"Well, now that you mention it," Blaine says, looking a little uneasy. "...damn it. Now I do want to know."

Kurt lets out a soft laugh, but it echoes oddly in the still, empty air of the house, so he quickly stifles it. "Let's go. Step carefully," he says.

Blaine again takes point. He makes it about three steps before one of them cracks under his feet. Only lightning-fast reflexes keep him from outright falling.

"That's it," Mercedes says. "I'm out. I'll keep looking around down here, but I ain't going up there. Those steps cannot handle this much woman."

"Very well. Be sure to listen for any screams of horror," Kurt says. "Especially ones that come to a very sudden stop."

"You are not helping," Blaine says flatly, continuing to step very lightly up the old staircase.

The upstairs area is even more dilapidated than the downstairs. There are holes in the ceiling, some leading to an attic of sorts, others leading directly to the open air, letting in little beams of sunlight that somehow make everything else seem even more gloomy by contrast. Papers are everywhere. Some are hanging on the walls—most are on the floor. All are very much faded and decayed—whatever might have been on them is lost to time.

"Wait," Kurt says, holding Blaine back. He gathers a bit of air between his hands and thrusts it down the hallway. The amount of dust and cobwebs he gets rid of is actually a little frightening.

"Wow," Blaine says. " Burning that much cobweb? I might've set the house on fire."

"I like that idea. Let's save it for later," Kurt says, pressing onwards.

As they continue to explore the upper level, strange things begin to jump out at them (figuratively, not literally).

"You know, I haven't seen a single animal-thing up here," Kurt says. "Besides the bones on the staircases."
"You're right," Blaine says. "This whole part seems like it belongs in a completely different house."

The more they explore, the more the strangeness of the contrast sticks out to them. Here in the upper rooms, things seem almost... innocent. Where below they had stuffed animals of the most unsettling kind, up above, they find only the cute variety—faded and falling apart, of course, but still oddly endearing. A wooden, rocking ostrich horse peers at them from a pile of toys—a top, a music box, a doll with one eye missing.

"They had children," Kurt says, appalled. "Whoever was responsible for that... butchering down below actually had kids."

"I feel bad for anyone who had to grow up in this place," Blaine says quietly.

The childlike nature of the majority of the floor soothes their spirits a little. As they move around, they find themselves growing calmer with every step. Their jitters lessen, and they even find their minds wandering slightly, trying to imagine people playing in this strange place.

It only serves to make what they find next even more jarring.

Blaine opens the door to the master bedroom, and is immediately greeted by the sight of a massive set of teeth, large enough to swallow him and Kurt whole in a single bite.

"WHOA!" he shouts, accidentally snuffing his own flame and stumbling backwards.

"AHHH!" Kurt shouts with him, upon seeing the enormous, grinning... thing that awaits them beyond the door.

It takes them a couple of seconds to realize the grinning thing isn't moving.

"What is that?" Kurt asks, helping Blaine up.

Blaine gulps. "Only one way to find out..." Together, they slowly, carefully tread towards it, still half-afraid it will spring to life like a snake and snap them up.

When he lights his flame up again, he honestly can't believe his eyes. The chill of complete horror that spirals through his spine is almost enough to knock him out on the spot. There is a king-sized bed, complete with gopherbear fur sheets, inside of—

"A dragon's skull," Blaine whispers. "Agni's mercy... that's an actual dragon skull."

Kurt clutches his hand over his mouth. "Oh La. That's..."

"Unbelievable," Blaine says quietly. "To attack and kill one of the original firebenders, and claim it as a trophy... whoever lived here was incredibly powerful."

"And dangerously insane," Kurt nods. "I hope I never, ever have to meet anyone who would do this."

And suddenly, it all makes sense. The unidentifiable feeling in Blaine's stomach twists itself into a familiar shape, and his dread multiplies tenfold. "Oh, Gods..." he says, suddenly sounding sick. "I think... I think I know where we are."

He stumbles through the room on unsteady legs, his flame wavering in a way that makes Kurt's heart clench. Coming to a dresser, he scans across the top, looking for something. When he doesn't
find it, he actually gets down on his hands and knees and starts sweeping his eyes across the floor.

"Blaine, what are you doing?" Kurt asks.

Blaine ignores him, as he seems to have found what he has been looking for. A long, rolled-up scroll of unusual, high-quality paper rests against the far wall of the bedroom. With shaking hands, Blaine picks it up, and unrolls it.

And Kurt's heart stops.

*The House of SYLVESTER*, is emblazoned across the top. Below, in ink that is faded, but still largely visible, are four figures in a family portrait. A tall, severe man, Alfonse, a feisty-looking woman, Doris, , a young girl with something slightly strange about her, Jean…

…and tiny, smiling Sue.

"Her house," Blaine whispers as he seems to close in on himself. His shaking hands drop the scroll. "We're in her house."

When Finn gets outside, he sees Artie nodding off with his back against a tree. He moves over as quietly as he can with Rachel clinging to him, and sits next to his buddy, trying not to disturb him.

It doesn't work. As soon as Finn gets near him, Artie snaps to attention and pastes a smile on his face. "What's wrong?" he says. "You scared of that little old place?"

"Dude, it is messed up in there," Finn says seriously.

"...for real?" Artie asks.

Finn nods. "Everything is made of dead animals."

The earthbender's eyes widen. "You mean… like a fur coat, or…"

"Like a footstool that used to be a dog. And actually still looks like one," Finn says. Rachel whimpers and clings to him even more tightly.

"...damn," Artie says. "That's just… wrong." He looks at Rachel. "Is she gonna be okay?"

"She," Rachel says into Finn's chest, "is right here and perfectly capable of speaking for herself, thank you."

Artie rolls his eyes. "Fine. Are you gonna be okay?" he asks, annoyed. He softens up a bit when he adds, "Seriously, you're ghost white right now. You might want to lie down."

"I'll be okay. I just… I never want to go back in there again," Rachel says with a shudder.

"You don't have to," Finn says, holding her close. "Don't worry."

"Hey, everybody," Mercedes says, sticking her head out of the doorway. "I know this is the last thing you probably want to hear right now, but we might be staying here for a little while."

Rachel curls into a ball that would make any hedgehog jealous.

"You can't be serious!" Finn says.
"'fraid so," Mercedes says. "Look at that sky."

In the distance, a heavy, threatening set of dark grey clouds hangs like a mural over the horizon.

"Those are coming right this way," Mercedes continues. "Shelter is hard to find out here, and the kind we make might not hold up under a storm that looks like that."

"I can't go back into that… that house of death," Rachel says. "It's too awful. I can practically hear the whines and whimpers of all those poor, miserable creatures, trapped and tormented in the form of furniture."

Artie rolls his eyes and comes this close to accusing her of melodrama when he catches a glimpse of her face. It's not acting. Those tears are real.

"Wow," he says quietly. "You're not faking. This really creeps you out, doesn't it?"

"Of course it does!" Rachel snaps at him. "How could you possibly accuse me of faking at a time like this?"

Artie raises his hands in surrender. "Sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Well, you did!" Rachel says testily. "You are just… you are an awful person!" she sniffs, turning back to Finn's chest.

Her face is buried in her not-boyfriend, so she doesn't see the small flash of heartbreak that takes over Artie's face for just the briefest of moments.

"I'm sorry, Rachel," Artie says quietly. "Seriously."

She sniffs and turns out to face him. "Well, you should be," she says haughtily, an effect somewhat ruined by her splotchy face and thick voice. "And apology accepted, I guess," she adds.

Mercedes trots out to join them. "Is it really that bad?" she asks Rachel.

The girl nods.

The four of them stop to think for a moment.

"What if we…" Finn starts. "Like, purify the place or something?"

"What, you mean like with fire?" Artie asks. "I'm thinking that might be the only thing that'll do the job at this point."

"Actually," Mercedes says, "that might not be such a bad idea. We clear out all that nasty junk and burn it."

"Like… a funeral pyre," Finn says, with a small smile. "For all the animals that died."

At this, Rachel sticks his head out. "…that… sounds lovely, actually," she says. "We can put their little animal spirits to rest. Everyone knows a proper funeral is crucial to spiritual wellness."

"Then that's what we'll do," Finn says. He looks up at Mercedes. "Will you… help me get the stuff out?"

Mercedes regards him coolly for a few moments. "Yeah, I'll help you out. Let's get on it."
"Shhhhhh," Kurt says, holding Blaine as tightly as he can without hurting him. The heartbeat that was so sweet and grounding to him last night is now wild and frantic, with breathing shallow and panicked to match. "It's okay," Kurt whispers. "It's okay. Breathe, Blaine. I've got you."

Blaine clings to Kurt like a piece of driftwood in the aftermath of a shipwreck. There are more feelings cascading through him than he knows how to name, but chief among them are horror and leave run escape get out NOW.

"Out," Blaine says.

"What?" Kurt balks. "You want me to leave?"

"No!" Blaine cries, clutching him even tighter. "Both of us. Out. Leave. Right now. I can't be here. I can't be here."

"Okay, okay!" Kurt says, trying desperately to keep Blaine calm. "We'll go. We'll go. I promise."

Steadying him with one arm, Kurt guides the shaky boy as best he can out the bedroom, down the hall, down the stairs. He passes Mercedes and Finn on the way.

"Dude," Finn says, carrying the mounted platypus bear out on his shoulder.

Kurt just shakes his head towards the pale, exceedingly upset Prince on his shoulder.

As soon as Blaine sees the door, he breaks free of Kurt and runs for it himself, not stopping until he is completely clear of the house.

"Blaine!" Rachel says, seeing the Prince in a state just as bad as her own, if not worse. "What happened? What is it?"

"It's her," he says, trying desperately to catch his breath. "This house belongs to her."

"Her who?" Mercedes asks as she runs out behind him.

"Sue Sylvester," Blaine seethes, seeming to shudder under the weight of the word. "The new Fire Lord."

Kurt can only watch as four faces adopt an expression identical to his own not more than a few minutes ago. Blaine falls on his knees, and Kurt rushes over to catch him.

"Shhhhhhh," he says as softly as he can, wrapping arms around him. "It's okay, Blaine. She hasn't been here in years, maybe even decades. She can't hurt you. We won't let her. I won't let her."

Blaine just shakes his head. "It's not… I'm not worried about that, I just… I'm sorry," he says. "I freaked out."

"You had every right to freak out, dude," Artie says. "I mean, I've only got secondhand accounts to go on, and that place freaks me out. You have a personal connection with this madness."

"Sue Sylvester did this?" Rachel says in quiet horror, gesturing to the growing pile of animal-things that they are making on the lawn.

"Either her, or someone related to her. Apparently, this is a family house," Kurt says. His fingers gently press on Blaine's ribs, feeling his heartbeat slowly but surely evening out.

"Being in that place," he whispers. "…it was like I was in her head. Like I could see the world as
she does... Life means **nothing**. Everything is just something to be conquered and destroyed and displayed. The world exists to glorify her. He shakes his head. "It was **awful**. I never want to feel like that again."

A peal of thunder ripples through the forest, causing Blaine to jump and kicking his heart right back into high gear again.

"Oh, **great**," Kurt says, eying the approaching storm with no small amount of disdain. "Blaine, I hate to say this, but I think we might have to take shelter in that house."

The sad, frightenared eyes that greet him are like being hit with an entire glacier, all at once. He would do **anything** to make sure Blaine never looks like that again.

"Hey, dude," Finn says quietly, putting a hand on Blaine's shoulder. "We're actually cleaning this place out. We're gonna take all the dead stuff and burn it."

"A funeral pyre," Rachel says. "To free the spirits of the animals, and purify the house."

Blaine takes a deep, **deep** breath, and nods. "That sounds good..." He breathes out. "And I want to help."

"Are you sure?" Kurt asks.

He doesn't **look** sure, but he nods, nonetheless. "It's just a house," he says quietly, like he's trying to convince himself. "It can't hurt me."

With Kurt's help, Blaine stands up and walks over to the others. Together, he, Finn, Mercedes, and Kurt slowly but surely pull everything that was identifiably once-alive from the house, and toss it into an ever-growing pile on the lawn. Towards the end, they just start tossing things out the windows for Artie to catch and ferry to the pile himself. Eventually, even Rachel gets in on the act, maintaining the shape of the pile and making sure nothing is missing or falling out.

The dragon skull is the last thing they move, and they wind up having to dismantle it and throw it down piece-by-piece—it simply isn't safe to move something that massive through the rickety house.

By the time they are finished, the place is almost completely empty save for the toys. In their search to make sure they get everything, Kurt even manages to find some relatively intact, non-fur clothing for them to wear. Blaine is a bit hesitant at first, but Kurt assures him 'they're just clothes.' The robes are a little large on him, but it's better than nothing. Kurt can feel a chill in the wind of the oncoming storm. Blaine will need the warmth.

Rachel presides over the funeral. "Oh, unfortunate creatures," she says quietly. "Ranging from the small and pinchably cute, to the large and utterly terrifying... we mourn your senseless, pointless deaths. There is nothing we can do to reverse the awful things that were done to you—all we can offer you is this funeral, this last bit of closure. May the flames set you free."

The two firebenders in attendance punctuate her statement with a helping of the best flames they can muster. They step in from both sides, blasting the larger objects at the base and feeding the flames with bending so that they spread higher, faster. Once the fire is burning well enough (and it burns **very** well, especially since Kurt thought to bend any lingering moisture out of the various skins beforehand), Blaine and Kurt step back and watch as the fire consumes everything.

Another crack of thunder echoes from the oncoming storm, and the wind picks up just slightly. Strangely enough, this does absolutely nothing for the sense of **peace** that this moment brings. The
six of them stand together in a clump and stare into the fire, their minds wandering hither and yon, but never too far. At varying points, each of them turns to watch Blaine. For the time being, however, Blaine only has eyes for the fire.

After a few minutes of burning, Kurt feels it—the heaviness, the stagnation in the air lifts like a bridal veil, as if nature itself sighs with relief. The shadows become shallower, the darkness less consuming, less foreboding. What was once an imposing, ominous manor suddenly just seems like an old, empty house.

The thunder rolls yet again, and this time, a visible arc of lightning splits the sky. The clouds have consumed the heavens, and the storm itself isn't too far off.

"We should go inside," Kurt says.

A murmur of agreement bubbles up from the mourners. Artie is so tired that he doesn't even comment as Finn lifts him off the ground and carries him indoors. Rachel shows only the slightest hesitation before taking a deep breath and marching across the threshold. Mercedes earthbends a dead tree into some soggy-looking firewood and brings it in with her. Soon, only Kurt and Blaine are standing by the fire.

"Are you okay?" Kurt asks quietly.

Blaine nods silently without looking back. "Just… saying goodbye."

And that's when it hits him. Blaine has cried and fought and wept over everything he's lost, but he never had the chance for a funeral—for closure of any kind. The pyre in front of him represents far more than just animals. It represents everyone who lost their lives to Sue's meaningless conquest. It's his chance to claim closure for himself, and Kurt is proud to see him taking it.

As the first raindrops begin to fall, Blaine finally turns around and gives Kurt a faint, but sincere smile. Before Kurt knows it, Blaine has walked up to him and wrapped him in a fierce hug. "Thank you," he says.

"For what?" Kurt asks.

"For just… being here," he says. "This whole time."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be," Kurt says honestly.

And just as the storm begins in earnest, the two of them find shelter together.

"Oh yeah," Santana says, looking at land around the big blue pond. "They were definitely here. There's signs of waterbending everywhere, and weirdly enough, a bunch of random-ass burn marks."

"Hey!" one of the 57th Mounted calls out. "Over here!"

She rides over to find a little mound, hastily pulled over the remains of a campfire. It takes them about a minute to dig it up.

"Okay, firebender," she says to one of the armored soldiers. "Tell me—how long ago was this burning?"

A taller soldier leans down over the scorched, ashen logs. "Not long. A few hours, maybe."
"We are so closing in on these bozos," she grins.

"Except the trail ends here," Puck grumbles, still annoyed and cranky.

"No, actually, it doesn't," Quinn says, massaging her forehead. "They found water. They have at least two waterbenders with them, and the Avatar is water native. If we follow the water, we'll find them."

**CRACK!**

A thunderclap ripples through the world around them.

"Madam, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I do believe the water is about to come to us," the leader says.

Overhead, the storm thunders its agreement to that assessment.

"Of course," Quinn sighs. "A thunderstorm. Lovely. What's next? Maybe a meteor shower?" She turns to her soldiers and Chi-Ryus, and issues an order. "Alright, people, set up shelter. As close to the cliff as you can, but not too close to the water. This one looks like it might be rough."

"Huh," Santana says, looking at her sideways. "You're actually deciding to stop on your own? Without being badgered by everyone?"

"Shut up," Quinn grumbles listlessly. "I'm tired, and I have a headache. There's no point in going on until this rain passes—fighting a waterbending Avatar during a rainstorm is second only to throwing yourself into an active volcano in terms of being an efficient suicide."

Puck hops off his mount, looking around to see if any of the soldiers are listening. Fortunately, they're all busy setting up the tents. Or arguing about the best place to set up the tents. "Hey," Puck says softly. "Seriously, are you okay? You are way moody right now—"

Quinn glares at him.

"Dangerous ground, Puckerman," Santana warns.

"No, I'm serious," Puck says, looking at Quinn. "I'm not saying you're moody because you're a chick, or whatever. Normally, you're not moody at all. You're a stone-cold badass, which I think is kind of awesome. But now you're all mopey and shit one minute, and super-pissed the next. What's up?"

Quinn looks up at him with half a death glare. "Nothing is 'up.' This just happens to be the most patience-taxing thing I've ever done, that's all. My patience is constantly being tried. It's being tried even as we speak."

"See?" Puck says. "That's what I mean! Normally, you'd say shit like that and it'd be like getting knifed. But that was weak. That was just... like, getting poked with a chopstick. A cheap one."

"Whatever, Puck," Quinn says. The thunder bellows, and Quinn feels a few specks of moisture splattered against her skin. "Go to your tent. We'll wait out the storm and continue when it lets up."

Puck looks over to the 57th Mounted and their tent-making progress. The fat one is still arguing with the skinny one over where to put the damn tent. And of course, the Chi-Ryus have already finished. "Why'd we get stuck with the dipshit patrol?" he grumbles.
"I ask myself that question every morning," Santana snarks.

Meanwhile, Quinn marches into the tent her Chi-Ryus set up. The girls are already inside waiting for her. She sits down cross-legged, and the others follow suit. This time is to be spent meditating and focusing their energies towards their eventual goal. Like a thrusting sword, all of their force needs to be concentrated on a single point of attack to effectively break their enemies. Spreading out her forces only makes them easier to deal with. The Chi-Ryus are effective because of their coordination and flawless unity, so she needs to take advantage of that.

Her new battle plan is one she hopes will be a bit more effective. Using information gathered from her girls and the assassins, she's spotted a huge tactical bull's-eye that she somehow completely overlooked.

The tall waterbender is one of the weakest fighters in the entire group, and at the same time, one of their most valuable members. He seems to be the only one capable of healing. If she crushes him first, the others will become much easier to crush by default.

Of course, she can't completely crush him, lest she risk setting off the ten-tons of human TNT that rests within the Avatar. It's a fine line to walk, and part of her relishes the challenge of dealing with and circumventing such a powerful foe. She'll have to disable the healer—find a way to destroy his ability to fight and bend without instantly killing him.

But the most vital element to any battle plan she makes is her Chi-Ryus. "Danielle," she says, calling to the brunette Chi-Ryu.

"Yes, Captain?" Danielle replies.

"How is your leg?" Quinn asks.

"Much better, Captain," Danielle says with certainty. "I should have no problems performing on the battlefield."

"Good," Quinn says. "Be sure to save your energy for just that. Put no more stress on the injured limb than necessary until the time comes. Refusing to give an injury time to heal proves nothing but your own foolishness. That goes for you, too, Clarice. Be careful with that elbow."

The strawberry blonde Chi-Ryu nods. "Yes, Captain!"

"Victory is close at hand, girls," Quinn says, already starting to feel better. "I can taste it in the air."

A distant, hawk-like cry sends her stomach plummeting again. Victory had better be close at hand. Or she will have a very difficult Master to answer to when the time comes…

In the newly-emptied living room of the Old Sylvester House, everyone is gathered around the fireplace. As usual, teamwork and training are the orders of the day—Kurt instructs Finn on how to bend the water out of the soggy wood, and Blaine instructs Kurt on how best to light it. Mercedes and Rachel sort through a box of old clothes for things that might fit them. Artie sits on a table near the window, apparently preparing to do a magic trick.

"Hey, Blaine," Artie says. "Remember when you punched me in the face?"

"Yeah," Blaine nods. "Good times."

"You know it," Artie grins. "Remember how you cracked my glasses?"
"Oh yeah," Blaine says.

"And... do you remember them being cracked the next day?" Artie presses.

"...no, actually, now that you mention it," Blaine says, looking at him oddly.

The earthbender smiles. "Behold a secret to my success." With that, he uses his gloved hand to pick up a glass shard and press it into a jagged crack in the window. It clearly doesn't fit perfectly, but Artie just takes two fingers and scrapes them over the lines. Suddenly, the glass fuses together as if it was always meant to be.

"Whoa!" Blaine says. "That's... awesome."

Artie grins smugly. "Glass ain't nothing but melted sand. And sand, my friend, is earth."

"So you can glassbend?" Kurt says, incredulous.

"Well, sort of," Artie says. "I don't know how to do very much. Mostly, I can fuse it together and take it apart. It's how I've kept my glasses for so long. I can adjust my own prescription!"

"Who taught you how to do that?" Mercedes asks.

"Ummm..." Artie coughs. "Nobody."

She puts her hands on her hips. "Sure. Right."

Rachel's keen gossip sense tingles powerfully within her. "What's wrong?" she asks.

"Artie doesn't like to talk about himself," Finn says, sitting near the fire.

"Oh?" Rachel asks. "Why not?"

"I just don't," Artie says, continuing to fuse pieces of glass together and shove them into the cracks to keep the rain out.

"You don't have any fond memories you'd want to recall?" she asks. "No happy stories of childhood? No one you left behind?"

"I spent the past few years as a street urchin," Artie says.

"...oh," Rachel says quietly. "...and before that?"

Several sets of eyes try to pin the earthbender down. He squirms uncomfortably beneath their gazes. It's a testament to how tired he is that he doesn't balk altogether. Instead, he simply shrugs. "Don't remember," he says quietly.

Kurt blinks at him. "...that's your big secret? That's what you've been keeping from me this whole time?"

Artie shrugs again, fusing another piece of the window shut. "It's a little more complicated than that, but... basically, yeah," he says. "I don't remember much of anything before I was paralyzed." And I don't want to.

"Surely there is something positive," Rachel presses, not quite being able to take the hint. "Maybe you're just uncomfortable with the prospect of making yourself emotionally vulnerable. In which case, I believe a perfect solution would have all of us doing the same."
“…say what now?” Kurt asks.

“Well, if we all share something about ourselves, then Artie doesn't have to feel like he's sticking his neck out. This way, everyone shares, and we all know each other a little better!” she chirps. “What do you say?”

“Great!” Rachel smiles. "I'll go first. Ahem... even in dark times, I always had my fathers. I remember being cast as the lead in a children's production of Sakura, Princess of the Trees, and almost immediately losing the role because someone's father bribed the director. They wouldn't even let me understudy. I was just heartbroken. So my fathers made their very own production. Obviously much more low-budget, and without an audience, but still… they made little costumes and played all the other characters, even hired Brad the Piano Player for a day so I could do the songs. It was sweet." She says, grinning softly. "I really miss them," she adds quietly, surprising herself with just how intensely true that statement is.

That statement rests in the room, with only the sound of the crackling fire and the storm outside to accompany it.

"I miss my mom," Finn says, after a few moments. "In our tribe, there was a lot of goodwill towards my family, 'cause my dad won the war…"

Mercedes coughs very pointedly.

Finn looks down. "Sorry," he sighs. "Anyway, there were a lot of other people who died, too, so she still had to work pretty hard to take care of us both. She wasn't a bender, but she was a super-awesome fisher. She had like… this spear thing…"

"A harpoon?" Kurt helpfully provides.

"Yeah!" Finn says. "She was epic with a harpoon. Big fish, little fish... sometimes she could even get two or three fish with one thrust. She'd go out on her boat and come back with enough fish to feed us, and to sell to the marketplace to pay for stuff, too. I kind of wish I could've helped her out more," Finn says quietly.

There's another little pause.

"That's actually how our parents met," Kurt says with a soft smile. "Well... sort-of. I heard that Mrs. Hudson's boat was damaged by an iceberg, and since my father was a Boatwright, I figured there was no reason not to casually recommend them to each other. It was strictly business at first—dad takes his boats very seriously. But when sparks fly, there's just no denying them. Mrs. Hudson—"

"Dude," Finn says. "Call her Carole! She's asked you like twenty times."

"—Carole," Kurt continues, "just kept coming back. For maintenance, for repairs, and eventually... for no reason at all besides good company. And my father certainly appreciated her companionship." He smiles wistfully. "They were married just a few months before I left. It was a beautiful wedding—I made sure of it."

"He totally did," Finn nods. "Dude was, like, mega-bridezilla. And he wasn't even the bride!"

Blaine chuckles at that, and the laughter spreads to everyone. Kurt fixes Finn with a mock-glare, but there's no real heat in it. Soon enough, the laughter dies down, and the floor is open again.
"My grandma had so many people to take care of," Mercedes starts. "I swear, sometimes it was like the woman had twenty hands. This one time, she caught Tommy trying to steal an appleberry pie from her kitchen window. Took that boy outside and gave him the telling of a lifetime. While she told him off, a bunch of boys from the village were playing a game of earthball nearby. Well, the ball got away from them, got launched up into the air and wound up headed straight for grandma."

"Ouch," Blaine says. "I bet they got in pretty bad trouble, too."

"Not at all," Mercedes says. "Grandma stomped up a flipper without even looking back. Without even breaking her sentence. Not only did the ball not hit her—she knocked it into the damn goal." She crosses her arms and grins. "I think that scared Tommy more than her scolding. He never tried that again."

"Wow," Blaine says. "That is some serious multitasking."

"The frightening thing is; she's not exaggerating," Kurt says. "I've met her grandmother. She's quite the woman."

Blaine huffs out a laugh, and then seems to grow somber again.

Kurt suddenly looks horrified. "Oh my La, Blaine, I'm so sorry. Here we are, all reminiscing about the people we've left behind, when you just… oh, we are such tools—"

"No!" Blaine says. "No, Kurt, it's fine, really. Just because they're… gone now," he says, swallowing thickly. "That doesn't mean I don't want to remember them."

He takes a deep breath, and nods, more to himself than anyone. "I think I'll go next." He closes his eyes. "My dad… he was never the same after mom died. Sometimes, it seemed like we barely talked about anything other than firebending. We'd go for days without speaking or seeing each other outside of practice. But I knew he loved me. Even if he wouldn't let me outside of the Palace… he at least made sure I had friends."

Blaine smiles sweetly, taking a short pause before continuing.

"Wes and David were my 'bodyguards,' on the official payroll, but all told, they were kids just like I was. Top firebenders, of course, but still close enough to my age for me to not feel weird hanging out with them. It was kind of awkward, at first—they were basically hired to look after me and make sure I didn't get hurt. But somewhere along the line, I stopped getting in trouble in spite of them and… started getting in trouble with them. We became friends. Best friends." He shakes his head. "They were my best friends. And they died protecting me."

Kurt wraps an arm around him. "I'm so sorry, Blaine."

"It's okay," the Prince says softly. "It was their choice. I understand that now. It wasn't about being paid or about doing their jobs. It was about protecting a friend, and that's exactly what they did. I would've been dead long before you even got to the Palace if it wasn't for them."

At this, Kurt hugs him full-on. "In that case, I wish I could've thanked them."

Blaine stays in Kurt's arms, and the silence is sweet, but sad. There is an unmistakable tinge of loss to the proceedings now, and the air hangs heavy.

It is this heaviness that prompts Artie to finally open up… if only a little. "There was… one guy who kind of looked out for me back in Ba Sing Se." He smiles wistfully. "The coolest
motherfucker to ever walk the Earth Kingdom: Sir Mister 'The Master' Alabaster, King of the Lower Ring."

"That is quite the name," Kurt says primly.

"Damn straight it is," Artie nods. "He ran that mother. Everybody from petty thugs and pickpockets to bar owners and drug kingpins answered to him. Though I suppose you could say his official job title was that of a motherfucking P-I-M-P."

"...a pimp," Mercedes says. "You idolized a pimp." She throws her hands up to the air. "Good Gods, suddenly it all makes sense," she deadpans.

"Hey," Artie says. "Do not impugn the King. It was a dirty job, but it was a dirty city. Somebody had to control it, and control it he did, with an iron pimp-hand wrapped in a soft, velvet glove. He imposed order on chaos, and took care of those under his wing."

"How did you wind up 'under his wing'?" Rachel asks.

"Well," Artie says with a grin. "One of his favorite tricks was to have 'construction crews' conveniently block off certain city streets. When you went to take the detour, what should you find..." He throws his arms out. "...but an alley full of adorable little begging orphans. Including yours truly."

"He used fake orphans to solicit donations?" Rachel says, appalled. "That's awful!"

"Oh, no," Artie says. "The orphans were real, and it was usually more about stealing than getting donations. There was a trick to it—if you were going through the alley and you gave something, even a single copper coin, you were off-limits. But if you decided to be stingy—you left that alley much poorer than when you came in, if you know what I mean?" He finishes with a grin, flipping a spare piece of glass between his fingers, before flipping it like a coin and snatching it out of the air.

Rachel is still appalled, if slightly less so. "That is still... incredibly unethical."

Artie shrugs. "Hey, when you live in an unethical world, surrounded by unethical people, you gotta do what you gotta do to get by." The boy grins again. "The King liked me. Said I was 'just full of surprises.'"

"Well, he got that right," Mercedes says. The air feels warmer already, and though the wind howls outside, the company inside seems to keep the world at bay.

Mercedes decides to continue the storytelling round. "Actually, you just reminded me of—"

And then it all, quite literally, comes crashing in.

A/N: I just can't hold it in anymore. To steal a bit from Portal 2... "SURPRISE! We're doing it now!"

There's a high-pitched screeching noise, and suddenly, the sound of shattered glass echoes through the house, the howling wind becoming much louder as a window in another room is violently knocked in.

For a second, no one moves or breathes.
"Where did that come from?" Rachel asks.

"I think it was the kitchen," Blaine says.

A peal of thunder rattles the house, and there is a sound of movement from the kitchen.

"Shhhhh," Kurt says, getting up slowly and motioning everyone to follow him. He and Blaine take the lead as the group slowly but surely moves towards the kitchen. Step, by step, by soft, careful step, Blaine and Kurt move through the entryway, towards the kitchen. The room is dark, but Blaine almost immediately spots the broken glass on the floor, as the rain blows in through the newly-opened window.

It's on him in a second.

"WHOA!"

A lightning-quick, strangely-shaped shadow leaps at him, and Blaine has a momentary freakout and falls over. Kurt is about to punch fire at the shadow when suddenly… it lands on Blaine's chest, and crows.

"…a messenger hawk?" Rachel says.

"That's… weird," Finn says.

"That's… not just any messenger hawk," Kurt whispers, slightly awed. "There's only one bird I've ever known to be that aggressive…"

Blaine looks up at the bird on his chest, peering down at him. "Pavarotti?"

Pavarotti caws in the affirmative.

The Prince smiles, but it's more in confusion than happiness. "I don't… what are you doing here, buddy?"

Pavarotti bends over, to indicate the scroll canister on his back. He hops off of Blaine and flutters over to the kitchen counter, as the Prince slowly, cautiously gets up and walks over to him, afraid the bird will evaporate if he moves too quickly. With careful hands, he opens the canister and retrieves the scroll.

Dear Sir or Madam,

If you are not who we are looking for; we apologize in advance for any inconvenience, inadvertent terror, or property damaged caused by our dragon hawk. Rest assured, we will be along to collect him shortly and compensate you for any damages. We strongly advise you to feed him in the meantime—we will not be held responsible for what happens if you choose to ignore this advice.

If you are who we are looking for; sit tight. We shouldn't be too far off.

Sincerely…

As Blaine reads the letter, Kurt hears voices calling out to each other, trying to be heard over the insane storm outside.

"…stupid bird! It's obvious that no one even lives here!"

"You don't know that. It could just be an exceptionally… rustic abode."
"Ballsacks. This place is as empty as—"

The door is suddenly kicked in and everyone turns towards it, as two young men dash into the room, covering their heads. They're both soaked to the bone, wearing cobbled-together armor and filthy, patched clothes. One is as dark as Mercedes. The other is tan-skinned, with short, straight hair.

They take a moment to catch their breath, seemingly unaware of anyone else being in the room. The tan-skinned one is the first to look up. "...empty as a what now?"

The darker one looks up as well. "Oh!" he says. "My... Agni, I am so terribly sorry. I... that is... we didn't mean to intrude it's just... your home is so... rustic, we actually thought it might be empty—not that we mean that in an offensive way. There's nothing wrong with an antique..."

A light clacking noise echoes from the kitchen. The canister bounces a couple times off the ground, having slipped from Blaine's limp fingers. The tan one—his expression smug at his friend's bout of verbal diarrhea—looks over at the sound and freezes, his expression going slack. The darker one continues to prattle until his friend tugs on his arm, and he, too, turns towards Blaine with an expression of complete, disbelieving awe.

No one moves. No one even breathes. What passes between the three of them silently demands silence, and everyone present has no choice but to acquiesce.

Blaine shakes his head just barely, his mouth gaping like a fish on land. His eyes fill with moisture that refuses to fall.

The tan-skinned one is the first to break the silence. "Well," he says, his voice rough with suppressed emotion. "You are... alive. And well. That's good. That's excellent, it will make it—"

And that's all he gets to say. Blaine is across the floor and wrapped around him in the blink of an eye, clinging to him like he's the only thing in the world that's real. The Prince's arms reach past him to pull in the darker one as well, and Blaine buries his face in whichever one is closer.

They hesitate for just a moment, not quite sure what to do.

And then the tan one's face crumples and he wraps himself around Blaine just as tight. The darker one clings to both of them and suddenly, they are smiling and crying and laughing and sobbing, all of them, all at once.

"You're alive..."

Kurt doesn't know who said it.

Maybe it was one of them.

Maybe it was all three.

Whatever said it, they're clearly all thinking it, because suddenly, their circle becomes even tighter. And Kurt gets the distinct impression that he has just witnessed a miracle.

A/N: It's exactly who you think it is. THEY LIVE! Coming Up Next – Blaine is reunited with two people he had long thought lost. What happened to them? What have they been doing all this time? How did they find him? The answers come from their own mouths in Dragon Hawks, Part 1: The
Tale of Wes and David. Don't miss it. ^_^
Chapter Notes

**Media:** Fic  
**Title:** Solar Winds (*Avatar: The Last Airbender* Fusion, 53/?)  
**Rating:** PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.  
**Spoilers:** None for either series that I am aware of.  
**Warnings:** None.  
**Word Count:** ~14,000  
**Summary:** When a usurper sets eyes on the Fire Nation throne, Avatar Kurt and friends find themselves on the run with the deposed Prince Blaine in a country gone mad. Can they escape Lady Sylvester's wrath? Or will her minions snuff them out for good? Fusion fic!

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**Author's Note:** Hee-hee… I've been looking forward to writing this chapter for ages. While Kurt and Blaine have been embroiled in their web of intrigue and action, someone else has been having their *own* adventure, completely separate from the gang and yet… connected in ways you might not expect. ;) It's a wild ride, and I hope you enjoy it!

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**CHAPTER 53 – Dragon Hawks, Part 1**  
*The Tale of Wes and David*

Blaine can't stop smiling.

He actually kind of wishes he could. His mouth is getting a little sore from beaming so widely for so long. But his dimmer seems to be broken, and his off switch has vanished entirely. There is no turning down his brilliance. He will go outside and tell the sun to take the day off and climb up into the sky and *shine in its place*. His friends are alive.

*His friends are alive.*

He can't let go of them. They're soggy and a little dirty, but they're warm and firm and *real* and he doesn't want to forget that, even for a second. He doesn't want them to slip through his fingers again. For Agni's sake, it shouldn't be *possible* to smile this brightly and cry at the same time, but it's all rushing into him and washing over him at once and he just can't take it. How much he has
missed them, how impossibly happy he is that they're okay, how much, how very, very much he loves them and he just has a lot of feelings, okay?

They're not letting go, either. They're practically squeezing the breath out of him, but Blaine doesn't care. They're not afraid of hurting him or breaking him—they've seen him rise and fall and rise again more times than any of them can count. They know how tough he is. They know he can take it.

Blaine is so lost in the moment that he practically forgets there are other people in the room. Pavarotti, of all people, reminds him by landing on his shoulder and cawing. "Pav!" he says happily, breaking the hug at last to scratch his bird behind the ears. "I missed you too, buddy."

"I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to come up for air," Kurt says lightly.

"Oh!" Blaine says. "Oh, guys, you should… you don't even know. I should tell you… introductions! I need to introduce you… I need to introduce you…"

His brain seems to get stuck on who needs to meet who first, and he has a momentary bout of vertigo.

"Whoa!" David says, holding out an arm to keep him upright. "Steady there, Blaine."

"Perhaps we should all go sit down," Wes suggests. "You're looking a little lightheaded."

"I feel fine," Blaine says emphatically. "I feel fantastic. I feel amazing. I feel…" The world tilts. "…a little dizzy, okay, yeah, let's go sit down."

A minute and a few introductions later, and they are all gathered around the fire in the living room. Pavarotti perches on the mantle, de-ruffling his feathers and putting his wings back in order. Blaine sits as close to Wes and David as he can without physically being in their laps (as that would be weird).

"It's very lovely to meet you all," Wes says. "And thank you for looking after Blaine while we were… indisposed."

"Oh, he was no trouble," Kurt says, looking to Blaine.

"So, is this who you were sneaking out to meet?" David says, assessing Kurt carefully.

"…yeah," Blaine says, blushing a bit. "He was… we were…"

"You sly dog!" David says, patting him on the back. "Dating the Avatar."

"You always did aim high," Wes says with a fiendish grin.

"Shut up," Blaine says, blushing even deeper. "We weren't… dating. I was his firebending teacher. Well, I still am. Except… now, we are dating. Well, I mean, we haven't gone on any dates yet, but we're… we are… Kurt, are we dating?" he asks, looking honestly unsure.

Kurt smiles patiently and pats him on the arm. "Yes, dear, we're dating."

"Good," Blaine says, sounding relieved.

"So, these are your dead friends?" Finn asks.

"Oh, yeah! Yes! I mean… they're clearly not dead, but they're the same guys. They're my best
friends," Blaine says. He's still having a little trouble seeing past the neon-bright FEELINGS that are streaking across his brainscape.

"Awww, you adorable little curly-haired creampuff!" David says, fondly ruffling Blaine's hair. The Prince is moderately impressed—there was shockingly little decorum in that gesture.

"So… why are they not dead?" Finn asks. "Well, I mean… how are they not dead? Or maybe… why did you think they were dead when they're not?"

"You thought we were dead?" Wes asks quietly.

"Yeah…" Blaine replies. "I mean… the last time I saw you, you were fighting, and then the people you were fighting just showed up, and… and she said you died." He closes his eyes, remembering Santana's vicious smirk as she taunted him. "She said you screamed the whole time."

Wes looks a little uneasy. David scratches his neck.

"So… what happened?" Blaine asks.

The two share a significant look.

Wes speaks first.

"We'd better start from the beginning. We were fighting the assassins, and doing a bang-up job, if I do say so myself. We had them on the run, and then, we made a crucial tactical error…"

David agilely flips over a flying dumpster as it sails past him, slamming through a wall and caving in the front of a butcher's shop. Puck charges after him, snorting and huffing like a sexually frustrated bull. Wes loops his fire whips into hoops, and rolls them along the ground at Santana, chasing her out of the alleyway by continually guiding them and changing their direction. The wheels chase her up an awning, where she uses her whip to snap them apart.

"Stand down," Wes orders. "Or we'll take you down."

"We will not ask again," David growls.

"Mercy makes me puke," Puck spits.

"All this talk of going down is getting me all hot and bothered," Santana says. "I hope you boys plan to follow through on all your talk, or I'm gonna be very disappointed."

Puck charges again. David's swiftness and agility enable him to get the upper hand on the slightly tired assassin, slipping in beside a poorly-placed punch and landing several devastating blows, blasting bits of his armor clean off. He tries to finish Puck with a fireblast to his head, but a lucky flinch results in Puck simply losing a large part of his Mohawk. The attack sends him stumbling backward and ends with him on his back.

The dark-skinned firebender leaps towards him, aiming to finish him off, when a whip wraps around his ankle and jerks him aside, landing him in a long, moose-drawn cart full of rugs. Santana smiles in a momentary victory, but her smile vanishes when she feels Wes land on the awning behind her, and only by diving forward does she miss getting her own head cooked. A large section of her hair is caught in the blast, and if she hadn't landed in a roll, it'd probably still be burning.

Unfortunately, she's landed in the same cart as David, who looks none-too-pleased about being
sidelined by her. She changes the grip on her whip, shortening it slightly so she can lash it faster and push him back. Once again, however, she's forgotten about Wes, who runs along the wall of the building and jumps off onto the cart behind her.

She's surrounded.

Santana looks at Wes. She turns to look at David.

She looks past David.

Then she smiles. "Bye-bye!" she coos, jumping off the cart.

Before they can react, Puck slams his fist down on the end of the cart, pitching it upwards and catapulting Wes and David high, high, high into the sky, and off into the distance.

"Holy crap," Blaine says.

"Those were more or less my feelings on the subject," Wes nods.

"Always watch your footing," David says sagely. "Anyway, the lady assassin was half-right. There was plenty of screaming."

"Fortunately, however, there was no dying," Wes smiles.

"How did you survive?" Blaine asks eagerly.

Wes and David share a significant look. "Well… umm…" David says uneasily. "Here's exactly what happened…"

"Well, this is a predicament," says David, crossing his arms thoughtfully as he flies through the air.

"How will we get out of this one?" asks Wes, calm as an underground lake.

"Only one thing to do!" shouts David bravely.

Wes and David stretch out their arms and legs, becoming human rockets and soaring through the glowing, red sky with trails of fire streaming off of them. They sweep down into the city and begin saving orphan children from burning buildings…

David's narration trails to a halt as everyone in the room looks at him completely unimpressed. Including and especially Wes.

"Really, David?" he asks, shaking his head. "That's the best you could come up with?"

"You are so full of shit," Blaine says flatly.

"Well," David says, crossing his arms. "That is more believable than what actually happened."

"Not by much!" Wes says.

"Just… tell us the truth," Kurt says diplomatically. "You'd be surprised at what we can believe."

"Well, if you insist," Wes says. "As we flew, our lives flashed before our eyes. We knew there was
no way we would survive the fall, so we began the tearful, last-minute confessions of doomed men…"

"Your cooking is terrible!" Wes cries. He and David cling tightly to one another as they fly upwards.

"I lied. You look awful with facial hair!" David shouts miserably.

"Your dancing is an embarrassment!" Wes bemoans.

"I have the hots for your sister. I have for years! Ye Gods, the things I would do to her…" David weeps.

"You son of a badgermole's breakfast!" Wes sobs. "I'll kill you!"

At this point, they reach the peak of their arc and begin their descent, falling towards the Fire Nation countryside well outside of the city limits. It's the trip down that truly drives the point home. This is it.

"I'm proud to call myself your friend," Wes says sincerely.

"It has been an honor to serve by your side, Wesley," David nods.

Those would have been the perfect final words. Unfortunately, their imminent demise is taking its sweet time in getting to them. They went really, really high.

So high, in fact, that they are able to spot something between themselves and the ground.

"What is that?" David shouts, pointing at a distant white speck below them.

"I don't know!" Wes shouts back. "Let's go for it!"

Still holding onto each other, the two firebenders kick their legs out and send out strong fire streams to their sides, pushing themselves through the air towards the odd, unidentifiable thing below them. The closer they get, the more they can make out—it's a large… white… fuzzy… flying…

"Bison?" Wes barks. "What in Agni’s name is an air bison doing—?"

"WHO CARES?" David shouts. "WE'RE LANDING ON IT!"

They try desperately to rocket themselves so their trajectory lines up with the bison. As they get closer, certain things become clearer. Things like…

There are people on that thing.

"LOOK OOOOUUUUUUT!" Wes warns.

The poor blonde girl has all of two seconds before—

"HOLD UP!" Artie shouts suddenly.

The narration stops in a screech as everyone stares at Artie.
"Yes?" Wes asks.

"A flying bison?" Artie asks. "With a blonde girl riding it?"

"I told you no one would believe it," David says sourly.

Artie holds up a hand to silence the dissenter. "Did this flying bison also happen to have a guy dressed in all black, with medium-long hair and a face that just begs for a fist?" he presses.

David gives him a powerful fish-eye. "...yes, actually," he says warily. "How on earth did you know that?"

"It's Brittany! And friggin' Jesse St. James!" the earthbender says.

Rachel gasps.

"You know those people?" Wes asks.

Mercedes makes a so-so gesture with her hand. "We're not exactly friends, but we've crossed paths."

"Jesse..." Rachel sighs sadly.

"Well, I'm glad to know you aren't friends with them," Wes says simply. "They aren't terribly nice people. Well, Jesse isn't. Brittany, we didn't really get to know much..."

—all of two seconds before Wes and David make impact. She does the best she can to throw up a shield of air to block their descent, but she mostly just succeeds in creating a windy cushion to slow their fall. It doesn't stop them, however; the two slam into her, and despite their best efforts, they are unable to prevent her from flying off the bison and into the trees below.

"Oh, no..." Wes whispers as he watches her fall.

"What the FUCK?" Jesse shouts, pivoting around from the bison's head at the cacophony. "What—who are—you idiots! You just... you just..."

"We didn't mean to!" David cries, his eyes suddenly tearing up. "I am so, so sorry, I, I didn't, we were trying to—"

"We were falling, you see," Wes explains, "and just trying to find somewhere to land that wouldn't kill us."

David jumps back in, sniffling. "Arguably, we succeeded. If... only momentarily."

"Very momentarily," the male airbender growls.

And then his staff is off his back and in his hand, and he is cutting slices into the air between them that they only barely manage to sidestep.

"Now, hold on a second!" Wes says. "We really don't need this to end in violence—if you would just be so kind as to take us a little closer to the ground—"

Jesse is understandably a little upset, and clearly not of the peace-loving variety of airbenders. Thus a... somewhat intense battle commences, with Wes and David mostly doing their best to not-die. Fighting back with firebending is a bit difficult when you're riding on the back of a flying
creature that is of indeterminate flammability and very fluffy. They have to do their best to keep their blasts small and make sure they are *not* aimed too low. Despite the limitation, Wes keeps up admirably.

David, however, lags just a bit. His eyes are watering and his nose is clogged and his throat is swollen, and yet, *none* of these are from any kind of remorse. Sure, he feels bad about possibly sending a young woman to her doom, but he didn't really know her. He shouldn't be *crying* about it…

"Get off!" Jesse shouts, trying to palm-gust them away.

"We will!" Wes says. "We already told you—"

"Just as soon as you… as you…" David starts. He doesn't finish, however, because his mouth and nose are suddenly occupied with a much more urgent matter. "Ah… *AH*…"

"David?" Wes asks, a little worried.

"ACHOO!" David answers.

His sneeze results in an accidental burst of flame that sets the beast's tail alight.

"Oh SHIIIII—" Jesse shouts.

The bison roars in panic and plummets towards the ground, banking wildly from side-to-side as if he's trying to shake the fire off. Said fire remains stubbornly attached—the firebenders, however, are having less luck. Wes and David cling to the beast's fur for dear life, as does Jesse. The difference between them being that Jesse is still trying to blast them off every time he gets a free moment.

"Just… let… go!" he shouts. "You're wasting valuable time! Heaven only *knows* how long it's going to take me to find her. Do you know what's going to happen to me if I'm *late*?"

"Late? For what?" David asks through his allergic haze. It is at this point that he notices the bison is carrying some kind of close-topped container with its six legs. "What are you talking abah… ah… ah…"

"Once again, I would just like to apologize on behalf of the both of us and assure you that if you will just get a little closer to the ground, or at least find something *soft*—" Wes starts.

"ATCHISSSHOO!" David sneezes again, accidentally blowing himself off of the bison. Wes panics and reaches out to grab him, resulting in him hanging from the bison with one hand and holding David with the other.

Suddenly, the bison pivots in mid-air, and Jesse spots something that makes him smile. "…*soft*, you say?" he asks. "Well, that looks soft enough for me."

Wes looks up to see them rapidly approaching an old, rickety-looking barn.

"That is your definition of *soft*?" he shouts.

Sadly, he is in no position to debate with the airbender, who slams his staff on Wes's hand just as they pass over the barn.

And then Wes and David are falling and screaming, *again*. The two continue screaming right up
until the point where they smash right through the barn's roof, crash through the upper hayloft, bounce off some bales of hay and land in a painful, tumbling heap on the floor.

Wes lifts his head up weakly, his entire body possessed with an urgent thought which he simply must voice. Turning his gaze to the heavens, Wesley Montgomery opens his mouth and issues a statement to the universe…

"...ow."

"S... seconded..." David chokes.

"And then, thankfully, we passed out," David finishes.

The gang winces in sympathy. Well, all except Rachel, who is looking at them completely aghast.

"I can't believe Jesse would do such a thing," she says, shocked.

"Why is that?" Wes asks.

"He always seemed so sweet," Rachel says quietly, looking miserable. "I just… the real him… it's so far removed from the way he acted around me."

"It is called 'acting' for a reason," David says. "You've known this guy for a long tim—"

"Forget Jesse St. Jerk," Finn says. "What happened next?"

Rachel gives him a glare.

"What?" Finn says, somewhat sheepishly. "This is a cool story. I want to know!"

Wes smiles. "Thank you for that lovely compliment!" He clears his throat. "As for you, Miss Berry… I hate to break your heart further, but that's hardly the worst thing Jesse does. But… we will get to that later. In the meantime, let us continue."

David nods and picks up the narration. "We were down for quite a while. I vaguely remember hearing some distant, charmingly rube-esque grumbling before someone started dragging me somewhere."

"I remember being poked with a stick and being just aware enough to protest the action with a groan," Wes adds, "but I wasn't strong enough to do more than that, and soon, I was dragged off as well. The next time I awoke…"

The sun is very insistent. Try as he might to shield against its relentless assault on his retinas, it will not be denied. So despite his aches and pain, Wes surrenders himself to the waking world and opens his eyes.

Several crucial observations are made in quick succession.

#1. He is in a room he doesn't recognize.

#2. He has been divested of his armor and, apparently, his shirt. In place of them are quite a few bandages.
And perhaps most alarmingly of all, #3. He is strapped to the bed.

Oh, this is just every kind of horrible.

He tries in vain to wiggle his way free of the leather (leather!) straps keeping him down, but apparently, his body isn't quite up to the task and politely informs him of such with a jolt of pain through his brain to his very soul. He ceases his struggles and tries desperately to remember how he got here.

There was... it was... the riots... and then... they were falling... and—

"David!" Wes says, trying to turn his head to look at the room around him. "David! Are you here? Are you alright? Dav—ahhh, ow..." he hisses, apparently pulling something a little harder than he should.

"Oh, heyyyyyy!" a familiar, slightly slurred voice greets him. "Buddy! You're awake. Welcome back!"

Wes turns his head as far as he can to the side to see David, in a familiar position to his own, but seeming much more... relaxed about it.

"Are you alright?" Wes asks. "What happened? Where are we, what is—"

"Slow your roll, my friend," David says calmly. "Slowwww your rolllll... one question at a time."

Wes rolls his eyes. "Fine. Are you alright?"

"I'm fantastic!" David pipes.

"Marvelous. What happened?"

"We fell from the sky," David says. He starts whistling high, slowly lowering his pitch, ending a crashing sound to punctuate the point. "Into someone's barn."

"And... should I assume that we are now in this person's house?" Wes asks.

David nods. "Indeed, you should."

"Lovely. Why are we strapped down?" Wes asks.

"Because," David says seriously. "We could be dangerous. They don't know yet."

Wes stares deep into his friend, trying to see into his strange mind. "Why are you so calm about this? Are..." He squints. "Are you high?"

"I am baked, my friend!" David grins giddily.

Wes is flabbergasted. "What... how... why..." 

"Apparently," David says, "I spent much of the first day sneezing and coughing, even while somewhat less-than-conscious. So the nice old lady gave me some homemade cold remedy. I've got to tell you—that stuff is awesome."

"I imagine so," Wes sighs. "Well... crap. Now what do we do?"

"Oh!" David says suddenly. "They wanted to talk to you. They said I was too loopy to give a
straight answer, but you, they're only too eager to intro… interrogrize…”

"Interrogate?"

"That's the one!"

"Alright then," Wes sighs. "Let's get this over with. Hello!" he shouts. "Is anyone here? I need to talk with—"

"PIPE DOWN, SONNY!" a cranky old voice calls out. "I'm a'comin!"

"That's the old lady!" David says excitedly. "You should ask her for some medicine."

"I'll pass," Wes mumbles miserably. "At least one of us should be sober for this…"

"Well, well, well…” the voice says, now much closer. Wes looks up to see that he is now being held at the business end of some kind of… broom-spear. "Whut have we hee-yer?" says a rather ancient, seemingly ill-tempered woman. "A couple o' barn-crashers!"

"Ma'am," Wes says calmly. "I'm… very sorry about your barn. If you will kindly put away your weapon—"

"I don't put away my nuthin' for nobody!" she growls, brandishing the broom-spear and pushing it dangerously close to Wes's delicate flesh. "Now, I'm gonna ask ye some questions, and yer gonna answer 'em. Yew tell me the truth, ye hear? If yer lyin', I'll gut ye where ye lay!"

Well, there's not much arguing with that. Wes nods. "Very well."

"Who are ye?"

"My name is Wesley Montgomery."

"Where're ye from?"

"I live in the Capital."

"What's yer job?"

Wes closes his eyes and thinks. It's hard to quantify his job, exactly. "I work for the Fire Lord."

"I knew it!" the woman shouts. "I know'd ye was a soldier from the second I lain eyes on that armor o' yers."

"Is… that a good thing?" Wes asks.

"I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts, deedly-dee-dee, there they are a-standing in a—"

"Quiet, yew!" she growls, aiming the spear at David.

"David!" Wes says intently. "This is no time for a singalong!"

"It is always time for a singalong," David pouts. He quiets down, however.

"Who's he?" she asks. "Boy's so hopped up on my medicine, he told me he was a platypus."

"Perry is my name!" David announces. "I fight evil, and wear a nice hat."
Wes looks at his friend, mortified. What is in this woman's cold remedy? "His name is David Thompson. He is also a soldier of the Fire Lord."

"Alright then. Now, fer the hundred thousand gold piece question—what were yew doin' crashin' through the roof of my barn?" she asks.

Wes closes his eyes again. He wonders if it is even possible to explain everything that has happened over the past... over the past... how long has he been out? Whatever. It doesn't matter. The world was a dangerous, frightening place when last he left it, and he is in a very vulnerable position. Perhaps he should keep a few things to himself... engage in a little strategic truth-telling.

"We were battling with an airbender, when he threw us off over your barn. Gravity is rather indiscriminate, thus it had no choice but to pull us down where we were. I'm very sorry about the damage," Wes says simply. "And I thank you for your... err... hospitality."

The woman glares at him. "Fightin' airbenders? Boy, you really expect me to believe that?"

Wes gulps. It is a little ridiculous. But it's the truth! He doesn't really know how—

"No, not really," David says simply. "Most people wouldn't even know about the secret airbender wars."

Horrified brown eyes turn towards David as Wes openly gapes at his incredibly high friend-who-is-about-to-get-them-both-killed.

The woman, however, seems oddly intrigued. "The secret airbender what now?"

"Oh, yes," David says casually. "They've been going on for years now. The airbenders are very crafty. They're always trying to sneak around and cause trouble. But the Fire Lord knows their tricks!" David grins smugly. "He's onto them. That's why he sent us. We're part of a top-secret airbender-fighting unit!"

Wes only grows more horrified by the second, but when he looks at the spear-wielding lady, it seems like she's actually... sort of buying it.

What the fuck.

"Izz'at true?" she growls, turning back to Wes.

He only has a split-second to make the decision. So Wes mentally throws his arms up in surrender and just fucking goes with it. "Yes, ma'am, it is," he says quietly. "Civilians aren't supposed to know about it. We don't want to cause a panic. But... yes, David is telling the truth."

She glares at him, still wary.

"Honestly," Wes says. "What other explanation could there possibly be for two firebenders crashing through your barn roof?"

That does the trick. She thinks about it for just a few seconds more, and then, her eyes soften, and she lowers the spear-tip. "Well, I'll be..." she says quietly. "Ya brave little suns o' guns!" She smiles, and Wes smiles back, more relieved than he can possibly say. "I always knew there was somethin' off about them puffbenders," she spits. "Always floatin' around, free as you please."

"They're quite sneaking," David says, nodding his head. He continues to nod long after he finishes speaking, apparently enjoying the motion.
"Well, I'm darn honored to help out two of the Fire Lord's finest! I'm Agatha," she says, walking over to undo the leather straps that bind them to the bed. Wes breathes a little sigh of relief, and gingerly tries to feel out his injuries. He's quite bruised and battered, but fortunately, he doesn't seem to have broken anything outright.

"We're honored to be staying in such a… fine establishment, Madam Agatha," Wes says, with a winning smile.

"Can I have some more cold medicine?" David asks as she undoes his bindings.

"I think you've had enough," Wes says.

"I'm all out right now, hun," she says sadly.

David looks heartbroken.

Wes sits up and looks out the window. They're on the second story of a house overlooking a small farm. It's daylight out, which suddenly recalls a question.

"Madam, how long have I been unconscious?" Wes asks.

"Couple days," she says gently.

Wes suddenly feels woozy. Two days? That's… there's… what if they...

"You feelin' alright, hun?" Agatha says, steadying him and gently sitting him back down on the bed.

"I just… two days," Wes says. "A lot can happen in two days…"

"You ain't jes blowin' smoke," Agatha says. She turns to the window and apparently spots something. "Well, I'll be. We got company!"

Wes looks over as well, spotting three figures approaching the house on a komodo rhino. One of them is unfamiliar to him.

Two of them, he recognizes all-too-quickly.

The assassins have come to call.

"Puck and Santana, again?" Blaine asks. "Really?"

"Oh, they have names?" Wes asks.

"Everyone has a name," Kurt says. "What were they doing there?"

"And are you sure you're telling this right?" David asks. "I remember things a little differently."

"You were high, buffalo-brain," Wes says. "Of course you remember things differently. You thought you were a platypus! And you almost got us killed…"

"They look like varmints," Agatha spits. "I'll take care of 'em. You sit tight."

Wes's heart is racing. "Wait!" he says. "Umm… when I said our work was top-secret, I meant very,
very top-secret. No one, and I mean no one, should know we're here." He looks around carefully, leaning in for a conspiratorial whisper. "Airbender spies could be anywhere."

"Don't ye worry, hun," Agatha whispers back. "Yer secret's safe with me! I'll tell Otis to keep his trap shut, too."

"Thank you!" Wes says sincerely.

She leaves, and he breathes a short sigh of relief. "David. David!" he says, looking over to his friend, who has taken to rubbing his face against his pillow and grinning like a loon.

"What is it?" David asks.

"They're here!" Wes seethes. "The assassins from last night! Or... two nights ago... fuck, I don't know."

"They're here?" David asks, eyes going wide.

"Yes," Wes says, putting his head in his hands. "I just said that. Listen to me when I am speaking, you—"

"REVENNNNGE!" David roars. Before Wes can stop him, he charges towards the open window armed with a cheap-looking vase, which he hurls at the offending assassins with all his might.

"You buffoon!" Wes shouts, pulling David away from the window and slamming him into the bed. "Stop it! You're going to get us both killed!"

"No, I'm going to kill them!" David announces. "I must avenge my honor!"

"We've been so thoroughly beaten that we're technically considered tenderized," Wes growls. "There's no way we can fight them and win in this condition!"

"I CAN DO IT!" David grouses. "I SHALL BATHE IN THEIR BLOOD! AND THEN BATHE IN WATER, BECAUSE BLOOD IS STICKY!"

The inebriated firebender squirms from Wes's grasp and goes for the window again, but Wes grabs him from behind and wrestles him around the room. Eventually, their little wrestling match spills out into the hall, where Wes finds an open closet door and promptly shoves David and himself inside.

"Let me—"

"Shhhh!" Wes hisses. He puts his ear to the door. "I think I can hear them talking..."

"Wait," Mercedes says. "You said there was another one with 'em. Pretty blonde girl?"

"...that is, once again, alarmingly precognitive," David says, giving her a slightly suspicious glare.

"We've met her too," Blaine says. "Quinn Fabray. Captain of Sue's forces, and leader of the Quest for My Head on a Plate."

"...oh," Wes says, wincing slightly. "Well, that really makes me feel like an idiot..."

"What do you mean?" Blaine asks.
Wes sighs. "It'll become clear in time. Anyway, I didn't get much of the conversation—just the general gist that they were hunting the Avatar. Then, they left…"

Wes opens the closet door as he hears them leave. "What is going on in this Nation?" he says quietly.

David marches out of the closet and promptly heads back into their room.

It takes Wes a couple of seconds to realize what's about to happen. He just manages to tackle David onto the bed after the intoxicated firebender hurls another vase at the departing assassins.

"Stop it!" Wes says. "Just… stop! We need to figure out what's going on here. Curb your violent tendencies for five minutes, please!"

David squirms a little more, but eventually relents. "Oh, fine," he sighs. Wes releases him, and he goes back to rubbing his face in the pillows.

Wes sighs and heads downstairs.

When he comes back upstairs, David seems to be feeling a little more lucid.

Wes, however, looks like he's having a waking nightmare.

"Whoa," David says. "What's got your bonnet in a twist?"

The other firebender just shakes his head silently and hands him a poster. David's eyes hungrily scan the page, but upon finishing the meal, his mind feels nauseous. He wishes he'd never seen it.

"Missing and presumed dead," Wes says quietly. "And the Fire Lord is dead, as well."


They mourn in silence.

Except… they don't. Not really.

Each boy is wracked with grief. In a mere two days, the world they knew has vanished entirely. A government crumbled, a leader was killed, a successor was lost, and all of those were things they were sworn to protect. Even at such a young age, they took the same oath as every other Palace Guard. And they were in a position to uphold that oath at last—to protect Blaine and fulfill their duty, as soldiers and friends.

And they let it slip through their fingers. A split-second mistake and everything crumbled. And perhaps cruelest of all—they survived the incident. They live now to see what their mistake has wrought, while their friend lies forgotten and decomposing and unmourned somewhere far away.

There is no great sobbing fit. No rending of garments, no beating of their chests. They were taught to control their emotions carefully, to conduct themselves in a certain manner. There is simply too much Dalton in their blood for such displays.

And yet, neither can completely maintain their decorum. Neither is truly silent. As the memory of their friend… their little brother replays in their minds—wounded, battered Blaine running for his life, trusting them to keep him safe—they can't help but crumble. So they just sit together in that room, crying tears that the other will politely pretend not to notice, indulging only in the occasional
sniffle, which the other will politely pretend he never heard.

"Guys…" Blaine says quietly. "It… it wasn't your fault."

"We were right there," Wes says. "We had them, Blaine, and we made one stupid mistake…"

"No," Blaine says. "They weren't the ones who killed my father. Sue was. Even if you had taken them out, my father still would've died. Things might have ended just the same. Or even worse."

"They were the ones who sort-of killed Blaine, though," Finn points out.

Both young gentlemen adopt expressions of utter horror. "They what?" David barks.

Kurt reaches over and smacks Finn. "Shut up!"

"Sorry," Finn winces.

Blaine sighs. "They got me pretty good," he admits quietly. "I… thought it was over for a little bit. It would've been, if it wasn't for Finn and Kurt."

Wes nods his thanks to the two boys in question. "How is that not our fault, Blaine?"

The Prince looks at them sharply. "You didn't hire the assassins. You didn't stage a coup. You didn't throw an entire city into chaos so you could seize power. All of that was Sue Sylvester."

Wes is conflicted for a few moments. Eventually, he nods. "Well, I… can't really find fault in your logic, but…"

"It still feels like we bear some responsibility," David says.

"If you bear anything, I bear it, too," Blaine says. "We'll shoulder the burden of that night together."

Wes's jaw drops. He looks at Blaine, awe and just a hint of pride playing across his eyes. "… you've changed," he says, with a little smile.

"He's all grown up," David says teasingly.

"Oh, you just… shut up," Blaine chuckles.

"Keep going!" Rachel says. "I was just starting to immerse myself in the narrative! Your plight is so moving."

Wes gives her a minor fish-eye, but picks up the narration, nonetheless. "Well, though we were briefly overcome by our mourning, we were men of action. We could not simply sit and stew in sadness…"

"…we have to find him," Wes says, rubbing his eyes.

David looks up at him, resolutely miserable. "Why bother?" he asks flatly.

"Because it's our duty!" Wes shouts.
"It was our duty, under a Fire Lord who no longer exists," David says sadly. "Think about it, man! We've been out for two days. Technically, we've been missing since the riots; our families probably think that we're dead!"

"...we can hawk them," Wes says. "Inform them otherwise; tell them that we will be busy for a while and not to worry."

"I don't know about your mother, but with mine—telling her not to worry is the surest way to ensure that she does," David says. "Wesley... it's over. It's just... done. Do you honestly believe he is even alive?"

"I... I don't know. And I don't care," Wes says firmly. "If he is alive, it is our duty to find him. If he isn't, it's our duty to find him and give him a proper funeral. And if we can't do that..." He breathes out, and closes his eyes. "...then we can avenge him," he finishes quietly.

David's eyes cloud over as he considers this. "...vengeance is far better than nothing at all," he says finally. "My honor demands something..." he sighs.

Wes stands up and holds out his hand. "We've come this far together. We may as well go the rest of the way."

David clasps it, and pulls himself up. "Oh, alright. I'm with you," he smiles. "I just have one question... where, exactly, do you intend start looking?"

"I intend..." Wes starts, before making two important observations.

#1. That sentence does not have any kind of satisfactory ending.

#2. Holy dragonballs, he is tired.

"...Wes? Wes!"

THUD.

"Apparently, I still had a bit of recuperating to do," Wes says.

"Besides which, Wes could've been cutting cartwheels and jumping through fire hoops, and Agatha probably wouldn't have let us out of the house that day," David says. "Other than a brief trip to hawk our families, we spent the next couple of days under her watchful eye and... interesting culinary artistry."

"She made chicken-possum that tasted like neither," Wes shudders. "It was quite a feat."

"After a bit of thought, we decided to track down the assassins as best we could. Our armor was essentially ruined during the fall, but our hosts were nice enough to provide us with the piecemeal-yet-functional ensemble we currently sport," David says.

"They provided us with a lot of things, actually," Wes says. "A knapsack full of supplies and clothes, even an aging ostrich horse named Cleetus. They were far past the point of kindness and hospitality... and they seemed almost sad when we left," he finishes quietly.

"But leave we did. After two days of rest, we headed out of the village that morning, and followed the rhino's tracks as best we could," David says. "A couple of days' travel and sun had worn them down a bit, but they're still komodo rhinos. They're not stealth animals."
"Cleetus was a surprisingly faithful mount," Wes continues. "Quick, steady, and capable. It carried us down the road, where we eventually found a fresh set of tracks heading south. It wasn't a few hours before we arrived in the disreputable little harbor town of Chenling, whereupon it took remarkably little time to find exactly what we were looking for…"

As Wes returns from tying up Cleetus, David runs towards him, waving a piece of paper.

"Look what I've found!" David says with a grin, holding up the reward poster.

"1,000 Gold for the capture of the Avatar and his friends," Wes reads, looking at the various hand-drawn figures. The Avatar himself is the only clear one. The others are mere stick figures with very vague distinguishing features. Strangely enough, they're all named… except one.

"Unknown..." Wes says, looking at the curly-haired stick figure. He glances up at David. "Do you think…?"

"I don't know," David says. "It could be. We don't know for sure."

"Well," Wes says. "I know who to ask…"

They head to the address on the poster, only to find a very lengthy line to get inside.

"What is going on here?" David asks. "I highly doubt that all of these people have an Avatar. Last I recall, they aren't mass-produced."

"Money speaks loudly," Wes says. "Sometimes loud enough to drown out common sense."

With no interest in waiting in line, the two of them attempt to sneak around the building to peek inside. By standing on David's shoulders, Wes is able to look into a narrow window that peeks into the hotel's lobby.

"What do you see?" David asks.

"…a deluge of delinquency," Wes says, watching the line of lunatics parade in front of the three 'judges' only to be shot down and turned away. "Oh, and our two very favorite assassins, along with that girl I saw at the farm."

"A girl, you say?" David asks. "Describe her to me."

"Well, she's blonde," Wes says. "And white."

"What is she wearing?" David asks.

"Some kind of official-looking white armor," Wes says. "There are several other girls with slightly different armor manning the perimeter. I'd wager she's their leader."

"Does she have long legs?" David asks.

"…what?" Wes balks, looking down at him.

"…nevermind," David says. "Carry on. Anything else interesting?"

"Well, there's… wait… wait a second!" Wes whispers.

"What?" David says. "Don't just react to things! Give me some description!"
Wes peers into the room as a blonde girl they do know (or at least, know of) saunters down the stairs. She stops next to Santana and whispers something in her ear. Santana rolls her eyes, grins, and swats her away fondly.

"…the airbender girl!" Wes says. "The one we dismounted in mid-flight! She's here! And she knows the assassins!"

"What?" David says, so shocked that he takes a step back, inadvertently destabilizing their human tower and sending Wes tumbling into the bushes.

"…ow," Wes sighs.

Afraid that their tumble kicked up a little too much noise, they scramble back onto the street and attempt to plot a course of action.

"This is so skewed," Wes says. "The armor those girls were wearing, and the fact that they have komodo rhinos as mounts… it's almost like the assassins have military backing."

"The new Fire Lord has the people who killed the old one on his payroll," David says flatly.
"Would that truly be surprising?"

"I suppose you have a point, but still… there are so many things we don't know. And it isn't like we can just walk up and ask. The assassins would recognize us immediately," Wes says.

"And certainly can't tattle on them, since the guards are under the military, which is under the Fire Lord…" David says, suddenly feeling a little odd. "If only we could… could…"

"Could what, man?" Wes sighs. "Finish your sentences!"

"If… we could… ah… AH…"

"Uh-oh," Wes gulps, pulling David into a side-alley and pointing him away from the street.

"ACHOO!" he sneezes, sending a fireburst towards a trashcan and sending several catcoons scrambling away in blind panic.

"Heavens man, pull it together!" Wes says. "Are you sick?"

"No!" Wes says, sniffling. "I'm just… allergic."

"To what?" Wes asks.

"I don't know!" David shouts. "Normally, I get all stuffed up during explododhendron season, but that's months away, and it is never this bad. The last time I did… this… was… ACHOO!"

"…on the back of that bison!" Wes says excitedly.

"Yes," David says. "I was just about to say that."

Wes's grin is ever-so-slightly-frightening. "David! You're allergic to bison dander!"

"Try not to sound so overjoyed about it," David sniffs.

"Do you know what this means?" Wes asks.

"I need to buy a nose guard?" David says.
"It means that there is a significant chance of a bison being near here," Wes grins.

David's eyes widen. "We could steal it!" he says excitedly.

Wes's face falls. "No, you dimwit! The assassins, the airbender girl, her bison… everyone we met that night is here except for one person."

"…the handsome bastard!" David says.

"Exactly. I'm willing to bet that if we find that bison, we'll find him," Wes nods. "Let's follow your nose!"

They do exactly that, winding up down at the docks. On one end, a few abandoned boathouses line a decrepit-looking pier, covered in strange fog even though it's the middle of the day. David pulls his shirt up over his nose and stifles his sneezes as the two sneak over to peek inside. The first two are empty. The third is collapsed. The fourth one has something very large and very much alive hidden under a tarp.

"Careful!" Wes whispers. "This thing could crush us. It could probably eat us if it really wanted to."

"I have no intentions of becoming bison munch," David says, holding his nose.

They look around for a bit, but there is no sign of Jesse. At least, until…

"Oh, shit," Wes says upon hearing a strange whooshing sound. "Hide!"

"Where?" David asks.

"Anywhere!" Wes says.

With few other options, they dive behind a large, covered cart.

Jesse saunters casually into the boathouse, whipping the top off of the snoozing bison and gently rousing the animal to wakefulness. "Hey there, buddy!" Jesse says. "Time to head out again. Wouldn't want anyone linking me to any suspicious deaths, now would we?" he says with a wink.

Wes gasps.

The airbender's head snaps around. "Who's there?" he demands.

David glares at Wes, who is frantically looking for an escape.

The airbender continues to look around cautiously, but he doesn't seem entirely certain of what he heard. There is a chance they could get out of this unnoticed.

So of course, David's allergies pick that exact moment to act out.

"ATCHHHHNG!" he sneezes, trying desperately to hold it in.

"A-ha!" Jesse shouts.


With precious little time before he arrives, Wes decides to mimic David and pulls his shirt up over his nose to hide his face. Just as Jesse skids to a stop in front of them, the two bolt out and blast
past him.

"Hey!" he shouts. "Get back here, you thieving little shits!"

He sends a couple of airblasts their way strong enough to tear floorboards from the boathouse, but they manage to sprint out of the way and escape back into the city. They turn around just in time to (just barely) see the bison and its rider fly out of the boathouse and into the fog along the coast, carrying the same cart they were just hiding behind.

"Jesse attacked you?" Rachel gasps.

"…this is the second time it's happened in the story, actually," Wes says. "Why are you surprised?"

"Well, the first time was justifiable. You fell out of the sky and knocked someone to their probable death," Rachel points out. "But that time he attacked you for simply… being there. What could he have possibly been carrying that was so important he would attack you just for being near it?"

"Drugs," Artie and Blaine say in perfect unison.

Rachel gasps.

"Don't spoil it!" David says.

Wes rolls his eyes. "They already know the ending, David. I don't think spoilers are too much of a concern at this point," he says. "We thought… well, I thought he was hiding bodies in there. Even if he wasn't, he seemed to be connected with the others, which meant he was looking for the same people, and he was doing it faster. Plus, St. James tended to travel alone, so David and I actually stood a decent chance of capturing him for interrogation without getting killed. So we decided to follow him, instead of the people who were actually threatening you, thus explaining why I feel like an idiot," Wes finishes.

"Hey," Blaine says, patting him on the back. "It's alright. It all worked out… more or less."

"The decision was made, and we wanted to set out immediately. Unfortunately, the next time we mounted Cleetus, he took three steps before promptly dropping dead beneath us," David says.

"Oh, the poor birdy!" Rachel moans, prompting a facepalm from Kurt.

Pavarotti has nodded off, taking a short nap on the mantelpiece.

As Wes and David continue their story, no one notices that it has stopped raining…

The Chi-Ryus' remarkable efficiency has the group up and riding again no more than a couple of minutes after the rain subsides. The ostrich horses have no trouble jumping up the cliff and continuing onwards.

Puck spent the entire break in a heated debate with the 57th Morons over riding animals. That stupid little jump just adds fuel to the fire.

"Did you know that ostrich horses can jump hundreds of feet into the air, even with fully-armored passengers and cargo attached?" asks tubby staff dude.

"Who cares?" Puck says. "So they can jump. Big whoop. Can they brawl?"
"You are so close-minded," Staff sighs. "You're... you're horny for rhinos, is what you are! You think that just because they're big and tough, they're automatically better.

"I don't think," Puck says. "I know!"

"I don't think you know either," Two-Swords dude snickers. "Sorry, man, you set yourself up for that one."

"Pah," the leader, Straight-Sword, scoffs. "Mongoose lizards are far superior to both animals. If they weren't so cost-prohibitive, we'd be riding them!"

"Dude," chimes in Spear Guy. "Have you ever ridden a giant eel-hound? Those things are crazy! Super fast, AND they can swim."

"Who needs to swim when you can run on water? Mongoose lizards run on water!" Straight-Sword says.

"I've heard legends of a mythical golden bird," Chain Whip jumps in. "Flightless, like the ostrich horse, but far superior. Not only is it fast and light—it can travel over any terrain. There is no place it cannot reach. Mountains, deserts, verdant fields, rocky plateaus... it can walk up the sheerest of surfaces, even run across entire oceans."

"...and all that would be completely pointless if the golden bird could just fly," Two-Swords counters. "Flying bison have everything. Strength, size, speed, carrying capacity, flight... face it. They're the best!"

"Dude!" Spear Guy jumps in, elbowing Two-Swords. "You know what'd be sweet? Riding a dragon!"

"Bison are freaking giant puffballs!" Puck says. "Nobody's riding any fucking dragons, lizards are stupid, ostrich horses are stupid, friggin' eel-whatvers are stupid, and rhinos rule. Argument over."

Straight-Sword shakes his head. "You have no idea how a proper debate is conducted, do you?"

Puck slams his palm into his forehead. "Just... shut up," he grumbles, thinking of poor Kilgore, alone in some stable, losers like this not treating him with the respect an awesome badass like him deserves.

Quinn and Santana ignore the debate entirely. Quinn because her meditation allowed her to center herself and her energies on the task at hand, thinking only of the imminent demise she is about to bring. Every second brings her closer to her goal...

(Santana ignores it because she's been wearing earplugs ever since the dudes in her tent started trying to flirt with her in the most painfully awkward way imaginable. It's shocking how much more she likes the world when everyone just shuts the fuck up.)

Back in the Sylvester House...

"We couldn't pursue Jesse on foot," Wes says, "but we had no mount, and no way of getting one. The supplies Agatha provided us with did not include enough money to buy a riding animal."

David grins. "But as we strolled through the stables, browsing the available animals, an idea came to us..."
"Whoa!" Wes says, moving over to the stable to get a better look. Mostly the selection has been sickly-looking dragon moose and a few rhinos with serious anger issues. But this... this is a whole new ballgame.

"We can't afford that. We can't afford any of this!" David says.

But Wes has to ask anyway. "How much for the mongoose lizard?"

The stable master laughs. "More than you've got, I'll tell you that much."

"You might be surprised," Wes says cryptically.

"Alright..." the stable master says. "I suppose I could let it go for... a thousand gold pieces."

"A thousand!" David balks. "You're mad!"

"Hey, these things are damn hard to come by!" the stableman chuckles. "Supply and demand, y'know?"

Wes nods. "We'll be back."

He drags David out of the stable.

"We'll be back?" David scoffs. "We'll be back? Where are we going, and why would we return?"

"We're going to get the money to buy the lizard, and we are returning so that we may give the aforementioned money to the man who owns the lizard, so that he will transfer that ownership over to us, thereby buying the lizard," Wes explains.

"And where, exactly, are we going to get—"

Wes grabs a poster from a storefront as they pass, and shoves it into David's face.

"...1,000 Gold Pieces," David reads. He looks down at his friend. "...no. No. You are insane. You are not suggesting that we—"

"I absolutely am," Wes says flatly.

"How?" David balks. "How are we going to steal that much money out from under the noses of an armed convoy of lady-soldiers and hired hit-men?"

"We will think of something," Wes says.

So they set up a little outpost near the inn where the Chi-Ryus and the assassins are staying. The gold appears to be in a small chest on the back of one of the rhinoceroses, but the female soldiers are constantly patrolling, looking for any signs of intruders. Wes and David monitor them carefully, and think.

After a few hours...

"Have you thought of anything?" Wes asks.

"No," David says.

"Neither have I," Wes sighs. "They're constantly keeping watch. There's no way we could even get close to their supplies."
"I told you," David says flatly. "This was a stupid idea. Why don't we just steal the lizard?"

"Because," Wes says. "We are honest, law-abiding young gentlemen."

David blinks at Wes.

"It's not a crime to steal blood money!" Wes insists. "It's like a double negative. Criminality of the acts cancel each other out!"

"That's not how it works!" David sighs.

They go back to watching the girls patrolling the perimeter, and remain like that for quite some time.

Eventually, the blonde leader of the squad comes back from somewhere, looking forlorn. They didn't even see her leave.

"Well, she looks happy," David comments.

"She looks like someone just died," Wes says.

The leader marches into the inn, and a few concerned soldiers actually follow her, breaking their patrols.

"Oh!" Wes says excitedly. "This is it! This is our chance!"

"Well, let's go then!" David says. They jump off the roof they're hiding on, sliding down a gutter and landing in an alley.

The whole thing doesn't take more than a few seconds, and yet, by the time they emerge from the alley, no less than a dozen other thieves are making a mad dash for the prize money.

"Huh," Wes says. "Apparently, we aren't the only ones seduced by the song of the golden gobblegoose."

David tilts his head as the thieves begin noticing each other and start fighting. "Should we… join the fray?"

Wes crosses his arms and keeps staring as the Chi-Ryus re-emerge from the inn and begin blasting at the hapless criminals. "Perhaps not," he says. "I think I have a better idea…"

The scuffle continues for several minutes. 1,000 gold pieces is quite a hefty sum, so it isn't surprising that people are willing to fight for it. The thieves are largely outmatched by the Chi-Ryu, but some are cleverer than others, and use the fight as a distraction. One lanky-looking fellow manages to sneak around to the rhinos and cut the chest loose before being tackled by a Chi-Ryu. This opens the door for a second thief to come in and scorch a hole in the bottom of the chest. He is kicked into a tree, but all that does is give the third thief his golden opportunity. He seems to be the smartest one of the bunch. Carrying two bags, one full of rocks, and one empty, he dumps the gold into the empty bag and dumps the rocks into the chest, before cleverly making it look like the hole was never fully-opened.

His getaway is ruined when a Chi-Ryu breaks his arm and throws him onto the ground. A fourth thief runs up, snatches his bag of gold, and promptly scrambles off into the night.

He stops to check his prize and count his winnings.
…thus giving the 5th and 6th thieves their golden opportunity.

WHACK.

"We'll be taking that!" Wes smiles, his shirt again pulled up to mask his lower face.

"Thank you for delivering it to us!" David grins as he finishes tying the poor fellow up.

Artie listens to their story with his hand cupping his chin. Upon reaching this part, he nods approvingly. "Nice technique. Very neutral jing," he says. "I think I like you guys."

Wes and David regard him with mixed gratitude.

"He likes us?" David asks as an aside to Blaine. "Should we be concerned?"

"Only slightly," Blaine says, patting him on the back.

"Let's see…" Wes says. "I think we can gloss over the next couple of days. Not much happened, really."

"Wait," David says. "Do any of you know a 'Norman'?"

A bit of contemplating, and a quick chorus of 'no,' 'nope,' 'don't think so,' and headshaking.

"Who is he?" Blaine asks.

David shrugs. "Just some hitchhiker we picked up. He's not important to the story."

"We dropped him off in the next town we went to as we chased St. James around the Fire Nation," Wes says. "Thanks to David's impeccably sensitive nose, we were able to track him easily, even on a flying animal. The mongoose lizard we procured with the stolen prize money certainly helped things."

David smiles. "If any of you ever has a chance to ride a mongoose lizard, they come highly recommended."

"Oh, I rode one of those!" Kurt says excitedly.

"You did?" David says.

Wes raises eyebrows and smiles at Kurt. "Did it do that thing where it comes to a body of water, and then it just—"

"—skims across the top? Oh, that was fantastic!" Kurt gushes.

David jumps back in. "And that thing where it comes to a big wall or cliff and it's just like—"

"'Monkeyfister, you are no obstacle for me,' and then it just climbs right over it?" Kurt finishes.

"Yes! Oh, that thing was immaculate," David says.

"I almost cried when I had to give mine up," Kurt sighs. "Good times… good times."

"It was the coolest thing I've ever ridden," Wes grins. "It enabled us to keep up with St. James fairly well. Every time he would stop, we would catch up with him. We continued tying cloth around our faces, both to preserve anonymity and to protect David from sneezing fits. We managed
to harass him quite a bit, but no matter what we did, we could never capture him, and we never arrived in time to get to what he was carrying."

"He got more and more cautious," David continues, "to the point of paranoia. After he nearly blasted us off a cliff, we came to the conclusion that simply chasing him was not enough—we needed to get ahead of him. Set up an ambush. So I, with my excellent knowledge of geography, sat down and figured out his route."

"Oh, don't you even start," Wes says, rolling his eyes. "His route was completely predictable. So much so that it was my idea to try and figure it out in the first place."

"Psh," David scoffs. "You wish you were as smart as me."

"As smart as I," Wes corrects.

"Guys," Blaine says diplomatically. "Focus, please."

"Right," Wes says. "Anyway, his 'delivery route' as it were, was visiting any medium-to-large town in the Fire Nation, sweeping west to east. Once we had that down, we decided to jump ahead of him and wait instead of chasing him around. So about a week after the riots, we arrived in Fenghuang, and waited—"

"What," Blaine says flatly.

Artie is staring at them slightly gape-mouthed. The others are giving them various expressions of disbelief (all but Rachel, anyway, who just looks confused).

"We went to Fenghuang," David says cautiously. "I assume you know where Fenghuang is. You seemed relatively awake and aware during geography lessons."

Blaine massages the bridge of his nose. "Ummm… quick question. When you were there, did you, by any chance, notice any loud, obnoxious old people verbally abusing their young helpers?"

David looks thoughtful. "Now that you mention it…"

Wes and David quietly discuss their plan as they walk down the street. Having spotted Jesse flying into town early this morning, they know their window of opportunity won't be open for much longer. Unfortunately, they didn't take into account how heavily guarded he and his 'cargo' might be.

As they walk, a rather loud CLACK! draws David's attention. He looks over to see a rather scruffy-looking young man pushing a loud, hateful older man in a wheelbarrow. The man constantly berates the poor fellow, and David can't help but watch the spectacle.

Wes smacks his arm. "Don't stare!" he scolds. "It's rude."

And they continue on down the street…

"How do you keep guessing these?" Wes asks. "Were those friends of yours as well?"

"No," Blaine says, rubbing his forehead with his fingers. "They were... nevermind." He sighs. "I'll tell you later. Just… keep going."
Artie snickers in the background.

"Very well, Blaine," Wes says, continuing the story. "Anyway, St. James rarely left the cargo for more than a few minutes at a time. His 'associates' or whatever you want to call them were quite irate with him for some reason, and he seemed more than a little worried. Our plan was relatively simple—we rented a flat cart used for moving furniture, and moved into position near his little hideout. We would create a distraction, rush in and snatch the container."

"The problem was creating a distraction in a way that wouldn't put us in imminent danger or immediately give us away," David says. "Even worse, filling out the necessary paperwork to rent the furniture cart took so long that by the time we moved into position that afternoon, St. James had grown even more paranoid. He resolutely refused to leave his cargo even for a second. He stood watch over it constantly."

"But just as we were about to give up, the universe smiled upon us once more," Wes says serenely.

"This is stupid," David says. "Forget creating a distraction. There is hardly anyone around—let's just go get him!"

"I'm starting to think you might be onto something," Wes sighs. "Whatever happened here when we left to rent the furniture cart seems to have cleared everyone out and made him nervous. He's off his game."

"We can take him," David nods with certainty.

"Let's do it!" Wes says.

They start pushing their cart towards the stables in the alley where the airbender stands, when suddenly, several people beat them to the punch. A tall, greasy-looking fellow and his short, pudgy friend step into the alley, both of them looking bruised and battered. For some odd reason, the pudgy one seems to have something drawn on his face in lipstick, and the greasy one is wearing blush. Several mean-looking characters of varying degrees of burly accompany them.

"What happened to you?" the airbender says.

"Nothing near as bad as what's about to happen to you," the greasy one says, pointing. "This is your fault!"

"How is you getting beaten up by a crowd of rabid women in any way related to me?" the airbender scoffs.

"It… you… it just is! It's your fault we had to chase 'em! You didn't even help! You just stood here like a wart on a badgertoad!" Pudgy accuses.

The airbender shrugs. "Not my problem. I have my reasons for not pursuing them. It was a simple case of mistaken identity."

"They stole our money!" Greasy shouts.

"Oh, hey!" the airbender claps. "Speaking of money—you owe me some! I'll take it now, if you please, as I have already wasted entirely too much time here."

"The only thing you're gonna 'take' is a beating, you little punk! Boys, get him!" Pudgy bellows.
The airbender sighs. "They never learn…"

Thus begins a rather heated (and shockingly one-sided) back-alley brawl. Even with a couple of firebenders, the thugs can't lay a finger on the airbender.

"Well, hello, Lady Opportunity!" David grins.

"Stop quipping and start moving!" Wes orders. As the airbender is occupied with the underworld tugging at his hem, Wes and David quickly and quietly move in. All told, it takes about fifteen seconds to run in, load the covered container onto the furniture cart, and push it out.

No one even notices them.

"I can't believe we just got away with that!" Wes smiles.

"Hey! The stuff is gone! Somebody took the blazing greens!"

"You had to go and say something, didn't you?" David sighs.

They pick up the pace, moving through the rapidly diminishing crowds and trying not to run anyone over.

"Slumbering slothpandas!" Wes grunts. "This is heavy! How many bodies does he have in this thing?"

David tilts his head and jumps up onto the cart (making it even heavier), peeking under the cover. "Oh… you are kidding me."

"What?" Wes asks.

"Good news and bad news. First, the good: there are no bodies in here. The bad: I think we've just wasted the past several days tracking a blazing drug mule," David grunts.

Wes pulls the cart to a stop, nearly sending David toppling off of it. "Excuse me?" he asks.

The stopping proves to be their fatal mistake. Jesse and his associates dash up behind them. The airbender recognizes them immediately, and cries, in a voice loud enough to be heard through the entire city…

"STOP, THIEVES!"

"Oh, fuck," David says. He jumps down, and the two of them try desperately to push the cart away from the thugs and the airbender. Unfortunately, the thugs are smarter than they look, and they manage to form a human wall, trapping Wes and David on an arch bridge over the Long River.

Jesse leaps over the muscle and gives a mighty death glare to the two of them. He yanks off their bandanas, revealing their identities at last.

"I knew it!" he growls. "Two firebenders fall out of the sky and just happen to land on my bison? And then I just happen to get harassed by thieves for the rest of the week? That's too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence!"

"You might be surprised," David says.

"I assure you, this is another misunderstanding," Wes explains.
"Monkeyfeathers!" Jesse growls. "You're spies! Saboteurs! Which temple do you work for? Who hired you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Wes says. "Really, we have no idea who or what you are!"

"We thought—well, he thought—" David starts, trailing off.

"Enough!" Jesse barks. "If you won't give me the answers straight, then I'll just have to beat them out of you."

"Ah… ah…" David says.

Wes immediately realizes what's coming. With no time to lose, he grabs David and pulls him onto the cart.

"Stop!" Jesse shouts, raising his staff.

"ACHOO!"

The explosive sneeze sends Jesse sprawling backwards. Even better, it propels Wes, David, and the container of drugs through the handrails and into the river.

The two boys land in the container, which floats quiet well. They rip off the cover, and soon, the two of them are floating merrily down the river on a makeshift raft, smiling smugly at the roaring, angry thugs they're leaving behind.

"Ha!" David says, cocking his head back. "We are untouchable. Unstoppable!"

And then half the thugs fly off of the bridge in an explosion of air as Jesse recovers. He slams his staff into the ground, and two large, batlike wings unfold from within.

"…you just had to say something," Wes echoes.

The airbender runs and jumps off the bridge, taking to the skies, and the chase begins.

Wes and David try to be rocketmen, blasting fire to up their speed, but St. James is far faster. As they raft through the city, the airbender dives at them. They try to intercept him with fire, but he pulls up at the last second, sending a gust of wind that knocks them both down. Fortunately, the city guards have noticed the commotion by this point, and as it turns out, they are far more likely to side with a couple of firebenders than a crazy, attacking airbender.

"Stop where you are!" the guards shout, launching a volley of fireballs at Jesse and forcing him to bank wildly to avoid them.

Wes and David pull themselves up and dust the greens off of their clothes, watching as Jesse is repeatedly forced to abandon attempts to attack them to dodge more fireballs. As the river picks up speed beneath them, the boys join the fun, hurling fire blasts of their own at the errant airbender.

"Wait for him to swerve, and shoot ahead of him!" Wes advises.

As Jesse pulls to the side to avoid being roasted, Wes and David fire in the direction he's heading. David's shot goes just a bit wide, but Wes's is a direct hit, punching a giant hole in one of his glider wings.
"You little shiiiiiiiits!" he cries as he goes sailing off to the side, crashing into some pottery. Wes and David watch with a measure of satisfaction as the guards start to surround him.

"Surrender!" they order.

Jesse just bounces up and pulls a small, white, oddly-shaped instrument from inside of his cloak. The airbender takes a deep breath and blasts into it as hard as he can, and… nothing happens.

"Ha, and ha again!" David says proudly. "His whistle is broken."

"I'm honestly not sure what good he thought a whistle would do to begin with," Wes comments, shaking his head.

The guards close in on Jesse, and the airbender seems to surrender, calmly placing his hands on his head.

It is just as the river takes them beyond the city limits that the purpose of the whistle becomes clear. Before any of the guards can lay a hand on the airbender, a tremendous white blur streaks down from the heavens and *demolishes* them, blasting through and sending them flying like a bullfallo destroying a house of cards.

"Oh, fuck!" Wes shouts.

"Balls, balls, a thousand times balls!" David curses.

Jesse perches proudly at the reins of his bison as it flies through the air, quickly gaining on them.

A jolt from the river nearly knocks them over. "Shit," Wes says, looking ahead. "We're about to hit the rapids!"

"Plan? Is there a plan? Do you have a plan? Because I don't have a plan!" David shouts, pulling his bandana back up.

"You watch our front!" Wes orders. "Steer us clear of the rocks! I'll defend our backs!"

"Got it!" David says.

The river plunges them down their first steep incline, and the chase begins *in earnest*.

David turns to the front and uses rocket-strength streams from his hand to guide them through the water, dodging large clumps of rocks and keeping them from being smashed against the shore during turns. As they speed down the river, David is pretty much the only thing that keeps them afloat.

"Rocks!" he warns, so Wes can brace himself as he swerves around them.

Meanwhile, Wes has his hands full with Jesse. His bison is well-trained; it knows they have something that belongs to it. Without needing to be guided, the enormous creature keeps pace with them easily, freeing Jesse to send bending attacks their way. He pulls his staff out again—wings now retracted, and slices a couple of crescent-shaped wind blades at them. Wes deflects them with a well-timed explosion, and counters by creating a flame between his hands, enlarging it, and blasting it towards Jesse in the form of a spread of five simultaneous fireballs. The airbender has no trouble deflecting the blasts himself, but the beast takes a couple of burns to its fur.

Wes feels a little guilty about hurting the animal, which probably doesn't have much of a say in all
this, but his guilt is quickly assuaged when the gigantic beast banks to the side, taking a deep breath and releasing it. The blast of wind that follows is so strong that it actually breaks off the trunk of a tree, sending it screaming towards them. Wes whips out his fire-ropes and expertly lashes it apart, winding up with only a few scrapes against his face from the shrapnel.

"Turn!" David shouts. Wes braces himself as they round a corner, and Jesse catches up with them again.

"The temples are just jealous!" Jesse accuses, using his hand to blast out thin, highly focused beams of air at them. "They know their time is up. They can't stomach change, so they're trying to drag everyone down with them! Well, fuck the temples, and—as an aside—fuck you! You can't stop the future!"

"You might as well be speaking whale!" Wes shouts, bobbing from side to side to dodge the gusts as David weaves them around some rocks. "I have no clue what you're saying!"

"Liar!" Jesse says, throwing a two-handed burst of air down at them. Wes buffets the convex wind-shield as hard as he can with continuous flame, weakening it significantly. But he can't blow it apart—the thing still hits him and knocks him into David, sending them both to the floor.

"Ow!" David grumbles. "Watch where you're landing!"

'I'm sorry!' Wes grumbles back. "The next time I'm attacked by an airbender, I'll politely ask if he can bend me away from—SHIT! HOLD ON!"

That's all the warning he can give before they plunge down a series of small waterfalls, painfully jolting them each time and making it impossible for them to get up between them.

When they finally reach a more level section of the river, Wes kicks back to his feet only to find ten tons of terrifying staring him down from only a few yards away.

"Give up!" Jesse orders from atop the bison. "Give me the drugs, and I might consider maiming you instead of killing you."

"You know what?" Wes says. "No. I don't even know who you are or who you work for, and I don't care. I feel like being contrary. You, sir, are a jackass!"

Wes is prepared to fight to the death, but David has other plans.

"You want the drugs?" he says, picking up a huge clump of z-leaf with both hands and holding it up.

Jesse's eyes widen. "Don't you dare…"

"Take them!" David grins, setting the leaf light. Wes pulls up his bandana to shield himself from the fumes as the smoke trails behind them, flying into the bison's face and choking it. It coughs (the gusts giving them a short speed boost) and shudders, banking away from the smoke and putting distance between them once more.

"Nicely done, David!" Wes says, slightly impressed.

David grins and turns back to his steering job. His jaw drops. "...you'll likely be taking that back shortly."

Wes turns around, only to see another waterfall ahead of them, this one larger than all the others.
The boys immediately rush forward and start firebending at the water, trying to push themselves away from their imminent demise, but it does almost no good at all.

"We'll just have to try and cushion our fall!" Wes says. "When we go over—"

At this point, they go over.

Oddly enough, something is already there to cushion their fall. The boys and their drugs bounce off something large and fleshy, and promptly land in the water, none the worse for wear. Upon recovering from the fall, Wes looks behind them to see what they bounced off of, and is shocked to find nothing less than a giant poison Dragon Frog sleeping under the waterfall, the liquid soothing what appears to be several burn marks on its face.

"Bridge!" David warns.

At this point, Wes has his own stroke of genius.

If this week has taught him absolutely nothing else, it's that one should never underestimate the value of playing one's enemies against each other.

And though it seems kind of cruel, Jesse is quickly catching up to them, and there are precious few options available.

So Wes decides to make a new enemy.

He hurls a two-handed fireblast right into the giant frog's face, startling the beast awake and enraged it beyond measure just as Jesse and his bison pass overhead.

The timing could not be more perfect.

The outraged amphibian leaps into the air at the exact right moment, slamming directly into the bison and nearly jolting Jesse off of it. The dragon frog lands back in the river in a disgruntled heap, while the flying bison now finds itself living in a very different world. As David guides them between the supports of the Long River Bridge, Wes watches with satisfaction as the bison bobs, weaves, and lurches in the air.

Jesse's panicked attempts to wrangle the creature back under control only make matters worse, causing the animal to dive at the worst possible time. The impact is inevitable. Wes can only wince as the bison slams headlong into the bridge, completely and utterly blasting it apart.

"...ouch," Wes says. "That is going to be a considerable local tax hike."

The airbender tries as hard as he can to get the confused bison under control, but it's completely useless. He has been thoroughly juiced, and the inebriated creature happily spirals off into the sky, swerving unpredictably, looping around and carrying a wailing Jesse with it off into the distance.

David steers them to the shore.

"Well," he says as he watches the bison do a barrel roll with Jesse holding on for dear life. "That was cathartic."

"I feel like this is karma coming to bear," Wes says. "Maybe he'll hit a barn or two on his way."

Artie can no longer contain his laughter. He shorts and falls over, smacking the ground and cackling to the heavens. "Oh, man!" he says. "Wow. Dude was not kidding when he said he had a
"He deserved it!" Rachel says, crossing her arms and looking thoroughly upset. "Honestly… delivering drugs! Working with criminals! Attacking people for no reason!"

"Well, technically, he was right about our being thieves," Wes starts.

"DO NOT INTERRUPT MY INDIGNATION!" Rachel yells, pointing at him. "He just… I just… oooooohhhhh! He makes me so angry!" She slices her hand through the air as she slams it to the ground in rage. A considerable breeze kicks up in its wake, ruffling Blaine's hair and waking up Pavarotti.

Rachel gapes at the sight. "Oh, my," she says.

"Yay," Kurt says lightly, offering her a golf clap. "Airbending!"

"Oh?" Wes asks. "Another airbender?"

"I assure you," Rachel says, crossing her arms. "I am nothing like Jesse St. James."

"Besides being an airbender," David corrects.

"Which is technically more than 'nothing,'" Wes adds.

"Oh, just shut up and finish your story!" she grumbles.

Wes smiles. "Well, after Jesse went sailing off into the wild blue yonder, David and I parked our improvised boat and stashed it under some vines."

"Intending to turn it in to the proper authorities later, of course," David says in a way that lets everyone involved know that he intended to do no such thing.

"By the time we got back to Fenghuang, however, the adrenaline rush of our momentary triumph had worn off, and we realized something very important…"

"We are so stupid," Wes sighs, banging his head against the wall of their tiny, incredibly cheap room at the inn. He's pretty sure it was intended as a closet, but beggars can't be choosers. "We've wasted the past few days chasing no one. I don't think he was connected to the others at all. And now we're back to square one—we have no idea where to even begin to look."

"Wesley," David says softly from the bed. "What are we even doing, man?"

Wes looks over at him. "I thought that was obvious."

"No, I'm serious!" David says, and for once, he truly is. His sad eyes leave no doubt of his sincerity. "Let me see if I have this right: you and I, technically still considered schoolboys, are—with no back-up, no support, and no one who even knows where we are—chasing after dangerous assassins and criminals who appear to be fully supported by our new government. We have no more money, and nothing but the clothes on our backs and this dinky little knapsack. And we expect to find one person—who may not even be alive—with an entire country to search through. Do I have that about right?" he finishes.

Wes blinks, shaking his head. "Well… I suppose when you put it in those terms, it does sound…"

"It sounds…" David presses.
Wes rubs his eyes, sits on the bed, and sighs. "Stupid. It sounds stupid. We are stupid—wait, no, I am stupid," he says, dropping his head into his hands. "This entire fruitless escapade was my idea. Going out on our own, following Jesse, stealing from him… I'm sorry, David. I just…" He looks up. "Do you really want to just… give up on him?"

"No," David says. "But I never wanted him to be hurt at all. Sometimes it doesn't matter what we want." He pauses for a bit. "You know what I want?" he asks. "I want to go see my family. I want a hug from my mother, and I want to squeeze my little sister and tell her how much I love her, how happy I am that she lives."

"I…" he says quietly. "I miss my family, too. I do. But Blaine essentially is family. I can't give up on him yet."

He reclines on the bed, looking up at the ceiling. "I shouldn't have dragged you into this, David," he says quietly. "I'm sorry. If you want, you can take the lizard and go to your home. I… I don't mind being alone."

David does not respond. Well, not in any way Wes can hear.

WHUMP.

A pillow smacks into his head, causing Wes to sputter and sit up.

David looks at him flatly. "You're right," he says. "You are stupid. And…" he adds, a little softer. "…it is for precisely that reason that I refuse to let you do this by yourself." He smiles. "You're not alone."

Wes smiles back. "Well, I'm glad you're so charitable."

And that's when it hits him.

"Not alo—"

Pavarotti screeches loudly and dives off of the mantelpiece.

That's all the warning they get before the boulder slams into the living room.

It is a testament to their reflexes that they can even react at all.

In the span of a split second, Kurt thrusts his hands out to create a cushion of air to soften the blow. Blaine at the boulder, using the firestream to buffet Kurt's air and add to the force. Mercedes and Artie immediately start trying to bend the rock, and while Wes and David jump in and throw two of the most explosive fireballs they can muster on such short notice.

With their combined efforts, the boulder that probably would've crushed all of them becomes a small flood of sand that gets all over everyone's clothes.

The gang is up and ready to fight in a second, but their faces fall just slightly when they see their opposition.

Through the massive new hole in the wall, Blaine counts Quinn, Puck, Santana, six Chi-Ryus, and ten other soldiers.

"Oh, Blaine," Quinn says, stepping forward and crossing her arms. "Today is much too nice to
waste indoors." She smirks.

"Come outside and play."

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: :) We're not quite finished with Wes and David yet, but we have some… other things to attend to first. *Dragon Hawks, Intermission: A Scuffle with Assorted Ruffians* is next. :P
Dragon Hawks, Intermission

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 54/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: None.
Word Count: ~7000
Summary: When a usurper sets eyes on the Fire Nation throne, Avatar Kurt and friends find themselves on the run with the deposed Prince Blaine in a country gone mad. Can they escape Lady Sylvester's wrath? Or will her minions snuff them out for good? Fusion fic!

Author's Note: This chapter is short, but it packs a punch. That's all I have to say about it. Well… maybe just one more thing: *Surprise!* ;)

CHAPTER 54 – Dragon Hawks, Intermission:
A Scuffle with Assorted Ruffians

Pouring out of the damaged house before it can collapse or something equally inconvenient, the gang lines up on the lawn to face their adversaries. Blaine and Kurt stand side-by-side in the middle. To Blaine's left, stand Wes and David. To Kurt's right, Artie, Mercedes, and Finn prepare to fight.

Behind them, stands Rachel. On her shoulder, perches Pavarotti.

"Why must violence follow us wherever we go?" she asks the bird.

Pavarotti caws, as if to say 'fucked if I know.'

"You are seriously testing my patience," Kurt says. He sticks out his hands and pulls up some rainwater from the ground, coiling it around him like a python waiting to strike. "Stop following us."
"What's wrong, Quinn?" Blaine growls. "Do you really need that much help to take me down?"

"Quite the contrary," Quinn says. "I'd prefer to take you down solo. Your side was the one that broke the rules of engagement."

"Oh, come off it, Lady," Kurt snarks. "Bombs are not part of any fair fight that I've ever been aware of."

"We can finish this one-on-one," Blaine says. "No one else has to get involved."

"Your friends seem to think otherwise," Quinn says, snapping her fingers. The soldiers and Chi-Ryus step forward. "So I brought these guys. These are not city-guarding simpletons," she says with a smirk. "This is an elite unit hand-picked to serve the Fire Lord."

The specialists step up to stand side-by-side with the terrible threesome, drawing their weapons. The apparent leader of the soldiers (the one with the spikiest helmet) stands next to Quinn, armed with a very nice straight sword with a dark red tassel on the end. Puck is flanked by a stockier one who wields dual dao swords and a slightly taller one who uses a spear. Santana is assisted by a slightly heavier soldier who wields a staff and the largest and most built of the unit, who wields a chain whip. The other five soldiers take firebending stances alongside the Chi-Ryu behind them.

"I think they'll do nicely to keep your friends busy while you and I hash things out," Quinn says. "No more outside interference."

Blaine gulps, feeling just a little worried. This, in turn, makes Kurt a little worried.

"Huh," Artie says, slightly shocked. "These guys actually seem to know what they're doing. I'm impressed."

"I'm not," Mercedes scoffs. "We've faced worse odds than this."

"We have?" Rachel asks nervously.

"Well, not you," Mercedes amends. "And I don't know about Blaine or his BFFs. But for the rest of us? This is nothing."

"I don't know," Finn says cautiously. "We're kind of outnumbered by… a lot."

"Hey!" Puck says. "Didn't we kill you?" he asks, pointing at Wes and David.

They shrug. "Didn't take," Wes says flatly.

"You actually sent us on vacation," David says simply. "It was quite the trip."

"Look, are we gonna stand here all day, or are we gonna throw down?" Santana asks. "Seriously, I've got shit I'd rather be doing."

"Enough!" Kurt says. "Look, I'm all about nonviolent solutions when they present themselves. Walk away, right now, and you won't get hurt. Otherwise, a quad-elemental smackdown is in your immediate future."

Blaine opens his mouth to add something, but he is distracted when Wes and David step out of line and calmly march in front of them.

"Prince Blaine," Wes says. "We'll take care of this, if you don't mind."
Blaine's jaw drops in stupefied disbelief. "You'll what?"

"We'll handle this," David elaborates. "You all can have a seat. Get comfortable."

"You're kidding," Kurt says flatly. "This is a joke."

"And it's not funny," Quinn says, annoyed.

Wes shrugs. "There is no joke," he says simply. "Surrender."

"You have no chance of winning this fight," David continues. "This is your first and only warning."

Puck and Santana burst into laughter. "Are you kidding me?" Santana asks.

"You two dweebys couldn't even handle us, and now you're gonna handle all this?" he gestures to the battle-ready battalion around them. "Give me a break."

"Guys, if you could stop being crazy and suicidal on my behalf, I'd really appreciate it. It's not a good habit," Blaine requests.

"This is ridiculous. No one is surrendering," Quinn growls. "You are outnumbered nineteen to eight, with at least one noncombatant. If you think those odds are in your favor, you have seriously miscalculated."

Wes and David look at each other and shrug, as if to say 'oh well, we tried.'

"The miscalculation is yours," Wes says, shaking his head in disappointment. "Alright. I move that we strike down the enemies of the Prince."

David smirks. "I second that motion," he says.

And Wes smirks with him. "All in favor, present arms, and say 'aye!'"

And just like that, it all turns around.

"Aye!" Quinn hears from her left. Suddenly, she has a very nice straight sword held at her throat.

"Aye!" Puck hears from both sides, now finding himself with a spear at his back and two curved swords under his chin.

"Aye!" Santana hears as she is rendered equally immobile, with a chain wrapped around her neck and a staff against the back of her knees.

"Aye!" cries a set of five more voices, as the Chi-Ryus are surrounded by a circular wall of flame, burning so high and held so tightly they can barely breathe without burning themselves.

"Aye!" David says, crossing his arms.

"Well, how about that?" Wes grins, entirely too pleased with himself. "A unanimous vote! Motion carried."

"Wait!" Puck says. "Can I vote 'no'? I vote 'no!'"

"Sorry, dude," Two-Swords shrugs, bringing his blades a little closer. "Motion already carried."

Blaine's eyes practically shoot out of his skull to take a closer look at this phenomenon. Kurt drops
his water supply in shock. Artie looks close to applauding, Mercedes is disbelieving, and Finn just looks confused.

"Oooh, plot twist!" Rachel says excitedly. Pavarotti squawks in agreement.

"What is the meaning of this?" Quinn spits.

"'This' could mean any number of things," the lead soldier says. "But its most pertinent meaning is that you should count your allies more carefully."

Quinn grinds her teeth as the cold steel presses against her neck. "You filthy band of traitors!" she seethes.

"Infiltrators," the lead soldier corrects, "is the term you are looking for. The only traitors here are you and yours."

Quinn holds herself carefully, even as she rages. "Impersonating soldiers? Stealing military-grade weapons and armor? That's treason—crimes against the military are crimes against the Fire Lord!"

"That's all well and good," the leader says simply. "But you forget one thing…"

"Sue Sylvester is not the Fire Lord!" Wes, David, and the lead soldier say in perfect unison.

"What is… what… who are these people?" Blaine asks.

"Oh, just some friends of ours," David says lightly.

"A little after-school club we started in your absence," Wes adds.

"Now," says the spikiest helmet. "Shall we discuss the terms of your surrend—?"

Quinn's answer leaves no room for doubt. She flips backwards with stunning speed, evading the leader's blade by literal hairs (losing several inches off her bangs) and kicking the sword out of his hand as she goes. His reflexes are quick, and he snatches the blade by the tassel before it flies out of reach; unfortunately, the damage has already been done. During her backflip, Quinn splits her legs and sends fire blasts at the soldiers holding Puck and Santana hostage, before snapping back to her feet and kicking a slice of fire at one of the soldiers on firewall duty.

All three take direct hits, giving their captives a precious moment to escape.

Chain Guy grunts and stumbles to the side as the fire blast hits him, enabling Santana to duck out of his noose. Staff Guy tries to sweep her legs out from under her, but she just lets the momentum carry her over into a handstand, where she kicks him in the helmet and rattles his brain. She handsprings over a swipe from Chain Guy and has her whips out in a second. She and Chainy get into it pretty good—but Chainy's got a different style from her. Santana is all about the lashing and the snapping, while Chainy just likes to keep his chain spinning, a whirlwind of constant motion. It's hard to get close to him and his chain-link defense.

Spear Guy gets knocked on his ass, and Two-Swords is too busy looking at him to pay attention to Puck. The assassin jumps backwards and throws his fist forwards. Two Swords knows enough to step the fuck back, but he still takes an indirect hit, getting swept off his feet and into the Sylvester House by a blast of air. Finn and Rachel immediately run over to downed soldier, while his friend steps up to his defense. "HEY!" Spear Dude shouts, "Not cool, bro!" He rushes forward and gives Puck a serious run for his money with his pokey-stick—and endless stream of jabs that Puck has almost no time to counter.
The soldiers holding the firewall are distracted when Quinn's attack hits one of their own, and the wall falters. This gives the Chi-Ryus all the opportunity they need to break free of the restraints and start fighting back. Soon, firebending battles are spread out all over the yard.

Meanwhile, Quinn herself engages Straight Sword. His style is dynamic and swift—in one hand is his sword, slicing and swiping in whip-quick circles, flipping in his grip as-needed, guided by incredibly dexterous fingers. His other hand is empty, held with two fingers extended, and used to add the occasional burst of flame to the proceedings. His legs are in constant motion, augmenting his strikes with kicks and leaps, shifting his stances and making him difficult to pin down. Even in full armor, he is agile and adroit. The coordination and precision of his strikes carry a strange air of elegance to them, and Quinn is shocked to find herself making very little progress against him. The pompous punk is fighting her to a standstill.

Then, one of the soldiers fighting her girls cries out in pain and hobbles over to lean against a tree. A couple of his friends gather around him, but they don't seem to be quite on the same level as the Chi-Ryu, and they're outnumbered. Observing this gives Quinn a nice little boost of energy and pride. She fights back with renewed vigor, and suddenly, Straight Sword is on the defensive.

"You've made a grave mistake," Quinn says as she lays a carpet of flames at Straight Sword's feet.

"This is not an error," the leader says, leaping backwards and glancing a blow off of her raised wrist guard. "It is a correction! Your so-called 'Fire Lord' mocks the very throne upon which she sits!"

Quinn raises the fire into a pillar and pushes it at him. Straight Sword flips to the side and thrusts at her, but she locks his blade between her wrist guards.

"Let go of that!" he orders. "It's incredibly valuable! You're going to scratch it!"

Suddenly, a bell rings in Quinn's mind. "Wait a second… I know you. I've met you somewhere before," she says, trying to stare through his helmet.

"Errr… no! No you haven't!" Straight Sword insists in a manner most unconvincing.

Wes and David give each other a brief glance before running forward to help. In the meantime, Blaine, Kurt, and the two earthbenders have a brief pow-wow.

"You think they can handle this?" Kurt asks.

"Possibly," Blaine replies, watching the fights as they progress. "But… why chance it?"

"I'm not the kind that likes to sit back and watch," Mercedes says simply.

"We have an advantage—let's take it. One-sided fights are the best kind, as long as you're on the right side!" Artie grins.

"Then it's decided," Kurt smiles. "Shall we, Blaine?"

The Avatar extends his arm.

"We shall, Kurt, we shall indeed," Blaine says, looping his arm into Kurt's and cocking his chin in the air. With completely ridiculous expressions on both faces, the two actually prance into battle together.

"…I worry about those two," Artie says.
"Hey," Mercedes says. "That's my line!"

And they charge in to join the fray.

Meanwhile, Finn and Rachel work together to help the soldier who fell to Puck's air-fist. The attack slammed him into the Sylvester House wall, though thankfully not through it. Instead, he's landed in some overgrown bushes and currently having some trouble getting himself down.

"Are you alright?" Rachel asks as Finn tries to pull him out. "Can you hear my voice? How many birds are on my shoulder? Do you hear any unusually loud noises?" She is sure to ask her question while enunciating carefully and giving it enough volume to be clearly heard through the din of battle and the soldier's helmet.

The guy flinches away from her. "Umm… just one," he grunts. "One bird, and one really loud noise."

"Okay, dude, I'm gonna try something. Get ready!" Finn says, before drawing up some rainwater and slicing the branches out from underneath him. The guy tumbles out of the bush and hits the ground with a clank.

"…ow," he grunts.

"Sorry," Finn winces. "Are you hurt?"

"No," he says, shaking his head. "But—oh, shit! Thanks for the assist; gotta go!"

Without further explanation, the guy picks up his swords and dashes back into the fight.

The duo turns their attention back to the melee, finding a scene of complete chaos.

Puck slams his fist into the ground in front of Spear Guy, blasting him backwards. As he flies, he jams his spear into the ground and drags himself to a stop before he hits anything. Unfortunately for him, his spear is now stuck in the dirt, and Puck has no intention of letting him pluck it out again.

"Come on!" Spear Dude grunts, trying to heave his weapon out of the dirt.

"Oh, I'm coming alright!" Puck says, charging and raising his fist.

"So am I!"

That's pretty much all the warning Puck gets before Two Swords is all up in his grill, slicing and dicing like one of those freaky-ass super chefs at a sushi bar. Puck doesn't want to end up in anybody's stir fry, but the guy's not making it easy for him. Dude is fierce with his blades. He strikes fast and hard, and his swords are pretty much everywhere at once. Even though he has two swords, he uses them as one. The blades always move in relation to each other, like there's magnetic force between them, sometimes pushing, sometimes pulling, but always keeping them connected. Puck manages to dodge a couple of swipes completely, but his luck doesn't hold out, and soon, pieces of his armor are popping off as the dude straight-up slices them clean.

"Hey!" Puck shouts. "Quit it! I paid a lot of money for those!"

"Then you should take better care of them!" Spear Dude replies.

And suddenly Spear Dude is coming right at him, and Puck is faced with two dudes at once,
feeling a little nervous. He dashes to the side to avoid getting caught between them. They try to chase after him, but Two-Swords doesn't realize that he lightened Puck's load by slicing off so much of his armor. Both the assassin and his attackers are shocked by how fast he can move now, and before they can do anything about it, Puck slams his fist into the ground and sends a shockwave of dirt their way. Both bozos are swept up by the wave, and Puck grins.

The grin vanishes when instead of smashing them against the house, the wave just kind of peters out and drops them next to…

_Shit._

"Well, look who it is!" Artie grins. "Everybody's favorite one-trick pony pup."

"Shut up!" Puck growls. "I've got a score to settle with you, little punk. Your ass is mine."

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Artie says with a slight shudder, "but if you want a piece of my ass, come over here and take it!"

Artie sends a wave of dirt at Puck, and Puck punches right through it, as the fight begins again…

On the other side of the yard, Santana is having a little trouble of her own. The clowns she is stuck fighting can't lay a finger on her, but all she's not making much progress against them, either. Staffy is pretty quick with his stick for such a big guy. All her attempts to rope him in just get smacked down or knocked aside. He's not as good at moving _himself_, but he doesn't really seem to need to move. Santana has kicked the _shit_ out of him at least two times, and he barely stumbled. It's a little unnerving.

"Why won't you fall over?" she growls.

"Physics!" he replies jabbing at her with his staff. "Greater mass means more inertia, which means more force is required to move me. Add that the armor, which absorbs and spreads the force of impact over a greater area, not to mention how much surface area I have, and your blows just don't hurt me! You can't argue with physics!"

"Argue with _this_!" She jumps up and slams both feet into his chest.

He stumbles backwards a few feet, but again, just shakes it off.

A chain wraps around her from behind. "A debate with the universe is fruitless. Its answer to all arguments is the same; it is. And that is inarguable."

Chainy tries to swing her into a tree, but she's got the reflexes of a catsnake. She twists around in mid-air and lands neatly on the branch.

"You'll have to do better than that if you want to take me down," Santana says.

Suddenly, the tree pitches sideways and dumps her on the ground, where a flipper of rock comes up to slam her into the dirt. She sprints out from under it, and looks around to see which earth-twerp is trying to smack her down now.

"How was that?" Mercedes asks. "Good enough? 'cause I can do plenty better…"

Over in Quinn's territory, there is a bit of a shake-up. As soon as Wes and David arrive, another soldier fighting the Chi-Ryus yelps and falls, clenching his leg and not quite able to stand. A friend of his moves to his defense, but that still puts the soldiers vs. Chi-Ryus ratio at 2 wounded and 3
standing for the soldiers, and 6 standing for the Chi-Ryus.

"Monkeyfeathers!" Straight Sword shouts. "This is not going as planned."

"Fall back!" Wes orders the soldiers. "Move the wounded behind us!"

"Do not let them move their wounded!" Quinn orders her Chi-Ryus. "Take them prisoner!"

"Don't listen to her!" David shouts.

"Stop ordering my Chi-Ryus around!" Quinn barks, offended.

"Stop ordering your Chi-Ryus to attack our wounded!" the leader counters.

"I'm not ordering them to attack the wounded; I'm ordering them to attack the unwounded so they can take the wounded prisoner!" Quinn clarifies.

"Ummm… Captain!" one of her Chi-Ryus calls out. "Which wounded prisoner did you want us to take? There are two of them."

"Not the wounded prisoner. The wounded soldiers! Take them!" Quinn shouts.

"Okay!" one of the still-standing soldiers says. "Wait… where were we supposed to take them, again?" He gestures to the limping soldier at his right.

"Over there!" David shouts, pointing to the house.

"Nowhere!" Quinn counter-shouts. "You stay right there."

"Hey!" Wes grumbles. "Now who's ordering the wrong people around?"

"Okay, ENOUGH!" Kurt shouts. "Everybody just shut up for a few seconds!"

The leader snaps his head over to look at Kurt, tilting it in slight confusion. "$I beg your pardon?"

Blaine steps in with some helpful instructions. "Soldiers, take the wounded to the house! Talk to the tall boy; he's a healer."

"Excuse me, sir, but—" the leader starts, before Wes elbows him.

"That's Blaine, you speckled badgertoad!" he whispers.

"It is?" the leader says. "Oh. I thought he'd be taller…"

"Chi-Ryus!" Quinn orders. "Do not let them escape! Stop them!"

"Kurt!" Blaine counter-commands. "Stop the Chi-Ryus!"

To his credit, the Avatar takes only a split-second to side-eye his boyfriend for giving him an order. As the Chi-Ryus attempt to head off the wounded soldiers' escape, Kurt lashes some rainwater into thin whips, striking at the Chi-Ryus' legs from the grass. The assault is sufficient to throw them off-balance, so he completes his assault by earthbending an impressive sinkhole underneath them, dropping them into a muddy pit.

The soldiers carry their friends over to Finn, and Kurt crosses his arms and grins.
"That's it!" Quinn growls. "I am sick of getting… **Kai-blocked** by you people! **CHI-RYUS!**"

The girls blast out of the mudpit and land beside their leader.

**"FLASH-FRY!"** Quinn commands. All seven girls rear back and prepare to firebend.

"Firestreams! **NOW!**" Blaine orders. Wes, David, the lead soldier, and Kurt all jump in to counter Quinn and her Chi-Ryus' stream of flame with their own, creating a massive firewall in the middle of the battlefield. A violent struggle ensues as the wall is pushed back and forth between them, filling the air with steam as rainwater evaporates and plants are incinerated. Neither side looks like they'll be giving up any time soon…

Meanwhile, Puck slams everything he can at the trio of losers, and none of it does a damn bit of good. The boulder he smacks at Two-Swords gets sidestepped. The tree trunk he smashes at Spear-Dude gets pole-vaulted over. He even gets smart and tries to blow Artie off the ground with an air punch, but the little dude just digs down deep and roots to the earth.

"Same old, same old," Artie says. "I was kind of hoping for something different, but I guess you can't teach an old lapdog new tricks…"

The assassin sees red. Puck dashes over and slams a tree into shrapnel, sending splinters screaming at the three. Artie just heaves up an earthshield for the guys to duck behind, prompting Puck to kick what's left of the trunk in frustration.

"Speaking of tricks," Artie says from behind the shield. "You two know any good ones?"

Two-Swords looks at his buddy. "Think we should light up?" he asks.

"Oh, fuck yes," Spear Dude says. "You know what they say…"

Two-Swords twirls his blades in his hands, Spear Dude whirls his spear over his head…

"It ain't a party…"

…and the metal ends of both weapons burst into flames.

"…until somebody brings the **fireworks!**"

Artie grins. "I'll fake him out. You light him up."

He bodily rams through the earthshield, coating himself with much of it and effectively becoming a fast-moving battering ram. The only parts of his body exposed are his eyes—the rest of him is rock-steady and zooming at Puck. The assassin relishes the opportunity to get up-close and personal, raising his fist and aiming to turn Artie into creamed cornball. But of course, Artie is no fool—he banks at the last second. Puck is already mid-punch, and his last-second attempt to redirect it throws his weight off, causing him to stumble and leaving him open to the firebenders. Two-Swords hurls some pretty forceful flame slices from his blades, forcing Puck to duck and jump. Spear's attacks are punchier and more compact—spearheads of flame that actually blast chunks off of trees and clumps of mud out of the ground as they hit.

Puck is so busy ducking and covering from the fire attacks that he completely forgets about stone-solid Artie until the earthbender rams his legs right out from under him. Puck flips out and lands on his back.

"Consider looking for a new job," Artie advises. "You're not very good at this one."
And then he catapults him towards the river.

Santana, in the meantime, has turned her agility to its highest setting, dodging every earthbending technique that Mercedes has. Pillars try to launch her, slabs try to squish her, walls come up to crush her, holes try to swallow her, and she takes none of it. "You can't touch this!" she taunts.

"She has much greater-than-average speed and flexibility," Staffy says, sounding uncertain. "We aren't making progress against her, but the reverse is true as well!"

"The mountain cannot tame the wind," Chainy nods. "Nor can the wind move the mountain."

Mercedes rolls her eyes. "She's not an airbender," she grumbles.

Chainy shrugs. "Moves like one."

"What should we do?" Staffy asks.

"We need to give her more to dodge," Mercedes says. "You bending boys?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" Staff says brightly.

"Then get to burning!" Mercedes orders. "Tell you what—you two fight, and I'll drive. Deal?"

Chainy tilts his head at her. "…the meaning of your words escapes me—WHOA!"

Suddenly, both boys stumble as discs of solid earth pop up underneath them. Before they have time to complain, Mercedes roots their feet onto the discs and slides them along the ground towards Santana like shuffleboard pieces. Though it takes them a bit to regain their balance, eventually both boys get the idea. Chainy runs his hand over his whip, spreading flame clear to the tip. He swipes the fiery chain at Santana, who jumps over it, only to bring it back around and lash it so that it snaps near her. As the momentum is transferred up the chain, the fire travels with it, being pushed and gathered along the whipe like a reverse avalanche, until all of it reaches the end in a powerful crack! The resulting explosion sends her flying backwards, but she lands on her feet, still ready to go.

So Mercedes moves in Staffy to keep the pressure on. The bigger boy, instead of setting his weapon alight outright, uses fire in short bursts. He'll twirl the staff over his head, adding a stream of flame when Santana tries to jump over him. He'll slam it on the ground near her, sending fire up the staff so that it spreads along the ground on impact. He'll repeatedly thrust it at her, adding a little punch of flame with each jab, driving her steadily backwards. Every attempt to counterattack or move around him is foiled by Mercedes, who uses earthbending to move him far faster than he could move himself. Slowly but surely, Santana finds herself being pushed back to the river.

Over in Finn and Rachel's little nook of the universe, Rachel is having pleasantly distracting (if a bit one-sided) conversations with the soldiers while Finn is kneeling and healing, just finishing up some wince-inducing burns on a dude's leg. None of them are life-threatening, but they're not very pretty, either. A wave of heat hits him, and he looks up to see a heart-stoppingly huge wall of fire erupting between the good guys and the bad guys. The thing is enormous and kind of really bright, and it looks like it's drying out the whole area, turning all the water into steam.

Even worse, it looks like it's being pushed towards them. As in—Quinn is somehow winning.

"Shit!" Finn curses. "Rachel, watch these guys, I have to… I have to something!"

"Finn!" Rachel says. "You can't just run over and—"
But Finn is already off and running, ducking and hiding in the steam…

Quinn is furious.

He slips away, and slips away, always sliding through the door just before it closes. Old friends pop out of the woodwork to support him, new friends appear as if from nowhere just to fawn over him and screw her up. He keeps winning, and he thinks it's right—that he is supposed to win. That he is supposed to have everything handed to him because of who and what he is. That he is supposed to rule—that it's his divine right.

The Prince lives a charmed life. He knows nothing. And it pisses her off.

So she channels that. She takes her newly-expanded rage reserve and infuses it into her firebending, shocking herself with how much potency it adds. Slowly but surely, the wall of flame is creeping towards the Prince and the Avatar, and not even the combined strength of them and their firebending friends can stand against it.

*Might* makes right.

She is so focused on her fury that her normally keen senses completely miss the giant oaf trying to creep around her. Neither she nor her Chi-Ryus notice him at all until it is already too late. She spots movement out of the corner of her eye, and glances over at Finn just as he slams a huge glob of water on her girls, scattering them, throwing off their concentration and leaving them open.

The enormous mountain of fire slams into her and her Chi-Ryus full-force. Reflexive blocking and the water they are covered in keep them from being too badly injured, but the force of the attack nearly knocks them into the river. And as she picks herself up off the ground, steaming both figuratively and literally, she sees she is not the only one in a losing fight

Puck lands in a heap on her left as Artie earth-catapults him overhead. Two-Swords and Spear give each other a high-five, before sharing low-fives with the earthbender.

On her right, Santana is shoulder checked by Staffy, hitting her at a seemingly impossible speed without even moving his feet. The Chain-wielding soldier slides over next to him, and Mercedes steps up to break the earth around their feet. Santana lands in the mud and slides to a painful halt against a Chi-Ryu.

In front and all around her, the Prince, his friends, and his Avatar stand ready for battle. Behind her, the river itself rises up into a looming wave, waiting for an excuse to crash down upon her.

"Surrender!" Blaine demands.

"I realize you're probably used to getting what you want," Quinn seethes, "but I'm going to have to say no."

"You don't exactly have a lot of other options," Kurt points out.

"Just give up," Blaine says. "You're surrounded, outnumbered, and you have nowhere to go!"

"Maybe we should listen to him," Santana says, staring at the curved water-wall that looms behind and over them. "Just sayin'."

Quinn searches her surroundings carefully for a way out. Everyone around her looks ready to strike or defend at a moment's notice.
Everyone but him.

Quinn smirks. "Fine," she says, holding up her hands, "I see your point." She turns to her girls, and begins speaking two languages at once, each telling a different story. "Chi-Ryus!" she says with her mouth. You take care of the waterwall, she says with her eyes. "We have been defeated. It is time to surrender with honor." I'll take care of the distraction.

She turns back to Blaine and friends as the Chi-Ryus kneel. "I surrender," she says, sweeping her eyes across the enemy ranks. "You may take us priso—"

And then she strikes. A whip-quick snap of her arm with two fingers extended, and a razor-thin line of flame screams from her fingertips as the Chi-Ryus scorch a hole in Kurt's water wall.

Finn doesn't even see it coming. He's too busy smiling at Rachel, that little smile that says 'yay, I helped!' She's smiling right back at him… right up until the moment she sees a thin string of fire tear through his shoulder, in one side, and out the other, with plenty of fire in between. Finn gasps, too shocked to even scream, and falls. Rachel's heart falls with him.

"FINN!" Kurt shouts. He drops the water immediately and beelines towards his stepbrother.

Quinn and company waste no time, dashing through the hole they blasted as the rest of the water falls down around them, absorbing the many fire attacks shot at their backs.

But just as it looks like they're going to make a clean getaway, the Avatar remembers himself, sliding to a stop in front of Finn. As Quinn and the gang scramble through the relatively shallow river, Kurt whips up a massive wave, sweeping every last one of them up and white-water rushing them downstream and far away, where hopefully they can't hurt anyone else. He watches the wave until it is out of sight, and then turns back to Finn.

While Kurt was occupied, a massive clump of bodies seems to have appeared around the wounded boy, who is lying on the ground, face pinched, clutching at his shoulder and gasping for air. Rachel looks like she's about to fall apart. Artie is absolutely horrified. Blaine is shocked, and even Mercedes seems distraught.

"Is… he okay?" the leader asks.

David smacks him, while Wes smacks his own forehead. "He was just… perforated!" Wes shouts. "Of course he's not okay!"

"We need to get him to the river," Kurt says urgently. No one does anything, so he glares at anyone in range. "Don't just stand there! Pick him u—"

"Got it," Mercedes says, lifting Finn all by herself. It's a testament to Finn's height and Mercedes's lack thereof that even when cradled in her arms, Finn's limbs almost touch the ground. The waterbender cries out as the earthbender jostles his injured shoulder, but she just shushes him and carries him to the river, gently laying him in the water. As soon as his shoulder is submerged, it starts glowing, and Finn's pinched face relaxes quite a bit. His eyes are still closed.

Artie, Kurt, Rachel, and Blaine all gather around him as he lies in the water.

"Finn?" Rachel asks. "Are you alright?"

"I'm…" he says weakly. "I'm okay." He smiles, though it quickly turns into a wince. "Just gonna… lay here for a little while."
A collective sigh of relief bubbles up from the entire crowd (Kurt is pretty sure they qualify as a crowd at this point), and the tension breaks at last.

"Don't scare me like that," Kurt scolds him gently, running fingers through his hair.

Finn grins. "S… sorry," he says.

As the Avatar stands up to take a moment to himself, Rachel sits down beside Artie on the muddy ground near Finn. The two begin a slightly one-sided conversation, talking at him moreso than with him, more to distract him than anything else. Mercedes looks ambivalent, but relieved, and after a moment or two, she walks over and joins the conversation.

Blaine has him wrapped in a hug before he even knows he's there. "Are you okay?" he asks.

Kurt nods. "Come on. Let's go meet our new… friends? Recruits? Who are these people?"

"I have no idea," Blaine says. "Let's find out."

They turn their attention to the group of soldiers, whose leader is currently addressing them at large.

"Well," Straight Sword says, sheathing his weapon. "That was an ordeal, but I'd say we handled it admirably. Good job, men!"

A collective whoop of triumph pops up from the soldiers, who start milling around and high-fiving each other.

Blaine finds his attention drawn to the soldiers as they celebrate. Two-Swords and Spear give each other one-armed hugs before gushing about how awesome they were. Staffy looks slightly panicked—the more level-headed Chainy finds him a place to sit down and puts a calming hand on his shoulder.

"Come on," Kurt says. "I think if anyone knows what's going on here, it's them." Together, Kurt and Blaine walk over to the three apparent leaders of the group, where things are only slightly less friendly.

"You couldn't have stopped them before they nearly killed us with a giant boulder?" David asks, crossing his arms.

"I'm sorry!" the leader says. "I had no idea he was going to do that! It was very spur-of-the-moment."

"Yes, death tends to happen that way, on occasion. Do try to avert it if you can," Wes says.

"Well, I solemnly vow that the next time I have occasion to stage a sudden and unexpected betrayal, I will shoot for more beneficent timing," the leader says, haughtily turning up his nose. "You are welcome, by the way."

Wes rolls his eyes, but his exasperation soon gives way to fondness, and he pats the soldier on the back. "Thank you," he says. "You did fairly well."

"Fairly well?" the leader balks. "Are you joking? We saved your proverbial arses! We "pulled your nuts from the flame," as they say," he says. The extra quotation marks indicate finger quotes, that—

Wait. Hold the fuck up.
Something twinges in Kurt's mind. He marches up to the spikiest helmet. "Do I know you from somewhere?" he asks.

"What a coincidence! I was about to ask you the same," the leader says. "I'd almost swear I recognize your voice. It's very distinctive, but I can't quite... place..."

He tilts his head at Kurt, slowly walking right up to him. Suddenly, grabs Kurt's robes and pulls them up so that they cover his face from the nose down.

Kurt smacks his hand away. "What is wrong with you?" he asks.

The leader gasps. "It's... it's you!" he cries, pointing accusatorially.

"Yes," Kurt says. "It's me. I'm Kurt. Who are you?"

"Ha!" the leader spits. "How easily you forget! Well... perhaps this will jog your memory." He reaches up and pulls off his helmet, revealing a boy close to Blaine's age, with vaguely similar gelled hair, lighter skin, and a slightly thinner face. "Do you recognize me now?" he deadpans with a glare.

Kurt jaw drops. "Oh. My. La," he says, pointing right back at the distinctly unamused boy. "It's... you're... you're... Not-Blaine!"

"Indeed," he says flatly. "We established that quite thoroughly."

"You two know each other?" Wes asks.

"We've... met," Kurt says uneasily.

At this, Blaine finally steps forward. "Okay, seriously. Wes, David—what is going on here? Who are all these people? What are they doing here?"

"Oh, right!" David says. "We still have introductions to take care of. MEN!" he calls out. "FALL IN!"

The helmet-wearing soldiers scramble from their various positions around the yard to line up in front of Wes, David, and Not-Blaine.

"I will do the honors," Not-Blaine says, stepping forward. "Your Majesty, Prince Blaine, I would like to introduce you to—take off your helmets, you fools! This is no way to meet the Fire Lord."

The soldiers' hands snap up and remove their helmets revealing... more boys. All boys, all around Blaine's age, some a little older, some a little younger.

"Prince Blaine, allow me to introduce..." Not-Blaine moves to the end of the line, and steps in front of the soldiers one-by-one, introducing each of them by name.

"Nick Duval!" he says in front of the dark-haired, brown-eyed boy with two swords. Nick gives a standard Fire Nation bow, and smiles warmly at Blaine as his commanding officer moves on.

"Jeff Sterling!" he announces in front of the spear-user, a bright blond with a slight fringe and a wide grin. Jeff gives Blaine two thumbs up until Nick elbows him. Then, he bows. Not-Blaine rolls his eyes and moves down the line.

"Trent Nixon!" he continues, stepping to the heavyset staff-wielder, a nervous looking boy with blue eyes and hair in what almost looks like a pompadour. Trent's bow is formal, if quick, and he
almost hits his head on Not-Blaine as he passes.

"Flint Wilson!" he says in front of the tall boy, a calm-looking figure slightly spiked hair and grey eyes. Flint's bow is measured, gracious, and slow. A bit too slow for Not-Blaine, who moves on before he finishes.

"And…" Not-Blaine says, starting to move down the line only to stop between Flint and the next soldier, a small, mousy-looking boy with black hair. "Erm… I'm sorry, but I can't seem to remember the rest of your names."

"Hey!" the rest of the soldiers grumble, quite offended.

"Don't get your cummerbunds in a twist!" Not-Blaine says, turning to walk back over to Wes and David, who are facepalming and shaking their heads. "I'm certain that we shall learn them eventually. And as for myself…"

He steps in front of Blaine, and bows with poise and elegance. "I am Thaddeus James Harwood the Third. It is an honor to meet you, my Lord."

"Thaddeus?" Kurt snorts. "Seriously?"

Thaddeus glares at the Avatar. "You may call me 'Thad,' if the full name is too cumbersome."

Pavarotti soars majestically over the gathered soldiers, giving a magnificent screech, circling around and landing on Blaine's shoulders.

David gapes and points at the bird. "Oh! He did it! He did the thing!"

"What thing?" Blaine asks.

"We've been trying to train him to do that for days!" Wes says excitedly. "Oh, it was just as cool as I'd imagined!"

"Indeed," Thad nods. "Now, if only we could work on the timing…"

The Prince shakes his head. "What timing? What are you talking about?" he cries, exasperated.

Thad steps forward and gestures to the soldiers. "My Lord, I am honored to present…"

The soldiers bow in unison.

"…the Dalton Academy Dragon Hawks!" he finishes with a grin.

There is a brief moment of silence, as if they are waiting for something, before Thad throws up his hands and stalks off, muttering about 'insufferable, insouciant, self-absorbed game hens…'

"Ideally," Wes whispers, "Pavarotti would do the flyover during the introduction."

Blaine looks up at the bird, which has his wings in what suspiciously looks like a shrug, and says the only thing his overworked mind can come up with.

"…ah."

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: That's right, people.
MOTHAFUCKIN' WARBLERS.

THEY HAVE ARRIVED.

Wes and David were just part of the surprise, mere decoys meant to distract you. **This** is the true surprise, the game-changer, and the entire reason for Wes and David's separate adventure. Where did these boys come from? How did they come together? Blaine's BFFs spin out the remainder of their epic yarn in *Dragon Hawks, Part 2: The Tale of the Hawks*. So, what do you think of the real Big Surprise? ;D
CHAPTER 55 – Dragon Hawks, Part 2

The Tale of the Hawks

"So… wait," Wes says, gesturing to Kurt. "This is awful monster who broke in while you were in prison?"

"The very beast himself," Thad says haughtily.

David tilts his head at the Avatar. "…you told us he was ten feet tall."

"A trick of the light," Thad says.

"And that he had horns like a gorilla goat," Wes adds.

"His hair was messy."
"And that he was covered in blood," David adds.

"...so he washed it off!" Thad says.

"You said he flew away on enormous wings of midnight black," Wes says flatly. "I see no wings."

Thad still refuses to budge. "Perhaps they only come out at night. I've heard stories of people who transform into monsters during the full moon."

Kurt gives him the stink-eye. "The only thing that happens to me during the full moon is a boost to my waterbending and occasional insomnia. Where did you get all of that stuff?"

Thad crosses his arms. "I... might have exaggerated select details, but my story captures the spirit of the encounter. Is that not more important than minute factual details?"

"Not really," Wes says.

"He left me in there!" Thad cries, outraged. "He knew for a fact that I was wrongfully imprisoned, and flatly refused to aid me. Not only that; he had the nerve to mock my situation! Such behavior is bestial by anyone's standards."

"Well, then, maybe you should flee the scary monster boy and do something else," David says diplomatically. "Why don't you go help pack everything up? We need to leave soon."

Thad glares at David and Kurt in turn. "...fine," he seethes, turning and stomping indignantly over to the others, who are tittering around between various ostrich horses, packing under the apparent guidance of Mercedes, who is directing traffic. Finn, his shoulder now bandaged, sits in a nearby chair-shaped rock that Artie bent up as Rachel hovers around him, chattering away, not noticing that he has fallen asleep.

"Well, that was suitably awkward," Blaine says. "I can't believe someone would make up a story like that just to discredit you."

"Well..." Kurt says. "There might be just a smidgen of truth to it. I mean, I did meet him in a prison and... sort of... declined to rescue him."

Blaine is somewhere between surprised and disappointed. "Wait, really? Why?"

"I thought you had been captured!" Kurt says sourly, crossing his arms. "I only had room for one rescue that day, and he was not it."

Wes snorts in ill-contained laughter.

"And what, praytell, is so funny?" Kurt asks.

"We once made a similar mistake," Wes says with a smile as David rejoins them. "Not exactly the same, but close."

"Oh?" Kurt says. "Do tell."

"Yes, please," Blaine says happily. "I want to hear the rest of the story."

"Alright," Wes says. "But no more interruptions! We have a lot of ground to cover before we go. Now... I believe we left off in Fenghuang..."
"...we're not alone!" Wes says, cracking a smile. "David! Why are we doing this by ourselves? Surely we're not the only ones who will take up this cause," Wes says. "We could get our friends to help us!"

"Marvelous idea!" David says. "One problem—we don't have any other friends."

"That's not true! There's... well... there were those people back at the Palace, but heaven only knows what happened to them. Other than that, we have... well... there's our families, but I don't think I want mine involved in this if I can spare them," Wes says thoughtfully.

"And I feel the same," David says. "Which leaves a grand total of no one."

Wes looks thoughtful for a few moments. "Well..." he says casually. "There's always Thad."

David stares at him flatly. "You can't be serious."

"What's wrong with Thad?" Wes asks.

"Thad is a pompous, overbearing, self-absorbed nitwit!"

"Who happens to be my friend, and I'll thank you not to insult him in my presence," Wes warns.

"Oh, please. You agree with me and you know it," David scoffs.

"That is entirely beside the point," Wes says, not budging from his position. "Think about it! Thad would be an excellent ally. He is very traditionally-minded, and well-connected to boot. Plus, he could feasibly walk right up to the assassins and have a casual chat with them."

"You could say the same thing for a charismatic street urchin," David says, still not convinced.

Wes rolls his eyes. Truth be told, he has been friends with Thad longer than he has with David. David, he met at Dalton. Thad, he's known since he was barely old enough to string words together. They formed a bit of a trio during their time at Dalton, but it was largely centered on Wes. David and Thad were not buddies by any stretch of the imagination. And Wes can't exactly deny David's assessment of some of the more... challenging aspect of Thad's personality.

But Thad does have one major trump card...

"Not many street urchins could offer the wealth or clout that comes with the Harwood name," Wes adds. "Lest we forget, the Harwoods are outlandishly rich."

David raises his brows in thought, tumbling the thought in his mind. "So, how is dear old Thad?" he asks with a grin. "We should in touch with him again. How I've missed his self-aggrandizing ways!"

"I knew you'd see the light eventually," Wes grins.

The next morning...

Wes and David set out bright and early to the local Hawk Office, to send Thad a letter. On their way, however, they are briefly distracted by a huge explosion. Wes puts a temporary mulligan on the no-staring rule, and the two head over to the site of the blast, which has torn a sizeable chunk out of the upper floor of one of the nicer inns in town. Voices burst from the smoking building...
"OWN TWO HANDS!"

"You said you were good to go!"

"I WAS HIGH, YOU JACKWEASEL!"

"Then why'd you say you weren't?"

"HOW THE FUCK WOULD I KNOW? I WAS HIGH!"

David tilts his head as a small crowd gathers around. "Is it just me, or does one of those voices sound familiar?" he asks.

Wes takes a look at those evacuating the inn. Among the standard crowd of vacationing families (with parents doing their best to shield their children's ears from the coarse language billowing out with the smoke), there are several lady soldiers, and two very familiar ladies.

"Shit!" Wes whispers. He starts to grab David and pull him away, but then he takes a closer look. Santana and Brittany seem to have eyes only for each other and the disaster unfolding on the upper floor. Brittany lays her head on Santana's shoulder, looking forlorn, and Santana whispers something that makes her giggle. They haven't noticed Wes or David, and don't seem likely to.

"DON'T YOU WALK AWAY FROM ME!"

Another explosion rocks the inn. Down below, the innkeeper despairs as his life's work slowly becomes kindling.

At this point, Wes decides that he'd rather not chance it, and pulls David aside so they can watch from a street corner.

"Wesley, what are you—"

"Look," Wes says, pointing to the ladies.

"…what are they doing here?" David asks.

"I don't know!" Wes answers. "Perhaps if we shut up and listen, we'll find out."

Unfortunately, they aren't able to catch much. A final explosion precedes Puck taking a flying leap from the upper floor onto the street and dashing off like a man with a starving tigerdillo on his tail. Quinn emerges from the flaming wreckage shortly thereafter, her Chi-Ryus there to assuage her rage. Slowly but surely, the crowds start to disperse.

"Damn it," David says. "The show's over."

"Let's get out of here before they spot us," Wes says.

"I second that motion," David says. They return to their original task of heading to the Hawk Office, passing the local stables on the way. There, they notice something odd—there is now a komodo rhino roosting beside Speedy (their newly-chosen name for the mongoose lizard), along with several dragon moose.

Outside the stables, a group of soldiers is conversing with a couple of Chi-Ryus. Since they don't have to worry about being identified by any of them, Wes and David decide to listen in on the conversation, under the guise of retrieving Speedy.
"…pect us to ride fucking dragon moose!" a dark-haired Chi-Ryus says.

"I'm sorry!" a soldier replies. "That's all we could bring on such short notice. There's a fort east of here with some rhinos you can use. The moose are just temporary."

"Look, the Captain is not in a good mood, okay? We may have only hours left before she full-on explodes," a sandy-blonde Chi-Ryu adds. "Like, literally. Complete with a mushroom cloud. Did you bring anything useful? Do you at least have some good news?"

"Well, I can't say there's much news to report from the Capital," the soldier continues as Wes starts climbing the saddle. "I hear the Fire Lord found some curly-headed punk she was lookin' for, got him locked up at the Palace…"

It's unfortunate that Wes hears this as he is climbing onboard Speedy, as his hands properly forget how to function, and he falls on his ass.

"What was that?" the dark-haired Chi-Ryu asks.

"Nothing!" David says lightly, sticking his head out "My friend here is a little new to the concept of saddles."

"Is he alright?" the sandy blonde asks.

"Fine!" Wes grunts, picking himself up. "When you fall off the lizard, you just have to get back on!" he says cheerily.

"That's the spirit, kid!" the soldier says. "You just gotta take what life gives ya sometimes, ya know? You girls should tell that to your boss."

"Why don't you tell her?" the dark-haired girl says.

"…ahhh… no thanks. I've got a thing… at a place, y'know?"

"Thought so," the dark-haired girl says. "Thanks for nothing."

And they all part ways, leaving the stables empty of other humans for the time being.

What was that?" David asks, glaring at Wes.

"I was shocked!" Wes says. "Did you hear what they were saying?"

"Yes," David says. "The Fire Lord has 'some curly kid.'"

"Exactly!" Wes says. "And what curly kid would the Fire Lord possibly be looking for?"

"…good point," David says thoughtfully. "Do you think we should investigate?"

"Oh, I think we should do more than that," Wes says. "I have an idea…"

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Once we finally got to the Hawk Office, we sent a letter to Thad warning him of our impending arrival—we intended to visit Dalton that very day, so we instructed him to gather up his friends to help us on a little 'project' we were working on. A short while and a brief detour later, and we returned to the old school at last.
The proud buildings of the Dalton Firebending Academy gleam in the afternoon sunlight as Wes and David pull into the courtyard on their lizard, which is slightly weighed down by a rather large cart attached to its tail. The sight that greets them is nothing less than appalling.

On the left side of the courtyard, a member of the custodial staff is chasing down several boys who were, just moments before, burning the outline of a large penis into the grass. In the middle, two boys are riding on the statue of the Dragon-and-Phoenix, two figures constantly circling each other and breathing flames. Male and female teachers desperately implore them to get down as they try to figure out how to turn the statues off. On the right side of the courtyard, several boys in a tree have turned the branches into a makeshift catapult and are laying mock-siege to the Windsor dormitories, who counter with flaming rolls of toilet paper.

"Is it just me," David asks, "or have the disciplinary standards… slipped just a bit?"

Wes hops off of speedy. "Something has slipped, alright," he says. "Stay here and make sure none of these hooligans gets to our cargo."

"Why do I have to stand watch?" David says.

"Because I have to go find Thad," Wes says. "Unless you want to chat up the old boy."

David crosses his arms. "Fine. I'll protect the contraband—"

"Not so loud!"

"—just try to make it quick."

Wes nods his assent and heads towards the lobby, ducking underneath a paper crane and stepping over a burning bag that smells very suspicious. As he enters into the lobby, he is spotted almost immediately.

"Wesley!" someone whispers. "Psst! Over here!"

Wes walks towards the sound of the voice, but the only thing he finds is one of the many ceremonial suits of samurai armor that stand watch over the school. "Hello?" he asks.

Thad sticks his head out from behind the armor. "Shhh!" he says. "Don't draw so much attention to yourself."

"What are you doing there?" Wes asks. "What happened here?"

"The Fire Lord has called a temporary halt to all educational activity in order to review and revise the current curriculum. Class is canceled for the foreseeable future, but the school is contractually obligated to continue to board us. Now the school is little more than a playground for bored adolescent firebenders. The structure has collapsed. Anarchy reigns supreme!" Thad whispers urgently.

Wes shakes his head. "Amazing how much can change in such a short time," he says softly.

"What is wrong with the Fire Lord?" Thad asks. "You work at the Palace, you should know. Has he gone mad?"

Wes looks up at his friend, disbelieving eyes scanning for any sign of disingenuousness. "…do you not know?"
"Know what?" Thad asks, looking around. He steps out from behind the armor. "Come, this way. We'll speak in private."

Thad leads them into a small, unused (of course) classroom, closing and locking the door behind them.

"Thad." Wes says carefully. "Something incredibly profound happened last week. Do you honestly not have any idea what?"

"You mean those strange sky-lights?" Thad asks. "Because I distinctly remember those. Everyone seemed either afraid of them or outraged by them. The racket made it very difficult to properly center myself."

"So you have no idea what else happened on the night of the lights?" Wes asks.

Thad shakes his head, looking at his old friend oddly. "No. The staff has seemed a bit on-edge lately, but no one has told us anything. Why? Is there something I should know?"

Wes can hardly believe it. Dalton is fairly secluded, even by Fire Nation standards—it was apparently converted from a monastery, so its out-of-the-way nature makes sense. Still, he can't fathom the staff keeping something of this magnitude a secret. At least… not willingly. "Thad… the Fire Lord was killed that night. There was a riot in the capital, followed shortly by a coup."

Thad's countenance goes from confusion to disbelief. "You're joking. That's… insane."

"I was there, Thad," Wes insists. "I saw it with my own two eyes. The Fire Lord is dead, and the Prince is missing, breaking the line of succession. An emergency Fire Lord was elected by the council. She is the one who issued the edict."

"But…" Thad says, shaking his head. "You and David… you protected the Prince, did you not? If… if there was a coup… good gods, man, are you alright?" he asks. "Where's Thompson? Is he… surely he's still…"

"David is alive," Wes says. "We're both fine. We narrowly made it out with our lives intact, and we're looking for the missing Prince right now. That's what this 'project' is about. The New Fire Lord got her position via sabotage, subterfuge, and assassination. The Fire Lord is dead, but if we can find the Prince, we stand a chance of invalidating her rule."

Thad blinks in complete shock, having to sit down and compose himself. "That is what your letter referred to? That's… it's… is this dangerous?"

"No," Wes says firmly. "David and I will be doing all the dangerous parts ourselves. All we need are a few good firebenders who can follow instructions."

"So it is dangerous," Thad says. "Just… not to the other students. Well, that's good. I did manage to wrangle up a few of my classmates, but… good gods. I can't believe it. I'm in shock."

"I haven't completely recovered, myself," Wes says. "But you don't have to worry. You will not be risking your life on our behalf, I assure you—"

"I most certainly will!" Thad says, offended. "How dare you insinuate that I would let my friends charge headlong into danger while I sit and sip tea!"

"Thad," Wes says, shocked. "Are you serious?"
"Of course I'm serious," Thad scoffs. "The Harwoods have a proud legacy of service to the Fire Nation. What kind of shame and dishonor would I bring my family if I shirked that duty?"

Wes shakes his head. "Thad, this is about much more than your family's honor. Can you even fight?"

This just causes even more outrage. "Can I fight? You may recall that during your time here, I was ranked Third Flame, behind only David and yourself, and I certainly haven't faltered since then. And did you forget about my swordsmanship?"

"Oh?" Wes says. "I remember your 'swordsmanship' from before I moved. I presume you've graduated from sticks?"

"Of course!" Thad scoffs. "I've been training with real weapons for nearly a decade. The Harwoods have been renowned for their bladework for generations! My father won countless exhibitions and competitions in his youth, and my grandfather and namesake so impressed the Fire Lord during the War of the Silver Flame—"

"—that he was given the honorary title of 'Dragonclaw.' You've mentioned it before," Wes says, rolling his eyes. "Once or twice."

"I see nothing wrong with taking a little pride in my heritage," Thad says, crossing his arms. "I do not take upholding the Harwood name lightly. Now, do you want my help, or not?"

Wes smiles, shocked but pleased. "Thad, of course I want your help. I just didn't expect you to jump into it quite so… enthusiastically."

Thad shakes his head in disappointment. "You have come to me in friendship, yet you expect me to refuse? To haggle price? You wound me, Wesley." He walks over to a fireplace, pulling out a poker and holding it up to the heavens. "By the life-giving light of Agni, so long as I draw breath, I pledge my sword to your cause." A short pause. "...I know this isn't actually a sword, but I think you understand the notion. You are my friend. I will not suffer you to face this alone."

"I apologize," Wes says with a soft smile. "I meant no offense. Thank you, Thad. There is just… one more thing I need to ask of you."

"Yes?" Thad asks, putting the poker back in its place.

"We… erm… weneedmoney," he coughs.

Thad blinks at him. "What was that?"

Wes sighs. "We need money. David and I are penniless at the moment, and we can't get money without going to our families, who I am fairly certain will tackle us and lock us in a basement at first sight; a rather ignominious end to our journey."

The young patrician regards his friend carefully. "That…" he says, trailing off thoughtfully, "...should not be a problem. I can give you a little to start with, and a short trip to my house will secure anything else we need."

"What about the others?" Wes asks. "You said you had gotten other students who would help us."

"I don't think it would be prudent to take them all to my house and back," Thad says thoughtfully.

"That's not what I meant, but you do have a point," Wes says. "Perhaps you could take our lizard.
"...your what?" Thad says carefully.

* A short walk later…

"...ye gods," Thad breathes, staring up at the creature before him. "He's magnificent. What is his name?"

"Speedy!" David announces.

Thad looks at him in thinly-veiled horror. "Speedy? Have you no respect for this creature? Mongoose Lizards are among the rarest and most beautiful of all mounts! They cannot be bred in captivity—their eggs will not hatch. They must be caught wild and carefully trained. Someone sacrificed *years* of sweat, tears and money to acquire this creature and you have the gall to call it Speedy?"

David glares at him. "He's very fast. Thus, Speedy. The name fits." He rolls his eyes. "He's just a lizard."

Thad's jaw drops in horror. He reaches up to cover the lizard's ears, only to quickly realize he doesn't exactly know where they are. "Pay no attention to him, Cornelius."

"Cornelius?" David barks. "That's your name? How is that any better than Speedy? How?"

"It's much more dignified," Thad says haughtily.

"Both of you, just shut up," Wes sighs. "Thad, be very careful with the lizard. It was incredibly expensive."

"And bought with someone else's money," David adds.

"I shall treat it as my own," Thad says proudly. "Now, as for the others… I didn't know what time you would arrive, so I instructed them to meet in the training room around sunset. They should be very receptive to your instructions, whatever they may be."

"Very well," Wes says. "When you get whatever it is you need, come to the Capital. We'll be looking for you at a restaurant called 'Breadstix.' Understood?"

"Perfectly," Thad says. "Now, if you'll excuse me… hi-ho, Cornelius! AWAY!"

With that, Thad rode off into the horizon, leaving David and I to find a place to hide from the chaos while we waited for the other students to show up. We sequestered ourselves in the practice room and awaited the arrival of Thad's helpers, who arrived in ones and twos just before sunset, arriving at a final total of nine.

* Nine students, willing to help us with a task they did not know about, whose names we didn't even know…

The atmosphere is just a little awkward. The students appear to be waiting for orders or instructions—a side-effect of a Dalton education, Wes would venture to guess. The two leaders sit at a table, facing the other students, strewn across various bits of furniture. Wes decides to break the ice.

"Since we are going to be working together, if only briefly, I feel it is important that we get to
know each other," Wes says. "We will each state our names and something about ourselves."

"Nick."

"Jeff."

"Wait, wait! Let's keep this nice and orderly," Wes says. "One at a time, as you are called upon. David and I will demonstrate." He stands up and clears his throat. "My name is Wesley Montgomery, 'Wes' for short. I went to school here before being employed by the Fire Lord. My favorite subject is History."

He sits down, and David stands up. "My name is David Thompson. I also went to school here, and I find history—and, consequently, Wesley—to be a bit dull."

A few light titters of laughter. Wes is willing to forgive a joke at his expense if it eases the tension. "Now, it's your turn. We'll start from this side of the room. Since you two were the most eager, you can go first."

A black-haired student stands up. "My name is Nick Duval. I'm here on scholarship, and my dream job is to become an adventuring archeologist."

"That job isn't as fun as all those serial scroll-stories make it sound," a larger boy butts in.

"Hey!" Wes says. "Wait your turn. It's rude to interrupt."

"...sorry," the boy says, shrinking down slightly. Wes feels a pinch of guilt from making him look so scolded, but maintaining order is important.

"I guess I'm next," the blonde says, standing up and proudly clapping Nick on the shoulder. "Jeff Sterling. Nick here's my best bud. My dad's in the Navy, and I have four brothers and sisters."

"Each?" David asks.

Jeff scoffs. "No. I mean... three brothers, one sister. I'm the oldest."

"Still," Wes says. "That's a pretty busy household." He moves along the room to the next participant, the larger boy who spoke up before. "Now it's your turn."

The boy stands up. "Thank you. My name is Trent Nixon, and my dad's an archaeologist. Really, the job is pretty boring. You mostly go around looking for old stuff and then trying not to break it once you find it. There's a lot of dusting involved."

"I can dust," Nick shrugs. "I'll dust from dusk 'til dawn!"

Jeff snorts a laugh.

"In that case, you'll fit right in," Trent says. "My mom is also a researcher. She studies volcanoes." He starts to sit down. "Oh! And I have a twin, but he doesn't go here."

"Very good," Wes says. "Next?"

The boy next to Trent stands up. And up. And up. He's a tall one.

"Flint Wilson," he says calmly. "I read."

And he sits back down.
"A man of few words," David says. "I like that."

"Words are the greatest form of bending. Benders bend the elements—words bend the benders," Flint quotes. "I speak carefully."

"An admirable trait," Wes says. He moves on to a shorter, mousy-looking boy. "And you?"

The boy seems somewhat hesitant to stand up. "My name is Nick. Also."

"Hmmm…" Wes says. "That presents a problem."

"You could call me Nichola—"

"He came first," David jumps in, pointing to Duval. "You can be 'Other Nick.'" He smiles, pleased with his problem-solving. "Go ahead, Other Nick!"

"Okay," Other Nick says. "I'm Nick Hudson, and… I… I… don't really know what to say. I'm kind of quiet. But not because I'm profound, like Flint. I just don't like talking. Normally, that is. Sometimes I ramble. Mostly when I'm nervous. Like, right now is a good example. I'm rambling, because I don't know what to say, and I just kind of keep going, because I can't think of a good stopping point, because I didn't really mean to start, and—"

"Okay!" Wes says, cutting him off. "I'll make a note of that, thank you."

They move on down the line.

A dark-skinned boy with very large hair. "Luke Wright. I once ate five live crickets on a dare."

"How did they taste?" Wes asks.

"Crunchy," he replies.

Most of the room cringes.

"Moving on," Wes says.

A tall blonde. "I'm James Kirk. I want to be a ship Captain."

"…that seems appropriate. I'm not sure why," David says.

"I think you'd make a good Captain," Wes comments. "Next?"

An average-sized brunet. "Ethan Moore. My girlfriend keeps forgetting my name. It makes me sad."

"…thank you for sharing that sadness," David deadpans. "Now I'm sad. But… not for quite the same reasons." He buries his head in his hands, quietly muttering. "I need a girlfriend…"

"Well, that's introductions out of the way," Wes says diplomatically. "It is very nice to meet you all. I'm sure we'll work well together."

"What, exactly—" Nick starts.

"Please raise your hand and wait to be acknowledged if you have any questions," Wes says.

Nick looks at him, confused. He looks at Jeff, who just shrugs. Then he raises his hand.
"Yes, Nick?" Wes asks.

"What, exactly, will we be working on?" Nick asks.

"I'm glad you asked," Wes says. "I'm not sure how many of you know it, but there has been a recent upset of incredible proportions in the upper echelons of Fire Nation government. What I am about to tell you must not leave this room, understood?"

The students look at each other a little nervously, but they all nod their assent sooner or later.

Wes looks around, making sure all the doors are closed, before he breaks the news. "The Fire Lord is dead."

Gasps of shock and horror and outrage. Even the stoic Flint looks moderately taken aback. Other Nick curls into the fetal position on a court as several other students stand up and start speaking loudly over one another.

"Shhhh!" David shushes. "Keep it down!"

"Order!" Wes shouts. "Order!"

No one listens to him.

"Damn it, give me something to—" He reaches over and grabs a small stone carving of an armored Fire Nation soldier and bangs it repeatedly on the table. "ORDER!" he shouts.

The banging seems to get their attention, and the students quickly quiet down.

"We have to keep this under wraps," Wes says. "For some reason, the staff is conspiring to keep this a secret from you, and I don't know why. If we're found out, we could be in terrible danger."

And the clamoring just starts again.

Wes bangs the soldier against the table. "ORDER!" he says, and the prattling ceases.

"Who are—"

"ORDER!" Wes bangs the soldier again, accidentally breaking its head off. "…shit." He shakes his head. "I'm sorry, but please raise your hand and wait to be—"

Trent raises his hand.

"Yes, Trent?" Wes asks, as David politely sweeps up the remains of the stone soldier's smashed skull and deposits them in a nearby potted plant.

"Who are you guys?" he asks. "Why do you need us, and what does the Fire Lord being dead have to do with anything? Is this a draft? Are we going to war?"

"What? No!" Wes says emphatically, trying to calm him down. "Oh, heavens, no! We're not—"

"We're the Fire Prince's bodyguards," David says. "He disappeared during the coup—"

"There was a coup?"

BANG. "Order!"
"—and we haven't been able to find him since," David finishes. "We believe the New Fire Lord, the one who planned and carried out the coup, is keeping him prisoner. We're going to break into the Palace and find him."

"We're gonna what into the where?" Other Nick balks.

"No, no!" Wes clarifies. "Not 'we' as in 'all of us.' 'We' as in 'the two of us.' David and I will be doing all the dangerous work. We know the Palace inside and out, better than anyone, and we would not dream of purposely endangering you. You can all relax."

They do, if only slightly.

"But you do need us," Flint chimes in. "For what?"

David puts his chin on his hands and smiles mischievously. "Our master plan is somewhat complex. The Palace is heavily guarded. Breaking in would be very difficult under normal circumstances… so we have decided to make the circumstances decidedly abnormal."

"We recently acquired a rather large amount of… shall we say… perception-dampening substances," Wes says. "Very potent stuff that we have a bit of experience with. When burned, it produces smoke which acts as a powerful painkiller and induces feelings of euphoria."

"Sweet," Jeff says. "Care to share?"

Nick slugs him. "Dude, shut up. Not the time."

Jeff rubs his arm. "I was just asking…"

"Our plan," Wes says, continuing as if uninterrupted, "is to smoke them out. And that is where we will need your help. The job should not put you in any kind of direct danger—if caught, you can simply pretend to be bored sniffers looking for a fix. That said… there is always an element of the unexpected, and I should warn you that the woman who did this is very dangerous. David and I will do all we can, but there is a chance that we will fail."

"We'll try to keep the heat off of you and onto us, but we can't promise 100% success. There is an element of risk here, so be aware. We're trying nothing less than to save the true heir of the Fire Lord's throne from a murdering usurper. You've seen already what Sue Sylvester has done to Dalton in a week. Imagine what she might do given a lifetime to rule an entire Nation," David says. Several queasy, fearful looks are thrown around.

"What we're trying to say is…" Wes says. "You're all… well, technically, we're all considered children in the eyes of the law. This is a difficult burden to ask of anyone. So if you want out, now is the time. You may get up and walk through that door, and we will not think any less of you for doing so."

Wes nods to the doorway, and allows a moment of silence. The gathered students exchange a series of inscrutable looks.

"Where's Thad? Did he chicken out?" Trent asks.

"Oh, no," Wes says. "Thad went to his house to get some supplies. He's with us for the long haul."

"Unfortunately," David mutters.
Trent crosses his arms. "Well, if he's doing it, then I'm certainly not going to back down. It'll be a cold day inside Mt. Juku before Thad freaking Harwood is braver than I am."

He sits back down, to a small titter of laughter from the others. No one gets up.

"Really?" Wes asks. "No one wants out?"

The students eye each other once again, but no one gets up.

Wes smiles. "Well, as the sun rises! I knew Dalton wouldn't let me down."

"I'm impressed," David says. "I think this might actually work."

"So… what's the plan?" Other Nick asks.

"We'll go over it in more detail during the train ride tomorrow," Wes says. "For now, you should all get some rest. We've a big day ahead of us, and we'll need to be in top form."

The students file out of the room.

"Oh, and… thank you," Wes says quietly. "You honor the Fire Lord with your bravery."

After that, he's pretty sure at least a few of them walk a little taller.

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The next morning, we made the arduous journey down to the nearest train station, and took a train to Dun Qi Kong. It was a bit of a challenge to smuggle all the Zaru Leaf we needed onboard, but we managed to hide most of it in carry-on bags. Fortunately for us, the guards seemed to be screening for something other than contraband—they each took long, hard looks at our faces before allowing us to pass. Flint and James were held up for being too tall, but in the end, they too were allowed onboard.

From the Monkey City, we were able to hitchhike with some local traders to the actual Capital. Neither of us had been back to the Capital since the night of the riots. We were so caught up in our planning and scheming and new friends that we never stopped to think about what was truly waiting for us in the city we called home…

Nick and Jeff are in a heated discussion on the proper punchline to a particularly dirty joke, and the entire cart full of boys is in stitches. The two are so into it that they don't notice as the laughter rapidly dries up, until suddenly, they are the only ones making any kind of sound. They look up to find the faces of their fellows staring out of the cart. Each of them looks to be largely devastated, but none moreso than Wes and David.

"Wes…" David says, his heart in his throat. "Wesley… look at it…"

"I see it," Wes says quietly.

The city is ruined.

Sure, many of the buildings still stand. But many are collapsed—little more than blackened piles of wood, mortar, and metal, jagged beams sticking out at all angles like boarcupine spines, warning away those who might get close. Many more are well on their way to falling down—a three-story inn seems to have had a good quarter of its face stripped off, and what remains leans to the side precariously, looking like the slightest breeze would be enough to send the entire thing toppling.
Windows are shattered left and right—some with torn cloth hanging over them, swaying back and forth in the still air, others are half-heartedly covered with boards or paper. Glass litters the streets, rubble and debris haphazardly swept to the side and clogging up gutters—wheels, broken furniture, animal carcasses, and Agni only knows what else. Black streaks and scorched holes are visible in nearly every edifice, scars of firebending gone wild. Many doors hang open, but no one comes or goes. From the corner of his eye, Wes thinks he sees a few people peeking out from the shadows, but as soon as he tries to find them, they vanish.

"Holy shit…" Jeff whispers. "You guys didn't tell us it was this bad."

"We didn't know," Wes says thickly, shaking his head. "We didn't know."

"She did this," David seethes.

"How could she make an entire city destroy itself?" Wes asks.

"I don't know," David says. "But I just… this is her fault. It has to be."

The unspoken statement is as clear as day. I need someone to blame for this. I need someone to hate. For David, Sue Sylvester fits that mold perfectly.

The other citizens, however, have been given a different scapegoat.

"Down with the Avatar!" a voice cries from their left.

"Down with the Avatar!" a chorus of voices echoes back.

The boys their heads just in time to watch an effigy in the likeness of the Avatar set alight, to the angry cheers of the crowd surrounding it. The thing appears to have been constructed to take plenty of punishment; rocks, bottles, and fireballs are thrown at it from all angles, but it remains standing defiantly even as it burns, allowing the citizens to vent their anger.

When the cart finally stops, the boys hop off with their bags of contraband, leaving to make their way through the destroyed city. Some areas are better than the one they entered through. Some are worse. But they all have one strange thing in common…

"No one is rebuilding," David says. "It's been over a week since the night of the lights. Why does it still look like this?"

There are a few slapped-together repairs, but Wes sees no professional work. Nothing is being done to rebuild, or to even prop up the buildings that seem dangerously close to collapse. As they move through the city, they come within sight of the Palace, and the reason for this becomes very, very clear.

"I guess all the contractors in the city are busy with other projects," Wes spits.

The only large-scale reconstruction being done at all is being done to the Palace, and it certainly isn't being half-assed. The entire building (or at least the parts that can be seen over the walls) is surrounded by scaffolding. Any damage done to it has been quickly painted over. A few parts still look a little uneven, but even from here, Wes can see people working on it at the very highest levels.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" a man growls at him as Wes almost steps on him.

"…sorry, sir," Wes says, bowing to the poor fellow.
The man just spits and goes back to sitting against the wall, legs splayed out across the sidewalk. Wes blinks at the man. "I don't mean to be rude, but… why are you sitting where people walk?"

"Ain't got nowhere else to sit!" the man grumbles.

"Are you homeless?" David asks.

"Am now," the man says. "Me and a shit-ton of other folks."

"…that's awful," Wes says. "And nothing is being done to help you?"

"Pfft," the man says. "Times like these, people gotta help themselves. There are parents out there with kids to worry about. Nobody's got time for a sorry old ass like me. Now go on, get out of here. 'm tired of talking."


He starts to walk off, but something stops him. Reaching into the small money pouch Thad provided him with, he takes out a silver piece and offers it to the man. "Would this help you at all?"

The man glares at him, teeth parting into a snarl. For a second, Wes is sure the man is going to slap the money out of his hand, snarl at him, tell him that he has no need for Wes's pity. But after a second, the man just snatches the money and looks down at the ground. "Thank you, son," he says quietly. "Now go on. Get out of here. And take my advice; don't go flashin' that money around, y'hear?"

Wes nods. "Yes, sir."

With that, the boys file past the man, moving deeper into the city.

"Guys… where are we going to stay?", Trent asks suddenly.

"What do you mean?" Wes asks.

"Think about it," Trent says. "Any inn that's left standing is going to be completely booked by people and families with nowhere else to go. We're not gonna find a room."

"Surely we can find something," David says.

But soon they realize how right Trent is. Every inn that they pass has a 'No Vacancy' sign. One even has a dirty-looking family pleading with the innkeeper for the prospect of paying and sleeping in the lobby, only to be told that his lobby is already rented out.

After a few more minutes of searching, Wes finds a relatively clean place to sit against a stable-looking wall, and plops down, taking a moment to rest. Around him, the boys quietly murmur to each other as they join him.

"This is a nightmare," Wes says. "I don't… I don't even know what to say."

"I live in a coal mining town," Nick says quietly. "There was an explosion one day that wrecked almost half the town. I thought I'd never see anything as bad as that, but… I guess I was wrong."

Jeff gives Nick a supportive shoulder clap.
"Can we... I don't know... do something to help?" Trent asks.

"What *can* we do?" Wes asks. "This is far bigger than any of us could possibly hope to remedy. Nothing we do would even make a dent in this disaster."

"In a dark room, even the dimmest candle is a comfort," Flint says.

"True," David says. "But we can't forget why we came here to begin with. If we can find the Prince, we can invalidate Sylvester's rule and give these people real help."

"David is right," Wes says. "For now... I think we should stick to the plan."

"We still don't have a place to stay," Jeff says. "Are we just gonna... *camp out* or something?"

David and Wes share a look.

"...there might be one other option."

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As one of the perks of our jobs, our families were provided with relatively nice houses in the hills just outside of town, which were largely spared from the riots. To be perfectly honest, I think we both had hoped to avoid seeing them. Not because we didn't love them, but because we did.

. We feared that we would reach home and fall into the comforting arms of our parents and siblings and never want to leave them.

But desperate times called for desperate measures. So we steeled ourselves as best we could, and prepared to face what were by far the most terrifying obstacles our journey had presented us with thus far...

Mrs. Montgomery rushes to the door, opening it and nearly fainting from shock when she sees her son on the other side, surrounded by five other boys.

Wes gives her a slightly queasy smile. "...hello, mother. May we come in?"

Mrs. Thompson sends her little girl Alicia to get the door. She opens it to the sight of her big brother and a bunch of other boys.

She looks at him, flatly unimpressed. "Boy, you are in trouble. MOM!"

Their respective reamings begin almost simultaneously, with slightly different flavorings.

"DAVID LOUIS THOMPSON, I HAVE HALF A MIND TO PUT YOU IN A STRAIGHTJACKET, BECAUSE SON, YOU ARE CRAZY IF YOU THINK YOU CAN DISAPPEAR FOR WEEKS AT A TIME WITH NO MORE CONTACT THAN—"

"—A HAWK? ONE HAWK IS ALL I GET FROM YOU? WESLEY ALLEN MONTGOMERY, I KNOW I RAISED YOU TO BE MORE RESPECTFUL THAN THAT. AND WHO ARE YOU TO TELL ME 'DON'T WORRY'? I'M YOUR MOTHER! OF COURSE—"
"—I'M GOING TO WORRY! I WILL WORRY AS MUCH AS I DAMN WELL PLEASE, AND THEN I WILL WORRY SOME MORE JUST TO SPITE YOU! I WILL WORRY ABOUT YOU SO HARD, IT'LL SPIN YOUR HEAD RIGHT OFF YOUR SHOULDERS! DAVID, YOU ARE —"

"—GROUNDED, GROUNDING, GROUNDING, YOU ARE SO DEEPLY GROUNDING THAT PEOPLE WILL CONFUSE YOU FOR AN EARTHBENDER! YOU'D JUST BETTER BE THANKFUL YOUR FATHER ISN'T HERE TO GIVE YOU HIS THOUGHTS. I DOUBT HE WOULD STOP AT GROUNDING. HE'D PROBABLY GO STRAIGHT FOR—"

"—GRINDING YOUR SORRY ASS INTO BAKING POWDER! YOU HAVE BEEN GIVING US FITS, SON! THAT'S WHAT REALLY GETS ME! DID YOU EVEN THINK ABOUT YOUR FAMILY WHILE YOU WERE OFF HAVING YOUR LITTLE ADVENTURES? DID YOU THINK ABOUT ANYBODY BUT YOURSELF? BOY, YOU BETTER—"

"—ANSWER ME! WHEN YOU ARE ASKED A QUESTION, YOU ARE EXPECTED TO ANSWER, NOT STAND THERE GAPING LIKE A BEACHED LUNGFISH!" Wes's mother pauses to catch her breath and calm her nerves.

Mrs. Thompson massages her forehead, while Alicia watches from the staircase with thinly veiled glee.

And then, both women ask the killing question.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"I'm sorry, mom, I just…" David says, looking down.

"I am truly sorry, mother, from the bottom…" Wes starts.

Neither of them gets to finish. David finds himself in a crushing hug, his head reaching just high enough to rest on the tall woman's shoulder. "You scared me, David. Don't ever scare me like that again," she says even as she squeezes him.

He wishes he could promise her he wouldn't.

Wes, by contrast, is pulled into a tight embrace by a woman he is shocked to find that he now stands taller than. "My baby," she whispers. "Oh, my baby. I was so worried about you."

He wishes he could make her stop.

But neither of them has the power to make their wish come true. So for the time being, they allow themselves to be comforted, offering whatever comfort they can in return. It's wonderful to be home again… but they know it can't last.

David's mother took a bit of convincing, but eventually, she opened her doors to the other students. She believed them to be homeless boys from the riots, and David did not correct her.

My mother was a bit easier. She was a teacher, so she knew about the ban on teaching. I told her they were friends from Dalton, which technically wasn't a lie, and she allowed them in.

That night, we all got a good, home-cooked meal. David was subject to a second chewing-out from his father when he got home from his restaurant. Mine was stuck attempting to sort out the chaos at university, so I was spared a similar fate. I was not, however, spared from my older sister,
Ashley, who got home later that evening, threw me face-down on the ground and sat on my head for fifteen minutes, my punishment for the crime of 'being a punk.'

It wasn't until the next day that either of us dared to try explaining things to them. We figured it would be more effective if we did it as a unit, so while everyone else went out to map the city and take care of the first part of the plan, I took my mother over to David's house, and we did our best to explain what happened...

"So let me get this straight," Mrs. Thompson says. "You're telling us you both nearly died on the night of the riots, you've been running around for a week chasing after dangerous criminals and dangerous assassins, and now you want to walk right back into danger—into the home of someone you claim is crazy enough to turn the entire Nation on its head and commit murder to get what she wants. You want to close enough to smell this woman's breath, all to rescue someone who may or may not even still be there. Is that about right?"

"Well..." David says. "When you say it that way, it sounds downright insane."

"Alicia!" Mrs. Thompson calls. "Go to the market and buy mommy a straightjacket, please!"

"What size?" Alicia calls back.

"Doesn't matter! One size fits all, sweetie," Mrs. Thompson replies.

"Wesley, you are not going back out there," Mrs. Montgomery insists. "What's done is done. I know it hurts that you lost your friend..."

"Mom, this isn't right!" Wes says. "That woman is evil! She hired those assassins, I know she did."

"How?" Mrs. Montgomery asks. "If you have proof that she got her throne illegally, why not bring it forth?"

"I... don't have 'proof'," Wes says. "All I have is my word."

"And mine," David chimes in. "You're not listening to us. How can you just sit there and worry about us when the future of an entire Nation is at stake? You believe us, I know you do. We wouldn't lie to you. Not about this."

Mrs. Thompson looks at David flatly. "I know it sounds bad, but you are more important to me than the Fire Nation."

"You are just children!" Mrs. Montgomery says. "It's not your place to take matters like this upon your shoulders."

"If not us, then who? No one else is willing," Wes says. "And we're not children. In the eyes of the law maybe, but after everything we've been through..."

"We're not kids. Not anymore," David finishes.

Wes's older sister, Ashley, watches the proceedings silently. Her face is inscrutable.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Thompson says. "But I can't let you go back out there and risk your lives over a ghost. For all you know, those assassins just dumped that boy's body in a river somewhere."

"So that's it?" David asks. "You know the truth, and you choose to do nothing about it?"
"I refuse to let you throw your life away for nothing," Mrs. Thompson replies. "You're not going."

"This is far too dangerous for boys to be handling," Mrs. Montgomery says. "You are staying with us, and we are all moving away from this horrible place. That is final."

And there, the conversation ended. Judging by the looks they gave each other as we left the house, I think deep down our parents knew what was going to happen that night. When the others came back having completed their tasks, they were quickly turned away and told to go back to Dalton before they got into trouble. David slipped a note to Flint about a rendezvous point before they left, looking suitably dejected.

That night, we waited until we were reasonably sure everyone else was asleep. Then we packed a few things, wrote our apologetic goodbye letters, headed to the doors, and... got our asses kicked by our sisters.

Ashley slams Wes into the wall, holding his arm behind his back and keeping him pinned. "You are such a punk," she says.

"Let me go," Wes growls. "I have somewhere to be."

"Mom's not asleep, you know," Ashley says. "She knows you're going to sneak out. And she knows she can't stop you."

"And yet you seem to have missed the message," Wes sighs.

"So that's it?" Ashley asks. "You're just leaving without even saying goodbye?"

"...I have a note," Wes says quietly.

She presses him harder into the wall. "You. Are. A. Punk."

"What do you want me to do?" Wes growls, breaking free of her grip and turning around. "I'm sorry, Ashley. I really am! But there is absolutely no part of me that is willing to sit around and do nothing while a murderer sits on the throne."

"I know," Ashley shrugs. "I don't have a problem with you leaving. I have a problem with you sneaking off like a punk. Like a little coward who can't even face his family and tell them that he loves them, but he has to do things his way. That, little brother, is what an adult does. That is why, no matter how big you think you are, you're still a child."

The anger leaves him, and he feels deflated and weak. "I just... I thought it'd be easier this way," Wes says quietly.

"For who?" Ashley asks. "For you?"

"For everyone," Wes says.

She crosses her arms and stares him down. "Fine," she says. "Go. Slink off into the night."

"Are you trying to use reverse psychology?" Wes asks. "Because it isn't going to work."

She shakes her head. "I'm not trying to do anything. I've said my peace. It's your life now. You make your own choice."
She turns and walks back into the house. Wes turns towards the door, pulling out the note and setting it on the mantle where he knows she is sure to find it. His hand slows to hover over the wood, the paper resting delicately in his palm.

Closing his eyes, he crumples the note and burns it, scattering the ashes into the fireplace, and marches back into the house. Down the hall, to the end, where he sees a flickering light from behind the door. He slides it open slowly. His mother takes one look at him, dressed in travel gear with a pack on his back, and bursts into tears. He hugs her as tightly as he can.

David is assaulted by Alicia. Being that she is only seven, she isn't quite as physically oppressive as Ashley, but what she lacks in strength, she makes up for in enthusiasm.

"YOU SUCK!" she squeals, jumping on his back from the stairs and pounding him with a barrage of tiny fists. "YOU SUCK, YOU SUCK, YOU SUCK, YOU SUCK!"

"Quit it!" David hisses. "You're going to wake mom and dad!"

"No, she's not," a deep voice says.

David growls in frustration as his sister continues to beat him senseless. David's father and mother both light lamps to illuminate the room as he grabs the squirming pile of anger and pulls her off, holding her at arm's length before she squirms free of him and runs to hide behind her parents.

"Going somewhere?" Mrs. Thompson asks.

"Yes, ma'am," David says plainly.

"That's an awfully big bag," Mr. Thompson says. "I guess you plan on being away for a while."

"It's a possibility, sir," David says petulantly.

"I don't know what happened to you that made you think you can just disrespect us like this, but you better straighten your head out, son. Running off without even telling anybody—"

"I left you a note," David says.

"Oh, well, thank you so much for thinking of us!" Mrs. Thompson says.

"You won't listen to reason. You won't listen to me," David says. "I see no other options. Mom, Dad… blazes, let's throw Alicia in here too; I love you, but I can't walk away from this! Something well and truly evil is happening, and Wesley and I… we might be able to stop it. It started with a riot, a coup, and a murder. Heaven only knows how it's going to end. I don't want to wait around and see."

Mr. and Mrs. Thompson look at him, their faces stone cold, their eyes assessing. Mr. Thompson speaks first. "…you really believe that, don't you?"

David nods. "I do."

"And the decision's made? No changing your mind?" Mrs. Thompson asks.

"No," David says simply.

They stare at him a little while longer, before Mrs. Thompson finally speaks, her voice thick. "Alicia," she says. "Say goodbye to your brother."
Alicia jumps out from behind her, looking heartbroken and angry. "You said he wouldn't leave! You said you wouldn't let him!" she says.

"Honey, your brother is a man now," Mr. Thompson says gently. "We have to—"

"No, he's not!" Alicia yells. "He's just a big stupid boy! You said he wouldn't leave and you lied!"

She runs up and starts kicking David's shins. David swallows a lump in his throat, gently kneels beside her, and wraps his arms around her until she stops kicking and starts crying. "I'm sorry," he whispers. "I love you, Little Leesha."

"You're stupid," she sobs. But she hugs him back.

Back at Wes's house, Mrs. Montgomery finally calms down after a few minutes. "You're my baby," she says quietly. "My little Wessy. I didn't think I could have any more children when I had you. I thought I was too old. And then… surprise!"

Wes chuckles. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh, hush," Mrs. Montgomery says. "We all need a little surprise every now and then. It helps give us perspective. Just when we think we have everything figured out, the universe shows us how little we truly know."

"I wish it didn't have to. It'd be nice if we could just depend on things to stay the way they are," Wes says.

"Yes, it would," Mrs. Montgomery says. "But the universe is too big and too complicated for that. Too many things moving around that we have no idea about. This world is so much bigger than us. I think you're starting to see that now. I think that's why this is so important to you. You've found something bigger than yourself that you believe in."

"So you're letting me go?" Wes asks.

"I don't have a choice, do I?" his mother replies.

Wes shakes his head. "I have to do this. I swore I would do everything I could for him. I swore it. I know I was just a kid, but I swore. Blaine was my friend."

She smiles. "Then go help him. Go, before I change my mind and get Ashley to tie you up and lock you in the basement."

Wes laughs, and gives his mother one last hug. "I love you."

"I love you too, Wessy," she says tearfully.

A few minutes later, when he emerges from his mother's room, he finds Ashley waiting for him in the hallway with crossed arms.

He stares her down for a few moments. She stares back.

And then she smiles, and pulls him into a hug. "Wise choice, little man," she says, squeezing him just tight enough for it not to hurt. "Wise choice."

Wes smiles. "Thanks."

"Stay alive, okay?" Ashley says, rubbing his back.
"I can promise you that I will do my absolute best," Wes replies.

Alicia cries herself to sleep on David's shoulder. He picks her up and holds her gently, carrying the sleeping girl to his waiting parents.

"I know it's hard for you to understand, but..." David sighs. "I feel protective of Alicia. She is my little sister. I want to look out for her. But... Blaine was honestly like a little brother to me. I wanted to look out for him, too. Someone attacked him, killed his family and took him away... and that this very person is sitting and being rewarded for this makes me sick inside. I can't stand by and do nothing."

Mrs. Thompson quietly takes Alicia from his arms, putting the girl against her shoulder. She holds the girl silently for a few moments. "Don't think I don't understand, sweetie," she says. "How do you think I feel about Alicia? About you? I'd just as soon tear down the walls of the Palace myself."

"I'd rather you didn't," David says. "In fact, I think Mrs. Montgomery was right. You all should move away, as soon as possible. The Fire Lord gave you these houses—the new one can just as easily take them away. She'll probably do worse if she figures out who we are."

"Son," Mr. Thompson says. "I still don't agree with what you're doing, but I won't stop you from doing it. You're at least as hard-headed and stubborn as I am, so I don't see much point in trying."

"Well, thank you for that vote of confidence," David says with a smile.

His mother hugs him. "Please try to be safe," she says. "Please."

"I'll try," David says. "I promise."

Mr. Thompson pulls him in for a hug. "Take care of yourself, son."

David nods. "The world might be getting very dangerous, very soon. Take care of everyone."

"That's my job," Mr. Thompson says quietly. "I'll do mine if you do yours."

When David reaches the end of his yard, Wes is there waiting for him. Both young men take a minute for one final look at the houses they've called home for years.

"Ready?" Wes asks, not looking at David.

David takes a deep breath. "Ready."

They walk away without looking back.

When they get to the rendezvous point, it's almost sunrise. The boys congregate in the ruined shell of a butcher's shop, which still smells very faintly of rotten meat.

Everyone's eyes snap to Wes and David when they walk in. Judging by the looks on the others' faces, they must look pretty bad.

"You guys alright?" Jeff asks.

"Yeah," Wes says.

David nods. "Yeah."
And that's the last they speak of it.

That day, eleven or so days after the riots, we were finally able to move on with the plan. We tried to wait for Thad, but a unique opportunity presented itself to us. As we kept eyes on the Palace, we noted a rather large and elaborate caravan of carts, tanks, and mounted cavalry pouring out of the gate at one point. A little investigation confirmed that it was none other than the Fake Fire Lord herself, on her way to visit a nearby military base to look at some kind of new machine they had built. Her exit took a great number of guards along with her. David and I knew that a golden opportunity like this was unlikely to present itself again, so we could wait no longer.

We prepared to sneak into the Palace, while everyone else got into position...

"Was that there before?" David asks, pointing up to the Palace wall.

Wes looks over to see an enormous likeness of Sue Sylvester carved from stone, its size a massive overstatement of the woman's importance and an understatement of her ego. Much of the statue is hidden by the Palace walls, but her head is clearly visible peeking out over the top, as if you say 'I'm watching you, bub.' Her eyes do seem oddly piercing.

"That is highly unsettling," Wes says.

"How can she honestly be building a monument when the City looks like… this?" David asks, gesturing to the catastrophe around them. If anything, the city looks worse than it did when they arrived. A rainstorm the previous day has made everything a little soggy and stinky, and washed a bit more nastiness out into the streets for people to try in vain to sweep up.

"It doesn't matter what she builds," Wes says. "We're going to ensure that it falls."

He kneels down next to a sewer grate, pulling out a small firecracker and lighting the fuse with a finger spark. Once lit, he lets the explosive drop, where it detonates with a loud pop!

The two then hurry off to get into position.

The pop echoes through the sewers, reaching the ears of their companions. None of them are particularly happy to be down there, but Wes is fairly sure that if given the choice, they would take their current jobs over infiltrating the Palace any day of the week. Having received the signal, the underground workers start working.

Much of the work was done the day before—the boys spent the day mapping out the sewer system and marking which junctions needed to be blocked off. One by one, the boys move through the sewers and check their debris walls to make sure they are stable. They're careful not to restrict the water flow, but at the same time, they must be relatively sure that little air can get past them. Fortunately, most of the sewers are pretty narrow, especially once you get closer to the Palace—it seems that the builders of the system wanted to be sure that no one could sneak into or out of the Palace from below. Once you get within a certain distance of the Palace, it's almost impossible to actually move through the sewers without crawling, and there are several metal grates to block intruders.

Above ground, Nick and Jeff have a job of their own to do. Casually strolling down the street from their designated starting point, they start subtly covering sewer grates and blocking up gutters. The excess of clutter makes it easy for them to casually knock things over and kick things aside as they pretend to goof around with each other, something the two apparently excel at.
At one spot in the sewer, relatively close to the Palace, but not too close, is Trent and Flint, with their entire supply of contraband. Pulling the thick bandanas over their faces to ensure they don't breathe any in, they wait for the signal fires from the others that indicate the blockages are secure. Once they see them, the boys light up the junk and get out of the sewers as quickly as possible.

All of this is to achieve one singular effect—as the Zaru Leaf burns, the selective blocking of the sewers and the covering of the grates means that the smoke has only one place to go; beneath the Palace, where the grates are not blocked.

Wes and David watch carefully. After a few minutes, smoke starts rising from behind the Palace walls.

The boys share a little grin at a job well done. It's go time.

Dipping their bandanas in water to make sure they act as decent filters, the boys tie them tight over their mouths and noses, before hopping up the same tree that Blaine used to use to get into and out of the Palace.

"I can't believe they still don't know about this!" Wes says happily as he scrambles up the branches.

"I know," David says. "I guess the glorious new leader is too busy erecting monuments to herself to worry about plugging holes in her security."

They reach the top of the branches. Wes jumps over and scrambles up the wall, grabbing the top with his fingers and hoisting himself up. David follows after him, having just reached the top when he hears a slightly panicked whisper from Wes. "David?"

"Yes?" David says.

"Pull yourself up very carefully," Wes says. "I think they know about the security hole."

David is a bit wary of that statement, but he does as he is told, carefully hoisting himself on top of the wall and taking stock of the world around them. The Palace Yard is literally chock full of tents and temporary shelters, while various bits of scaffolding and support beams hold up the Palace itself. Most of it is apparently less-than-habitable at the moment, though the main wing and the prison are both relatively intact. Smoke filters up from numerous sewer grates, clogging the air and sending the various guards and Chi-Ryus running around, trying to figure out what's happening. But the guards and Chi-Ryus are not their main concerns at the moment. All across the top of the wall, below it, and on almost any surface they could conceivably land on from it, are dozens, if not hundreds, of goddamn iron bear traps. Wes himself is literally inches away from triggering one, breathing very heavily.

"Good gods," David says. "That is beyond evil. That is just… mean!"

"I agree," Wes says. "If we keep our wits about us, I think we can navigate around the traps. The smoke is obscuring our position, so hopefully we can get down off the wall before anyone sees us."

Carefully, oh so very carefully, the two of them stand up and start stepping around the bear traps. David briefly considers triggering a few on purpose, before realizing they are probably connected to some kind of alarm system. Slowly but surely, they make their way across the wall, heading towards the kitchens, where they can jump down onto the roof without killing themselves. Hopefully. Assuming the roof isn't manned by ravenous vipiranha's or something equally
horrifying just waiting to kill them in the most gruesome way imaginable.

"What's going on here?" Wes hears someone cough from below. "What is this?"


"Is it just me, or do I no longer care what this is or why it's happening?"

"IT'S TOTALLY NOT JUST YOU! Oh… oh man… my face is all tingly. It's awesome! I bet if you punched me, I wouldn't even feel it. Do it! Punch me in the face!"

"Okay!"

**WHAM.**

"HOLY SHIT! THAT WAS AWESOME!"

"This is some powerful stuff," David says. "Whoever that airbender was, he carries good shit."

"Just be careful not to breathe any yourself. The last thing I need is you getting all loopy on me again," Wes says.

Taking a moment to make sure the kitchen roof is relatively clear and trap free, Wes jumps down and lands in a roll. When he hears no snaps or cries of pain, David follows him.

Unfortunately, the reason there were no traps located on the kitchen roof is because the building itself was heavily damaged by the Avatar's assault. It supports Wes easily enough but the second David adds his weight into the mix, the whole roof caves in and dumps the boys onto the second floor.

"…ow," Wes grunts.

"We do not have good luck with rooftop landings," David groans, picking himself up and helping Wes off the ground.

They take exactly two steps before the floor gives way under them again.

"Fuck our lives!" is all Wes has to say about the matter.

"Shh!" is David's reply. "I think someone is coming."

The boys get to their feet and lurch over to hide in the shadows, listening to the voices as they get closer.

"I heard… I heard something!" a female voice says. "It was emphatically loud and crashy!"

"Yes!" a slightly deeper female voice says. "Something definitely crashed! It was like 'PHWOOM.'"

"We should investigate!" a male voice says.

There is a brief moment of silence.

"Have you found anything?" the higher-voiced lady says.
"Nope," the lower pitched woman replies.

"What were we looking for?" the male asks.

"The thing that crashed!" the higher voice says.

"Ohhhhhhh," the male says. A few seconds of silence. "FOUND IT! It was the kitchen!"

"Holy shit, it was! Good job, soldier!"

"Now we can get back to what we were doing before."

…

"What were we doing before?"

"I don't remember."

"We should ask an adult for help!"

"Let's go find one!"

And the sound of footsteps follows.

"I can't believe this is actually working," David chuckles.

"Don't count your turduckens just yet," Wes says, lighting up a small flame so they can see in the darkened, condemned building.

The two navigate their way outside, where the smoke-filled world somehow seems even more surreal than when they left. A group of Chi-Ryus is loudly accusing a group of guards of stealing all the mayonnaise. The guards counter with the argument that they would never do that, because mayonnaise would make them fat. Several people are on the ground, rolling around in the grass and/or dirt. David is able to count at least twelve sets of girls braiding each others' hair at various points around the yard.

Sneaking around is incredibly easy, as absolutely freaking no one seems to be paying any attention to anything at all. After a while, they actually stop trying to sneak. No one notices.

"How oddly anticlimactic," Wes says as they reach the prison cells. He stops just outside the door. "Well, this is it," he says. "The moment of truth."

"What if he isn't in there?" David asks. "What if he's hurt? Or worse?"

"Whatever comes, we'll deal with it. That's just how life is," Wes says. "Ready?" he asks.

"Let's go."

The door opens, and in they charge, slamming the lone guard into unconsciousness in a second flat. They lift the keys off of his unconscious body and dash into the holding cells.

"Blaine!" Wes calls out.

"Blaine, can you hear me?" David yells.

Each of the cells they come to is empty, except the last one, which contains a very prominent head.
of curly hair, belonging to none other than…

"…Bird Guy?" David balks.

Bird Guy stares at him flatly. "I have a name, you know. It's Jeremiah."

"What are you even doing in here?" David asks.

"The Fire Lord locked me up because she doesn't like my hair. And apparently because I let slip that Blaine once had a crush on me," Jeremiah replies.

"You knew about that?" David asks.

"He wasn't exactly subtle about it," Jeremiah says. He sighs. "Poor kid. I kind of miss him…"

"…you're not Blaine," Wes says, his voice oddly monotone.

"…no," Jeremiah says carefully. "Should I be? I thought Blaine was dead."


By the end, he's breathing flame and kicking explosions into the wall. David, just a wee bit freaked, puts his hands on Wes's shoulders and pulls him away. "Calm down! Wes, get a grip, man! What's wrong with you?"

"Don't you get it?" Wes growls despairingly. "It was all for nothing. Again! Every fucking thing that we do is for nothing! We have accomplished absolutely dick here, save for a massive waste of everyone's time! We risked our lives, we pissed off our families, we stole a hundred pounds of narcotics—"

"You did what?" Bird Guy asks.

"—and what do we have to show for it? FUCKING JEREMIAH!" Wes roars, kicking the bars of the prison cell.

"Wes, please," David says carefully. "Calm down…"

"I can't calm down!" Wes says. "This isn't right! Why does this keep happening? Why can't we find him? Why can't we do anything right? Why couldn't we save him?"

"Wait… find him?" Jeremiah asks. "He's still alive?"

"He might be," David says quietly, while Wes punctuates his nervous breakdown by repeatedly bashing his head against the wall. "Official reports say he's missing and presumed dead. We're looking for him."

Suddenly, Jeremiah smiles. "You do know there's one surefire way to track him down, don't you?" he asks.

Wes stops beating himself to death and slowly turns around. "There is? What is it?"
The birdkeeper shrugs. "Pavarotti."

"Pavarotti?" David asks. "That foul-spirited fowl?"

"Do you know any others?" Jeremiah asks. "Pavarotti is Blaine's dragon hawk. The thing that makes dragon hawks ideal as messenger birds is that they form life-long bonds with their masters. They can find them anywhere, no matter where they go!"

Wes blinks at him. "You're shitting me," he says.

"Nope," Jeremiah says. "The Aviary was hardly damaged at all in the attack. Assuming my replacement isn't a complete boob, Pavarotti's still in there, same place as always. If Blaine is out there, Pavarotti should lead you right to him."

Wes smiles, feeling slightly delirious. "Unbelievable. That's… I… thank you!" he says, reaching through the bars and shaking Jeremiah's hand.

"Um… you're welcome?" Jeremiah replies.

"Feeling better now?" David asks.

"Yes," Wes says, taking a deep and measured breath. "Come on! We have a bird to find."

They start marching out of the cells.

"Hey, wait!" Jeremiah says. "Aren't you gonna let me out?"

"Oh, right!" Wes says, tossing him the keys.

"What, you just expect me to sneak out by myself?" Jeremiah asks.

"Honestly? Yes," David says. "It's easier than it sounds. Just hold your breath!"

The situation outside has deteriorated even further by the time they re-emerge. Their journey to the Aviary takes them past the duck pond, where several Chi-Ryus have shed their armor (and everything else for that matter) to take a dip in the cool, clear water.

"Don't look," Wes says.

David looks. He doesn't really mean to stop walking, it just sort of happens.

"Focus, man!" Wes says, grabbing him and pulling him on. David's actually grateful for the tug—it means he can walk without watching where he is going, trusting his good friend Wesley to guide him through the perils of life while David's eyes focus on more important things, like a smokey pond of naked ladi—

**WHUMP.**

And suddenly, David has a face full of wooden pillar.

"You steered me into that on purpose, didn't you?" he grumbles.

"Get your head in the game, for Agni's sake," Wes sighs.

Once they reach the Aviary, it takes Wes all of ten seconds to find Pavarotti, as fierce and ornery as ever. The bird does its level best to snap his finger off when he reaches for the cage.
"Oh, you hateful little bundle of feathers and fury," Wes sighs. "How I've missed you!"

"Who's going to save his county? Who's a good bird and going to save his country? You are! You are, Pavarotti!" David coos.

The bird snaps at him and screeches indignantly as he detaches its cage from the hanger and carries it outside.

"Jeremiah aside, this is all going stunningly well," Wes says.

"I know," David says. "Now, all we have to worry about is getting back out. I don't think we can go out the way we came in. There's no more roof there."

"At this point, I think they'll open the gate for us if we ask nicely enough," Wes chuckles.

They step out of the Aviary, and suddenly, they are confronted by a group of very angry-looking Chi-Ryus.

"Hhhhhhh!" one of them gasps, pointing at the cage in David's hand.

"…thieves!" another one says.

Wes laughs nervously. "Who, us? No, no, we're… bird doctors!"

"Yes!" David agrees. "We're bird doctors. These are our… anti bird-germ masks!" he says, pointing to their bandanas. "Don't want to get bird flu!"

"LIARSSSSS!" a Chi-Ryu hisses. "You are not doctors. You are thieves."

"You're stealing our food!" another cries.

"No, I promise, we're… wait, we're stealing your what?" Wes says.

David clutches the cage protectively. Pavarotti isn't quite sure what's going on, but something about the looks in those girls' eyes makes him uneasy. He screeches threateningly at them, though his screech seems a bit… mellower than usual.

"WE HUNGER!" a Chi-Ryu says.

"We need food. Now! Like right now! We might die!" another one hisses.

"Get the food! Eat the chicken!"

"Eat the chicken!"

"EAT THE CHICKEN!"

"No!" Wes says. "Don't eat the chicken!"

"It's not even a chicken!" David says.

"They're stealing the chicken!" one of the Chi-Ryus bellows to the world at large. "SOUND THE ALARM!"

"OKAY!" someone shouts back.
"I CAN'T REMEMBER HOW."

"JUST DO IT YOURSELF!"

"OKAY!" She clears her throat. DINGDINGDINGDINGDINGDING! REEE-ROO-REE-ROO! CHICKEN THIEVES IN THE AVIARY! THIS IS NOT A DRILL! NOR IS IT A HAMMER! OR A SET OF PLIARS! OR—"

"Shit," David says.

"We're boned," Wes agrees. "Run!"

Neither of them needs to be told twice. David heaves Pavarotti above his head to keep him safe from the munchies, and Wes charges past the somewhat sluggish, but still shockingly formidable Chi-Ryu. He tries laying down a line of fire at their feet to push them back, but the girls are fearless and apparently mostly numb. They just stumble right through the flames, mostly unharmed. David shakes one off of Pavarotti's cage and trips her. Wes is forced to wrestle with one, holding her by the shoulders as the tries to bite him.

"Wes, look out!" David says.

Wes snaps his head around just in time to see a guard lurch towards him, with a groan of "THIIIIIIIIEEEEFFF." With little else to do, he tosses the Chi-Ryu into the guy's arms and rams them both, knocking them down and jumping over them.

The two manages to shimmy and shake past several more of the shambling hoards. Their escape attempt is futile, however. Soon the entire yard is filled with groaning, sluggish, lurching figures oddly immune to pain. There seems to be an endless number of them, and they all seem rather terrifyingly intent on eating the boys and their bird. Their backs are against the wall.

"We're surrounded!" David says. "Fuck! What do we do?"

Wes desperately scans their surroundings. "...we get high!"

David tosses his hands up. "Well, we're dead anyway, why not? Smoke 'em if you got 'em—"

"No, you idiot!" Wes says, pointing to the Sue Sylvester statue a short distance away. "We take the high ground! Come on!"

Wes runs up the wall and springs off, bouncing across the heads of the slobbering masses, eventually making it to the scaffolding around the incomplete statue. David tosses him the birdcage, which Wes is barely able to snag out of the air before it plummets into the hands of the hungry crowd. David follows in Wes's footsteps, stepping across heads even faster than his friend.

"Now what?" David asks.

Hands start to reach up and pull at the scaffolding as the crowd groans louder.

"Climb!" Wes orders, jumping up the scaffolding.

"And then what?" David asks, jumping up after him.

"I don't know!" Wes shouts. "I'm just trying to avoid being cannibalized! If you have any ideas to
contribute, I would love to hear them!"

The two flip and leap up the scaffolding as the hoard grabs and shakes it. David tosses Pavarotti at Wes just in time to jump up and join him on Sue Sylvester's terrifyingly broad shoulders as the scaffolding collapses entirely, raining debris on the crowd below (which doesn't bother them much).

"Great!" David says. "Now we're stuck up here!"

"Once again, I do not hear any productive suggests from you!" Wes says.

Pavarotti, feeling thoroughly mellow, caws calmingly as David tries to find a way out of this disastrophe. "...is it just me, or is her head on crooked?" he asks.

Wes turns around to look at Big Giant Sue. Sure enough, her head is slightly twisted. It doesn't appear to be completely attached to her shoulders. Apparently, it really was only just recently added to the statue, and they haven't quite finished screwing it on.

Suddenly, the statue itself lurches violently as the teeming masses begin to pull on the support ropes.

"I think I can contribute now!" David says, flipping up on to Stone Sue's head. "Toss me the bird!"

Wes hurls Pavarotti and joins David on the peak of Mount St. Sylvester.

"Hit the support ropes on the Palace side!" David orders. "We want to fall towards the wall!"

Wes nods, and whips his hands in the air, bending up some fire ropes. With as much speed and precision as he can muster, he snaps both whips at the support cables, explosively severing them one by one. Every cable causes the statue to lurch slightly, forcing the two to rebalance themselves. Once Wes has severed all four ropes on the Palace side, the balance is broken entirely.

"Hold the fuck on!" David shouts. Wes crouches down and braces himself as the statue slowly tilts, further and further over, until it starts falling outright. Fortunately, David's idea comes through with flying colors—the statue is just tall enough for its head to slam into the top of the wall, smashing the neck and decapitating it.

David finds himself hanging on by a nose—Sue's nose, to be precise. One hand clutches a fantastically relaxed Pavarotti in his cage, the other clings tight to the Fire Lord's nostril.

"Hang on, David!" Wes says.

"Oh, I almost forgot to do that! Thanks for reminding me!" David replies.

Wes rolls his eyes and jumps down onto the side of Sue's nose.

Suddenly, the wall beneath them gives a mighty groan and shudder. Large cracks spiderweb outwards from the head's impact site. Apparently, the reconstruction on the sections destroyed and destabilized by the Avatar hasn't quite finished.

"...that's not good," Wes says.

"Pull me up, you idiot!" David yells.

"If I move again, the whole thing might collapse!" Wes calls back.
"If you don't, I'm going to die!" David orders.

Wes takes a single step forward.

Another shudder, and the cracks practically start racing each other to see which can get to the ground first.

Knowing that he has little time left, Wes grabs David and heaves him onto the topmost part of the head, landing him in Sue's ear.

The wall shudders again. Wes has just enough time to pull himself onto the royal noggin before the cracks reach the bottom and the whole damn thing collapses. The head falls with the boys on top of it, bouncing off a segment of falling wall and pitching forward. With legs flailing, they manage to stay on top of the royal noggin even as it starts rolling away from the Palace.

"Hey!" someone shouts. "Stop those guys!"

Wes doesn't think they could stop if they wanted to. The stone head has too much momentum; their only options are to keep on running with it or stop and be squished by it. A few fireballs and a couple of arrows whiz past them as they keep up as best they can.

"Neckhole!" Wes warns in vain, just as the aforementioned hole swallows them both, landing them inside the head of the False Fire Lord.

"Ha!" David chuckles, even as he keeps running. "Would you look at that? Completely hollow!"

"Shut up," Wes says. "We need to figure out how to stop this thing!"

"Look out!"

"OH DEAR AGNI!"

CRASH.

"Quickly!" Wes says. "Before someone gets hurt!"

"Do you have any ideas?" David says. "Because I'm running dry!"

"Watch out, Mr. Mailman!"

"Watch out for wha—AHH!"

SQUISH.

"...it's a miracle! I'm alive! I'm oka—AGGHH, OH MY BACK."

There's a series of KTHOOMS and THUNKS as various fire attacks and projectile weapons impact the cavernous cranium. None of it has any effect. If nothing else, Sue Sylvester has a very hard head.

"Is it just me, or are we picking up speed?" David asks.

"Oh, fuck," Wes groans. "I think we're on a hill."

"I can't keep running like this!" David says, already short of breath.
"Screw it!" Wes breathes. "Protect the bird and pray!"

David throws his body over Pavarotti's cage as his legs give out from underneath him. Wes's collapse as well, and soon, the two find themselves thoroughly plastered to the inside of the Fire Lord's skull as her enormous grinning mug smashes through everything in its path. The stone shell shudders with every impact, and soon, bits and pieces start to chip off of it, letting in small bits of sunlight.

Wes feels a strange sinking feeling as the destructive impacts cease. It takes him two seconds to realize—

"We're airborne!"

And then it all comes violently crashing down. The head shatters against the ground, the world becomes a series of flashes, crashes, and incredibly painful rolls. When they come to a stop, Wes is sprawled out on his back. His vision is white, and his ears are ringing.

His hearing comes back first.

"…landed over here!"

"Come on, hurry up!"

_Crap. Crap! Get up, Wesley! Get up, get up, get up!_ Wes tries to move, get up, get ready, do something to stop himself from getting caught after all that, but his abused body just isn't cooperating. All he can do at the moment is roll his head from side to side and groan.

"Grab them. Hurry up!"

He opens his eyes, and slowly but surely, the world comes into focus. Dark shapes move around above him. Hands come down to grab him, and he manages to summon the gumption to swipe at them.

"Whoa, dude!" one of the shapes says. "Chill, okay? It's us!"

The picture comes into sharper focus, and Wes is finally able to make out the shape of Nick above him.

"We've got you, okay? Just relax."

"We..." Wes says weakly. "We got him."

"Got who? The Prince?" Nick asks.

Off to the side, he sees Jeff lifting up Pavarotti's cage. "...your majesty?" he says.

The bird promptly pukes on him.

And there, Wes passes out.

______________________________

*Our memories of the remainder of the day are just a bit hazy after that. We'll let our brothers-in-arms fill you in on the rest of what happened.*

Nick? Jeff?
"Are they dead?" Other Nick asks. "They look kind of dead."

"They're not dead," Trent says. "They're unconscious."

"Are they gonna wake up?" Other Nick asks.

"I don't know!" Trent says. "Why would I know that?"

"You knew the answer to the first question," Other Nick points out.

"They're probably gonna be hurting pretty bad when they wake up," Luke says.

"That was a pretty epic crash," Nick nods.

"They were like—WHOOSH. Whee! KSBOOM," Jeff says, re-enacting the moment.

The boys have taken cover in the basement of a half-collapsed dojo. The building is in bad shape, but the basement is actually fairly intact, which makes it a great hiding spot. They managed to drag David and Wes away from the crash site before the guards showed up, and they're currently sprawled out on tables, having been KOed for about an hour. The bird hangs out in his cage nearby, mellow as fuck, rubbing its head against the bars and, like, bird-purring. It's weird.

Suddenly, Wes's head shifts to the side, and he groans.

"Oh, hey!" Nick says. "You're awake! Dude! What happened? What's with the bird? Why'd you cut the giant scary Fire Lord's head off?"

"…ow," Wes says. "Ow, ow, owww. Ow, oh fuck, owww."

"What hurts?" Trent asks.

"Living!" Wes replies honestly.

"Dude," Nick says to Jeff. "Go get some of the Z-Leaf you stashed for later."

"You know about that?" Jeff says.

Nick looks at him flatly.

"…I mean, umm… what Z-Leaf?" Jeff amends.

"Just go get it," Nick says. "You don't have to bring it all, just enough for—"

"Oh!" David says suddenly. "My organs. My precious internal organs! What did I do to make you hurt me so?"

"…on second thought, bring it all," Nick says. "I think they need it more than we do. Errr, you. I meant 'you…""

A few minutes later...

"…it's like… it's like we all have hands, you know?" Wes says, staring at his hand. "And they can pick stuff up, and do things, and operate machinery… but can they feel?"

"I'm pretty sure they can," Nick says carefully.
"But do they?" Wes insists. "Do they feel what we feel? Do they feel the feelings they create? That... that's the kind of thing you have to think about."

David shakes his head at his friend, clearly awed. "When did you get so smart? That was... that was very deep. It was deeply deep. You are like, below the ground deep. Far down... so far... too far... I can't see you anymore. Wesley!" he calls out. "Can you hear me?"

"I can't. I'm too deep..." Wes says sadly. "It's dark down here, in the cavernous depths of wisdom."

Jeff leans over and elbows Nick. "Dude is baked."

Nick nods. "I think they might be a little overcooked."

"Look at you!" David says, crawling over to Pavarotti's cage. "So majestic... so free. But so caged! That's... that's not right."

Pavarotti is still pretty mellow. It's rolling around on its back, but it caws in acknowledgment.

"Fix it," Wes says. "Fix it, David! Right the injustices of the world!"

"I will!" David says. He opens the cage. "Be free, majestic creature! Go, and sing with all the voices of the mountains!"

Pavarotti screeches happily and flies out of its cage... straight into a wall.

"This is pointless," Trent sighs, grabbing the disoriented bird and shoving it back in its cage. "They're completely incoherent! We're not going to get any answers from them like this!"

"Hey," Jeff shrugs. "It was either incoherent with pain, or incoherent with happy smoke. Friggin' obvious choice. It's like... you have to take a bath. Do you want to use a sponge, or a baby boarcupine?"

"Thus sayeth the master of incoherence," Trent says sourly.

"Hey!" Nick says. "Ease up, dude. We might be able to get something out of them. Hey, Wes! David!" He snaps his fingers. Two sets of slightly bloodshot eyes lock onto him, however momentarily. "We have a couple questions for you guys, okay?"

"Questions and answers are two sides of the same coin," Wes says. "We must flip to decide which is which."

David starts clapping. "Somebody hit a bongo for this man! He is a poet."

Nick shakes his head. "Oh, boy... okay, first of all; what the fuck happened? Was the mission a success? Why did you bring us a bird?"

"First..." David says. "The iron teeth threatened to devour us. Then the world fell from beneath our feet, and we plunged into darkness. We went where we wanted to go, and found that which we did not know we sought. The shambling hoards turned upon us, and we rode away in the Head of State."

"Heavy is the head that wears the crown," Wes says profoundly.

"The weird thing is," Other Nick whispers to Flint, "I don't think he's lying."
"Truth comes in many forms," Flint says.

"Okay," Nick says. "Let's just… stick to one question. The bird. Seriously, what's with the bird?"

"The bird is the way," Wes says. "He is the hope of the future."

Pavarotti seems to be squinting at a dust bunny, trying to determine whether or not he should eat it.

"Why?" Nick presses, desperately hoping for some kind of answer.

"He's a dragon hawk, man," David says. "He belongs to our little brother… our main man Blaine."

"Dragon hawks form life-long bonds with their masters," Wes says. "They can find them anywhere."

Suddenly, David sits straight up. "Dude. Wes," he says. "I've just thought of something. Pavarotti is like us. No, no—we are like him!"

Wes gasps. "You're right! We're… we're birds of a feather! Flying towards the same sunset…"

"You hear that, little buddy?" David asks, holding up Pavarotti's cage. "We're right there beside you. We know how it feels!"

"We're all dragon hawks, in the end," Wes says. He looks over at Pavarotti. "CREEEEEARK!"

"CAW! CAW!" David says.

Pavarotti caws back.

"The bonds of brotherhood are not bound by species!" Wes says proudly.

From there, it just deteriorates. Wes stands up and starts flapping his arms. David hops up on a table and roosts proudly on his perch. Eventually, both of them try to fly. Neither succeeds at doing anything but rendering each other unconscious.

"Well," Nick says. "That was definitely... something."

Well, that was far more embarrassing than I had anticipated. I kind of regret letting you tell that now, but it's out, so there it is.

Once we had Pavarotti, we had a surefire means of finding Blaine. The only problem was… we didn't have much of anything else. Thad was still missing, and while he was able to give us a decent amount of money to start us off, it wasn't going to last much longer.

We awoke the next day, feeling a little hazy, but in much less pain. Unfortunately, things had gotten worse while we were out. The Fire Lord returned, took one look at the catastrophe we left in our wake, and declared martial law until we were found. The city's gates were blocked, and we knew any attempt to get past them would likely result in our arrest.

For the time being, we were stuck.

Thankfully, our unwitting savior was not far off…

The gang hangs around Breadstix, which is still mostly intact, looking for any sign of their errant
member. They set up in various positions around the ruins of a candy store. Wes and David keep their heads down, as guards and Chi-Ryus now patrol the streets. They know that the chances of them being recognized are slim—after all, their faces were covered, and most of the people who saw them were high off their asses. But slim isn't the same as zero, and the risk of being thrown in prison suddenly seems very, very real.

They are, for all practical intents and purposes, enemies of the state. It's an odd realization to come upon them so suddenly. They more or less knew what they were getting into when they started, but now that the reality is upon them…

"By Agni, Wesley," David says. "We're fugitives. We're wanted men; we are criminals."

"Not exactly," Wes replies. "They don't technically know who we are. But… I see your point. We are… wow, we really are sticking our necks out here, aren't we?"

"It's you and me against the world," David says.

"You and I," Wes corrects.

"Hey," Nick grouses. "Don't count us out."

Wes and David tilt their heads. "What do you mean?" Wes asks. "You weren't involved in any of the major lawbreaking. You don't have a stake in this—you can leave, if you like."

Nick looks a little uneasy, but he shrugs it off. "So… what if I don't want to?"

David squints at him. "I don't understand. You're saying you want to help us? Even knowing what it might cost you?"

Nick sighs. "This?" he says, gesturing to the ruined city. "Looking at this makes me sick. When my hometown got blown up, it didn't look like this after a week. All the construction work is being done on the Palace and that stupid statue you guys broke—a statue whose giant head crushed even more of the town."

Wes and David give a slight wince. "We didn't mean to make things worse," Wes sighs.

"Oh, no, I'm not blaming you guys!" Nick says. "That stupid statue should never have even been there. It's just a giant ego trip, and the fact that the Fire Lord thinks that a giant ego trip in the middle of a freakin' disaster area is okay…" He clenches his jaw. "…let's just say that even if I didn't know the truth, I'd probably hate her. I want to help. I want to help you guys take her down."

Wes walks over, his eyes assessing Nick. "You really mean that, don't you?"

Nick nods. "And I can't speak for him, but I'm pretty sure Jeff will hang around too, if you want. A lot of the guys will. I mean…" He laughs. "I don't know if you realize it, but that shit you guys pulled yesterday… that was pretty badass."

David crosses his arms, a smug look on his face. "Well, thank you. It's nice to have that acknowledged."

"It was also dangerous," Wes says seriously. "Either or both of us could have died doing it. Or we could have been captured, imprisoned, tortured…" He shudders. Now he's just freaking himself out. "Are you sure you want to expose yourself to that kind of danger?"

"I don't know," Nick says honestly. "All I know is… this?" He gestures to the wreckage. "This is
wrong. And I want to do something about it."

Wes starts to say something else, but Jeff barges into the ruins of the room. "Hey, guys! I think we've spotted T-Bag!"

"...T-Bag?" Wes says.

"Uhh..." Nick says uneasily. "Little nickname we have for Thad. It's kind of... we're not... he's not exactly our favorite person in the world."

Nick walks off before Wes has the chance to question him further.

"Hmmm..." David says. "I like it! It's succinct, insulting, and even somewhat subtle."

Wes rolls his eyes. "Come on."

They march to the front of the wrecked shop, peering through a broken window at a small caravan of rhinos. Sure enough, the lead rhino carries Thad himself, looking a little ruffled and distinctly out-of-place. With an expensive-looking pack at his side, he hops off.

"Once again, Master Harwood, I cannot apologize enough," a soldier says. "For the misunderstanding, for the lost lizard, for... everything."

Thad smiles at him semi-graciously. "It's quite alright," he says. "Water under the bridge, you know."

"Thank you, sir," the soldier says. "Your forgiveness is far more than we deserve."

"Well, I'm glad we agree on that!" Thad says lightly. "Now, someday—and that day may never come—I will call upon you to perform a service for me. Until that day, however, you may consider my forgiveness as a gesture of my goodwill."

"Y-yes sir!" the soldier says.

Thad nods at him. "You may go now."

The rhinos march off, leaving the overdressed Thad standing on the sidewalk. As he looks around for any familiar faces, some unfamiliar faces begin to eye him with a distinctly hungry look. Wes sees at least two people with sheathed knives in their belts, and suddenly, he remembers the old man's warning about flashing his money around.

"Get him in here!" Wes says urgently.

With a shrug, Ethan hops out from behind cover and pulls Thad over.

"You don't have to tug me!" Thad grouses. "I'm quite capable of independent locomotion, thank you."

"Thad!" Wes says, pulling him further into the back rooms. "Are you insane? You're going to get mugged walking around like that!"

"Walking around like what?" Thad says.

"Like... that!" he says, pointing to Thad's obviously tailored and expensive clothing.

"...these are my clothes, Wesley," Thad says carefully. "Would you rather I wear nothing?"
"Could you not… I don't know… *tone it down* a bit?" he asks. "Do you own *nothing* less expensive?"

"How am I supposed to know how much my clothes costs?" Thad scoffs. "Nice to see you too, by the way."

Wes sighs. "Where have you *been*, man?"

"And where is my damn lizard?" David asks.

Thad takes a deep breath. "You want to know where I have been? I will tell you where I have been. I have been to the very depths of human depravity. I have seen things which no waking eye was meant to see! I have experienced horrors that would have broken the mind of a lesser man."

"…what?" Wes asks.

"I shall tell you the tale," Thad says simply. "Those of you with weak constitutions may want to excuse themselves before I begin, for mine is not a tale of sunshine, or puppies, or butterfly rainbow candy apple gumdrop sugarplum fairies. It is a dark, twisted tale of corruption and evil at the highest levels. Listen, friends, and be warned of the dark that waits…"

The following is, more or less, the tale as he told it. As we mentioned previously, there may be just the tiniest hint of bias in the narrative, so take what is said here with a grain of salt, as it may not be one hundred percent accurate...

Thaddeus James Harwood the Third rides upon his noble steed, the mighty Cornelius, fresh from a visit to his beloved homestead. He carries with him supplies vital to the resistance movement, a rag-tag band of young soldiers with an unfailing sense of right and wrong and an appetite for justice. It is his noble duty to lead these young men into battle against the vile and wicked forces of the Usurper Lord, and he intends to do his duty at any cost.

Suddenly, his path is blocked! Snarling, bestial rhinoceroses foaming with rage burst up from the very earth to impede his progress, carrying scallywags and ruffians of varying degrees of filthiness.

"Hol' it right thar!" one of the ruffians grunts. "We's lookin' fer curly folks. Fire Lord don't like them curly folks."

Thaddeus is taken aback at both the complete lack of manners and the *incredibly* potent stench of the man before him. "Well, my good sir, I assure you that no 'curly folks' can be found here. My hair is *wavy* at best, and I tame it with a generous application of gel."

"LYE-ER!" the man grumbles. "Yer fancy gellin' don't fool us none! GET HIM BOYS!"

Suddenly, there are twenty other men and rhinoceroses, descending upon him from all directions at once. Nonetheless, Thaddeus has little trouble fighting them off. Their uncivilized and unskilled flailing could not possibly hope to match his elegance and ferocity in combat. His victory seems certain, until one of the peasants gets a lucky shot by knocking a tree down on top of him, rendering him unconscious.

His cargo and his mount are confiscated, and he is thrown in the deepest, blackest pit of a prison that exists within the Fire Nation. Foul, rancid fluid seeps from the walls like blood, running along the floor in thick, sticky rivulets. The stench of human suffering is almost too much to bear, and all around him, the screams of damned and miserable souls echo from the metal walls.
Thaddeus remains determined to escape, his mind always on his comrades even as hope rapidly begins to fade from sight like the moon before the dawn. But just as the midnight of his soul seems blackest, a light appears!

Little does he know; it is not the light of hope, but the light of darkness! A flame fueled by despair, lit with human suffering and stoked by the tears of recently orphaned children.

The walls seem to scream in terror as their metal is torn apart like tissues rife with phlegm. From the very deepest places in the earth, where nameless horrors too terrible to comprehend fester in the shadows, an impossible figure crawls into the waking world. He is moon-white skin, cloaked in shadow, bathed in blood, half-man, half-monster, the horns of a gorilla-goat jutting from his skull, eyes afire with light unnatural, sharp fangs dripping with stinking ichor.

The horror sniffs about the room, its senses searching.

Thaddeus can barely remain coherent in the presence of this abomination, but he holds together for the sake of those who depend on him, addressing the frightful creature. "E-excuse me, sir—" he starts.

The dark one turns and snarls at him. "SNRRRRK GRRMBL GRHHHHHK XCKKK BLAINE."

It is a testament to this brave young man's fortitude that he is able to speak at all. He continues. "I am not certain who it is that you refer to, but if I could just have a moment of your time—"

"STOP RIGHT THERE!" a voice cries. A hapless guard, seeing the abomination from a distance, rushes forward in a brave attempt to fight the evil.

"No, don't!" Thaddeus attempts to warn him, but alas, it is for naught.

"BLAIIINE!" the dark one roars, as the terrible light from his eyes flares up, leaping from his skull like twin beams of sheer terror, streaking across the room to slam into the man, whose head suddenly swells and bursts like a fermenting watermelon left out in the sun. The man gropes blindly at the wall, smearing handprints into his own splattered gore, before falling down dead.

"You monster!" Thad breathes, horrified. "How could you? Such violence, such wickedness—"

"THRAKPT you monster! SNRRECKT BLMPTHPT oh, save me! FRRRK KRNTK EEP NOT-BLAINE," the dark one insists.

Thaddeus grits his teeth in rage. "You mock me, beast?"

The thing snorts in derision.

"DIIIIIEEEE!" Another guard bravely rushes in to avenge his fallen comrade, but the creature seems to melt into liquid shadow before his very eyes, rushing towards him like a flood and sweeping over his body. When the shadow passes, where once stood a man, there now stands a mere skeleton, its bones stripped clean of all meat. The man's remains crumble into a heap as the creature reforms and picks bits of sinew from its teeth.

"Abomination!" shouts Thaddeus. "I can bear this carnage no longer! Begone from my sight—your 'Blaine' is not here!"

"BLAIIIIIIINE!" the dark one screeches, his voice high and terrible as the wail of a murdered
woman's ghost. The shadows around his body unfold into tremendous, pitch-black wings which swallow all light and goodness. With a single flap, the creature bursts through the ceiling, tearing through floor after floor and escaping into the night sky.

Having seen such terrible things, Thaddeus's mind reels. He sits and centers himself, meditating and purifying his spirit. Eventually, he falls into a fitful slumber.

When next he awakens, he is being examined by three strange new figures. A bald Neanderthal, a dark-haired seductress, an airy blonde fairy, and an angry blonde harpy.


"RAWR RAWR RAGE ANGER," the harpy harps.

"Whatever, whatever, who cares, whatever," the seductress purrs.

"ME LIKE SEX," the Neanderthal grunts.

"RAWR I HATE YOU RAWR," the harpy cries at the Neanderthal, breathing fire at him.

"HELP, FIRE AM SCARY," the Neanderthal grunts, hiding behind the seductress.

"Whatever, whatever, I do what I want," the seductress purrs.

"Sweet lady kisses!" the airy fairy sighs.

"RAWR NOT THE RIGHT GUY, IDIOTS STUPID MORONS HATE YOU ALL DIE FOREVER," the harpy shrieks, before setting the Neanderthal on fire and stomping out of the room.

"MY PAIN IS HURTY!" the Neanderthal yelps, running out after her.

"Whatever, whatever, sexytimes?" the seductress purrs.


And then, for some inscrutable reason, the two begin to make out.

Thaddeus most certainly does not watch them while pretending to be asleep.

"RAWR RAWR HURRY UP, LEAVE YOU BEHIND WORK AS POLE DANCERS," the harpy screeches.

And then they leave. Shortly thereafter, a guard finally comes down to free him.

"Master Harwood, I am so sorry for the mix-up. We found your family ring while performing a standard search of your belongings. I nearly had a heart attack!" the guard says as they head to the upper floor, where the four strange figures are still grunting and arguing.

"I assume you treated my possessions with the proper dignity?" Thaddeus says primly. "I would hate for any of my priceless family heirlooms to be scratched.

"Of course, young sir!" the guard insists. "Nothing was damaged at all. Except… well, I'm afraid your lizard was lost during the break in."

Thaddeus is crushed. "Say it isn't so!" he cries. He imagines the poor creature looking up in horror
as the vile abomination swooped down and took it into its claws, carrying it back to its nest to feed its wicked spawn. Thaddeus sheds a tear for noble Cornelius, his life ended too soon.

"Alas, then I am undone. For you see, I was on my way to the Capital, on a mission of utmost import, and now I am without transport," Thaddeus laments.

"Oh, fear not!" the guard says. "We will provide you with transport ourselves! It is the least we can do after all you have suffered…"

"…and they provided me with a personal escort to the Capital, thus bringing us to the present," Thad says, finishing his story.

The others are eying him with varying levels of skepticism, ranging from 'are you sure?' all the way up to 'bender, please!' Wes and David, however, have their minds elsewhere. There is a certain other aspect to Thad's story they feel compelled to address.

"…wait," Wes says. "There was a name."

"What?" Thad says.

"When the… the thing broke in. It wanted someone specific. It said a name. Say it again," Wes says.

"Oh!" Thad says nodding. "It was… Blaine. Yes, that's it. Blaine."

David's jaw drops. "I don't believe it…"

Wes smiles at him, at a momentary loss for words.

"What?" Thad asks. "What's so important about that name?"

"That's the Prince!" Wes says, laughing. "That's his name, Thad! They were looking for the Prince!"

Thad's eyes go wide. "Really?"

David nods, starting to smile as well. "There is no way to be completely sure, but…"

"It's the closest thing to genuine confirmation we've seen," Wes says. "David… he's out there. He's still out there!"

David nods. "And we're going to find him! What do you say, gentlemen? Are you up for finding the real Fire Lord?"

"All in favor, say 'aye!'" Wes says.

"AYE!" the entire group choruses.

"Fantastic!" Thad says. "…wait, how are we going to find him?"

"We have our ways," David says sneakily.

"But what we don't have is 'transport,'" Wes says.

"Good point. Even if we did, we need a way out of the city," David says. "The whole place is
locked down because of the little stunt we pulled."

"Pulled?" Thad gapes. "You did it without me?"

"Oh, don't soil your hanky," David says. "You were running late. We're on a schedule."

"Besides," Wes says carefully. "I think you might be able to help us nonetheless. Just… exactly how much money did you bring?"

It took some arguing, and maybe even a bit of arm-twisting, but eventually, we got Thad to buy some reduced price ostrich horses from a nearby stable. Apparently, people are so afraid of the spread of plague that few are willing to buy Earth Kingdom animals, even if they are bred in the Fire Nation. I have to give it to Thad—his haggling skills are quite impressive.

And his bluffing isn't bad either…

The gang comes up to the blockade, manned by a bored-looking city guard reading a scroll.

"Excuse me," Thad says. "I need to pass, if you don't mind."

"Sorry," the guard says. "Nobody is allowed out of the city until the terrorists are captured."

"I see," Thad says evenly. "In that case, may I have your name? I'd like to be able to cite you in my letter to grandfather explaining why I can't attend his birthday celebration. I'm sure Grandmaster Harwood would love to meet the imbecile who detained his firstborn grandson as if he were a common criminal."

That gets the guard's attention. "Wait, what? You're talking… the Grandmaster Harwood? The D-Dragonclaw?"

"The very same," Thad says proudly.

"You're lying!" the guard accuses. "You're full of shit. You ain't a Harwood!"

"Oh?" Thad says lightly. "Well then where did I get this?"

He flashes his family ring at the guard.

"Recognize the crest?" Thad says.

"S-sir!" the guard says, scrambling to his feet. "I am so sorry—you don't, you don't really need my name, do ya? I mean, this was all just a misunderstanding; I'll open the gate right now!"

"Well, in that case, I suppose we can let this pass without incident," Thad says lightly. "I assume my entourage," he says, gesturing to the other boys on ostrich horses, "is also cleared to pass through?"

"Certainly!" the guard says, unlatching and pulling open the gate. "No problem, sir! You have a safe trip, and tell your grandpa happy birthday on my behalf!"

"I shall," Thad says airily as he passes through the gate.

Once they are well out of hearing range, Thad breaks into spontaneous laughter. "I can't believe he fell for that!" he sighs.
"Fell for what?" Wes says. "Everything you said was true."

"No it wasn't," Thad chuckles. "Grandfather's birthday isn't for another three months!"

And so, that evening, almost two weeks after the riots, we began to track you down in earnest. We were somewhat worried about Pavarotti flying off and leaving us in the dust, so we wound up tying him to David by a rather lengthy string. Fortunately, to a certain degree, Pavarotti seemed to understand what we were trying to do. He flew just fast enough for us to keep up, though he did wind up taking a rather odd series of detours into various woods and clearings. At one point, it even sidetracked into Fenghuang, of all places.

By that time, it was around midnight, and, as Nick so helpfully informed us, both the horses and the men were considering mutiny, so we stopped and let everyone rest.

David and I got almost no sleep ourselves, however. Something about having what was almost proof that you were alive had supercharged us, set us on fire, figuratively speaking. We set out the next morning—FAR earlier than anyone would've liked—and after a rather odd detour that took us up a sheer cliff, we wound up in Sho Fa late in the afternoon. We felt like we were closer than ever. Unfortunately, there was one roadblock we never saw coming...

It just kind of happens. Pavarotti soars into the edge of town, seems to spot a particular building, and proceeds to dive bomb the fuck out of it.

He slams through the window with absolutely ridiculous force, prompting a rather undignified squeal from whoever is on the other side.

A panicked Wes and David hop off their mounts and rush into the building to retrieve the bird and, possibly, the boy it belongs to. But instead of finding the Prince, they find two rather fascinating queens.

Hiram and Leroy stare warily at the bird on the table. Hiram bravely threatens the ornery fowl with the business end of an ink pen. "You stay back! I will give you such a smudging…"

"This never would've happened if we'd had sparkly windows," Leroy mutters.

"Sorry!" David announces. "Very, very sorry, our messenger hawk is somewhat aggressive."

"We're looking for someone," Wes says urgently. "Someone about… yay tall, with dark, curly hair, possibly held in place by copious amounts of product, slightly tan…"

"Oh, you mean that boy with the Councilor?" Hiram says. "He left just a few minutes ago."

Wes actually jumps up and down with excitement. "Come on, David! Grab Pavarotti and let's move!"

David snatches the hawk from the desk to a squawk of protest, and dashes out the door alongside Wes.

"Hey!" Leroy shouts. "You just broke our window! You can't just leave!"
"Somebody has to pay for this!" Hiram shouts.

"Thad!" David says as they mount their horses again. "Pay the men."

"What?" Thad barks. "Why should I be held responsible for damage caused by angry birds?"

"Just do it!" Wes shouts. David releases Pavarotti, and the two are off again.

Thad smiles somewhat uneasily at the two gentlemen staring at him from the inn's door. "...well, I really must be going at the moment, but I'll be happy to come back and haggle price with you later. As a gesture of my sincerity... you two!" he says, pointing at James and Ethan. "Stay and help them clean up."

"What?"

"Why us?"

"Because you were closest to my pointer finger," Thad explains simply. "As for the rest of you... onwards!"

They follow in the footsteps of Wes and David, only to find them coming out of a hair salon of all places, another broken window at the storefront. The process repeats itself, and this time, Luke and Other Nick are the ones who have to stay for janitor duty.

Wes and David are far too close to give up now. Not even when their psychotic avian guide smashes into a theater during a rehearsal. The rather large number of indignant and somewhat melodramatic actors and actresses upset by this particular intrusion keeps Thad occupied far longer than usual, and the two leaders have little choice but to leave him behind as they continue to the uppermost level of the city.

Pavarotti soars high above the glittering mansions, seeming to eye one in particular. It's little trouble for their ostrich horses to leap clean over the walls protecting this mansion and its occupants, despite the many loud protests of the guards below. They're over the top before anyone has a chance to stop them, and the noble dragon hawk leads them on, around the yard of the main mansion, to a separate party hall on the side, where it dives through another window, placed slightly up the wall. The boys have to put their climbing skills to good use to get to the entrance, which makes them more certain than ever that this is where they will find Blaine, that this is where their journey comes to fruition at last.

One at a time, they swing through the window and land on the floor of a bathroom, before barging into the room beyond.

They expect a familiar face.

Just... not this one.

There is a brief moment of silence, as the three occupants of the room stare slack-jawed at one-another. When they speak, they are the voices of each others' thoughts.

"You have got to be kidding me," they say in perfect unison.

"You," Jesse St. James growls, quickly pulling his shirt back down over his head (was he changing clothes?). "You dare show your faces here? Of all places?" he says. "Your brazenness is equaled only by your foolishness!"
"Wait!" Wes says, holding up his hands. "This is all a misunderstanding. We weren't looking for you at all—believe me, you are the last person I care to see right now."

"Cut the crap!" Jesse barks, slowly stalking towards them. "I know why you're here. You just never give up, do you? What was your master plan this time? Kidnap Rachel, and hold her for ransom? You make me sick!"

"I don't know who Rachel is!" David says. "Really. Seriously. If you let us leave right now, we won't bother you at all. Or Rachel! we promise!" Pavarotti squawks indignantly at David speaking for him. He doesn't like Jesse.

"It's too late to back out now!" Jesse says, gritting his teeth. "My shitty time in the Fire Nation started with you two. It's fitting that it will end the same way." He smirks and whips out his staff. "People like you never stop. This doesn't end until one of us is dead. Or… you know… two."

Wes grits his teeth. They are so close. "You don't have to do this…"

"But I want to!" Jesse says.

He whips his staff around his body, creating a tremendous whirlwind which lifts up and swirls damn near every small object in the room—including an indignant Pavarotti.

"Hey!" David shouts. "Easy on the bird!"

The firebender punches a flame through the whirlwind, landing a direct hit to Jesse's cloak.

The wind ceases immediately, and Pavarotti recovers enough equilibrium to fly out the window.

Jesse looks down at his burnt clothes, shocked and appalled.

"Come on," Wes says. "Let's go!"

They make a valiant attempt to leave through the window, but before either can make it through on their own, a powerful blast of air does the defenestration for them. They land several yards away from the window, rolling to a stop. They kick back to their feet quickly, but Jesse has already chased them through the window, sending a slice of air that knocks Wes into a bush. He lands, sweeping David's feet out from under him and launching him headlong into his ostrich horse. The upset animal whinnies and flees the scene of the violence.

"Everything you've put me through… I'm going to pay it back," Jesse says, his voice low and dangerous. "Times ten!"

Wes pops out of the bush and punches a fireball at him, but Jesse pivots around it easily. David tries three sweeps in quick succession, but Jesse bounces over every fiery wave like he's playing a game of hopscotch.

"There they are!"

"Hey, who's that other guy?"

The guards start charging them from both directions.

"Shit!" Wes curses. He sends a fireball into the ground in front of St. James, forcing him to jump back. With the path cleared, he dashes forward and flips on top of the remaining ostrich horse. David hops up behind him, and the two begin to make a hasty exit.
"Stop right there!" the guards shout, but Wes pulls his o-horse into hopping right over them.

"Where do you think you're going?" Jesse says. "We're just getting started!"

The animal jumps again as they come to the wall. Unfortunately, this puts them right in the airbender's home territory, and he wastes no time in seizing the opportunity. At the peak of their jump, Jesse soars over on his repaired glider and grabs David, attempting to fly off with him. With little other choice, Wes grabs on to David's leg, and suddenly, all three boys are taking an impromptu flight through the city.

Jesse makes a valiant attempt to steer them into every chimney and weathervane he can spot. Wes swings himself around them, discovering that if he swings hard enough, he can steer the glider just a little bit. The resulting battle for control nearly kills all three of them several times over. As Wes is dragged through the tops of a small row of blazewood trees, David makes a valiant attempt to set St. James's glider on fire. He can't quite manage it, but he does distract the villain long enough for Pavarotti to swoop in from above and claw the ever-loving shit out of the thing. The bird's talons tear through the canvas with ease, and soon, all three of them are headed for a crash landing on the middle level.

Jesse lets them go just in time for them to slam painfully into yet another rooftop. Fortunately, this one at least has the courtesy to hold together while they bounce off of it. Jesse himself makes a slightly better landing a short distance away, on the roof of the same theater.

Wes winces as he gets up, feeling a slight twinge in his leg. David stumbles to his feet, seeming a little dizzy, as the smug snake stares them down from across the roof.

"Just the three of us," Jesse says lightly, collapsing his shredded glider back into his staff. "As it should be. I am going to savor this!"

A surge of adrenaline fills Wes. He is sick and tired of being blocked at every turn. He is tired of chasing wild ferretgeese, tired of running into brick walls, tired of airbenders, tired of drug dealers, and tired of failing. "Fine," Wes says, letting the adrenaline push the pain to the back of his mind. "You want to fight? You want to finish this? Then let's finish it!"

"I'll give you something to savor, motherfucker," David growls. "TASTE THIS!"

Pavarotti circles above them, looking down as brilliant orbs and stripes of flame cut across the roof, exploding and colliding against blasts of air as the three combatants begin to fight in earnest. A short distance away, a unit of guards is moving towards the building, several of them gesturing wildly to their fellows, who are yelling loudly for more support.

The bird knows that Wes and David aren't his true masters, but they freed him from captivity, and took care of him, so he feels an attachment to them. Even as they fight, he can tell that they are injured and running on adrenaline. They will need help. So he goes to find it.

Thad emerges from the Groban Theater for a breath of fresh air after some very intense negotiations with the theater's owners. He's contemplating encasing Pavarotti in some kind of foam rubber shield to prevent it from causing so much destruction when the very thing itself suddenly soars into his field of vision. It flaps about in front of his face, squawking and screeching and making a general nuisance of itself.

"Go away!" he says, swatting at the thing. "Haven't you caused enough headaches for one day?"

The bird flaps over and sinks its talons into his shirt, pulling him somewhere.
"What is wrong with you?" Thad barks. "That is a very nice outfit that you are shredding!"

The bird continues to ignore him, pulling him along until finally Thad wrests himself free of its ironclad grip, turning around to glare at it. "You are seriously testing my patience. I hear dragon hawk is a delectable entrée if prepared properly, and the more you squawk at me, the more of an appetite I develop—"

"MOVE!" someone shouts.

Thad jumps to the side just as a group of panicked guards dashes past him.

"Come on, guys! They say they've got the Avatar fighting a couple of firebenders on the roof over here," the guard calls to a few of his fellows.

Thad's jaw drops. He looks over at Pavarotti, who squawks at him and takes off in the same direction the guards were running.

"Well, why didn't you just say so?" Thad says, running over to his saddlebag. "I just need one thing…"

Back on the rooftop fight, Wes and David are quickly finding that they have seriously underestimated Jesse St. James's skill level. The two have laid down an impressive amount of fire, but they have yet to land a hit on the slippery airbender. He splits and leaps and flips and twirls in the air, deflecting or dodging just about everything they throw at him, all while blowing them all over the blasted rooftops. Airbending attacks aren't terribly painful on an individual basis, but when their effects are stacked over time and combined with plenty of hard surfaces to slam against, they definitely add up.

David swings his fist along the ground, sending a shark-fin of fire slicing through the roof. Jesse steps to the side. David steers the fin around to attack him from behind, but the airbender just leaps over it. Wes pulls out his twin fire whips in an attempt to slam him back down, but Jesse actually throws himself down first, pushing a gust of air above him and rocketing to the ground. He dashes under the whips at Wes, who dispels the ropes and hurls a two-handed blast of flame at Jesse. Not only does the airbender turn away from the attack—as he turns a Jesse-shaped blast of concentrated air continues in his stead, breaking through Wes's attack and slamming into him with enough force to carry him clean over to the next rooftop. David charges and tries to engage him in close quarters with blowtorch-daggers, and he is almost agile enough on his own to keep up with the airbender. But after a short exchange of missed blows, Jesse feints and sweeps his arms around in a quick circle. A miniature tornado appears and bends over, lifting the firebender and spinning him around before sending him over onto the next roof to join his friend.

Just in time, too, as the guards start climbing onto the roof to join them at this point. "Stop, whoever you are, and whatever you're doing! You are under arrest!"

"Really?" Jesse says. "I don't feel like I'm under anything. I'm on top of the world!"

And he jumps clear over their heads to punctuate the point, landing on the next roof, where Wes and David are just beginning to pick themselves up.

"Aww, are you tired already?" Jesse says. "Because I'm just getting started. You know, my boss sometimes had us spar with each other for twelve hours straight. As a warm up."

"Oh, eat a dick," Wes says sourly. "I have heard enough of your voice to last me a lifetime."

"Well then," Jesse shrugs. "In that case, allow me to introduce you to eternal silence. Sweet
dreams!"

He starts to charge them, only to falter when suddenly the roof explodes underneath him, sending him flipping over onto his face.

"Did someone call for an ass-saving?" Thad jumps up from the flaming crevice, landing poised and proud on the roof behind Jesse. "Because I am here to deliver."

"Thad!" Wes says.

"How on earth did you find us?" David asks.

"A messenger told me," Thad says casually.

"Who the dick are you?" Jesse growls, bouncing back to his feet.

Thad grins. "I am so glad you asked," he says. He steps forth, reaching down to a hitherto unseen sheath and pulling out a beautiful sword, the blade gleaming in the late afternoon sun. "I am Thaddeus James Harwood the Third, wielder of the Red Whisper, heir to the Harwood fortune and the legacy that comes with it."

Jesse shakes his head. "…who?"

"Don't worry," Thad says lightly. "If you have trouble keeping all of that straight, I'll be happy to carve it into your memory."

Jesse rolls his eyes. "Fine! Fuck it! I'll kill you, too!"

He charges in, rapidly assaulting Thad with his staff, flipping it back and forth, striking with both ends and from every angle. To the surprise of Wes, David, and especially Jesse St. James, Thad deflects each and every blow handily. His dexterity and flexibility is incredible—he seems to be able to spin, flip, and otherwise rotate the sword on whatever axis he needs to at a moment's notice. Not only does he defend against Jesse's strikes, he actually deflects his staff into the ground, breaking Jesse's guard long enough to kick him in the stomach.

"…huh," David says. "He's… actually quite good with that."

"Told you," Wes says.

It is at this point that Jesse seems to realize that the twerp in front of him has just scored the first successful offensive hit against him in the entire fight.

He is furious. "Oh… now I am just… I am just… you know what? Just for that, I will kill all of you twice."

Thad's sudden appearance is enough to bolster Wes and David's spirits, allowing them to rest for a moment and get back into the fight. Which is good, because Jesse seems to figure out an effective anti-Thad strategy fairly quickly; keeping him busy at range. By hurling airbending at him from a distance, he keeps Thad busy enough to make it almost impossible for him to close in. Thad defends himself fairly well, but the airbender is steadily driving him towards the edge of the roof.

Fortunately, David charges in at this point and grabs Jesse's staff, flipping backwards and kicking Jesse into the air. Wes's fire whips are already on their way down by the time he is launched, and they smack into him with enough force to make him bounce off the rooftop.
Jesse breakdances on his way up, spinning his legs and creating a whirlwind that blows Wes and David a short distance away. Unfortunately for him, Thad is already on his way in, and no sooner than he is on his feet than the blade-wielding firebender is in his face again. Sword and metal staff clang and spark against each other, but the firebender is canny enough to take advantage of even this, scraping his sword along the staff and enhancing the sparks created into full-blown flames that nearly burn Jesse's hair off.

The airbender gets enough of a break to feint backwards and throw a gust of wind at Thad's chest, but as Thad flies backwards, David leaps over him and takes his place, landing in front of the airbender and sending a rolling wave of fire at his ankles. Jesse steps over it, only to have David start giving him lessons on fancy footwork. Every time the airbender tries to put his foot down, David beats him to the punch with his own foot, stepping in front of him, around him, and behind him, kicking him away and blocking him. Jesse is so concerned with staying upright that he doesn't notice Wes until it is too late—the firebender charges in and slams a concentrated fireball into the ground beneath him, causing an explosion that sends him flying.

Jesse lands on the edge of the roof, getting up and gritting his teeth. Thad, Wes, and David all approach him slowly, ready to fight. Even worse, the guards have now figured out how to get onto this roof. Several of them are climbing up at that very moment.

"Sur... surrender!" one of the guards pants. "You are completely... surrendered! I mean... surron... surrenderoni... just stop fighting!"

Several more guards climb up beside him, and suddenly, Jesse is looking at odds that are very much stacked against him. He grits his teeth and fights the urge to scream. He refuses to lose to these idiots. REFUSES.

And he still has one trump card up his sleeve.

"HEY!" one of the guards calls out from below. Wes looks over to see most of the guards on the ground rapidly filing away from them. "Get down here! They found the REAL guy! We gotta go catch him!"

"But..." the guard on the roof pants. "But I just got up here!"

"I don't care! Forget about these guys and get back down here! That is an ORDER!"

"Awww," the guard grumbles, slinking sadly off the roof.

"Well, so much for the support of local law enforcement," Thad says lightly. "Ah well. I'd say we're quite alright without them."

"Well, you're not the only one with support," Jesse says with a grin. Wes turns around to see him casually tossing a small white object up and down in his hands.

Wes's eyes nearly bulge out of his skull as he recognizes the whistle. With quick-draw skills he never knew he possessed, he blasts the instrument mid-toss, sending it flying off the roof. "Ha!" Wes says. "Let's see you blow your fancy whistle now."

David sneezes.

Wes freezes.

Jesse sleazes. "Already blew it."
Thad turns to the side. "AHHH!" he barks. "What is that?"

An enormous white beast easily the size of a house now floats just off the roof, eying the firebenders with a very unhappy expression. Its braided hair flaps gently in the breeze, prompting a short facepalm from Jesse. "Damn it, Brittany…"

"A sky bison," David says miserably, sneezing again.

"I hate sky bison," Wes groans.

"What a coincidence!" Jesse says. "They hate you too. Mr. Duck! Attack!"

The bison draws in a deep breath, and before they can move, it blasts the firebenders with a hurricane-force wind, stripping a large segment of the roof completely clean of tiles and sending all three boys flying clear across the street.

They slam rather painfully into a slanted rooftop, and Thad has to jam his sword into the tile to keep from sliding off. Wes and David rather unhelpfully cling to his feet, adding more weight to the strained blade.

"Wesley!" Thad warns. "So help me heaven, if this sword is scratched…"

"Shut up, Thad!" David says. "We have more important things to worry about!"

Jesse sails over on Mr. Duck, the bison preparing for another breath of flesh-stripping air, when suddenly, the beast finds itself with a face full of feathers and fury.

"Yes!" Thad says.

"Go Pavarotti!" Wes shouts.

"Get that douchebag!" David encourages.

The bison twists and groans at the avian assault, but seems largely powerless to do much else. The bird is too small and quick for it to swat away. Fortunately for Mr. Duck, that's where Jesse comes in. The airbender swings his staff at the bird, helpfully gusting it aside.

"Hey!" Wes shouts. "Do not mess with the bird!" He angrily hurls some fairly impressive fire rings at the man-and-beast duo, the rings going around Mr. Duck, but being just enough to freak the bison out and threaten the airbender. Jesse responds by backing Mr. Duck off, before turning the beast around and facing them with its rear.

"What's it doing?" David asks.

Mr. Duck answers by flapping its enormous beaver-like tail, sending a blast of air so powerful that it slams the boys through the roof, landing them in the attic of the building.

"Ffff… fuck me," Thad groans. "Are your jobs always this painful?"

"Usually," David says.

"You'll get used to it," Wes grunts.

That's all they have time to discuss before Mr. Duck 's face fills the hole they left behind. The
beast takes another deep breath.

"...oh, crap," Thad says.

It is at this point that Pavarotti recovers from his blow, and heads off to seek more help. Much more help.

"I think that's the last of it," Jeff says, as he dumps the broken glass into the trashcan. "What is featherbrain's beef with windows, anyway?"

As if on cue, Pavarotti proceeds to smash through another window, right next to the first.

"Oh, fuck you, bird!" Jeff says, flipping the bird the bird.

Pavarotti swoops down and starts screeching and fluttering around Jeff's head.

"Ahh! I didn't mean it! Help!" Jeff says. "He's gone rogue!"

"Whoa, easy!" Nick says, running up and grabbing Pavarotti right out of the air. "Chill out, Pav! What is it?"

The bird squawks indignantly, as if to say 'if I could talk, I would, dumbass.'

"What's going on?" Trent says, running into the room. "I heard glass brea—PAVAROTTI. SERIOUSLY, WE JUST FINISHED."

Pavarotti squawks and screeches, struggling free of Nick's grasp and flying wildly around the room.

"I think it's trying to tell us something," Flint says calmly. "What is it, buddy?"

The bird squawks and screeches.

"They fell down a well?" Flint asks.

Pavarotti shrieks and flies around.

"Oh," Flint says. "My mistake. But they are in trouble?"

A caw.

"Dude, what do you think you're doing?" Nick asks.

"I'm communing with nature. Shhh!" Flint says. "What was that? Some kind of giant animal?"

Jeff tilts his head. "...what's he saying?"

"Wes, David, and Thad are in trouble. They're being attacked by a giant animal," Flint says.

Trent rolls his eyes. "Oh, come on. There is no way you got all of that from that dumb bird fluttering around randomly. And why on earth would there be a giant animal in Sho Fa? You guys are crazy if you actually believe—"

Suddenly, the building is rattled with a thunderous impact, as if a multi-ton object just slammed into the roof. The entire building quakes, bits of dust and fluff falling from long undisturbed nooks.

Nick, Jeff, Trent, and Flint share a look.
"That was probably nothing," Trent says lightly.

Something *roars* above them.

"...but maybe we should investigate anyway," Trent continues. "You know, just in case."

Actors and actresses, orchestra members, and a few crewmen all suddenly flood into the lobby.

"What *is* that?" one of the actresses calls out.

"It's probably nothing," Nick says. "Nut on the off chance it isn't... do you have any weapons in this building by any chance?"

The girl stares at him. "I don't know... try the prop closet."

"Thanks!" Nick says, dashing off, with the others not far behind. Pavarotti screeches after them.

Mere moments later...

"Damn it! Wrong closet!" Trent says.

Another impact.

"Fuck it!" Nick says. "Just grab something and let's go!"

Above them, Mr. Duck takes to the air again, leaping upwards only to belly flop downwards in another attempt to squish the panicked souls scrambling about on the roof. They've been blasted or smashed across six rooftops at this point, and to say it's taking its toll is putting it very lightly. They barely have time to get to their feet before Mr. Duck smashes into the roof again, its massive girth kicking up strong enough winds to knock them over again.

"It's going to *kill* us!" Thad says miserably, leaning on his sheathed sword for support. His very nice clothes are now covered in dust and thoroughly ragged. "Why does it hate us? Who is this airbender? What did you *do* to him?"

"Who knows?" Wes breathes, crouching on one knee and wiping some blood from his mouth. "Life is full of mysteries."

"Most of them want us dead," David says, bent over double and clutching his stomach.

The bison jumps up again, and the boys scramble away from each other, only for the bison to land in the middle and send all three of them sprawling.

"You attacked me," Jesse says. "Sabotaged me, *humiliated* me, and stole from me. And all that... all that, I could take. But when you showed your faces here... when you threatened *her*, you crossed the line. And once the line is crossed, there's no going back."

Wes weakly tries to pull himself up, but his arm gives out beneath him. "I *swear*," he says tiredly. "All of that was an accident! We don't know what you're talking about!"

"Seriously!" Thad implores. "I just *got* here!"

"Yeah, well..." Jesse says. "You just piss me off."

"Right back at you!" David says petulantly.
Jesse lashes the reins, and Mr. Duck walks on its six legs to stand over Wes, bearing its massive teeth in a snarl.

"It's over, firebender. I've always wanted to see if he could actually do this," Jesse confides. "And thanks to you, I can! Mr. Duck! Eat!"

"What?" Wes barks.

The bison opens its mouth.

"HYAAAAAA!"

And suddenly, it has a squeegee jammed between its teeth.

The beast tilts its head in confusion, causing Jesse to flail around as he tries in vain to keep his balance. While the two are distracted, Trent grabs the battered Wes and pulls him to safety. Wes soon sees that Thad and David have experienced similar rescues by Jeff and Nick.

"What the… why are you… how did you…?" Wes asks.

"We heard you needed some help," Nick shrugs.

"From who?" David asks.

Flint climbs up the ladder, Pavarotti perched on his shoulder. "A little bird told us."

"You crafty little thing!" Thad says fondly, looking up at Pavarotti. "I take back every disparaging thought I've ever had about you!"

Pavarotti tilts his head and squawks in the vein of 'whatever.'

Jesse finally gets the presence of mind to jump down and remove the bison mouth-guard manually, popping the bent pole out with his bare hands and turning to face the newcomers. "There's more of you?" he cries, exasperated. "What the fuck? Seriously, who are you guys?"

Trent twirls his broom over his head. "Oh, nobody special."

Jeff stabs at the air with his mop. "Just… birds of a feather."

Nick dual-wields a plunger and a toilet brush. "Flying towards the same sunset."

Flint swings around a rather filthy length of rope. "We're all dragon hawks, in the end."

Pavarotti screeches and takes to the sky, carrying a small scroll in its talons.

"That was beautiful," Wes says. "Where did you come up with that?"

The four look at him a little confused, but they shake it off quickly. "It's not important," Nick says lightly.

"Shut up!" Jesse shouts. "I have had it up to here with this country! As soon as we're done conquering the rest of the airbenders, I'm going to suggest we conquer the other nations. Starting with this one!"

Jesse lashes Mr. Duck into a charge, but Nick, Jeff, Trent, and Flint all combine their efforts into raising a massive fire wall in front of it. The bison balks and screeches to a halt, tossing Jesse
overboard. The airbender performs a torpedo spin to break through the flame wall, but a world of hurt awaits him on the other side. No sooner than he lands than Nick and Jeff are all over him. He barely has time to pull out his staff and defend himself as Jeff wields his mop like a spear, while Nick spins his twin toilet instruments with the expertise of a professional sword fighter. Jesse finds himself assaulted from both sides, while Trent and Flint work on Mr. Duck. The bison seems to know that its master is in distress, but the fire makes it nervous. A nervous bison can't quite remember how massive and powerful it is, or how easily it could probably blow said fire out. Working together, they keep the fire moving steadily towards the bison, which moans and backs off.

Meanwhile, although they use them well, Nick and Jeff's janitorial supplies aren't quite up to the craftsmanship of Jesse's metal staff. When Jeff's mop snaps in half, Jesse is able to jut his staff into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Nick counters in a rather unorthodox way by jamming the plunger onto Jesse's face. The airbender begins wildly tossing gusts around the roof as he desperately tries to pull the horrible thing off of his beautiful mug.

The plunger comes off on its own when Jeff pays Jesse back by smacking him in the face with the still-damp business end of his mop. Jesse coughs and sputters, just distracted enough for Trent's broom to sweep (heh) him off his feet.

Watching their fellow Daltonians fight gives Wes and David a short second (or third?) wind, enabling them to struggle to their feet. Thad stands a short distance away, watching with a small measure of pride as the students fight off the airbender and his beast.

"These four are on the school's competition wushu team," Thad says smugly. "Along with yours truly, the Team Captain. They're quite good, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh, I'll say plenty," Wes says.

With little other option, Jesse is forced to back off for the moment. He flips to his feet, and dashes towards Flint, using a powerful gust to blast away the fire keeping Mr. Duck under control. Mounting the bison once more, he flies up to hover just out of reach.

"Had enough already?" Nick says, pointing at him with his brush.

Jesse grits his teeth, contemplating his next move. A distant screech calls his attention to the horizon, where he sees something that just flabbergasts him utterly—more reinforcements on their way in, bounding across the rooftops on ostrich horses.

"It's over, airbender!" Wes says, standing side-by-side with Thad and David. "You can't win this fight!"

From the streets below, the occupants of the Groban Theater have gathered to cheer them on.

"Get 'em, boys!"

"Take that puffball down a peg!"

"FIRE NATION RUUUUULEZZ!"

With a somewhat sick expression, Jesse realizes that Wes is right. And honestly, that just makes him all the more furious. He's contemplating a suicide run out of sheer spite, when suddenly…

"AAAIIIIIIIEEEEE!
An impossibly loud scream echoes across the city from parts unknown.

Jesse's eyes widen. "Rachel..." he whispers.

Taking one last look at the bird-brains who dared to hand him something resembling a defeat, he decides that he can't just leave them there victorious. So he takes one final parting shot.

Lashing the reins, Mr. Duck dives down and swoops back up again, swinging his flat tail at them as he goes. The gust slams into the three apparent leaders of the mob, sending them sailing towards the edge. That's all he has time to see before the reinforcements on horseback start tossing fire at his rear, so Jesse St. James flies off into the distance, looking to more important matters.

It becomes apparent to Wes almost immediately that they are going to fly off the roof. After everything they've gone through, their journey is going to end with them smeared on the pavement.

"Catch!" Flint shouts, hurling his rope at him.

A rocket-stream from his hand allows him to pivot in mid-air and grab the rope. David, in turn, grabs onto Wes's leg. Thad grabs onto David's.

Flint steadies himself as the rope is pulled taut, and the three boys swing right smack into the wall of the theater. After the beating they've taken, that final blow is almost enough to knock them clean out. But it seems that even Thad is able to find some hidden source of strength to keep him hanging on as the boys work together to haul them back onto the roof.

It is as they find themselves on solid ground again that Wes notices something.

Applause. Whistling, shouting of all sorts.

"You guys kicked ass!"

"That was awesome!"

"Encore! Do it again!"

"Is that... are they cheering?" Wes asks.

Picking himself up, he moves on pained and unsteady legs to the edge of the roof, where the Groban Theater crowd has been joined by a mob of citizens, who are currently giving them a standing ovation (well, they likely were never sitting to begin with, but still). They clap and cheer, some of them offering fist pumps of solidarity, others jumping up and down in their excitement. Several children are riding on their parents' shoulders to get a better view. All twelve boys are now standing in full view of the crowd, their ostrich horses parked behind them.

"What should we do?" Thad asks.

"I'm not really sure," Wes says.

"Take a bow?" Other Nick suggests.

The boys look at each other.

"All of us, on three," David says. "One, two, three."

They bow.
And the crowd goes wild. Wes finds himself smiling in spite of himself. He's never been much of an attention-seeker, but this feels strangely nice. He can't let himself bask in it for too long, but still… it's nice.

"Come now," Wes says. "Let's not stick around. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves."

"You mean more than we already have?" David asks.

"I see nothing wrong with a little attention," Thad says, smiling and waving to the crowd. "I rather like it."

Wes rolls his eyes, and turns around. "We have work to do. Come on, we're closer than ever, we have to find…"

It is as he is walking away from the cheering crowds, as the adrenaline surge slowly subsides and everything that has happened starts to catch up to him, that Wes suddenly feels a bout of vertigo that stops him cold.

"…we have to…” He shakes his head, which only blurs his vision further. "…oh boy…"

"Dude, are you okay?" Nick asks, suddenly at the end of a very long and dark tunnel. Wes can think of only one thing to say to that. "…motion to pass out," he mutters.

"Second," he hears David echo.

"All in favor… lower your entire body…” Thad groans.

He doesn't need to be told twice.

FLOP.

As much as we would've liked to keep going, a solid sleepless night and a sound, thorough thrashing at the hands of an airbender and his ten ton friend left us down and out for the time being. It was quite frustrating to come so close, only to be violently blown backwards, but… I'd hardly say the day was a complete waste.

Something happened to us that day, as we fought beside each other for the first time.

You might say that was the day we vitrified.

"Man," Jeff says, reclining in a chair next to Wes's bed. "You guys get knocked out a lot."

Wes blinks and tries to shake the cobwebs out of his head. He looks up to find himself in a fairly nice inn, David and Thad already awake and sitting on the other beds beside them. David's abdomen is tightly bound with bandages. Thad has a bandage wrapped around his forehead, and he keeps scratching at it.

"Stop that!" David mutters.

"Don't tell me what to do," Thad says petulantly. "You are not my nanny."

"Where are we?" Wes groans.
"Berry Inn," Nick says. "Thad brokered a deal so he could pay for rooms for everyone in lieu of actually paying for the windows."

"We can't…" Wes shakes his head. "We can't stay here, we have to—"

He tries to get up, only for the world to determinedly tilt on its axis.

"Yeah, uhhh, no," Jeff says, tapping him on the forehead, which is more than enough to knock him over in his current state. "You need to take a fucking break, man."

"Jeff's right," Nick says. "Airbender dude laid you guys the fuck out."

"It was the beast that did most of the work," Thad grumbles.

Wes lays his head back on his pillow. "But… we were… it seemed like we were almost there…"

"Wesley," David says simply. "We're not going to do Blaine much good if we go and die before we get to him. As much as I hate it… I think we need to rest for a bit. We still have Pavarotti. We'll find him."

Wes sighs in frustration, but has little choice other than to admit defeat. "I suppose you're right," he says.

Nick nudges Jeff, who clears his throat, and stands up. "So, uhh… we were kind of thinking… since you guys' jobs mostly seem to consist of you getting your asses kicked and running yourselves into the ground…"

"Hey!" David says, offended.

"…you might want a little more help," he finishes. "Like… on a… more permanent basis, you know?"

Wes blinks at the ceiling, and sits up (slowly this time) to look at him. "…what are you saying?"

Nick shrugs. "We want to join you. You and David."

"And me!" Thad adds testily.

"Join us?" Wes says. "But…"

"You guys need help," Trent says. "At the very least, you need people to make sure you eat and sleep while you hunt down missing royals."

"Plus, what happens when you actually find the dude?" Jeff asks. "I don't think Sue Sylvester is just gonna step aside so you can plop him on the throne. You might have a little fight on your hands."

"You want to help us fight?" David asks. "You've never even met Blaine, but you'd be willing to fight to help him become Fire Lord?"

"I don't know if you've noticed," Luke says, "but Sue Sylvester won't be winning any Fire Lord of the Year contests. This year, or any other."

"She's kind of evil," Other Nick chimes in.
"She must be stopped," Flint says. "Her rule is poison. Without the antidote, the Nation may not survive."

"After all the crazy stuff we've seen," Nick says. "You really think we're just gonna go back to Dalton and twiddle our thumbs while we wait for the nice lady to tell us we can learn again?"

"This is dangerous!" David says. "You saw us getting bison-bashed out there."

Jeff shrugs. "So? We can fight. We're pretty kickass."

"You know the saying," James (or is it Ethan?) says. "'There are no bad benders at Dalton.' Everyone in this room is at LEAST above-average in terms of their bending prowess."

"Are you serious?" Wes says, shaking his head. "All of you?"

Thad scoffs. "Of course they are! We're proud students of the best boys' school in the Nation. We have a legacy to uphold, after all."

"It would be nice to have some dependable back-up..." David says thoughtfully.

"What exactly do you think you'll be doing?" Wes asks.

Ethan (or is it James?) shrugs. "You guys have been calling the shots so far, and you're the ones who know the Prince. You're the leaders."

"I'm cool with following you guys," Trent says. "Provided you don't, you know, order me to kick a puppy or rob an old woman or something."

"I've said it before, but it bears repeating—you guys are kind of badass," Nick says. "And you're pretty good leaders, too."

Wes honestly doesn't know what to say. He's never really thought of himself as a leader, but everyone in the room seems sincere. They're willing to follow him. To trust him, to help him find Blaine and put him back where he belongs.

"If you really want to help," Wes says, with a small smile, "then who am I to say no?"

"I'm sure Blaine will appreciate it, as well," David says.

Thad stands up, a little wobbly, and makes his way to the front of the room. "Let's make it official!" he says. "All in favor of taking a temporary leave of absence from our non-education in order to offer our services to this noble cause, say 'aye!'"

"Aye!" a chorus of voices says with just the slightest variation in enthusiasm.

"That sounded suspiciously unanimous, but I must ask; all opposed?" Thad continues, quirking an eyebrow.

Silence.

"Well, there you have it, gentlemen," Thad says, smiling at Wes and David. "We're with you until we are no longer needed. We should... oh! We're all Dalton students—this is practically a school club! We need a name..." He purses his lips in thought. "Daltonians for a Better Tomorrow? Future Noblemen of the Fire Nation? The Gentlemen's Club?"

Pavarotti sails in through the open window and lands on the table behind Thad, a small, dead
ratsnake in its claws.

Wes grins at the bird. "How about 'the Dragon Hawks'"

A number of small, sly smiles seems to suggest that the name is a good one.

"What an ingenious idea!" Thad says, elated. He gestures to the bird. "Witness, gentlemen, our mascot, the noble Pavarotti! A powerful specimen of finest breeding and utmost dignity, a creature with the air of nobility around him, graceful, neat and poised in all he does…"

Note that he says all this as Pavarotti rather savagely tears the ratsnake's head off of its body and scarfs it down in a single gulp.

"All in favor of the name?" David asks.

Everyone raises their hand.

"All opposed?"

All arms downward.

"Well then," Wes says proudly. "It's settled. From here on, we are the Dalton Academy Dragon Hawks!"

And so we were.

David, Thad and I took a day or so to get our strength back up. It was during that time we learned of Quinn and her assassins' presence in the city, and their failed attempt to defeat the Avatar. Thad identified her almost immediately as the 'harpy' from prison, and David and I knew we probably needed to keep track of them. So Thad called in a favor…

Thad walks into the fortress like he owns the place, spotting the leader almost immediately.

"Young Master Harwood!" the man says. "Wonderful to see you again, sir! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Thad grins at him. "Remember when I said that someday, I would call upon you to perform a service?"

The man nods, now seeming slightly nervous.

"Well, that day is today!" Thad announces happily. "My friends and I are in need of some armor. Costumes, you see, for a historical re-enactment. We'll need weapons too, of course…"

And just like that, we had Fire Nation military uniforms and weapons. From there, the plan was simple—while Thad and the gang kept the assassins and Chi-Ryus distracted, David and I would take Pavarotti and try to track you down before they did. And as luck would have it, we succeeded.

"And so here we are," Wes says, crossing his arms and posing proudly next to his ostrich horse.

Blaine stares at him, mouth agape.

"I think we've rendered him speechless," David says lightly.
Blaine blinks, and looks down. "You guys… did all of that… went through all of that… for me?"

Wes grins. "Well, not just for you…"

"There is the Fire Nation to consider," David says lightly. "And our own sense of moral outrage. But… if it makes you feel better, then you could say we did it for you."

Blaine laughs, still looking down.

"They're looking at you, you know," Wes says quietly. "They've never seen a Prince before. Don't feel too pressured, but… you are kind of like a symbol of hope to them."

The Prince looks over his shoulder, catching several pairs of eyes that quickly and nervously look away.

"Maybe you should say something," David says. "We're almost ready to leave."

Blaine nods. "Line everyone up."

"Hawks!" David calls out. "Fall in!"

The soldiers quickly drop what they're doing and try to form a line. Thad has to step out and redirect them so that they remember the proper order.

Blaine watches as they scramble around, an inscrutable look on his face. Wes, David, and Kurt watch him watching them, trying to see what's on his mind.

"You've got some pretty dedicated friends here," Kurt says softly, nodding at Wes and David. "Don't be too nervous."

Blaine shakes his head. "No," he says quietly. "They're not my friends."

Kurt raises his eyebrows at that proclamation. Wes looks mildly devastated—David looks almost angry.

But the troops finish lining up before they can say anything, and Blaine steps forward to address them.

"Hello," he says, clearing his throat. "I'm sure most of you already know this, but just in case you don't; my name is Blaine, son of Fire Lord Anderson, and Crown Prince of the Fire Nation. I just wanted to take a moment to thank all of you for… everything you've done. I felt like I was alone in this, for quite a while, and I can't tell you how much it means to learn that isn't the case." He pauses, and smiles. "I especially want to thank my brothers, Wes and David. They never gave up on me, and if it weren't for them, I wouldn't be standing here today." He nods to the boys, who are too caught off-guard to reply. "There will be time for more formal introductions later. Right now… I smell terrible, and I'm pretty sure this shirt belongs to a dead man. Who votes we find some civilization, ASAP? All in favor, say 'aye!'"

This gets a decent laugh, and several enthusiastic 'ayes!' from Hawks and non-Hawks alike.

"Alright, let's do it!" Blaine says.

The soldiers break off and head to their ostrich horses, and Blaine walks past the three of them like it's no big deal. Like what just happened was nothing at all.

Wes stares after him. "What did he just call us…?"
David blinks. "I think… I think he said…"

Kurt just grins, and pats them both on the back. "Welcome to the family!" he says lightly, sauntering off to join his boyfriend.

The two boys share a look. They grin, and shake their heads at their sentimental little brother.

And then, they walk off to join him.

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A/N: And there you have it, folks! Blaine now has his very own set of Dragon Hawks to play with. :) Don't worry about them stealing too much spotlight, though—I love them, of course, but this is Blaine and Kurt's story. For the video gamers out there, you might think of this as the point where we change from Final Fantasy to Final Fantasy Tactics. As someone already pointed out, the Dragon Hawks answer only to Blaine. He is their leader, which is a major responsibility that he hasn't really had to deal with before. How will he cope? Only time will tell. ;)

COMING UP NEXT: After a lengthy stint as an object of myth, Sue Sylvester makes her triumphant return to the story. ;)
Kurt takes a moment to count his blessings, looking at the convoy of characters riding all around him.

Finn is sleeping somewhat miserably, propped between Rachel and fellow giant Flint. Since Rachel is hardly capable of supporting his weight, Finn is leaned forward and drooling on Flint's armor. To his credit, Flint doesn't seem to mind. Rachel gives him a gentle backrub, careful not to disturb his injured shoulder, looking conflicted and sad.

Artie rides with Jeff. He pokes the other boy in the ribs, whispering something and gesturing to Thad, and Jeff starts laughing so hard that he nearly knocks both of them off the horse. Mercedes and Nick ride over to push them back into the saddle, only to be brought in on the joke and nearly choke with laughter themselves.
Last but not least, Blaine rides with Wes, giving a brilliant grin at something the other boy said. From Kurt's horse, David makes a comment that makes them both start laughing, and Kurt can't help but marvel at how different Blaine seems around them.

He has always been a little closed off, a little mysterious, not unlike Kurt himself. Blaine is a lot like a complicated origami structure, with all sorts of little messages and notes written on the paper. Every time Kurt starts to think he has him figured out, he unfolds a little more, and a new message is revealed. He opened up quite a bit after the train ride, but even then, it was nothing like this. The return of his childhood friends—his brothers-by-proxy—has put him in full bloom. His eyes sparkle again, and he smiles like he doesn't particularly care who he blinds. It's a wonderful thing to witness.

Even nature seems to have taken notice. Little birds flutter over and perch in his hair. Squirrelmunks and fire ferrets cling happily to his shirt. Even normally predatory animals like saber-toothed moose lions and platypus bears trot alongside him and stare at him adoringly. It's cute, but now that Kurt thinks about it, it's a little weird. Especially since neither Blaine, nor anyone else in their little convoy seems to notice the animals at all.

"You've gotten pretty popular lately," Kurt teases. "Even nature seems to want a piece of you."

Blaine keeps right on smiling, seeming to ignore Kurt.

"I suppose we could just blame it on animal magnetism," Kurt continues.

Blaine keeps right on ignoring him, snorting at another comment from David.

Kurt is appalled. "Umm, hello?" he says. "It's nice that your friends are back from the dead and all, but you don't have to ignore me to…"

A low, throaty rumble vibrates through the air above him. Kurt turns his eyes up and nearly flips backwards off his horse.

"DRAGON!" he shouts. "Holy crap, there is a dragon right above us!"

Blaine continues to ignore him. So, in fact, does everyone else. They don't even notice when the dragon swoops down to fly mere inches above their heads.

This is taking oblivious to a whole new level.

It is then that Kurt notices that Thad is trotting just ahead of them, prattling on about something or other, seemingly oblivious to the fact that almost everyone is either ignoring him or outright mocking him.

"Oh," Kurt says. "Now I get it."

He leans back to look at himself. Sure enough, Kurt-in-real-life is fast asleep, having had his lights bored out by Thaddeus's incessant warbling, which can only mean…

"This is a spirit thing," Kurt says idly. "Interesting…"

The dragon groans in the affirmative.

Blaine looks over at the sleeping Kurt, and his eyes soften, and his smile shifts into such pure adoration that Kurt very nearly melts into a puddle of spirit-goo. He'd reach out and hug the boy if his arms would actually touch him.
Kurt glances up at the birds on Blaine's head, the various lizards and rodents clinging to his torso. They look at him as well, seeming to brighten up a bit and flutter over to give him some loving as well.

"You're the animals from the Sylvester House, aren't you?" Kurt says and he scratches the fire ferret behind the ears. "Did our dinky little funeral pyre really help you out?"

The various critters don't quite seem to get the gist—apparently, even in spirit form, animal communication is a little tricky. He can't really think of much other reason for the animals to be following them, however, especially this particular grouping of animals.

A winged monkey perches on his back, running fingers through his hair, probably searching for bugs. He's fairly sure this is a sign of affection, so Kurt takes it in a positive light. After all, it's not like it's messing with his real hair. "Well, we were glad to help," he says. "And as much as I appreciate adoring fans of any species, you don't need to stick around for our sakes. You can go! You're free now."

At this, the dragon swoops down to fly right next to him. If it were tangible, it would've knocked half the Hawks off their horses with its wings alone. The enormous creature side-eyes him and gives a low rumble. Despite the size and ferocity of the thing, the sound isn't threatening at all. It seems almost… inviting.

The animals flutter and hop on over to the dragon. From its back, they, too, turn to look at him. "Me too?" Kurt asks. "You want me to get on?"

The dragon, at least, seems to understand human speech. It rumbles and drifts slightly closer to Kurt.

"Well, who am I to say 'no' to a dragon ride?" Kurt says, letting himself drift over to grab onto the scaly creature's back. No sooner than Kurt is onboard, the dragon swoops back up into the heavens, moving with impossible speed over the beautiful Fire Nation countryside. The colors swoop by so quickly that they seem to bleed into each other, making him feel like he's flying through a painted world. When he is able to tear his eyes off of the vibrant country around him, he looks ahead and sees what they are heading towards: a particularly tall plume of black smoke, like the kind from a train, only moreso, seems to be moving through the countryside at a rapid pace. A high, blaring whistle blasts through the air, causing Kurt to cringe.

"What is that?" Kurt says.

The dragon swoops down for a closer look, flying through the smoke trail until it emerges in front of the thing producing it; a terrifying hybrid of tank and train, a veritable metal monster. A huge, armored engine pulls along several heavily armored cars, but there is no track to speak of. The thing is much too wide and powerful to fit on a track—instead, it ploughs through the land itself, leveling the ground in front of it and demolishing all obstacles. Two large cannons are mounted to the sides of the front car, and several smaller cannons are mounted along the sides of the others.

"That doesn't look friendly," Kurt says.

An iguana parrot climbs up on his shoulder and points ahead, and Kurt turns his eyes to the front just in time to see a man dive out of the way as the train annihilates his house, sending splinters and shattered furniture flying in all directions.

"Ouch," Kurt winces.
The spirit animals huddle in close to one another as the dragon swoops in front of the tank-train and slows itself down, sliding easily through the walls of the engine of destruction. They pass through several cars, Kurt catching glimpses of weapons and personnel and some terrifyingly huge live things, before they slide into a car that is slightly larger and more elaborate than the others. Unlike the bare, cold, metallic décor in the others, this one is drenched in deep reds and golds, and lavishly furnished. It even appears to have multiple rooms.

A sudden sinking feeling takes root in Kurt's stomach, only deepening as they drift further into the car. They pass through several rooms—full of maps, scrolls, books, strange-looking equipment, and a few rather miserable-looking men and women pouring over all of the above, dressed in vivid red armor that covers every part of them from head to toe, making them seem almost inhuman. Soon, they come to the last and largest room of the car. At the far end, on a raised platform, several torches burn prominently around a large palanquin, protected by a line of six firebenders in the same armor. Inside the palanquin, a shadow sits on a throne, its features blurred and obscured by several veils. Even its silhouette seems to have an air of power about it, and the animal spirits surrounding Kurt regard it with abject terror.

"That's her, isn't it?" Kurt says.

As if in answer to his question, a voice suddenly echoes from above.

"Fire Lord Sue!" a tinny voice says through something in the ceiling. "We have confirmed impact with the house we warned you about."

A diminutive girl steps out from behind the palanquin, retrieving a metal cone attached to the wall with a wire and handing it to the figure inside.

"Any damage?" the Fire Lord says into the cone.

"Yes, Fire Lord!" the tinny voice echoes. "The house was completely destr—"

"To the engine!" the Fire Lord says. "Who cares about the house? We blew the whistle, we gave plenty of warning. If these people like their houses so much, they should take some initiative and move them."

"No damage to the hull or the engine, Fire Lord! All gauges read within normal levels!" the voice calls back.

"Excellent!" Sue says. "Carry on."

"Yes, Fire Lord!"

The small girl replaces the cone on the wall.

Kurt shakes his head. "How can anyone be that callous?"

A fire ferret buries its head in Kurt's shirt, and he absentmindedly strokes the creature as he continues to watch Sue.

"Becky!" Fire Lord Sue says. "Bring me one of those tweedy little twerps."

"Which one, Fire Lord?" Becky asks.

"Eh," Sue says. "They're all the same to me. Pick whichever one looks the most terrified."
"Yes, Fire Lord!" Becky says, bowing and marching off to one of the other rooms. She returns dragging a squirming, skinny figure by the ear, something he has to bend over quite a bit to accommodate. "The Fire Lord requests your presence!" Becky says, releasing him.

"Y-yes, my Lord?" the man says, standing and twitching nervously.

Sue says nothing.

"Y-y-you wanted to see me my Lord?" the man sputters.

At this, Sue slowly rises to her feet, taking slow, measured steps away from her throne. The veils obscuring her visage are pushed aside one by one, until the woman herself comes into full view. She is an enormous specimen herself, nearly as tall as Finn, dressed in a jet-black robe with gold trim, her hair in a top-knot, with the Fire Lord's headpiece firmly in place. She stares down at the man, and sneers.

"How dare you say that about my mother!" Sue growls, snapping her fingers. The Red Guard steps forward and surrounds him, and the poor guy just panics even harder.

"Wh-wh-what?" he stutters. "I didn—I didn't say anything about her! I was asking what you wanted to see me for!"

Sue looks appalled at him. "You have got some nerve," she says. "Who are you to question her sexual proclivities? For all you know, she just likes the smell of leather, and even if that's not the case—what my mother does with barnyard animals in the privacy of her own home is none of your business. I have half a mind to incinerate you where you stand, you uppstart little four-eyed mouth-breather."

The man is now terrified beyond the point of words, turning stark white and looking like he could pass out at any moment.

Sue marches down the staircase, prompting the man to back away from her. He tries to escape, but the Red Guard gives him nowhere to run. Sue circles him like a vulture, seeming to contemplate his fate.

"P-p-p-p-p-please..." the man says.

Sue rolls her eyes. "And he just doesn't get it," she says. "See, you're standing in my presence, so by default, every word that comes out of your mouth is deep, personal insult. Not just to myself, but to the Fire Nation itself. If I were you, I'd get real low, real fast, and start speaking clearly, before I stop hearing accusations of bestiality and start hearing treason."

The man is face-down on the ground so fast that it'd probably qualify as a belly-flop if there were any water involved.

"Please forgive me, Fire Lord," the man says into the carpet.

"I'll think about it," Sue says, sauntering back to her throne. "On a completely unrelated note; hey, I asked you put that overdeveloped noggin of yours to work on a few things. How's that going?"

"Fairly well," the man says, still face-down on the ground.

"Hey!" Sue says, snapping her fingers. "I'm up here. This isn't the Earth Kingdom. Don't talk to the dirt," Sue grouses.
The man picks his head up. "Sorry, Fire Lord. As I said—it's actually going quite well. Based on my calculations and the results of the preliminary tests, it should be possible, with sufficient manpowe—"

"Should?" Sue says dangerously. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that. It sounds like me and all of my good friends at a cook-out, expecting a fireworks show that never happens. It sounds like a sniveling engineer making excuses, like 'well, the rocket should have gone off!'" She leans forward. "It sounds like his primal scream of terror as he soars into the heavens, strapped to his failed rocket, shortly before I rectify his failure by detonating him myself."

The man gulps. "...that doesn't sound good."

"No, poindexter, it doesn't. So how can I get a little more certainty out of you?" Sue asks.

"W-w-well," the man says. "You have to understand… there are many variables that could affect the outcome of—"

"You know, four-eyes, it's the funniest thing—your mouth is moving, but all I hear is the braying of a donkey rabbit. Get to the point," Sue says.

"But that is the point!" the man cries in desperation. "Something on this scale has never been attempted, in the whole of recorded Fire Nation history! You are toying with the forces of nature that no one fully understands in ways that defy the imagination, all to test a theory based on a story you found carved on rocks—"

Kurt puts his hand over his mouth. The carving! The Sun Warrior thingy! It does have something to do with this.

"SILENCE!" Sue shouts. "I didn't kidnap you so you could come in here and question my genius. You just said you thought it was possible. What changed your mind?"

"I do think it's possible!" the man says. "I j-just… I don't know how to scale it. I have no idea how many it would take to guarantee—"

"So basically, you're telling me there's no kill like overkill," Sue says. "Shoot for the stars, get as many people onboard as possible."

"Well," the man stammers. "That would probably help, but… just because something can be done doesn't mean it should. Tampering with forces on this scale is almost guaranteed to have vast, far-reaching consequences beyond what we can predict…"

"Yeah, yeah, thanks for the tip. You're boring me now," Sue says. "Leave."

Without even waiting for him to get up, the Red Guard hefts the man to his feet and hurls him from the room.

Sue snaps her fingers. "Becky!" she says. "How we doing on time?"

"Ahead of schedule, Fire Lord!" Becky says.

"Outstanding. Get your notepad—we've got some orders to issue…"

At this, the dragon groans and banks to the side, flying out and away from the vehicle.

"Hey!" Kurt says. "Where are we going? She was getting to the juicy part!"
A couple of squirrelmunks bound up in front of Kurt, pointing into the distance and chattering. Kurt looks ahead to see a narrow pass between two fairly high cliffs—one that the tank-train will have little choice but to pass through. The dragon roars and rockets ahead of the steamer, flying up to the very top of the cliff and dumping Kurt off.

Kurt glares at the beast. "You better not make me walk all the way back to my body. I will be a very unhappy Avatar."

The dragon roars, and the other creatures cling tightly to its scales as it begins flying in circles.

Kurt squints at it. "…what are you doing?"

The spirit beast starts to glow as circles in mid-air, flying faster and faster, until suddenly it is no longer a dragon, but a living lightning bolt. Up into the clouds it soars, before diving back down and blasting into the cliff with a bone-rattling thunderclap. Kurt reflexively shields himself from the explosion as the cliff crumbles, several tremendous chunks coming loose and falling, falling, falling… landing right on top of the steaming tank train's engine as it passes underneath.

A cacophonous grinding screeches out from the steel beast as the miniature avalanche slams into it. Kurt watches with bated breath as the vehicle emits a huge cloud of steam and smoke, and slowly grinds to a halt.

The engine is heavily damaged. The hull is warped and leaking steam, there are bits and pieces of metal everywhere, and several wheels and treads seem to be bent or outright broken. An engineer climbs out to survey the damage, shaking his head with dismay at the carnage.

"Oh," Kurt says. "That's what you were going for. Very nice."

A weak-sounding roar from above him makes Kurt look up. The dragon and all its spirit friends drift down towards him, their ghostly forms appearing faded and weak, seeming to flake off and disintegrate before his very eyes.

"Oh no!" Kurt says. "You're fading away. You used up all your energy, didn't you? You didn't have to do that…"

The dragon regards him sadly, nodding towards the wreckage and roaring one last time as its woodland friends climb down onto its face to bid Kurt farewell. As the dragon fades, it reaches out with its little whisker-things, and touches Kurt on the forehead. The last thing he hears before he wakes up is a miserable lament from the engineer…

"This will take days to repair!"

Kurt awakens with a start just as the thunderclap from the dragonbolt reaches his actual body.

"Whoa!" Blaine says, reaching over to keep the slightly startled Kurt from flipping off the back of his mount. "Kurt, are you okay?"

"…I'm fine," Kurt says breathlessly, still trying to recover from his little astral trip. "Just a little… startled, is all."

"That was a pretty juicy one," Jeff says appreciatively.

"We'd better get inside soon," Mercedes says. "That storm might not be as over as we thought."
"Oh no!" Rachel says. "I just remembered—lightning always strikes the tallest point! Finn, put your head down this instant!"

Finn shakes his head sleepily as Rachel tries to push him down to her level. "Wha…?"

"Okay," Kurt says, shaking his head to try and clear his mind. "As soon as we get to town, we're buying new disguises, and then there's something I need to tell everyone."

"Excuse me?" Thad says testily. "Surely you don't intend to use my money."

"And why wouldn't I?" Kurt asks.

"It's set aside for Dragon Hawk expenses," Thad says flatly. "You, sir, are not a Hawk. Neither are your companions."

"Ummm, hi," Blaine says, raising his hand. "Fire Prince, here? I think they could use new disguises as well."

Thad looks conflicted. "… well… I suppose… if you believe it is necessary… then I can allow it," he grinds out. "But don't get anything expensive!" he warns. "I'm made from money, not of it. There's a difference."

At this point, Blaine catches the sight of a city wall in the distance. "Okay," he says. "Let's split up, so we don't draw too much attention to ourselves. Wes, David, you guys are in charge of finding us all somewhere to stay. Take Finn with you—he needs to get inside and rest as soon as possible. Thad, you're coming with Kurt, Mercedes, Rachel and I to facilitate a little shopping trip. Nick, Jeff, you two look for stables for the ostrich horses. Everyone else, look for somewhere we can meet without drawing too much attention to ourselves. Once we're done, we'll use Pavarotti to get everyone together, and then Kurt can make his announcement. Everybody clear?"

Wes and David share a look of slight shock at Blaine's take-charge attitude.

"Yes, sir!" they say.

"Yes, sir!" the Dragon Hawks echo.

"Alright then, let's do it!" Blaine says.

The group stops to split along the lines Blaine has outlined, shuffling riders and horses as necessary.

"Well, look at you, Mr. Natural-Born Leader," Kurt says teasingly as he hops up on Blaine's horse. Blaine blushes and grins bashfully as the two of them ride ahead. "You think so? Really?"

"I like a man who isn't afraid to take charge," Kurt says teasingly. "Just be warned—you may be in for a power struggle. I'm a fan of being on top, myself."

Blaine's eyes go wide, and he turns bright red. "You… uhh… you… what?"

Kurt tilts his head at him. "I said I'm a fan of being on top.' It was pretty clear. Do you have a bug in your ear, or—OH!?" It hits him like an ice-cold bucket of slush. He goes from normal, to milk-white, to bright red in the span of a second. "Oh my La. Oh my La, no. I mean—yes, I mean… I don't know yet, but that's not—I didn't—I didn't mean it like—"

Kurt buries his own brilliant blush in his hands, and the two ride in red-faced silence.
When the others catch up to them and inquire about their sudden, dramatic color change, neither has much to say on the subject.

A few hours later finds Kurt, Blaine, Mercedes, Rachel, and the most of the Dragon Hawks gathered in the kitchen of a quaint little house near the city limits. It's already been largely ransacked by thieves, having belonged to some poor soul stuck in the quarantine zone. Its owner may or may not even be alive—either way, they don't have to worry about him coming back any time soon.

At current, everyone is awaiting the arrival of Artie, Wes, and David. Blaine insists upon waiting until everyone is present before he makes the announcement, so they're doing what they can to pass the time. Kurt is feeling invigorated after their shopping trip, wearing fresh, clean clothes in a color palette a little brighter than what he normally goes for. He's feeling a little bold this evening. Besides, however bright his outfit may be, it pales in comparison to…

"Rachel, honey?" Kurt says.

Rachel looks up from her conversation with Mercedes. "Yes?"

"Please, move about five feet—" He points. "—that way."

Rachel looks a little confused, but she complies.

"Thank you, sweetie," Kurt says kindly. "The neon nightmare you call an outfit can no longer hurt me there."

Mercedes snorts. Rachel looks at her, aghast. "You said I looked good in this!" Rachel accuses.

"No," Mercedes clarified. "I very diplomatically said that it fit with your personality."

"And so it does!" Kurt says. "Blinding, bright, and best in small doses."

Rachel crosses her arms. "Well, it is the nature of a star to shine. Don't hate me for what I am."

Kurt rolls his eyes and prepares a reply when a chorus of oohs and ahs draws his attention over to Blaine.

The Prince is dressed simply but elegantly, his hair once again coiffed and tamed with that infernal gel of his, making him look every bit the competent, suave authority figure. Blaine is passing the time by making a minor spectacle of himself, showing off firebending tricks to the Dragon Hawks, preening at the attention he's receiving. The Hawks seem to be completely infatuated with their shiny new Prince. It'd be a little exasperating if it wasn't so darned cute.

There is a smattering of applause as Blaine bends up a little fireburst in the shape of a bird and lets it fly over everyone's heads.

"That is so cool!" Jeff says.

Thad thwacks him on the shoulder. "You are addressing a royal! Show some respect, man!"

Jeff winces. "Sorry, dude. I mean… ummm… sorry, your highnesty. Err… your majesticism? Your… Princeliness?"

His High Majestic Princeliness chuckles. "'Blaine' is fine, really."
"Cool," Jeff says with a grin. "Sorry, Blaine!"

Thad looks a little sour, but says nothing.

The wait is making him a bit antsy, so Kurt decides to get in on the action. "That was nothing," he says lightly. "Watch this!" He whips his hands forward, drawing out the water from his pouch and looping it around in the air in front of him, stretching it into a long, smooth dragon. He's just getting some momentum going when suddenly, a fire dragon joins the dance, the two looping around each other somewhat chaotically, until the two crash into each other in an explosion of steam.

Blaine grins sheepishly. "Whoops," he says. "Sorry." The Dragon Hawks laugh and applaud, and Kurt is about to take a bow when he notices that none of them are looking at him. They're all focused on Blaine.

"Spotlight hog," Kurt mutters. "I don't get it. I'm the Avatar. I can bend four elements. Why are they so fixated on Blaine? He's just a firebender. They see firebenders all the time; they ARE firebenders!"

"It's not a competition, sweetie" Mercedes says quietly.

"I know that!" Kurt says testily. "I'm just saying… if it was, clearly I should be winning. They're all weird around me, like I scare them or something."

Mercedes looks at him carefully. "Don't take this the wrong way, but… you can be a little unapproachable sometimes."

Kurt's jaw drops in utter appall. "I am very approachable!" he says. "I am… friendly, and warm, and… and…"

He is saved from elaborating on this point by a knock on the door. James and Ethan open it up to find only a small, bespectacled statue of a fat man slapping his belly. There is a note attached that says 'take me in. '

"It's Artie," Kurt says flatly. "Bring him in."

The two Hawks look a little unsure.

"Go ahead, guys," Blaine says.

Oh, of course they do it when Blaine says to. The boys heave the statue indoors as Kurt continues to stew in impotent frustration.

The second he is on the floor, Artie cracks the statuesque shell he has formed and arranges the bits into a little disc beneath him. "Put on your helmets and get out the gym mats, because y'all gon' flip the fuck out when you hear what I just heard."

Blaine raises his magnificent eyebrows at Artie's boast. "That sounds pretty major," he says.

"Well, it can't be any more major than my news," Kurt says.

"Oh, we'll see about that," Artie says. "I just heard that th—"

"Wait!" Blaine says. "We can't start yet. Wes and David aren't here."

At this point, there is another knock on the door. James and Ethan step over to open it, allowing
Wes to enter, followed by David with a somewhat pissed-off Pavarotti.

Wes looks at Kurt despairingly. "We told him to stay at the inn," he says.

"He wouldn't listen," David says. "We tried barring the door, but he kept making these pathetic noises and pawing against it and… it just felt cruel."

The Avatar squints in confusion, until a prominent, lumbering shadow fills the doorway, leaning against the frame to catch his breath. "Finn!" Kurt says, running over to him. "You dumpling-headed doofball, what are you doing? You should be in bed."

"I feel… fine…" Finn says, even as it is obvious that he isn't moving out of the doorway on his own strength any time soon.

Kurt sighs. "You are the worst liar ever, but there is no point in making you walk back. You'd probably pass out."

"Yes," Finn says. "My master plan… worked awesomely…"

Kurt shoulders as much of Finn as he can manage and helps him over to a chair. Artie slides on his earth disc to sit next to him, while Rachel surreptitiously moves to stand on his other side, once again subjecting Kurt's retinas to colors that clash more violently than pits full of rabid animals.

"Sit," Kurt orders. "Do not move, do not speak, do not do anything. You are resting, do you understand?"

Finn nods weakly, and Kurt takes a second to pat him on his uninjured shoulder before walking back over to stand next to Blaine.

"Alright," Blaine says. "Is everyone here?"

"Yes," Kurt says, stepping forward. "Now, I have some very important—"

"Wait!" Wes says. "We haven't even called the meeting to order yet."

Kurt tilts his head at him. "It looks pretty 'ordered' to me."

"Looks can be deceiving," Wes says. "It's very important that we follow protocol. Alright everyone, settle down!" he orders the largely silent room. "I hereby call this meeting of the Dragon Hawks to order. David shall call the roll."

"Nick?"

"Present."

"Jeff?"

"Here."

Kurt tilts his head. "Can you not see them? They're right there!"

Wes looks at Kurt, unimpressed. "It's important that we, and they, acknowledge their presence in an official manner."

The Avatar crosses his arms. "Fine," he says.

He waits until the rest of the roll call. And then… "Okay!" Kurt says. "Big news, people!"
"Wait!" Wes says, growing steadily more exasperated. "Kurt, we haven't gotten to new business yet!"

Kurt clenches his jaw. "And when, exactly, do we get to that?"

"First, David has to go through the minutes of the previous meeting," Wes says. "Then, we'll report on new developments and progress made since then. Then we can get to special orders of business."

Kurt shakes his head in awe. "Okay, seriously. This is incredibly important. Can we skip a few steps?"

Mercedes leans over to whisper at him. "Kurt, baby? This is you being very unapproachable."

He glares at her, but upon surveying the rest of the room, he finds the Dragon Hawks regard him with trepidation. Blaine just looks confused, while Wes is starting to look extremely agitated. Thad, on the other hand, seems oddly pleased.

"Avatar Kurt," Wes says, his voice low. "I understand that our ways might seem a little strange to you, but I ask that you respect them nonetheless. Can you do that?"

Kurt takes a calming breath. "...yes," he says. "I'll try."

"Thank you," Wes says. "David?"

As David drones over the previous meeting's non-events, Blaine leans towards Kurt. "Are you feeling alright?" he whispers.

"I'm fine," Kurt says. "I'm just feeling a little energetic this evening, and it's making me impatient."

"You'll get your chance to talk," Blaine says, nudging him with his shoulder. "I promise."

"...at which point, Pavarotti responded by relieving himself on Senior Hawk Thad's shoulder. Senior Hawk Wesley felt this was an appropriate place to adjourn the meeting, and he did so."

"Thank you, David. Now, it's time for the reports. As I'm sure you've noticed, we have several new faces among us this evening. First and foremost among them..."

Kurt perks up and tries to make himself look less bored as Wes calls attention to him.

"...is Prince Blaine himself," Wes finishes. "It is an honor to have you with us at last. We are at your command, my Lord."

Blaine gives a regal nod as Kurt deflates beside him. "It's an honor to be here," Blaine says. "Again, thank you all for everything you've done."

"Of course, we also have several other new faces that need to be introduced," Wes says.

Kurt perks up again, and starts to step forward.

"Prince Blaine, would you do us the honor of introducing your friends?" Wes says, and Kurt throws up his hands, leans against the counter and crosses his arms to sulk. He is officially in a Bad Mood. Capitalized, ratified, certified, and authenticated. *Fuck* this noise.

"Of course," Blaine says, stepping forward and gesturing to each of them in turn. "Dragon Hawks, it is my honor to introduce the lovely Miss Rachel Berry..."
"The most talented vocalist to come out of the Fire Nation since April Rhodes," Rachel says proudly.

"April Rhodes!" Luke says. "She is smoking hot."

"She's a really good singer, too," Other Nick says, sitting at a table and playing with dust bunnies.

"Well, I am just as good," Rachel says, "if not better."

"Not as hot, though," Other Nick says, not looking up.

Rachel looks appalled. "Excuse me?"

Other Nick finally looks up. "It's not your fault. You just have small boobs."

Rachel covers her chest. "I do not! What an awful thing to say!"

Other Nick looks appalled. "I didn't say you weren't hot yourself. I just… I just said you aren't April Rhodes hot. There are varying degrees of hotness, determined by multiple factors, such as age, weight, height, bone structure, cup size, nose length—"

Rachel's hands rocket up to her nose. "What's wrong with my nose?" she demands.

"Other Nick, please stop talking," Wes sighs. "Miss Berry, it's very nice to meet you."

"Next, we have Miss Mercedes Jones, of the Earth Kingdom," Blaine continues.

"Hello, boys," Mercedes says, with a grin and a wink.

"…hello to you too," Jeff says with a wink.

"How you doing?" Nick asks, cocking his head back.

David snaps his fingers, creating a small shower of sparks. "Douse it, you two," he warns, turning to Mercedes. "You'll have to forgive them. Dalton is an all-boys school. They don't quite know how to handle interaction with the fairer sex." He clears his throat. "It's not every day that they get to interact with an enchanting creature such as youRRRK—"

The sentence ends in a grunt as Wes elbows him in the least subtle way possible. "It's lovely to meet you as well, Miss Jones," Wes says diplomatically.

Mercedes snorts, but there's a look in her eye that suggests mischief is afoot…

"Moving on," Blaine says, unable to hide his smile. "Mister Artie Abrams, also of the Earth Kingdom."

Artie bends his disc into a pedestal so he sits a little taller. "What up, Hawks?" he says. "Double-A at your service; finder of things not yet lost, re-distributor of wealth, and virtuoso on the human heartstrings and player of the capital-G Game."

"…what did he say?" Thad says.

"I think he just basically admitted to being a thief and a con-artist. Is that correct?" Wes asks.

"Pretty much," Artie says.
"Oh," Thad says with a queasy smile. "Well, it's wonderful to have such an… interesting character onboard." As he speaks, he seems to be checking his pockets to make sure all his valuables are on him. If it were anyone but Thad, Kurt would probably warn him that he is doing nothing but giving Artie ideas. Oh well.

"Glad to have you with us, Mr. Abrams," Wes says. "I'm sure your… talents will come in handy."

"Up next, we have Mister Finn Hudson, of the Northern Water Tribe," Blaine says.

"Hi," Finn says miserably, rocking back and forth.

"…Finn, are you okay?" Blaine asks.

The taller boy nods, even as he clenches his jaw.

"You're in pain, aren't you?" Blaine asks.

Finn shakes his head. "I'm fine. Keep going. Nice to meet you," he grunts.

Kurt rolls his eyes at his step-brother's stubbornness. "I bet you wish you were in bed right now, don't you?" he asks.

Finn resolutely shakes his head. "I wouldn't be able to sleep, anyway."

"It's nice to meet you as well, Finn," Wes says. "We will not forget your pains on our behalf. We honor your bravery, and wish you a swift recovery."

"Thanks," Finn whispers.

"And last, but certainly not least… someone very dear to me, who saved my life and has become my closest friend in the world," Blaine says softly. "Kurt Hummel, of the Southern Water Tribe, and the current incarnation of the legendary Avatar."

As usual, Blaine is just so darn smitten and lovey-dovey that Kurt's thickest ice-bitch armor cannot withstand him, and he melts just a little. "I'm pleased to meet all of you," Kurt says, with the tiniest smile.

"You honor us, Avatar Kurt," Wes says, himself easing up just a little. "We cannot thank you enough for all you've done for Blaine."

"No, but please, by all means, keep trying," Kurt says, mostly joking.

"That's everyone," Blaine says.

"Very good," Wes says. "If there is nothing else, I would like to open the floor for new business. Is there anything that needs to be addressed?"

"Yes," Kurt says, stepping forward. "I would like to—"

"Please raise your hand and wait to be called upon," Thad says.

Kurt glares at him. "Seriously? You're going to—"

"Yes, Mr. Abrams?" Thad says.

Kurt turns around to see Artie with his hand in the air. "…traitor!" he accuses.
Artie shrugs.

"Mr. Abrams has the floor," Thad says smugly.

Back to sulking it is. Kurt crosses his arms and leans against the counter as Artie starts to speak.

"Anyone pregnant or with a heart condition might want to sit down for this one," Artie says. "Everybody steady and braced against something? Good. Because, ladies and gentlemen… the Fire Lord is in town."

"What?"

"No way!"

"Holy shit!"

"Seriously?" Kurt barks. "I was just about to say that!"

"ORDER!" Wes says, banging his fist on the table. "ORDER! I… ow, I need a fucking hammer or something. Everyone calm down!"

As the room continues to chatter, the Avatar throws his hands up. "I give up," he says. "Blaine, I cannot deal with…"

Turning to Blaine, Kurt is the first to notice—the Prince has frozen. Blaine is pale and blank-eyed, barely breathing. He actually jumps when Kurt reaches behind him to grab his hand. "Hey," he whispers. "Don't check out on me yet."

Blaine summons his courage as best he can. "I'm okay. I'm fine," he says. Kurt gives his hand a gentle squeeze, and Blaine squeezes back as the room finally settles into something resembling calm.

"How did you learn this?" David says.

"Heard a couple of guards passing it along the grape vine," Artie says. "She's not technically in town—she's staying in a fort not too far from here, but still. She's close. And that's not all—as soon as she got to the fort, she ordered a massive troop movement. All soldiers of the Royal Navy are supposed to report to Zedong, wherever that is."

"It's a port city on the eastern tip of the Fire Nation mainland," Blaine says quietly. "It has one of the biggest shipyards in the country, as well as being a naval base."

The Dragon Hawks look at each other in trepidation.

"This is huge," Wes says. "This is a gigantic development."

"What is she up to?" David asks. "What could she possibly be planning?"

"A declaration of war, perhaps?" Thad suggests (which makes Blaine pale even further and start to squeeze Kurt's hand just a little too hard).

The Avatar wrests his hand free of the Prince's for just a moment. "I don't think so," Kurt says stepping forward. "War is simple. Even common. Sue is up to something historical, by her own estimation."

The three head Hawks look sharply at Kurt. "You know something?" Wes asks. "Tell us!"
"Oh, now you want me to talk?" Kurt snarks, indulging his inner diva for just a moment. "Alright, here is what I know—the reason the Fire Lord is in town is because she was heading this way in some kind of hybrid of train and tank. A trank, if you will. The trank was damaged in an avalanche, and it will take a few days to fix."

"How do you know all this?" Thad asks.

"I took a magical spirit journey with some fluffy woodland creatures and a dead dragon—it's not important," Kurt says. "What is important is what I learned while I was there. Sue has researchers working for her, and according to them, Sue is attempting something that has never been done before. Something with potentially catastrophic consequences."

"What is it?" David asks. "Stop beating around the bush and tell us, man!"

Kurt grimaces. "That's... the problem. I didn't really get to learn more than that." He pauses for a second. "Wait; I did learn that whatever Sue is trying to pull, it has a basis in that Sun Warrior carving. Do we have that here?"

Trent heads over to a leather bag and pulls out the carving, bringing it over to set it in front of Wes, David, and Thad. Blaine and Kurt step over to look at it. All they see, however, is the chart that Sam had a copy of.

"This is pointless," Blaine says. "Sam is the only person I know of who can read this stuff."

"He already translated this, though," Kurt says. "Is there any more?"

"Maybe there is something on the other side?" Wes suggests.

They carefully turn the carving over as most everyone but Finn crowds around to look at it. On the other side, there is a long series of hieroglyphics, lined on both sides by figures taking very specific poses.

"That looks like bending instructions," Rachel says. "The poses are different, but the layout is the same as my scroll."

"It's no bending I've ever seen," Blaine says. "Maybe we should try it, see if it does anything?"

"Ummm," Kurt says. "Maybe not. Judging by what I heard on my spirit journey, it could be very dangerous. I don't think we should try it unless we get Sam to tell us what it is."

"But we have no idea where Sam is," Blaine says.

"We could search for him," Wes says.

"We might not need to," Artie points out.

The others turn to look at the earthbender. "Say what?" Kurt asks.

"Kurt, think about what you just said," Artie says. "Fire Lady's tramp—"

"Trank."

"—whatever," Artie continues, "is sitting out in the wilderness. The Fire Lord is chilling elsewhere, and I'll bet she took most of the guards with her. You yourself said there were researchers in that thing, so I'm willing to bet there is information there as well, ripe for the taking!"
"We could mount an assault," Wes says thoughtfully.

"I like that idea," Mercedes says. "Hit 'em fast and hard, lay 'em out, and take what we want."

"I was going to suggest we assassinate the Fire Lord, but that could work as well," David says.

"Assassinate?" Blaine yelps. He actually reaches out and grabs Kurt's hand just so he can squeeze the crap out of it.

"David!" Thad says, appalled. "I'm shocked at you. That is not how a gentleman handles conflict."

Blaine's grip eases up a little.

"If it's a confrontation with the False Fire Lord, clearly Blaine would approach her openly and challenge her to an honorable Agni Kai," Thad finishes.

Oh, and right back to crushing we go. Kurt's fingers cannot handle this much longer. "Why don't we ask Blaine what he wants to do?" Kurt says, pulling his fingers from his boyfriend's death-grip.

"Excellent idea, Kurt," Wes says. "Blaine, which plan do you favor?"

The room turns to look at Blaine, and for the first time, the Prince seems to shrink under all the attention. "I… umm..." He shakes his head, trying to work his thoughts out. "An assault could be incredibly dangerous for all of us, and it risks blowing our cover. An assassination attempt would probably end in horrible disaster, and even if it succeeded… I don't think I could handle how close to being like Sue that would bring me. As for an Agni Kai… that's just a horrible idea. Sue is terrifyingly powerful. There is no way I could beat her in a fight. She'd kill me in seconds."

"Well, we have to do something!" Thad says.

"I know," Blaine says.

"We've been gifted by the gods with a golden opportunity!" Thad continues.

"I know," Blaine insists.

"It would be a terrible crime to waste an opening like this!" Thad presses on.

"I know!" Blaine cries, and Kurt has had enough.

"He's not saying we should waste it!" Kurt says, walking up to Thad. "He's trying to come up with better options. I don't hear you contributing any ideas. Well, no workable ideas, anyway."

Thad steps around the table to walk towards Kurt. "Is that so?" he says. "Because I don't hear you contributing anything besides complete and utter disrespect. You are rude, selfish, and arrogant, parading around like you own the place just because you think you were born special."

"Guys?" Finn says.

Kurt feels his blood start to boil. "Oh, look who's talking, Mr. Moneybags!"

David watches the exchange with increasingly wide eyes. "Wesley, methinks the pot and the kettle are about to come to blows."

"ORDER!" Wes says. "Calm down, both of you!"
"Guys!" Finn says, a little louder.

"Oh, blow it out your smokestack, dragon butt!" Kurt says.

Wes gasps. "Excuse me?"

"I told you he was terribly uncouth," Thad says smugly.

"That's it," Kurt says. "I am fresh out of patience with this circus sideshow."

"Hey, EVERYBODY SHUT UP!" Finn shouts.

The room now turns to the waterbender, who is still sitting down, but still manages to look tired from that little outburst.

"Kurt, calm down. And… other guys, don't be too mad at Kurt. He's always kind of touchy at this time of the month," Finn says.

In the silence that greets that statement, you could hear firefleas having sex in the carpet.

Suddenly, Mercedes is nearly folding in half from laughter. Rachel looks supremely scandalized and embarrassed. Artie laughs so hard he falls off his pedestal. Everyone else looks mortified.

"But…" David says. "I thought he… was a he."

"There is a bit of androgyny," Thad says thoughtfully.

"No!" Kurt growls. "There isn't! Finn, what is wrong with you?"

"It's true!" Finn says. "It happens to me, too. I get all twitchy and I can't sit still…"

"Ewwww," Ethan says, inching away from Finn.

"…and you get mood swings that either have you super happy or super pissed, like all the time," Finn says.

Kurt's eyes widen. "…oh," he says. "Oh, holy crap. I almost forgot!"

"Kurt, what is he talking about?" Blaine asks.

To answer his question, Kurt walks over to the window and pulls aside the curtains, looking up at the early evening sky. Looking back down at him is the huge, round, white face of the moon.

"Oh," Blaine says.

"Oh!" Thad echoes. "…wait, I don't get it."

"It's the full moon," Blaine explains. "Waterbenders are tied to the moon the same way we are tied to the sun. Waterbending becomes stronger at night, and during a full moon, it's supercharged."

"And so are we," Kurt adds. "Finn's right. I always get a little more… tumultuous around the full moon. And Finn can't sit still to save his life. He barely sleeps during full moon nights." A little perspective on the situation helps Kurt get himself under control. "I can't believe I lost track of the moon phases. I guess I've been… a little… distracted at night lately," he says, coughing a bit. "Anyway… I'm sorry I got so upset and so impatient. I didn't realize what was going on."
"…that's quite alright, Kurt," Wes says.

"Just don't do it again," Thad says.

Wes glares at him.

"What?" Thad asks.


Thad sighs and crosses his arms. "…I'm sorry," he says. "My behavior was… unbecoming of one of my station."

"Apology accepted," Kurt says. "Believe it or not, this could be a good thing. See, I've just gotten a wonderful idea…"

He walks over to Blaine. "How about instead of mounting an open assault, we wait until nightfall, and sneak in?"

The idea seems to ping something in Blaine's brain. "…that would be less risky," he says quietly.

"Not necessarily," Thad says. "I'm sure there are bound to be some guards on hand throughout the night. Our firebending will be weaker—and incredibly easy to spot, as well. Firebending at night and sneaking do not mesh well."

"While it's true that your firebending will be weaker," Kurt says, "that's true for all firebenders, enemies included. I, on the other hand, will be unstoppable. The full moon is kind of a three-night event, but its peak will be tomorrow night. With me in the lead, you have nothing to worry about."

Blaine carefully mulls this over. "I think this is the best option we've got."

Wes looks around. "Is anyone opposed?"

Nothing.

"Very well then," Wes says. "A sneaking mission it is! Good thinking, Avatar."

"Thank you," Kurt says haughtily.

"Who's going?" David asks. "We don't need to take everyone. Moving with too many people would be cumbersome and make us easier to spot."

Artie pipes up from the floor. "I'm the resident expert in the art of stealth, so obviously, I will be going," he says. "Now, we need people who are light and quick, who know how to fight without bending if need be. So…" He looks around. "You two!" he says, pointing to Nick and Jeff. "You're definitely in."

"Yes!" Nick says.

"Fuck yes," Jeff agrees. They high-five.

"You three could probably handle it," Artie says, pointing at the Head Hawks.

Wes and David seem fairly eager. Thad looks a little annoyed at having his fate decided by Artie, but he soon gives into his own excitement.
"And…" he surveys the rest of the room. "…you," he says, pointing at Other Nick, who seems completely shocked.

"Me?" he asks.

"Yup," Artie says. "You're the last one in. Congratulations!"

"Ummm… cool. I guess," Other Nick says.

"Umm, hello?" Mercedes says. "What about me?"

"And me?" Rachel says. "I am very light and fast on my feet."

"True," Artie says. "Unfortunately, you are also very loud. And Mercedes… you know I have nothing but mad respect for you, but you've got the same problem. You're not exactly subtle."

She narrows her eyes at him. "Boy, don't you tell me how subtle I ain't," she scoffs. "Subtle my fist all up in your face, show you subtle…" she mutters.

"My point exactly," Artie says.

"What about me?" Finn asks.

"Seriously?" Kurt says. "Seriously? Finn, you have a hole in you. There is absolutely no way you are going on this mission. You rest, you soak, you heal."

"But…" Finn grunts. "The full moon! You know I can't just sit around. I already feel like my legs are gonna get up and leave without me just from sitting here."

"Finn, you're just going to have to live with it," Kurt says. "I won't risk you getting hurt even worse than you already are."

Finn sighs.

"Hey," Blaine says. "I've got an idea—how about while we're out, you guys team up with the other Dragon Hawks and start a Sam search?"

"That is a great idea!" Kurt says. "Can any of you draw?"

Luke slowly raises his hand. "I'm pretty handy with a brush or a pen," he says.

"Fantastic!" Kurt says. "You guys help him make drawings of Sam, and you can ask around to see if anyone's seen him."

"Better than doing nothing, I guess," Finn says sulkily.

Mercedes gets an odd look on her face. "I guess I could look for Sam," she says quietly. "I've been wondering what that boy's been up to."

"I'd love to meet him," Rachel says. "I can respect a scholar."

Finn winces a little, but it's unclear if Rachel or his shoulder is the cause.

"Alright," Wes says. "So the plan is as follows; Thad, David, Nick, Jeff, Other Nick, Blaine, Kurt, Artie, and myself are assigned to infiltrate and raid the Fire Lord's 'trank.' Everyone else is assigned to the search for this 'Sam' character. Are there any objections?"
A few looks are shot around the room, but no one says anything.

"Then it's settled!" Wes says, clapping his hands. "Excellent work, everyone! Despite a somewhat rocky start, I'd say this was very productive. I advise all of you to rest well and prepare for tomorrow night. Meeting adjourned!"

"Remember," David says. "Leave in groups of two, and not all at once! We don't want to draw attention to ourselves!"

Kurt raises his eyebrows at Blaine. "Be my leaving partner?"

Blaine smiles. "But of course."

"We'll rendezvous with you two later," Wes says. "And Kurt… I must apologize as well. I'm sorry that we got off on the wrong foot. I'm sure we can put all this behind us."

"Yes, very sure," Kurt says, smiling at him even as he drags Blaine to the door. "Thank you, apology accepted, good night, and good luck. Ta!"

With that, he opens the door, and drags the Prince outside.

"What's gotten into you?" Blaine asks.

Kurt answers by way of a deep, wet, hard kiss right on the mouth that lasts for nearly ten seconds.

When it ends, Blaine is left breathless and flushed. "I… that was… wow."

Kurt graces him with a little smirk. "I'm feeling a little… wild tonight," he says, pulling on Blaine's collar. "How are you feeling?"

"Ummm," Blaine says, turning red. "A little nervous, a little sick, a little afraid, to be perfectly honest."

"…oh," Kurt says, turning down his seductiveness for the moment. "Are you alright? Do you want to go lie down? You did look a little faint in there…"

Blaine gives an answer of his own with a soft, lingering kiss that leaves Kurt's lips moist. "There are a lot of things on my mind right now," he says quietly. "I'd kind of like to forget them for a little while. Think you can help me with that?"

Kurt grins. "When I get through with you, you won't even remember your own name."

Seductiveness back on full blast, he pulls Blaine into a little side-alley, full-body pressing him against the wall the second they are out of sight, and picking up right where he left off; kissing his boyfriend hard enough to suck the air right out of his lungs.

All Blaine can think is that if Kurt really gets like this every month, Blaine might well become the first firebender who prays to Tui as well as Agni.

Credit where credit is due, and all.

A/N: COMING UP NEXT—Dejected at his rejection, Finn says a little prayer to Tui and gets more than he bargained for. Rachel's nose for gossip picks up a scent, and she presses a bit more backstory out of Mercedes during the search for Sam. Meanwhile, Kurt, Blaine, Artie, and the others get their ninja on, heading into well-guarded enemy territory for a nighttime rendezvous.
with destiny. Do the heavens smile upon them? Or is the moon just one more thing waiting to come crashing down when they least expect it? Chapter 57: *Can't Fight the Moonlight* is right around the corner. Don't miss it! ;)

Can't Fight the Moonlight, Part 1

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 57/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: None.
Word Count: 6,000
Summary: When a usurper sets eyes on the Fire Nation throne, Avatar Kurt and friends find themselves on the run with the deposed Prince Blaine in a country gone mad. Can they escape Lady Sylvester's wrath? Or will her minions snuff them out for good? Fusion fic!

Author's Note: I must confess; part of the reason this has taken so long has to do with a slight blow to my motivation. But that's my fault, not yours. It's not reasonable for me to expect everyone to review every chapter, and I've started letting reviews (or lack thereof) affect my motivation, which is unwise. Readers come and readers go. I'll just have to don my shades and deal with it. B-

CHAPTER 57 –
Can't Fight the Moonlight, Part 1

The next day finds Kurt and his Prince moseying merrily into a quiet spot in the woods outside of town. Training is the order of the day. Maybe this time, they'll actually get something done.

"I still can't believe you passed out on me last night," Kurt says, shaking his head as they enter the clearing.

"I was tired!" Blaine says. "Some people get tired at night. People who aren't moon-crazy and trying to eat my face."

"But your face is so nice," Kurt pouts. He moves in for another kiss, only to meet the palm of Blaine's hand. "Party pooper."

"I have to be," Blaine says. "I'm in teacher mode now. It is my solemn duty to poop parties and
squash fun wherever I find it. Firebending is not a game! This is serious business."

"Oh, fine," Kurt grumbles. "I'll get into pupil mode. Give me a second." He closes his eyes and takes a breath, passing a hand in front of his face as if he's wiping away one persona and replacing it with another. When he opens his eyes, he cracks a bright smile. "So, what's on the agenda for today, Sifu Blaine?" he asks eagerly. "Flaming whips? Rocket skates? Explosive juggling? Your eager pupil is dying to know."

Blaine snorts. "That was a little over-the-top."

"Like you can talk," Kurt scoffs.

"Point," Blaine says. "Come, sit with me." He moves to the middle of the clearing and sits cross-legged on the ground. Kurt follows suit, sitting across from him. Blaine picks up a few stray sticks and jams them into the ground in a semi-circle around him. Again, Kurt follows his example. 

"Today's lesson," Blaine says, "is about the concept of mushin."

Kurt quirks an eyebrow. "Oooh, I think I've had that! Is that the one with the rice puree, with little beef tips and those spices and—"

"Kurt," Blaine says as a warning, smiling in spite of himself.

"Fine, fine," Kurt says, holding his hands up. "Mouth closed, mind open."

"Thank you," Blaine says. He conjures a tiny flame at the end of his two fingers, lighting each twig around him.

"So," Kurt says, repeating his motion. "I'm going to take a wild guess that 'mushin' is some kind of all-natural inhalant."

"Nothing quite so corporeal, I'm afraid," Blaine says. "Mushin is a state of mind. Or to be more precise, a state of mindlessness. Today, we are going to practice sitting and not thinking."

The Avatar blinks at his teacher. "...say what?"

"Sitting and not-thinking," Blaine repeats. "It's harder than it sounds!"

"You want me to be mindless?" Kurt says, incredulous. "Because I've run across quite a few hollow heads in my travels, and I'd really rather not mimic them."

"Not 'mindless' as in dumb," Blaine says. "'Mindless' as in 'having no thoughts.'"

"Ohhhh," Kurt says, thoughtfully cupping his chin. "...yeah, that clarified nothing."

"Let me try to explain this better," Blaine says. He looks around, and points to a nearby puddle. "Okay, see that puddle? The surface of the water reflects the world around it. Right now, the picture is distorted because of all the little waves and ripples. Still it for me, would you?"

Kurt bends the water into a perfectly calm reflecting pool.

"There," Blaine says. "That's what 'mushin' is. The water is our minds; they reflect the world. But our thoughts and emotions distort the picture, like the waves. Mushin is learning how to still those waves—to turn off our feelings and preconceived ideas about the world, and perceive it as it truly is."
"Oh," Kurt says, smiling a bit. "That is a neat idea."

"I thought you might like it," Blaine says. "When you achieve mushin, you are completely and utterly in the moment. Because your whole mind is open, nothing can surprise you—you react instantly to whatever comes. Your mind, body, and spirit act as one, and you become pure will."

"This is sounding more impressive by the second," Kurt says warily. "What's the catch?"

Blaine smiles. "It's really, really hard to get into, and even harder to maintain. Sometimes, just realizing that you're in it is enough to snap you out of it. My dad used to say that everyone hits it once or twice on accident, but only the true master can invoke it at will. It takes years of mental discipline… so I figure we might as well get started now." He gestures to the flaming sticks. "Focus on the flames, and just breathe. Feel the way they move, focus all your senses on them."

The Prince closes his eyes and begins to taking deep, slow breaths. The fire breathes right along with him. With a shrug, Kurt does the same, closing his eyes and concentrating on his breathing, feeling the near-living force of the fire taking in the air as he does.

This continues for a few minutes. Kurt isn't sure what he's supposed to be doing, exactly. Well, he kind of is—he's not supposed to be doing anything. And that's kind of what he's doing.

Isn't it?

"Um, Blaine…" Kurt says.

"Shhh," Blaine says.

"But I have a question," Kurt says.

"No, you don't," Blaine says lightly. "There are no questions, and no answers. No thoughts at all. There is only perception…"

Kurt rolls his eyes without opening them. Fine. Blaine wants him to perceive. Well, he can perceive just fine. He perceives the sounds of nature around him, the chirping and twittering of the birds, the scampering of the smaller critters. He perceives the smell of life, exotic Fire Nation flowers wafting into and out of his nostrils, mixed with burning wood and fresh animal poop. He perceives beads of sweat rolling down his face. And several twigs poking him in the leg. And the mother of all itches in his crotch.

Oh, screw perception.

He opens one eye to peek at Blaine.

Blaine is peeking back at him. The Prince quickly shuts his eyes. "No peeking!" he says.

"You peeked first!" Kurt points out.

"Only to make sure you weren't peeking," Blaine says. "Which you totally were."

"You started it," Kurt says. "You were eying me up, you perve."

"Shh!" Blaine says. "You're ruining my… anti-concentration."

"You can't get me off your mind, can you?" Kurt teases.

"At the moment, no. Mostly because you're still talking," Blaine says.
Kurt falls silent for a few seconds, but he can't fight his smile. "You are so stuck on me," he says. "I'm in your head. I've set up shop and I'm there to stay. I'm sauntering around the place, contemplating redecoration, rearranging the furniture for optimal *feng shui*..."

"And *still* talking," Blaine adds.

"Oh, like you're complaining," Kurt says. "You love the sound of my voice."

"Well, it's safe to say that *one* of us does," Blaine counters.

"You *loooove* me," Kurt continues, undeterred.

"Stop it!" Blaine says, but Kurt can hear the smile in his voice.

"*I'm in your mi-ind!*" Kurt singsongs.

"Kurt, quit it!" Blaine says, smiling wider. "This is a serious lesson."

"You're the one breaking the rules by thinking," Kurt says. "I'm just pointing it out."

"But you're thinking about me thinking about you," Blaine says. "You're doing it too!"

"And you're thinking about me thinking about you thinking about me," Kurt counters.

"And you're thinking about me thinking about you thinking about me thinking about you!" Blaine says. "We could do this all day. Seriously, enough. No more thinking, no more talking," he finishes with a small laugh.

"Fine, fine," Kurt says.

A few more seconds of silence.

"You're still thinking about me, aren't you?" Kurt asks.

"Oh, sweet Agni," Blaine says. "You are *impossible.*" And suddenly, Kurt is on his back and Blaine is on top of him, leaning down with the most annoyed, *brilliant* grin that Kurt has ever seen. "And you know what else?" he says, leaning down to brush his lips against Kurt's. "You're right."

Needless to say, any and all attempts at meditation end there. Overall, Kurt is pretty sure the ensuing kisses bring him a lot closer to being *in the moment* than sitting around and scratching himself.

After several minutes, the make-out session tapers off into the two of them just lying on their sides, gazing at each other. The smile on Blaine's face makes Kurt glow. The adoration in his eyes makes him *blush.*

"I'm crazy," Blaine says, out of nowhere.

"How so?" Kurt asks.

"I just... there's *so much* when I look at you," Blaine says. "I've known you for... what, a little over a month? And I feel like I could just... lie here and make googly eyes at you for the rest of my life."

Now, he's *really* blushing. "Well," Kurt says with a smile, "if it makes you feel any better, it took me exactly ten minutes after our first meeting to start envisioning our wedding."
"Oh, really?" Blaine says, amused. "What did you have in mind?"

"I've gone through several iterations," Kurt says. "There was the one with the ice sculptures that spewed colored flames... and the one with the special undersea fireworks... and the one with the professional dance-benders from all four nations... oh, and of course, the one with choreographed flights from hundreds of trained doves on a strict diet of sparkles..."

"Wow," Blaine says, laughing. "You have expensive taste. Good thing you're marrying into royalty."

"Oh, you hush," Kurt says, playfully swatting his shoulder. "I'll have you know my ideas have gotten much tamer since then. Honestly, our lives involve enough noise and flame as it is."

Blaine laughs. "Okay, so now what does your dream wedding look like?"


Blaine starts laughing again. "Thank you, Kurt. You're right, I feel much better now."

Kurt rolls his eyes. "Well, I'm glad to make you feel less crazy by comparison."

"Less crazy?" Blaine asks, leaning in again. "Not at all. I'm just glad I'm not the only lunatic here..."

And they're kissing again, and Kurt thinks, in some distant part of his brain, that they were probably supposed to be doing something here...

La's whiskers if he can remember what.

They do, eventually, get a bit of training done before they head back to town. After taking a second to check on Finn (who is very much passed the fuck out, for good reason) Kurt and Blaine follow Thad to the meeting spot that Artie apparently specified; the dark, dingy basement of the house they met in last night. The six chosen Hawks are present and accounted for, as are the Prince and the Avatar. The only one missing is Artie himself, and the wait is causing them to get a little antsy...

"Are you sure this is where he told us to meet?" David asks Thad, leaning against the basement wall and incinerating another cobweb out of annoyance.

"I'm positive," Thad insists.

"You could have misheard him," David points out. "You were squealing like a girl as he spoke."

"I did not squeal," Thad insists. "I yelped. It was an expression of surprise—he spoke to me from beneath an overturned bucket! You would have been just as shocked."

"Perhaps," David says. "But I wouldn't have squealed."

"Yelped!" Thad insists.

"Whatever," David says.

"Is Mr. Abrams usually late?" Wes asks, looking to Kurt.
"He… kind of comes and goes as he pleases. He can be a little hard to keep track of, as I'm sure Thaddeus can attest to," Kurt says, prompting a 'harrumph' from the affronted Dragon Hawk. "But I wouldn't worry too much. He'll be here soon."

"I sincerely hope you are right," Wes says. "I don't like to be kept waiting."

"Well, that's where you and Artie are different," Kurt says. "Earthbenders are all about the waiting."

Across from the three Senior Hawks, Nick and Jeff play flame-pong, batting a fireball back and forth with their weapons. Other Nick seems to be staring at nothing in particular, which apparently worries Blaine.

"Are you okay?" the Prince asks.

Other Nick snaps to attention. "What? Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

"Good," Blaine says. "You were kind of staring a hole in that spice rack."

"It… bothers me," Other Nick says.

Kurt quirks an eyebrow. "What, exactly, bothers you about it?"

"It's out of order," Other Nick says flatly. "All the slots are labeled, but none of the bottles are in the right slots."

Kurt shakes his head in slight disbelief.

Blaine is a bit more composed. "Well, if it bothers you, why not fix it?"

Other Nick tilts his head at him. "Really?"

"Sure," Blaine says.

"Oh, of course," Kurt snarks. "In fact, why not organize the whole basement? I'm sure whoever lives here will be thrilled to come home and find all their things in perfect order."

"Cool," Other Nick says, the sarcasm passing so far over his head that it doesn't even ruffle his hair. He immediately gets up and starts studiously arranging the spice rack. Blaine gets a good laugh out of Kurt's incredulous expression.

A few more minutes pass.

Suddenly, Nick completely misses his round of flame-pong. The fireball soars past him and lights up a bag of flour, and Jeff throws his arms up in victory.

"Yes!" Jeff says. "Supreme champion of the basement!"

"You guys hear that?" Nick asks.

"Hear what?" Wes asks.

The room falls silent as everyone listens to the sounds of silence.

"I don't… wait," Kurt says. "I think I do hear… is that… singing?"
"I hear it too," Blaine says. "It's a little muffled, though. Where's it coming from?"

The Hawks all attempt to find the source of the noise (save for Other Nick, who has finished the spice rack and is alphabetizing jars of fruit preserves). Kurt and Blaine join in, resulting in a room full of people walking around ear-first, attempting to follow the noise to its source.

Eventually, Thad presses his ear to a wall. "...oh!" he says. "I think it's coming from over here! It—wait... it stopped."

There is a pregnant pause for but a second or two.

Then the wall crumbles into dust, and Thad is buried.

"SECRET TUNNEL!" Artie sings, sliding over the dust pile. "SECRET TUNNEL! Through the basement... secret, secret, secret, secret TUNNELLLLLL!" He ends with a dramatic flourish, prompting applause from Blaine.

"Very nice," Blaine says. "I loved the vocal runs at the end."

"The entrance was very attention-grabbing," Kurt says.

"Yes," Thad says as he pulls himself out of the dirt. "Just the kind of charm and subtlety I'd expect from the Earth Kingdom."

Nick and Jeff applaud loudly, even adding a few whistles.

"Thank you, thank you," Artie says, bowing as Kurt watches in amusement. As he rises up again, Kurt almost swears it looks like the shadows under Artie's eyes have gotten deeper. He seems a little thinner, as well.

He brushes it off. It's probably just the bad lighting in the basement.

"I know, I know," Artie says. "I'm amazing."

"You're also late," Wes says.

"Hey, I might have kept you waiting, but it was for a good reason..." He slams a fist into the ground, sending a line of force through the earth. It hits something in the tunnel and tosses it towards him—a small knapsack, which he opens. "Catch!" he says, tossing something at Wes.

The firebender unfolds it. "Black outfits?"

"This is a nighttime mission," Artie says. "We'll need to be sleek, silent, and hard to see. I was busy finding these, and now I have enough for everyone!"

He starts tossing clothes left and right, and soon, everyone has their very own dark costume.

"They come complete with black scarves to tie around your faces," Artie says. "Anonymity is our friend. Blondie, yours has a black cap, since you're the only one here with shiny hair."

"Sweet," Jeff says, holding up the outfit. "Dude, we're gonna be ninjas!"

"Just like Flying Fox," Nick says with reverence. "Sweet! Can we have codenames?"

"Fuck yes!" Jeff says. "Kicking Kangaroo!"
"Soaring Salamander!" Nick says.

"Hidden Dragonwolf!" Jeff says.

"Crouching Tigerdillo!" Nick says.

"Solid Snakegoose!" Jeff shouts.

"Exploding Penguin!" Nick continues, growing more and more excited.

"Put a lid on it, you two," David grumbles.

"I see the logic behind the costuming," Kurt says, "but what's with the secret tunnel?"

"It leads outside the city walls," Artie says, "It'll let us come and go without being hassled by the guards at the gates. Considering our outfits, they might be a little suspicious."

"Good point," Blaine says. "Thanks, Artie."

"No problem," the earthbender says. "Now, I think we should get going ASAP. There's no telling how long it'll take us to get to this place, and we want to make every minute of moonlight count. There's also the matter of…" He pauses as he notices Other Nick is not looking at him at all. "…what is he doing?"

"Imposing order on a chaotic universe," Other Nick says flatly without even looking back.

"Okay…" Kurt says, shaking his head. "When I told you to arrange everything… you are aware that was a joke, right?"

Other Nick turns around. "It was?"

Kurt nods.

"Oh," Other Nick says. His face twists into a mask of concentration. "…I don't get it."

Artie makes a face. "…anyway," he says. "There's… umm… there's also the matter… dang it! I forgot what I was gonna say." He shakes his head. "Well, whatever. From here, it's pretty much Kurt's show anyway. Mon Avatar," Artie says, bowing graciously.

"Thank you," Kurt says, stepping forward. "Alright, here is what we are dealing with. From what I can remember, there are three cars attached to the main engine, each of them the about size of a building. The first car is the armory—it has tons of cannons and other assorted weaponry in it. The second car… I didn't really get a good look, but I think there were animals in it, and not the cuddly kind. The last car is our objective. That's where the info is. The place is likely to be heavily guarded, but other than that, I can't tell you much. We shouldn't worry too much about planning this out beforehand, because—"

"Excuse me?" Thad says. "We shouldn't worry about planning? Good sir, a failure to plan is a plan for failure."

"I agree with Thad," Wes says. "I don't like going in here blind."

"Oh, come on, dude," Nick says, rolling his eyes. "Are you a firebender or what?"

"You're acting like an earthbender," Jeff says. "All tryin' to carve everything in stone before it even happens."
"Hey!" Artie says, unamused. "I'm sitting right here."

"Live a little!" Jeff says. "Sometimes, you just gotta make shit up as you go along."

"That's how fire does it," Nick finishes.

"Yes, and that's also how killer, city-eating infernos are started," David says.

"Come on, guys," Blaine says. "Kurt knows what he is doing. We don't have to completely plan this out, but we don't have to charge in blind, either. There's a balance to be struck."

"I understand your concerns," Kurt says, "but—as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted—there's no point in planning too far ahead because things have probably changed since my magical spirit dream."

"...ah," Wes says. "You do have a point."

"We can talk about it more along the way. For now, let's all get into gear and get ready," Blaine says.

Nick and Jeff don't need to be told twice. They fly up the stairs like overexcited bottle rockets. Other Nick follows after them, still apparently deep in thought.

Kurt gives a patient smile to the wary trio of Senior Hawks. "There's no need to worry," he says. "Just consider the coming mission a lesson in waterbending philosophy. Sometimes, you have to go with the flow."

Saul Barrington stalks towards the gigantic engine, kicking busted rocks and bits of shorn metal out of her way as he goes. The air in the canyon is filled with the clangs and bangs of hammers slamming into heated metal. Teams of masked welders stand on scaffolding surrounding the engine, using careful applications of firebending and force to repair the damaged metal. Others work on the links between the cars, damaged and bent out of shape when the enormous thing had to slam on the brakes. Within the engine itself, teams of engineers are straightening the kinks out of twisted pipes and broken gears, fixing damaged fuel lines and trying to make sure nothing else catches on fire.

Been a lot of fires today.

A renowned drill sergeant and ruthless taskmaster, Saul has been personally appointed by the Fire Lord to oversee this process, and he does not like what he sees. "Come on, people!" he shouts. "Pick up the pace! Hammers, up that tempo! I want a beat I can march to! ONE, TWO, ONE, TWO, TEN-HUT!"

The rhythm of reparation speeds up, and Saul smiles. "Now that's more like it! You sorry sacks need to keep in mind: every second the Fire Lord is delayed is a second that the plague could sneak into our country! You smelly, sweaty sacks of meat and hair are carrying the future of a nation on your backs! DO NOT DROP IT, DO YOU HEAR ME?"

No response.

"When I ask a question, I expect an answer, you filthy boot-licking maggots! I said, DO YOU HEAR ME?"

"Yes sir!" cry the workers, somewhat meekly.
"Pa-thetic," Saul spits, turning on his heel to march away in disgust.

"S-sir," someone croaks meekly. "I don't mean to be a bother, but the sun has gone down, and I was thinking… maybe I could head home? I've been here all day, and I'm quite tired…"

"Well, boo-fuckin'-hoo!" Saul says, stepping up to the meek little sumbitch and popping his personal space bubble like he popped his wife's cherry—loudly, forcefully, and with a great deal of spit. "Somebody get me the world's smallest string quartet so we can play a fuckin' lullaby for Mr. Sleepy Time! Would you like me to swaddle you in a blanket and breastfeed you while I'm at it?"

The twerp flinches. "Sir, I just… I have a family, and—"

"

"I have a family!" he says! Well, son, tell you what. When the plague sweeps in and wipes out three quarters of this country's population resulting in widespread panic, governmental collapse, and spontaneous outbreaks of oral herpes, you can just explain to all the sick and dying that you let the damn plague in because you couldn't be bothered to do your part, because you had a family! I'm sure they'll understand," Saul spits.

"But sir, the sun is down!" the twerp whines. "It could be dangerous to…"

"Oh, heaven forbid you break a nail defending this nation!" Saul says with disgust. "Look at that horizon and tell me what you see."

The man looks. "Umm… the full moon?"

"The full-faced, glowing-assed moon, thank you!" Saul says. "And if that ain't enough light for you; are you a firebender, or not? Light a coal-shitting candle and get back to work!"

The man scampers off, and Saul gives himself a mental pat on the back for a job well done.

"S-sir," a nervous engineer stammers.

"What in the noodle-dicked ducks do you want?" Saul barks.

"There is a… small problem with the extinguisher cart," he says. "The cannon isn't working, and I'm not sure why."

"Do I look like your dang babysitter?" Saul asks. "Why the blazes should I care that you're having a problem squirting your stuff?"

"Well, sir, that cannon is our primary means of extinguishing fuel fires," the tweedy little nerd says. "If we can't use it, there's a significantly increased chance of an uncontrolled inferno that could lead to a catastrophic explosion. The loss of life could be tremendous…"

"…then the damned engine would take even longer to repair," Saul says. "Good thinking, soldier. Lead the way."

"Sir, I'm not really a sol—"

"I said 'lead the way!' Move it, move it, move it!" Saul shouts.

The engineer scuttles off through the canyon, and the grizzled man follows, keeping his eyes peeled for any slackers. The Fire Lord's instructions stated that security be wary of any weaklings trying to make a run for it. There will be no escape until the job is done. Saul's soldiers and them Chee-Rio ladies will make damn sure of that.
The old soldier smiles as one of his boys full-on sacks a welder trying to sneak away. *That's* how you do it.

"Huh," the engineer says suddenly. "It seems a little early for fog…"

Saul snaps around and spots a large, thick cloud of mist moseying through the canyon towards him.

"Sir!" one of Saul's men says. "Fog bank moving in at 12 o' clock! Please advise!"

Saul shakes his head. "Advise?" he spits. "It's *fog*, soldier! It ain't gonna eat you! Keep to your patrol!"

The soldier salutes and returns to his route.

Saul marches away in disgust (and thus completely misses the fog seeming to lash out like a tentacle and swallow the poor guy whole).

The engineer finally leads Saul to the extinguishing cart; a mobile cannon on a wheeled metal platform.

"So, what's your issue, poindexter?" Saul asks, climbing up onto the wheeled platform, eyeing the cannon skeptically.

"Well, I'm not sure *exactly,*" the engineer says. "It won't shoot."

"Not sure?" Saul says, disgusted. "Well, good to know all that time you spend with your nose up a book's ass wasn't wasted."

"I think," the engineer grumbles, "that there is an obstruction of some kind in the barrel, but I can't really—"

Saul doesn't even wait for him to finish. He grabs the guy and marches around to the front of the cannon. He starts to look inside, but thinks better of it. "Son, this is your only warning," he says. "If this thing squirts me in the face, so help me Agni, I will *crush* your scrotum into a diamond and give it to my wife for our anniversary. Are we clear?"

The engineer nods. "Don't worry," he says. "I turned it off."

Saul nods and sticks his head into the barrel. It's too damn dark to see anything, so he strikes a flame on the end of his fingers and sticks it inside to get a better look.

"Sergeant Saul!" one of the guards says suddenly. "Sir, there is some kind of anomaly over near the —"

"Soldier, did I give you permission to speak?" Saul asks.

"But—"

"*Did I?*" he repeats.

"…no, sir," the soldier says.

"I didn't think so," Saul spits. "Whatever it is, you fuck off and handle it yourself. If you need some help, I'll be over there to hold your hand and give you a shoulder to cry on when I fucking finish what I'm already doing!"
"But sir, I really think—" the guard starts to say. Cuts himself off, though.

Saul grins. Smart kid. "Thought so. Now, listen up, poindexter," Saul says, finally spotting the problem. "Your problem is that you don't give a shit. When was the last time you cleaned this damn thing? There's gunk in here harder than a lion-turtle's left tit! You'd need a damn explosive to unclog it now! I tell my men all the time—if you don't take care of your shit, your shit won't take care of you! Are you even listening to me, you soggy-spined mudworm?"

Suddenly, Paul notices something exceedingly odd.

"It's quiet," he says. "Too quiet."

The man yanks his head out of the cannon and takes a look around, only to find fog twice as thick as before. Saul can barely see two feet in front of his face, let alone far enough to spot any of his soldiers.

"SOLDIERS!" he shouts. "Report your status!"

Silence.

"That is an order!" he says.

Nothing. Not a thrice-burnt word.

The old soldier gets into firebending stance, ready to strike at a moment's notice. Strike at what? Fucked if he knows.

A shadow moves in the periphery of his vision. He's on it like stink on a gorilla goat's armpit, throwing fire as hard and fast as he can.

All he hits is the fog.

"Stop in the name of the Fire Lord!" Saul shouts. "Whoever you are, come out with your hands on your head, and your legs crossed! No bending stances, or I will cook you like a solstice ham!"

Another shadow seems to approach him from the fog, walking towards him calmly.

"Freeze!" he commands, preparing to fire.

"I was just waiting for you to say it," whispers a cold voice from behind him.

Well, Saul always did believe in leading by example…

Kurt dutifully drags the last of the unconscious guards back to the cave Artie bent, arriving during the tail end of a profound conversation.

"…so it's funny because he said something that wasn't true?" Other Nick asks.

"More or less," Nick says. "That's how sarcasm works."

"So if I said that you were… I don't know… a four-hundred foot tall purple platypus bear with pink horns and silver wings, would that be funny?" Other Nick asks with utter sincerity.

Nick and Jeff stare at him for two seconds, before exploding into laughter.
"...I still don't get it," Other Nick says flatly.

"...is he gonna be okay?" Blaine asks, eying Kurt's human cargo.

"He'll be fine," Kurt says, brushing a few flecks of frost off the poor sap's armor. "I didn't actually freeze him solid... I just had a little fun and knocked him out."

Artie slides out of the cave and raises a slab of earth under the unconscious firebender and slides him into the cave with the others, fastening his hands and feet together with solid rock cuffs.

The Dragon Hawks stare at the Avatar is unabashed awe.

"...do you even need us here?" David asks. "Seriously, you just took out like twenty people. Alone."

Kurt plays it off easily. "I've done worse. Or better, depending on how you look at it."

"Told you we're in good hands," Blaine says smugly.

Thad crosses his arms. "Well, we're hardly finished. What's the next step, o vaunted Avatar? Where does your 'flow' lead us now?"

"Artie," Kurt says. "Use your magic hands trick. What can you tell me about the inside of that monstrosity?"

The earthbender closes his eyes and puts his hands to the ground. He sends a few experimental tremors towards the rolling metal beast, brow furrowed in concentration. "There are definitely people inside," Artie says. "A few females, a few males. And animals in the second car, just like you said. Looks like someone is feeding them."

"What kind of animals?" Wes asks.

"Some big," Artie says. "Some small. The biggest cage takes up almost half the car by itself. It's mostly empty, though."

"Well, that's comforting," Wes says.

"The last car is what we want, right?" Jeff asks. "Why don't we just sneak in and get what we need?"

"I'm with Jeff," Nick says. "Kicking ass and taking names is fun and all, but we should probably avoid trouble when we can help it."

"There's one way into that last car," Artie says. "It's a little bridge that connects to it from the second car. I think I can get you guys up to it."

"Well then," Kurt says. "Let's get to it."

The Avatar and the earthbender lead the way through the fog. When they reach their destination, a slight problem presents itself.

"Shit," David says. "There are workers up on that bridge."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," Kurt says. "I just took out twenty guards. What's a couple of welders? I'll have them unconscious and tucked away for naptime in no time."
"Wait, whoa!" Blaine says. "Why do you need to knock them out?"

"So they don't spot us and sound the alarm?" Kurt says.

"But… didn't you hear the guy yelling at them?" Blaine asks. "I'm pretty sure they're here against their will. Why don't we try talking to them? They'd probably be happy if we just let them go."

"Plus," Artie adds, "they might have useful information."

"Hmmm," Kurt says. "I guess you have a point. But I should still be ready to take them down. You know, just in case."

"Oh, you just want to show off your moon powers," Thad says.

"That is merely a bonus," Kurt says, walking over to stand next to Blaine. "Up!"

Artie heaves them upwards on a stone piston, launching them high enough to land on the bridge. The poor welders are nearly startled off of it.

"Who—what—what are—" one of them stammers, falling over backwards.

"Shhh!" Blaine says. "It's okay, it's okay, we're not here to hurt you. We'll help you out of here."

The metalworkers look cautiously optimistic. "…really? This… this better not be some kind of hidden loyalty test to see if we're slacking off…"

"No test," Blaine says, stepping forward. "My name is Blaine—"

"Shhhh!" Kurt says. "You're wearing a disguise for a reason! Don't just hand them your name!"

"Oh, right!" Blaine says. "I forgot about my disguise."

He pulls the scarf off of his mouth, revealing his face in its entirety, and Kurt fights the urge to try metalbending with his forehead.

"You're here to help us?" one of them asks.

Blaine nods. "We'll get you down to the ground. Don't worry; the guards are taken care of."

"Thank you!" the first one says. "Thank you so much!"

"They let us have one thirty second break every four hours!" the second one says. "And we practically had to beg for that much!"

"Wait," Kurt says, stepping forward. "Before you go, we have some questions. What do you know about this thing?" he asks, gesturing to the Fire Lord's car.

The workers shrug. "Not much," one of them says. "We're just trying to fix this connector. The last car was hardly damaged at all. It's locked tight; nobody is allowed inside."

"Dang it!" Kurt says.

"Do you know who has the key?" Blaine asks.

"One of those really scary chicks," the second worker says.

"A Chi-Ryu?" Kurt asks.
"Yeah!" the guy replies. "She's in one of the other cars."

"Thanks for your help," Blaine says. "Kurt, would you help them down?"

The Avatar gapes at him.

So do the two workers. "K-Kurt? As in the Avatar?"

"Jeez, Blaine, could you announce me a little louder? I think some people on the South Pole might have missed it!" Kurt hisses.

"It is!" the first worker shouts. "Agni preserve us!"

"The Fire Lord's Killer has come to feast upon our SOULS!" the second cries, clinging to his companion.

"Wait!" Blaine says. "No, that's not—he's not…"

"HELP!" they cry. "SOMEONE HELP!"

"Shut up, you morons!" Kurt growls.

"What's going on out there?" a voice from inside shouts.

"Damn it!" Kurt says.

"HELP US!" the workers shout. "HE'S—"

Kurt has had enough. He bends some nearby mist into water and sweeps the welders off the connecting bridge with a single stream. The soar through the air and vanish into the fog. The only other sign they were ever there is a slightly wince-inducing flop shortly thereafter.

Blaine looks at the Avatar in horror. "Kurt… you… why did you…"

"They wouldn't shut up!" Kurt says.

"You could've killed them!" Blaine says.

"Oh, come on!" Kurt says. "We're not that high!"

"Still," Blaine says. "You can't just… attack people!"

"And you can't just go around blabbing our identities to everyone we meet!" Kurt counters.

"They seemed perfectly nice!" Blaine says. "They were grateful!"

"Yeah!" Kurt shouts. "So grateful, they practically sounded the freaking alarms themselves!"

"That's not the—"

Blaine is interrupted by the metallic screech of the door opening.

A Chi-Ryu stands in the doorway, a bag of animal feed in her hands. The bag drops as soon as she spots them, and she steps into stance. "Intruders! Sound the alarms!" she shouts.

The clangs and bangs of metal working are quickly replaced by the clangs and bangs of alarm bells ringing out.
"What did I tell you?" Kurt sighs, stepping into stance.

"Oh, crap!" cry several panicked workers as they abandon their posts.

"Oh, crap!" shouts Blaine as he steps into stance beside Kurt.

"Oh, crap," Wes says from the ground as the sound of the alert reaches him.

"You! Invaders! Get you the hot fireballs of bending to die!" the Chi-Ryu shouts.

"What?" Blaine says.

The Chi-Ryu answers by hurling a firebolt at Blaine, who easily brushes it aside. Several other guards join her at the doorway, but at this point, Kurt begins taking control of the mist again, bending it into a larger and larger stream of water around him.

The Avatar gives a mighty glare to the gathered guards, resulting in a single, unifying thought passing through all their minds just before he strikes…

"Oh, crap."

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: I can't tell you how many times I've rewritten this chapter. When I'm writing and I cut a section or decide to start over from scratch, I literally cut the section and paste it into another document. My 'cuts' document for this chapter has 6,000 words—as many as the actual chapter. O_o

In other news, I've been thinking of ways to retool the story based on responses to certain chapters, and have ultimately decided that it needs tightening—therefore, POVs that are NOT Kurt or Blaine will very, very rarely be used from this point on. I'm truncating a few subplots and cutting others entirely. Sadly, I think it must be done.

Sorry to keep everyone waiting for so long. ^_^
Can't Fight the Moonlight, Part 2

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 58/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: None.
Word Count: 10,000
Summary: When a usurper sets eyes on the Fire Nation throne, Avatar Kurt and friends find themselves on the run with the deposed Prince Blaine in a country gone mad. Can they escape Lady Sylvester's wrath? Or will her minions snuff them out for good? Fusion fic!

Author's Note: Massive, MASSIVE backstory reveals in this chapter. Srsly, it's huge, you guys. Also, I feel I should clarify what I said last chapter: while I *will* be cutting subplots, I will not be *dropping* subplots. That is to say, anything I've started will likely be finished. The cut subplots have not been started yet, and you won't miss them. Also, while I will be using non-Klain POVs less, I will not abandon them entirely. The chapter after next, for example, is all about Finn, Mercedes, and Rachel's adventures during the full moon. Anyway, thanks for all the heartwarming comments. I feel much better now, and I hope you enjoy this chapter. ^_^

CHAPTER 58 –
Can't Fight the Moonlight, Part 2

The Chi-Ryu dives through the door and jumps up just in time to avoid the flash flood that washes away the other guards. She hangs upside down from the doorframe and slings expanding waves of fire at the two of them, which Blaine is able to bend and blast apart. It doesn't take long for the guards to recover and try to rush them again, but the bottleneck of the door makes it impossible for them to take advantage of their superior numbers. Kurt mans the defense, his waterbending absorbing the punishment from countless fire attacks, while Blaine provides the explosive offense.

"Avatar and boyfriend!" the wavy, dark-haired Chi-Ryu shouts. "For coming here, you are the idiots of foolishness! Your deaths are the rungs of a ladder! The ladder I will climb, which leads to a rocket, which I will ride to GLORY!"
"Okay… just out of curiosity, is the Common Language your native tongue?" Blaine asks.

"SILENCE!" the Chi-Ryu says. "My nerves are nervous. I find speakings the difficultest when I am excite. It is unmattering! TASTE MY FURY." She punctuates this by tossing a trick fireball towards them, which bursts into dozens of tiny embers just before it reaches them. Kurt easily extinguishes them all in his watershield.

"BLAINE!" Wes shouts from below. "Blaine! Are you alright?"

"Yeah!" Blaine calls down. "I think we've got it—" He pauses to duck under a fire whip. "Under control!" Kurt steps forward to engage the Chi-Ryu in a little close-range combat while Blaine issues orders. "You guys, go take out the guards in the other car! We're looking for a key on one of the Chi-Ryus!"

"Aye-aye!" Wes calls back.

Blaine turns his attention back to the fight only to find both the Chi-Ryu and Kurt gaping at him. Even the guards seem a little confused. The Chi-Ryu recovers first, diving back into the door.

"Obstruct the entranceway!" she orders. "They are the seekers of us, and we are the position of superior defensosity!"

The door slams shut before Kurt can stop it, and the Avatar turns to glare at his loudmouth boyfriend. "Do I need to gag you?" he growls.

"I'm sorry!" Blaine says. "I talk! It's what I do! It's what I'm good at!"

"Just… keep a lid on it for five minutes!" Kurt sighs, turning back to the door with disdain. "Great, now we have to find a way to get through this door, too."

Blaine looks at it carefully. "Maybe if we superheated the metal to soften it up, you could smash through it…"

_Clang clang clang_. Kurt knocks on the door. "Okay!" he says. "You win, we're leaving! Running away now! Disappearing into the night, never to be seen again… So I guess you'll just have to tell your boss that you let us escap—"

The door opens and before the guard can even think of attacking, Kurt has kicked him in the face and frozen him so that he is acting as a human doorstop.

"…or we could just do that," Blaine finishes.

Kurt swirls his arms around, sucking in quite a bit of mist and bending it into the form of a liquid snake. Sending the slithering ribbon of water in front of him, the Avatar gracefully skates on top of it, easily dodging any and all attempts to fry him and prompting Blaine to wonder whether or not he should even bother to go in there.

Eventually, he decides that he should.

_Just in case._

The Avatar easily keeps the guards at bay on his own, giving Blaine time to take in the whole of car two. Cages are arranged in three levels. The first level is mostly one large cage that takes up nearly the entire first floor of the car. It's mostly empty, save for some picked animal carcasses, a giant water bowl, and a few large, rough-looking boulders covered in jagged spikes. The second
level, where he and Kurt are, has cages arranged along three of the four walls, accessible via wide, sturdy-looking catwalks. The creatures inside the cages are a bit tough to make out due to lack of lighting in the interiors, but they appear to come in all shapes and sizes. The third level is accessible via ladder, and has a few large cages that extend down from the ceiling.

As Blaine notices Kurt steadily pushing back the guards with waterbending, he notices something else—the guards aren't really fighting back. Not as much as they could be, anyway. They are keeping Kurt occupied without putting themselves in too much danger. Why?

The answer comes shortly. As Blaine runs up to offer Kurt what assistance he can, a loud voice from behind the soldiers shouts "MOVE!" The soldiers dive out of the way just in time to avoid being squished. An enormous ball-thing, almost twice the size of Kurt, rolls towards the Avatar at an alarmingly high speed. Kurt freezes his water into an ice wall to try and stop it. He succeeds. Unfortunately, the momentum transferred is enough to push the wall itself into the two of them, smashing it into pieces and knocking them flat.

Blaine kicks to his feet just in time to see the ball unfold into some kind of monstrous, armored bear. It's much larger than a normal bear; nearly ten feet tall while resting on four legs. Its back and head are covered in a thick segmented shell, and its armored tail is nearly as long as the rest of its body.

"An armadillo bear," Kurt says tiredly. "Oh, this is going to be such fun."

The Chi-Ryu jumps up to stand on the fearsome beast's armored back, posing proudly. "Fear me, puny tiny small pathetic ones! I am Lucy, and my fearsome beasts shall crumble you up like croutons to sprinkle on salad! This salad, dressed with pain and suffering, shall be the appetizer for the main course of death. IT IS THE SALAD OF YOUR DOOM."

"I think the metaphor got a little lost there," Kurt says.

The bear curls up and starts rolling again.

Blaine gulps. "She got the message across."

Kurt steps into action immediately, snatching back every iota of water that he lost in the bear assault with frightening ease.

Blaine tosses a couple of fire blasts at the rolling behemoth, to no effect. They fizzle out against the creature's tough hide.

"Advice?" Blaine asks. "You've clearly seen one of these before."

Kurt nods. "He can't see while he's in ball mode. Be ready to move."

The bear continues his approach, picking up speed.

Blaine takes his stance alongside Kurt.

"Ready…" Kurt says.

The catwalk rumbles under the weight of the rolling thunderball.

"Now!" Kurt shouts.

Blaine rocket-jumps and Kurt shoots himself into the air on an impromptu geyser. They both clear
the ball-bear, watching as it rolls right underneath them.

No sooner than the second they land, both of them are put under fire (both figurative and literal) from Lucy and her goons. Kurt counters with a volley of his own, peppering the soldiers with a stream of sharp icicles, spiced up with the occasional fireball.

Meanwhile, the bear is somehow able to detect the oncoming wall before he hits it, rolling to a stop and unfolding. Blaine is not normally for violence against animals, but when animals attack, there is no law but the law of the wild. The Prince tries a couple more fireballs, but they don't even leave a mark on the beast's thick, armored hide. Incensed by his assault, the bear begins to stomp towards an increasingly nervous Prince.

Kurt, meanwhile, continues to bend his amoeboid mass of water to intercept any and all projectiles being thrown his way. Rather frustratingly, he also watches Lucy the Chi-Ryu climb a ladder while her goons cover her exit. "She's going to open more cages!" he grumbles. "Blaine!" he calls, looking back. "Can you handle the bear?"

"What?" Blaine asks, continuing his fiery barrage. "You mean this monstrosity? This thing whose leg I am the size of?"

"Great!" Kurt says. "I knew I could count on you."

"Hey!" Blaine barks as Kurt slides away on his water stream. "That was not— you can't just—!

The armadillo bear roars as it continues to close in on its prey. "We seriously need to work on our communication skills!"

Blaine continues to hit the implacable beast with a steady stream of firebending. He manages to slow it, but he completely fails to stop it. It's too good at shifting itself around so that its armored bits protect its fuzzy bits. He needs to figure out a way to hit it from underneath.

Maybe if it gets a little closer…

"Easy, Blaine," he says to himself. "It's only a killer armored bear the size of a dinosaur that wants to eat you. No big deal. You can do this." Having suitably psyched himself out, Blaine stops throwing fire at the beast and throws his arms out to the side. "Alright, fuzzball. Bring it on!"

With a mighty roar, the bear obliges.

Kurt, meanwhile, slides quickly and easily over, under, around, and through any and all attacks on his person. He snatches water from the bowls of several unfortunate animals to bolster his supply, switching over to firebending. Shooting fire while riding on a stream of water—okay, he's leaving specifications in his will: any and all statues or representations of him made after his death must be of him doing this. Nobody does it like Kurt Hummel. The guards are standing in front of the armadillo bear's now empty cage and they actually seem shocked when Kurt washes them inside and closes the gate, freezing several of them to the wall for good measure.

Lucy tries to flash-fry him from above, but Kurt shoots himself up on another geyser, landing perfectly on her level. "Give it up!" Kurt says. "Don't make me hurt your beloved animal friends."

"I am not threatened by your threats," Lucy says, backing up towards another door.

"Oh no you don't!" Kurt says as she turns and tries to shove the key into the lock. Kurt bends up an ice spear and hurls it at her.

The good news: he knocks the key out of the lock and out of her hand.
The bad news: he demolishes the lock, rendering the action pointless.

"Thanks for your assist!" Lucy shouts, flinging open the cage doors. "Fly, my pretties! Fly!"

The air is filled with colorful plumage and ear-splitting shrieks as an entire troop of baboon-birds flies out to greet them.

"I'll get you, Avatar!" Lucy says. "And your little boyfriend too!"

Meanwhile, in the other car…

Smoke. Metal clashing on metal. A steady, fiery hiss.

Thad's voice. "JEFF! You idiot, we just said no fire—"

Jeff's voice. "Yell at me later, dude, just put out the damn fuse!" Metal clangs.

Wes's voice. "Where is it? Nick, do you see it?"

Nick's voice, preceded by a series of coughs. "I can't see anything!" Clashing weapons.

A detonation, followed by more smoke.

David's voice. "Will someone please take out the crazy lady throwing smoke bombs?"

Other Nick's voice. "Got it!"

David's voice. "The crazy lady?"

Other Nick's voice. "No, the fuse!"

Wes's voice. "Why would anyone keep this many explosives out in—oh, fuck, HIT THE DIRT!"

Other Nick's voice. "There is no dirt!"

Thad's voice. "Get dow—"

BOOM.

Kurt smacks a monkey in the face with a water whip.

He thrusts a stream of mist into another one, clogging its feathers with frost and forcing it to crash land somewhere away from the pissed off Avatar.

"Look, lady" Kurt says, unimpressed. "Is this really the best you can—"

Suddenly, Kurt is rushed from the side, barely having time to react before a baboon bird jumps on him and attempts to take a bite out of his face. The bright, colorful mug of the creature is a stark contrast to the terrifying mouth full of sharp teeth that Kurt is currently holding at bay. He will need so many doctor visits if this thing bites him.

The frustrated simian starts hammering on Kurt, revealing a hitherto unknown fact to the Avatar; monkeys hit hard.
"OW!" Kurt shouts, finally gaining his bearings and using a bit of mist-breath to put ice on this ape. The freezing stream of vapor immediately causes the monkey to let go of Kurt in favor of pawing the ice off its face, and Kurt wastes no time in using a horizontal geyser to send the thing flying.

He looks around, only to see more of the winged simians than ever. The air is positively full of them. Kurt takes his waterbending stance, gathering all available liquid into a circle around him before forming it into a set of eight tentacles.

"Alright," Kurt says. "I have had enough of this monkey business…"

Nothing this big should be this fast, Blaine thinks. It just isn't fair.

Despite the heavy shell and massive girth of the armadillo bear, the thing seems to have no trouble whatsoever running at a pace that would outmatch a sprinting human with ease. When it gets within range, it nearly pounces on him (he's pretty sure you have to leave the ground for it to be considered an actual pounce, but still).

Blaine is ready. He skates away from the bear on a cushion of flame, leaving a burning trail in his wake. The bear comes down on the flames instead of Blaine. The Prince expects a moment of panic, or at least a sign of pain, but the bear simply stomps out the flames and makes to lunge at him again.

"Oh, shit!" he shouts, jumping backwards. He doesn't get it. What went wrong? Is the stupid thing just fireproof?

…maybe it just wasn't hot enough. He's seen plenty of fires stomped out before, usually fresh ones. That must be it.

An idea for a new trap starts to germinate in his brain. Unfortunately, Mr. Fuzzy has no intention of letting him carry it out. The bear swipes at him several times, the Prince evading evisceration at his claws by mere hairs. The beast is pushing him back pretty quickly. At this rate, he'll reach the end of the catwalk soon, and then he'll be really screwed.

Knowing this, Blaine takes some initiative and flat-out runs from the beast. The bear starts running after him, but Blaine pretty much expected he would. He waits for the bear to pick up some momentum, knowing it'll take a second or two to get up to speed. Once he feels it gaining on him, Blaine darts to the side, running up one of the cages and hanging from the metal mesh. He gets a front-row seat as big buddy skids out on the metal catwalks, attempting to bring his massive girth to a stop. Fortunately for Blaine, it takes him just as long to stop as it does to start, and he slides well past the Prince, enabling him to hop down and run in the other direction to put some distance between them.

Amusingly enough, Mr. Fuzzy's size actually works against him on the catwalks. They're wide by human standards, but for giant monster bears, they're barely enough room to even think about turning around. This gives Blaine all the time he needs.

With a deep breath, the Prince takes his stance and thrusts his palms down at the catwalk, letting loose with a focused firestream and holding it steady for as long as he can. He isn't trying to set fires this time—it's heat he wants to impart, and nothing holds it quite like metal. By the time big buddy has figured out to stand on his hind legs in order to turn around, a large section of catwalk in front of Blaine is covered in flames and glowing orange.

"Come on…" Blaine says. "Let's see you stomp this out."
Up above, Kurt has his hands full with flying monkeys and the cackling witch who released them. He's trying everything he can, but there are just too many of the damn things. Not even octopus form can defend against all of them at once. The second he smacks one away, two more fly in to take its place. He's quickly running out of options.

"Taste you the hot, refried beans of defeat?" Lucy asks.

"What is it with you and food?" Kurt asks, tentacle-smacking a couple more monkeys away, only to have one drop down on him from above and start trying to pull his hair. "Oh, fuck no!" Kurt says, throwing a flaming fist at the monkey on his back to scare it off. "Okay," Kurt says. "I need a second to think."

Drawing his water supply into a dome around him, Kurt freezes it into a thick shield of ice and takes a second to stop and breathe and get his bearings back.

The baboon-birds shriek as they land on his dome and start hammering away at it. They are deceptively strong, evidenced by the steadily growing cracks they are creating. Some fireballs from Lucy help speed the process.

Think fast, the Avatar tells himself. Their advantage is their numbers and their mobility. If I can find a way to stop them from using those, I'll be set. Through the transparent, frozen glass, he takes a look around, and smiles as he spots the answer almost immediately.

Outside the dome, the baboon birds continue to shriek and pound on Kurt's impromptu igloo, never noticing the faint, steadily increasing orange glow within until it is too late. The ice dome erupts into a shower of shards, steam, and flame as Kurt breaks free. The feathered monkeys are scattered in the confusion, and even Lucy has to shield herself from a few flying ice chunks. Which is why she is caught completely off guard when a rail of ice suddenly extends right to her position from the steam cloud. Kurt slides down it with incredible speed, slamming right into her and knocking her into the open door of the baboon's cage.

Instead of attempting to lock her inside, however, Kurt jumps into the spacious cage with her, shutting the door behind him and freezing it with a thick clump of ice to replace the destroyed lock. The baboon birds fly to the bars and rattle them in a vain attempt to get through, but Kurt quickly dissuades them from that particular course of action with a heaping helping of fire.

"Oh, think you that you are the clever primate?" Lucy asks. "Well, your logic is full of holes like a cheese grater! Now, it is your boyfriend who will have to snack on the wrath of my monkeys! And you who will have to deal with me, with no escape!"

"Blaine will be fine," Kurt says. "As for you and me... well, considering the setting, I think this qualifies as a cage match. You know what they say about cage matches... 'Two enter..." Kurt adopts his stance. "...but only one leaves.'"

Down below, Blaine punches a rapid stream of fireballs at Mr. Fuzzy to prompt him into charging again. It works—the huge, lumbering beast begins trotting towards him with all the fury of a furry freight train. When it reaches the flames, it once again attempts to stomp them out.

This time, however, it doesn't go so well. Blaine hears a sizzling sound that makes him wince as the bear roars and backpedals away from the heated metal. Its front paws were burnt pretty badly—so badly, in fact, that Mr. Fuzzy now refuses to stand on them, instead using its large tail to balance it out as it stands on its hind legs.

Standing up like that, the giant thing looks even more giant. On four legs, it was twice Blaine's
height. On two, it's four times taller than the Fire Prince, making him feel smaller than Wes and David's teasing could ever hope for.

The good news is that despite the imposing size, the bear is now in a much weaker position, exposing its unprotected, furry underbelly.

The bad news is that judging by the ever-loudening screeches, Blaine now has something else to worry about.

"What is that noi—" is all he has time to say before baboon birds start dive-bombing him from above. The screeching animals swoop down and kick at him with their hind legs, barely giving him time to throw up an arm to block them before he is knocked over. He gets to his feet with a spinning kick, throwing a healthy amount of fire around him to scare the birds off. He starts punching fire at the annoying animals, only to be remind by means of a mighty thud that he forgot about the fucking bear.

Mr. Fuzzy has gone into ball mode again, and is rolling towards him with the intention of making the Fire Prince into a hotcake. Blaine once again rocket jumps over the rolling behemoth, but the results are less than stellar; at the apex of his jump, two baboon birds slam him against the cages, knocking the wind out of him. He just manages to grab onto the bars before falling into the narrow space between the catwalks and the cages, but the annoying apes seem to have no intention of letting him catch his breath. One of them flutters over and grabs onto his back. Blaine's immediate instinct is to push off the cage as hard as he can, and it probably saves his life—the force of their flight causes the baboon to bite the air instead of Blaine. The Prince falls, landing on his back on the catwalk, which knocks the wind out of him again. Fortunately, the baboon cushioned his fall somewhat.

Stumbling to his feet, Blaine lamely punches a weak flame at the baboon birds. It misses by a mile, fizzling out long before it actually reaches any of them, but the feathered monkeys flinch anyway. They're afraid of fire, Blaine realizes. It actually makes sense. Most animals, even those in the Fire Nation, are instinctively afraid of anything that burns. Lighting a large flame at the end of each hand, he holds the flames out to his sides, ready to swirl them at a moment's notice, hoping to deter his ape attack squad.

It works… in the short term. The baboon birds are cowed by the steadily burning flames, and refuse to approach him while he's wielding them. Unfortunately, they aren't running away, either. And if the look on his face as he steadily walks towards Blaine is any indication, Mr. Fuzzy is definitely not afraid of fire…

The baboon's den is an interesting choice for a cage match. It is a tall cage that is actually extended down from the ceiling, fairly spacious, with a large, tree-like structure in the middle for the baboons to call 'home.' Other than that, there's not much, save water troughs, food bowls, and a pretty powerful stench.

Kurt sucks the water out of the nearby food bowls, using it to block Lucy's fire punches. Firebending, while effective as offense, tends to be just a mite predictable in the wrong hands. Direct attacks are the easiest to block or dodge. Juiced up by the moon, Kurt decides to get a little fancy with his waterbending. Rather than strike her with a single water whip, Kurt extends four simultaneous water whips from a single hand, lashing in from several different directions. Lucy covers her hands in flame and manages to smack two of them away, but the other two catch her right in the torso and knock her off balance.

It's an easy victory for Kurt. Or at least it would have been, if not for one aspect of the cage he
failed to take into account. The Avatar steps forward to finish the fight, but instead of being greeted with the clink of boot-on-metal, Kurt's foot makes a thick, wet, squishing sound when it comes down.

The Avatar looks down in horror.

"Oh… monkey poop!" he says, slightly panicked. "Ew, ew, ew! Gross! Get it off! Get it off!"

He completely forgets about the fight, turning all his efforts to hopping on one leg and trying to shake the shit off of his shoes. Lucy takes the opportunity to make a stunning comeback, sliding her foot along the ground and sending a rolling wave of fire at Kurt's non-stinky foot. Having little choice in the matter, he makes an awkward, one-footed jump over it, but Lucy catches him mid-flight with a crescent firewave, knocking him against the bars of the cage and giving him a rather painful burn on his arms.

Looking to the side, Kurt suddenly feels sick. He almost landed in crap again. He tries to recover, but Lucy pounces on him and pins him to the ground. She bends up a fireball to slam down on his head, and Kurt, quite literally, has time for nothing else. With all the courage he can muster, Kurt reaches out, grabs a big handful of poo, and flings it right into Lucy's face.

This breaks her concentration spectacularly. She immediately jumps off of Kurt. "Oh, grossness! It is to vomit."

"I will never be clean again," Kurt laments as he calls back his water, slams Lucy into a tree, and promptly freezes her in place. He doesn't even bother to taunt her as he walks towards the exit, desperately swirling the water around his hand to try and wash off the stink (and the shame, though he's pretty sure that's permanent)…

Back below, Blaine brandishes burning balls to keep braying baboon-birds back. A big, burly bear bellows about his burnt bunions, begging to bash the burner's brains in. Blaine is boned.

With few other options as the bear gets closer and closer, Blaine finally combines his two flames into one and turns it into a stream, spraying fire as far and wide as he can to frighten the baboon birds into fleeing. Once the screeching simians take to the skies again, big buddy leans forward and makes to swipe at Blaine with his scorched paws. Blaine is having none of that, but instead of dodging backwards, he dives forward, spins around in mid-air, lands on his back and shoves a fiery foot into the bear's exposed chest. The flame hits its mark perfectly, and the bear stumbles backwards, batting at its scorched chest to extinguish his burning fur.

The baboon birds make their appearance again, but this time, Blaine has no time for them. As Mr. Fuzzy stumbles backwards, Blaine senses an opportunity to finish this fight, and he seizes it with both hands.

By 'it,' of course, I mean 'a flying baboon bird's foot.'

The Prince jumps up and grabs onto one of the fluttering animals. He knows it can't fly with the added weight, but he doesn't need it to—he simply uses it as leverage to swing himself up and jump to the next primate. The flying monkeys have unintentionally formed a line between Blaine and the off-balance bear, and Blaine wants the high ground for his big finish. Swinging from monkey to monkey, Blaine gets higher and higher until he is about even with Mr. Fuzzy's face. With one final monkey jump, Blaine sends himself flying towards the beast's head. The bear raises a paw to intercept him, but at the last second, he changes his heading, kicking his feet behind him and rocketing towards the bear's chest. The giant paw barely ruffles his hair as it whiffs past him, and Blaine slams two flaming fists into the bear's already scorched midsection, creating a small
explosion.

With a mighty roar, the beast topples onto its armored back, frantically patting at its chest and kicking its feet in an attempt to right itself. Finally extinguishing the flames, the beast gives a rather pitiful moan and curls into a ball again. This time, it doesn't try to roll anywhere. Blaine keeps his eyes on it, just in case.

"Mercedes taught me a few things about the animal kingdom," Kurt says, sliding down an ice pole from the level above. "That's a sign of surrender. It means he gives up and acknowledges your superiority. Congratulations!" Kurt claps him on the back with a grin. "You're the Alpha Male."

Blaine grins back at him, but the grin is short-lived. "Tell that to them," he says, creating another flame and holding it in front of him. The baboon birds screech angrily, wanting desperately to strike at him, but not quite able to overcome their fear of fire.

Kurt tries one of his beginner airbending techniques, whirling his hands around to create an invisible globe of pressurized air to toss at them. The gust scatters them and even manages to knock one out, causing it to fall into the cage on the bottom level. But it doesn't deter them in the slightest.

"There are entirely too many of these!" Kurt says, annoyed. "I'd really like to avoid killing them all, if I can help it."

"They're scared of fire," Blaine says. "If we work together, we might be able to herd them back into their cage!"

Kurt conjures up a flame of his own. "Well, if that's what we have to do, then let's do it!"

It's a tricky process. Blaine uses fire ropes, extending them up and occasionally snapping them against each other to create sparks and keep the monkeys at bay. Kurt, on the other hand, isn't quite advanced enough to use that particular technique, and has to settle for punching explosive bursts in front of any straggler who attempts to break free. They eventually manage to get all of the monkeys gathered around the entrance to their cage.

"Can you open that?" Blaine asks.

Kurt flicks his wrist around, and the ice keeping the cage shut melts and flies towards him, flinging the cage open.

"Alright, let's do it!" Blaine says. The Prince lays his whips down and bends them up into a wall of fire, trapping the monkeys inside. From there, Kurt throws fireballs just shy of the monkeys, forcing them to flee in a panic. Eventually, they have nowhere to go but the cage, and once they're all inside, Kurt sends his water supply back out to close and freeze the door once again.

Suddenly, a smattering of applause drifts up at them from the level below. Blaine looks down to see the Dragon Hawks, clapping loudly and looking a little… smokey. Several guards are with them, all disarmed with their hands tied behind their heads.

"That was awesome!" Other Nick says.

"Eh, it was alright," the guard in front of him says.

"Hey, you shut up," Nick says. "No commentary from sore losers."

Kurt smiles. "Why, thank you! I'm glad you enjoyed our—wait a minute," he says. "How long
have you been down there?"

"Long enough," David says with a shrug.

"Why didn't you help?" Kurt asks.

"You seemed to be doing quite alright on your own," Wes says. "We didn't want to throw you off. Too many chefs, and all that."

"Prince Blaine, may I say that your whip technique is positively stunning," Thad says. "And to think," he says to Wes. "I used to think you were good."

"Hey!" Wes says.

Blaine smiles, jumping over and climbing down the cages to get to their level. "Wow, you guys are done already?"

"Of course," Thad says easily. "They were hardly a challenge. The mass-produced tinfoil-on-sticks used by the military can hardly hope to compare to a real weapon." At this, Thad pats the sword at his side with no small degree of pride.

"Hey," Jeff says. "Don't we use mass-produced tinfoil on sticks?" He hugs his spear and frowns, patting it as though Thad hurt its feelings.

Thad rolls his eyes. "Never you mind," he says. "Where should we put these?" he says, gesturing to the guards. One Chi-Ryu is among them, looking particularly perturbed.

"We've got an open cage," Kurt says, leading them to the armadillo bear's cage, where several other guards are still pinned down by casings of ice. The Hawks casually toss their guards inside, and Kurt closes the door and locks it (thankful that this particular lock is not broken at all).

"We found a key on our Chi-Ryu," Wes says, holding up the aforementioned key.

"Wow," Kurt says, impressed. "I didn't expect you guys to be so... useful."

"Yes," Thad says neutrally. "I had the same thoughts about you."


"Blaine!" Wes whispers intensely. "Shhhh! Don't. Move. There is a live armadillo bear in the corner. It's looking right at us."

The Prince turns to look at the bear, which has unfolded and flipped back over, and seems to be timidly eying him from afar.

"I don't think he's gonna bother us," Blaine says, starting to walk towards him. Sure enough, as soon as he gets close, the bear almost whimpers, curling up into a ball again. "Aww," Blaine says. "I'm sorry, big guy. I didn't mean to be so rough on you."

The Dragon Hawks turn in unison to stare at the Prince in complete shock. "Wait... what?" Nick says. "You beat that?"

Blaine shrugs. "Yeah... I think I overdid it, though. Poor guy was just doing what he was trained to do. He didn't know any better."

Jeff is gobsmacked. "You. You, standing right here," he says, walking up to Blaine and touching
him, as though he's not quite sure he's real. "You beat *that thing right there? By yourself?"

Thad smacks Jeff's hand. "Don't touch him!" he says. "You'll contaminate him with peasant germs."

"Thad, it's fine," Blaine shrugs. "And to answer your question… yeah, pretty much."

The Hawks are collectively stricken speechless.

Kurt rolls his eyes. "I could've done it too," he mumbles.

Blaine walks up to the curled up critter, patting its tough shell gently. "What should we do with him?"

"What do you mean?" Kurt asks. "We roll him into a cage. What else would we do with him?"

The sparkle in Blaine's puppy-dog eyes pretty much says it all.

Kurt's jaw drops. "You are kidding me."

Blaine raises his eyebrows, grinning with his most hopeful of grins.

"No!" Kurt says. "There is absolutely *no way* we are taking him with us."

Blaine frowns at him.

"How would you possibly hide something that big?" Kurt asks. "*Where* would you hide it? Do you know how much those things eat? How would you feed it?"

Blaine's bottom lip trembles.

"Oh, don't *even* try that with me," Kurt says, crossing his arms and turning away. "The answer is 'no.' And that is final."

Blaine sighs. "Alright, guys. Help me roll him back into captivity."

Still largely speechless, the Dragon Hawks comply, rolling the newly-timid bear into one of the few cages that would fit him.

"Can we at least give him a parting gift?" Blaine asks. "I feel bad for beating him up."

Jeff turns to Nick. "He feels bad," he says blearily, "for beating up a bear."

"A bear that's *ten times his size,*" Nick adds, sounding faint.

"It's not *that* impressive," Kurt says, looking around the room and spotting a bucket. A little waterbending magic, and the bucket flies towards him. As Kurt suspected, it's full of fish. He hands it to Blaine, who sets it inside the cage.

"There you go!" Blaine says, pleased. "Sorry we have to leave you here, big guy, but we've got stuff to do. Enjoy your meal!"

The bear stays in ball form. It steadfastly remains curled up until it hears the metal door close behind the last leaving Dragon Hawk. Then, it timidly uncurls and sniffs the bucket.

Glancing around to make sure no one is watching, the bear scarfs down all the fish in a single gulp.
He likes it when they swim around in his tummy. It tickles.

"Artie, are you down there?" Kurt asks as he fumbles with the key to the lock. "We're going in!"

"I'm here!" Artie says from below. "I've got it on lock-down. Do your thing. I've got your backs!"

"Are you okay?" Blaine asks. "You sound a little tired."

"I'm fine!" Artie says. "Worry about yourself. And hurry up! We don't want to be here when the next shift comes in!"

"Noted!" Blaine says, looking around at the Hawks. It's then that he notices something odd. "Other Nick, where did you get that bag?"

Other Nick, who is now wearing a rough-looking knapsack around his shoulder, turns to Blaine and explains. "I got it off the Chi-Ryu we fought. It's treated dragon stomach. Totally fireproof! She was using it to keep bombs in. And I kind of like bombs, so I figured I could do that too."

Wes side-eyes Other Nick. "You 'kind of like bombs?'" he repeats.

Other Nick nods. "They're so cool! I like fireworks, mostly, but bombs are cool too. Like the SuperSmokers the Chi-Ryu was using, which use a 50/30/20 blend of—"

"Okay," David says, patting him on the shoulder. "Point of advice; don't go spreading that information around. Because—and I'm being honest for your own good here—you just got a lot weirder in a very short amount of time."

Other Nick nods soberly.

"Hey," Blaine says. "Don't be mean to him just because he has different interests. You never know when—"

"Quiet!" Kurt says.

At this, the key finally clicks into place, and the massive, complicated lock whirs and clicks, actually releasing steam as it unlocks. Soon, the incredibly thick door is able to slide right open, allowing them entrance to the final car.

"Everyone, be careful," Blaine advises. "Artie said this car was empty, but there's no telling what we might find in here."

"Other Nick," Wes says. "You're in charge of keeping up with anything useful we find. We'll store it in your knapsack."

"Got it," Other Nick says.

"Everyone ready?" Kurt asks.

Murmurs and nods of assent.

"Artie!" Kurt says. "We're going in. Warn us if anyone is coming."

"Got it!" Artie says.

"Follow me," Kurt says. He bends up a small flame above his hand, using it to cast a light into the
pitch-black darkness of the car. One by one, Blaine and the Dragon Hawks follow suit, carrying their dim torches into the very heart of darkness.

The door closing behind them sends a slight ripple through the lingering mists.

Artie stares after them as they go.

He isn't tired. He isn't. He snatched some chi-enhancing tea before the mission, and he is as energized as he will ever need to be. Even if he wasn't, it's not like it matters. He's gone without sleep longer than this. At the Lake, they taught him—

They taught him—


"No," Artie says, clenching his teeth and shaking his head. "No, I'm not thinking about this. No."

He slides over to one of the treads, taking cover underneath the car. He needs to remain focused and vigilant. He'll watch for threats.

He places his hands to the ground, monitoring his surroundings, watching for movement.

In the animal car, a baboon bird with a broken wing hobbles around inside the bottom-most cage, where Kurt or Blaine must have knocked it down. It makes a few weak attempts at flying, but there's nothing it can do. Its wing is busted. If it wants out of the cage, it'll just have to climb. The injured little fella shuffles over towards one of the big, spiky boulders, probably to climb on top of it. It gets within about six feet, and…

Wait…

It's gone.

What?

Artie presses his fingers and palms harder into the ground, sending out a few searching tremors. There's no way something should just vanish like that. It didn't fly. He should be able to see it, but… Nothing. There's nothing in that bottom cage at all except for those big rocks.

Those rocks…

...rocks slam into the earth all around him. His legs are useless. He claws at the ground like a panicked animal, desperately trying to pull himself away before he is crushed, but there is no escape...

No escape…

Escape.

Artie blinks, and shakes his head. Someone is escaping. Is… is it him? No… think. It's… the Chi-Ryus… one of them is trying to escape. The one in the top cage is still frozen to the tree, she's doing… something. He can't quite tell… she's too far away for him to get much detail. But there are baboons in the cage with her now, and they seem to be gathering around her. Not hooting and howling at her, not trying to eat her, but just… looking up at her. Paying attention to her, like…

Like she's talking to them.
That can't be right.

People can't talk to animals. No more than… than a tree could talk to a person… or a person… to a rock…

… talk to the earth, Artie. Pray to her. She listens. She is our Mother. She takes care of us… all of us… We are her chosen, the best and brightest of her children… we protect her. She is sick, but we can make her well. We will watch for her enemies, and strike them down, whether they come from the Air Nomads… the Water Tribes… the Fire Nation

The Fire Nation

What? Artie jumps, snapping to attention with a start. Something… something is wrong. He thinks. There is… there is something he was doing. Is doing. What is he doing?

Where is he?

He's… the Fire Nation. Yes. Of course. Duhy. The earthbender grits his teeth and slaps himself. His thoughts are trying to slip away from him. He needs to focus. He needs to concentrate. And… and if he closes his eyes, it's only to focus his other senses.

That's it. It just… it helps him focus. That's all…

He needs to concentrate. To look at…

What was he looking at?

Oh yeah. The guys. He was watching their backs. Artie smiles. He likes these guys. They're cool… they work together well… they always look out for each other. Artie will look after them. Like he was taught to look after his own brothers. Like he was taught…

We are all brothers here, Artie. We look out for each other. We look out for the City, for the entire Earth Kingdom.

We are always watching…

Sue's car is somehow even more terrifying than Kurt remembers. It's more than just the darkness and the vast emptiness—though those definitely do not help matters. It's… the mess that kind of drives the whole thing home. The car's contents are in complete disarray. Papers are strewn across the floor; bits of broken machinery and shattered glass strewn around broken shelves and busted furniture. The truck's sudden, crashing stop must have caused all of this—everything seems to have just slammed against the front wall.

It's strange how all places associated with Sue Sylvester seem to turn to ruin sooner or later. The Capital, her house… and now this place.

The eight of them gather together in the middle of the hallway, their flames casting enough illumination to outline doorways and cast shadows into the rooms.

"Steady with those fires, guys," Blaine says. "We don't want to burn anything important by mistake."

"How are we supposed to sort through all of this?" Wes asks.
"As far as I can tell," Kurt says, "the only way to do it is just to do it. One piece at a time."

"We'll cover more ground if we split up," Blaine says.

Kurt nods. "Good idea," he says. "There are four rooms off the main hallway, which leads to the 'throne room,' where Sue was sitting. There wasn't much of interest in there... at least, not that I saw.

"Let's split into pairs," Blaine says. "Kurt and I, Wes and David, Nick and Jeff, and Thad and Other Nick. We'll each take a room."

"If you find anything of value," Kurt says. "Take it."

"How are we supposed to know what's of value?" Thad asks.

Kurt contemplates this for a bit. "Keep your eyes open, and your mind sharp. Trust your instincts."

"Good advice for any situation," Wes says. "Alright, men. You have your assignments. Let's get to it."

The four duos nod their assent and head off to investigate their respective rooms.

Kurt and Blaine take the Northwest Room. Blaine leads the way, keeping his flame bright. The papers shuffle and crumple as he steps on them. This particular room houses a table with two broken legs, tons of papers, and lots of little red dots on the floor.

Kurt leans down to pick up a book. "This is an Atlas of the Earth Kingdom," he says.

"What would she want with that?" Blaine asks.

Kurt shrugs. "No idea. No one has made any notes in it or anything."

Blaine moves around the room, spotting one thing that seems oddly out of place. A large, rectangular wooden board leans against one wall. The Prince picks it up and turns it over, only to find nothing less than a map of the entire world on the other side. A few red pins are jammed into certain places, and Blaine suddenly realizes that there used to be a lot more pins in the map. Most of them are on the floor now.

"Kurt, come here and look at this," Blaine says.

"This is apparently the geography room," Kurt says. "Atlases, maps... I wonder what she was marking here?"

Blaine looks at the few pins still stuck on the board. "These are all mountains in the Earth Kingdom, it looks like. Maybe these are strategic places she wants to conquer?"

"Sue probably wants to conquer the entire world," Kurt says. "But you're right... these could be positions she wants to seize first."

"Why?" Blaine asks.

"No idea," Kurt says. "If she really plans on starting a war with the Earth Kingdom, she needs an updated map. This one is vastly outdated."

Blaine quirks an eyebrow. "How so?"
"The Earth Kingdom has… changed a bit in response to the plague," Kurt says, pointing at a large enclosure in the Northeast of the Earth Kingdom. "See that? That's Ba Sing Se."

Blaine's eyes nearly bulge out of his skull. "That's the Impenetrable City? That's huge! That's almost half the size of the Fire Nation mainland."

Kurt nods. "It's pretty large, or so Artie tells me. I've never been there myself, but… I have seen its walls. Mostly because they've grown."

The Avatar's fingers trace jagged lines outwards from the enclosure, stabbing through various parts of the Earth Kingdom.

"Imagine this board as a piece of glass, with cracks spreading outwards from Ba Sing Se to other parts of the Earth Kingdom," he says. "Those cracks? They're walls. Huge walls, hundreds of feet high, insanely thick, and miles long."

"That's… incredible," Blaine says. "The walls of Ba Sing Se sound impressive enough by themselves. Why are they making new ones?"

"The plague," is Kurt's simple answer. "That's their solution to the problem. The walls enable them to isolate plague outbreaks. Did you think you guys were the only ones with a quarantine?"

Blaine shakes his head. "I guess… I never really thought about it. We've been really fortunate in being sheltered from the plague so far."

"You have no idea," Kurt says. "It's… bad up there. The Earth King employs some kind of massive spy network to watch for outbreaks. Anytime an outbreak is reported, a new wall is made, isolating that town and a sizeable chunk of land around it from the rest of the Kingdom. From then on, that place is an 'Orphan Zone.' No one is allowed in or out. The Earth Army mans the walls, and they are instructed to kill anyone who tries to get past them."

Blaine's chest hitches. "That's horrible. What happens to the people inside?"

Kurt's face becomes somber as he draws the answer from his memories. "Sometimes, the plague clears them out completely. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes… there is no plague, just a false alarm. Either way, the result is the same. Anyone left behind is just… abandoned. Left to fend for themselves. They can't get food or goods from anywhere else in the Kingdom. They can't escape. There is no law but what they can enforce themselves. Sometimes slavers get to them. Sometimes militant groups seize control. Sometimes… the people are alright. They can get by just with what they have available within the walls. And… sometimes they can't."

By the end of his speech, Kurt's voice is barely a whisper, and Blaine can't take it anymore. He reaches over and pulls Kurt into a tight hug. "You are going to beat this," he says. "You are. You are going to save the world, and all of those people. I know it."

Kurt hugs him back. "I wish I could believe you," he says. "But it's just… it's so enormous, Blaine. I don't know how to fight something this huge."

"You'll figure it out," Blaine says. "We'll all help you."

Kurt shakes his head. "Sometimes… I feel like I do more harm than good. Disaster seems to follow me everywhere."

Blaine keeps his hands on Kurt's shoulders as he breaks the hug. "What do you mean?" he says, looking into his eyes.
"Well… you know what happened here," Kurt says.

"That was not your fault at all," Blaine says.

"What if… what if I told you something that was?" Kurt asks.

Blaine just looks confused.

"I didn't mention who builds the walls, did I?" Kurt asks.

Blaine shakes his head. He remains silent, hoping that will encourage Kurt to talk.

"Prisoners," Kurt says. "Earthbending prisoners. They are kept in enormous, moving metal buildings, and carted around the Kingdom to wherever they are wanted. Mercedes, Artie and I… we got thrown into one of these prisons. We helped make a new wall."

The lump in Blaine's throat makes speaking difficult, but he pushes past it. "Kurt… again, that wasn't your fault."

"Does it matter?" Kurt asks. "We still did it. We made a wall, and a new Orphan Zone to go along with it. And… worst of all… when we finished, someone we knew was trapped inside. A very dear friend to us." Kurt sniffs. "Her name was Tina. She… helped us in so many ways. And in return, we put her, her family, and her entire town in the middle of a lawless wasteland." He sniffs again. "I don't even know what happened to her. After we escaped, I just wanted to get out of the Earth Kingdom as fast as possible."

Blaine hugs him again. "It's okay," he says. "I… I understand why you would feel like that."

Kurt smiles, just a little. "I guess you do," he sniffs.

"And you know what?" Blaine says. "If you met Tina again, and told her what you just told me… I bet she wouldn't hold you responsible, either."

"Still…" Kurt says thickly. "When we escaped… it was… well, it was actually pretty spectacular," he says with a little laugh. "We got control of the prison and drove it into the ocean. It was incredible, and the prisoners were so grateful, but all I could think about was… if I had just done it a little sooner…"

"…they still probably would've finished the wall," Blaine says. "Like you said, this is huge. The biggest country in the world is doing this. I'm sure that was far from the only one of those prisons. You did what you could."

"I guess… you're right," Kurt says, giving him a little smile. "Thanks. I feel a little better now. And I'm… glad to have gotten that out." He gives Blaine a little squeeze. "Anyway…" he says, breaking the hug and turning his attention back to the matter at hand, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "Enough about the past. Let's concentrate on the present. Should we take this map?"

Blaine follows his lead, dropping the topic for now. "It's a little big… maybe if we take it off the board and roll it up…"

The two of them work together to remove the map from the wood. They roll it up and take it out into the hall, where Wes and David are waiting for them.

"Did you find something?" Blaine asks.
Wes nods, indicating a stack of papers in his hands. "Our room seemed to be an archive of sorts. There were mostly notes on scrapped projects. This appears to be one that involved weaponizing animals," he says, holding up a sheet of paper. "I'm not sure if it has anything to do with her current plans, but it's a somewhat telling look into her mind." There are several drawings of animals with cannons and other weapons mounted on them. All but one of the animals in the picture, Blaine recognizes. It's some kind of monstrous turtle, with a huge, rough-looking shell covered in jagged spikes, powerful arms and legs, a head with large horns and very sharp teeth, and a long, spiked tail.

"What is that?" Blaine asks. "It looks kind of familiar, but I can't quite place where I've seen it."

"That is a dragon turtle, I believe," Wes says. "Terrifying creatures, or so the history books tell me."

"History books?" Kurt asks.

"They were hunted into extinction," David says. "The last living specimen was killed a little over a hundred years ago."

"I feel strangely relieved," Kurt says. "I'm normally all for nature, but that… that looks unpleasant."

"Hey!" Nick says, as he and Jeff approach from behind. "Me and Jeff didn't find much we could use."

"Yeah," Jeff says. "Our room just had a bunch of broken crap in it. Machines that we probably wouldn't have known how to use if they were brand new."

"Nevermind the condition they were actually in," Nick says. "We did find this, though."

He holds up a sheet of paper that appears to have been mostly covered in ink.

"Most of it is blotted out, but it talks about the sky lights," Jeff says.

Nick reads the paper aloud. "…tests conclude that the presence of the red lights at night is indeed beneficial to the procedure, but contrary to earlier reports, it is NOT a necessary factor in—"

He doesn't get to finish. Suddenly, the door bursts open, and before any of them can react, a huge plume of flame issues forth, managing to incinerate pretty much every piece of paper they are holding as they scramble to shield themselves from it.

"Crap!" Kurt shouts, drawing out his water supply. "They escaped!"

The Chi-Ryu and several guards toss a buffet of flame through the opening. Wes and David step forward to do some counter-bending.

"What's the plan?" Wes asks.

Blaine dashes into the one remaining room. "Thad? Nick 2? Are you in here?"

"Yeah," Other Nick says. "I think we found something!"

"You mean you think I found—" Thad starts to correct.

"Whatever!" Blaine says. "O.N, stuff as much stuff as you can into your knapsack. We need to
"Yes, sir!" Other Nick says. Blaine dashes back out into the hallway, where Kurt is buffeting the goon squad with a horizontal hailstorm. Jeff and Nick have their weapons out, slinging fire from spear and twin blades, respectively.

Thad and Other Nick dash out of the room behind him, just in time to see a small, black orb with a fuse in it fly into the room and behind them. Other Nick's eyes go wide upon seeing it, and without even a second's hesitation, he runs in and kicks the ball as hard as he can down the hall. "Duck!" he shouts.

No sooner than the words leave his mouth, the bomb detonates. It's an incendiary bomb, specially designed to spread as much fire as possible. Thanks to Other Nick's warning, the gang is able to shield themselves from most of the punishment, but all four rooms full of research are rapidly incinerating by the time the smoke clears.

"I think we've gotten all we're going to get," Blaine says. "Let's get out of here!"

Kurt leads the charge, bending an air gust to blow guard and Chi-Ryu alike back into the animal car. "Shit!" he says. "Where's Artie? What is he doing? He was supposed to warn us!"

"We should worry about ourselves right now," David says, blocking a fire blast from another guard attempting to get at them.

Kurt snatches as much water as he can from the surrounding area, forming a slide of solid ice leading to the ground. "Please keep your hands and feet inside the slide at all times," Kurt warns helpfully, folding his arms and sliding down feet-first. The others follow suit one by one. The guards make to follow, but the second the last Hawk is off the slide, Kurt melts it, and the poor sap lands in a heap on the ground.

"Artie!" Blaine calls out. "Artie, where are you? Are you okay?"

"What?" Artie says, sliding out from under the trank. "What… what's going—"

"Where were you?" Kurt asks. "What were you doing? We almost got killed by an ambush just now."

Artie's eyes go wide. "But… I didn't… I didn't mean—"

"Whatever!" Wes says. "We need to leave immediately!"

The Hawks dash away from the trank, but the fog makes everything look… off. The landscape seems to have changed slightly.

"Are we in the same place we were before?" David asks.

"It seems… rockier," Jeff says.

"Definitely up a few notches on the rocky scale," Nick agrees.

Blaine looks around. Sure enough, there do seem to be more rocks around than before. They are almost completely surrounded by boulders. Large, rough-looking boulders, covered… in jagged… spikes…

The Prince's eyes widen.
Suddenly, it snaps into place. He looks up at the animal car and sees that the entire front wall has folded open, and now acts as a ramp. Anything inside of it could get down this way.

There are guards in the car. Guards who are not chasing them.

The bottom cage is empty.

Blaine knows where he's seen those animals before.

"Everyone, stop!" Blaine cries.

The gang complies, but Other Nick actually takes him a little too literally, literally freezing in mid-motion so that he is standing on one foot. Blaine watches him wobble and knows immediately that he is going to fall.

He is closer to a 'rock' than anyone else.

He sprints like his life depends on it. As Other Nick flails and starts to fall, Blaine's hands lash out and snatch him by the collar, rudely yanking him away just in time to see scaly head full of sharp teeth lash out like a snake, his bite missing the boy by mere inches.

They quickly scramble to their feet. "Holy shit!" Other Nick says. "What was that?"

The Hawks and the Avatar back away from the boulders, winding up clumped together in the middle. They watch as one by one, the 'boulders' suddenly sprout powerful arms and legs, large, spiked tails, and reptilian heads full of sharp teeth. They aren't boulders at all. They're shells.

"Wes," Blaine says. "About those dragon turtles…"

"This shouldn't be possible!" Wes says. "My history text said they were extinct!"

The enormous turtles (seven in all) roar as they steadily begin stalking towards their prey.

Kurt snatches as much water as he can, and prepares for battle once again…

"I think your history book is outdated."

TO BE CONTINUED

A/N: I just wanted to thank everyone who reviewed last chapter. It really, really helped me get back into the proper spirit. I feel silly now. ^_^ I think I'm going to try for at least one chapter a week. It may have to be a 'partial chapter,' like this one, but weekly updates seem like the best idea. I can't make any promises though. Anyway, stay tuned— this segment had some interesting tidbits on the past, but the next one is concerned with the future. A harrowing battle with creatures from the ancient world, and some big clues as to what Sue is planning all await you in the exciting conclusion of Can't Fight the Moonlight! Hope to see you there. :D
Can't Fight the Moonlight, Part 3

Chapter Notes

**Media:** Fic  
**Title:** Solar Winds *(Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 59/?)*  
**Rating:** PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.  
**Spoilers:** None for either series that I am aware of.  
**Warnings:** None.  
**Word Count:** 10,000  
**Summary:** When a usurper sets eyes on the Fire Nation throne, Avatar Kurt and friends find themselves on the run with the deposed Prince Blaine in a country gone mad. Can they escape Lady Sylvester's wrath? Or will her minions snuff them out for good? Fusion fic!

**Author's Note:** Prepare for a truly shocking plot development! How shocking, you ask? Until I wrote this chapter, not even *I* knew that it was going to happen! :O Enjoy!

**CHAPTER 59 – Can't Fight the Moonlight, Part 3**

So, on the one side, you have the enormous trank, loaded with guards (who don't seem to be coming down any time soon) and weapons. On the other, you have the canyon wall. In between, you have a circle of hungry carnivorous dinosaurs, which is slowly closing in on a small group of apparently delicious firebenders.

Oh, and up above, there is a crap-ton of baboon birds swooping around. They don't dare get too close to the turtles, but their presence hangs like a screeching, foul-smelling cloud of teeth and claws.

"Your fates are sealed," Lucy cries, "like a letter from grandma containing cookies!"

From the baboon cloud, two of the larger birds swoop down, carrying Lucy between them. She hovers just out of reach of the turtles.

"Okay, are you *hungry*?" Kurt asks. "If we feed you, will you go away?"
"I HAVE HUNGER!" Lucy cries. "Hunger for blood!"

Blaine cracks a fire whip near her, causing the baboon-birds to panic and veer off, carrying her along with them.

"Well, that takes care of the bitch problem," Artie says. "Now we just have the other 99 to worry about."

"You be quiet!" Kurt says. "You got us into this mess. How do you miss seven giant turtles stomping around?"

"I was… distracted?" Artie shrugs.

"I say we throw the cripple as a distraction and run past while they feed on him!" Thad says.

"Touch me and die, trust fund!" Artie balks.

Kurt looks at the circle of snapping terrors. "I think I have a slightly better plan."

Sweeping his arms in wide, graceful circles, Kurt bends the remaining fog into spirals of moisture, sucking the water out of the very air. A few stray blades of grass get caught in his waterspout and wind up dried out and crumbling. The group is suddenly surrounded by a rapidly rotating airborne river, protecting them on all sides.

"Whoa!" Blaine says. "Kurt, that's a great idea! Keep up your defense, and we can—"

And then Kurt abruptly bends the river up, around, and down through the ground.

Blaine's jaw drops. "Did you mean to do that?"

Kurt closes his eyes and smiles, raising and lowering his hands as if conducting a symphony. "I have a plan, but it might take a minute. Cover me, would you sweetie?"

Blaine blushes into the very picture of 'aww, shucks.' "Alright!" he shouts. "Hawks, cover the Avatar. Let's tear these turtles a new… umm… shell-hole, I guess!"

With that rousing battle cry, the firebenders spring into action. Each one steps out and takes a turtle in his sights. Wes opens with a continuous two-handed firestream to the face, while David targets his turtle's legs with fin-shaped fire waves that cut through the earth. Nick kicks rapid bursts of flame at his beast, and Jeff uses his spear as a medium to thrust wedge-shaped fire blasts at his. Thad uses his weapon as a medium as well, slicing and dicing flames through the air, while Other Nick sticks with basic fire punching. Blaine performs a firebending tour de force, opening with a volley of straightforward punches and kicks, switching to overhead arcing fireballs, tossing in a couple blasts that loop around and hit from the side, and finishing with a short crouch to build up his energy, followed by a flaming uppercut that releases a tornado of flame that tears up the ground on its way to the turtle.

All of it does very little good. At the most, the turtles draw the threatened limbs into the safety of their shells until the assaults cease. Even when the fire attacks hit something besides shell, they don't seem terribly bothered. Blaine is the only one who manages to outright stop his turtle, causing it to withdraw entirely into its shell. But even that is temporary; as soon as Blaine stops his assault, the turtle emerges and continues its slow walk.

"Okay!" Blaine says. "So, they're fire-resistant."
"They are dragon-turtles," Artie points out. "Let's get some earthbending up in this mother…"

Artie slams both fists into the ground, transferring his energy into an erupting line of dirt. When the attack reaches the sweet spot beneath one of the turtles, he jabs upwards and causes it to erupt into a rock-piston, set to launch the thing.

He gets about six inches of air. The turtle barely notices anything happened.

"Heavier than they look," David observes.

"Alright, fine," Artie says, rolling up his sleeves. "If we can't beat it up, we'll take it down."

He slides just shy of the nearest turtle's snapping range, knitting his fingers together and swinging his hands down. The ground beneath the turtle shudders and collapses into a hole, swallowing the shelled beast in a single gulp. Artie has about three seconds to indulge in a smug grin before the turtle's head pops back up via surprisingly long and stretchy neck. It takes one look at the earthbender, promptly opens its mouth and breathes fire at him. Artie is so surprised he only barely manages to get an earth wall between himself and the blast, taking some burns on his hands.

"They can breathe fire!" Artie says as he slides back to the safety of the group. "What the fuck?"

"They are dragon-turtles," Blaine echoes uneasily.

"Fuck that!" Artie says. "Pavarotti's a dragon hawk. Finn had a pet dragon moose. None of them could pull that shit!"

Back at the hole, the dragon turtle rather casually rises up on its hind legs and climbs out, seeming quite unbothered by the whole thing.

"You should not exist!" Wes shouts at the turtles. "This is… this is unacceptable!" He turns to the guards in the trank car, pointing an accusing finger at them. "You cannot use dinosaurs! Do you hear me? Dinosaurs are cheating!"

"Kurt, are you making any progress over there?" Blaine asks, taking a look back. There he sees his boyfriend doing the same motions he was before, a gentle, wafting rise-and-fall of his hands, his wrists arcing gently as he pushes them down and pulls them up.

"Things are coming along swimmingly," Kurt says, eyes still serenely shut. "Just keep doing what you're doing."

"Oh, you mean failing?" David says, sounding slightly panicked.

"Sure, whatever," Kurt says, unperturbed.

Blaine surveys the situation grimly. The turtles, while not terrible fast-moving, are largely implacable. Bending doesn't seem to do much more than warm them up. "Try your weapons!" he says.

Thad, Nick, and Jeff all whip out their weapons of choice and rush towards a turtle. Jeff gets close enough for a thrust and takes it. In return, the turtle takes the tip of his spear clean off, leaving Jeff with nothing but a stick. Nick doesn't even get that close—his turtle opens up for a volley of fire breath. The force of it is enough to push Nick backwards, even when he's blocking. Thad sees both of these unfortunate incidents and promptly pulls an about-face before he even gets close enough to strike.
He gets some mighty death glares from the others, but remains largely unrepentant. "Do you have any idea what my family would do to me if I let our ancestral weapon get eaten?" he asks.

"You're more afraid of being scolded by your family than being devoured alive?" David asks.

"There's not much difference, really!" Thad answers obviously.

The circle grows smaller and smaller. The turtles are now close enough to let loose with the fire breath, and they take full advantage.

"Block them!" Blaine shouts.

The Hawks toss up their arms and hands to bend the fire aside. Artie slams up some rock walls as a defensive perimeter, but it's a temporary measure at best.

"We just had to listen to the foreigner," Thad grouses. "Go with the flow, he says! Well, would you look at that! The flow leads right into the mouth of a leviathan!"

Kurt continues to serenely conduct his unseen symphony, the gentle rise and fall of his hands almost hypnotically smooth. "Pop quiz," the Avatar says. "Where are we?"

"Oh!" Other Nick says. "I know this. In a canyon!"

A chunk of the wall crumbles into dust and clay as a turtle headbutts it.

"Good," Kurt says. "And what makes canyons?"

"Rivers," Wes says. "But I fail to see how—"

The wall buckles, and a turtle's head smashes through, trying to take a bite out of Blaine. The Prince feints just out of range, and then jumps up and slams two flaming feet down on the turtle's crown. The reptile retreats, and Artie patches up the hole.

"Correct!" Kurt says. "There used to be a river here. Final question; what happened to it?"

"It dried up?" Blaine asks.

"It would seem so," Kurt says. "Sometimes canyon rivers do dry up."

The half the wall suddenly buckles and crumbles, as three of the seven turtles slam into it at once.

"Duck!" Artie says.

"And sometimes," Kurt says, pushing his hands down and preparing for the finale. "...they go underground."

His hands shoot up to the heavens, summoning a torrent of subterranean water like nothing Blaine has ever seen before. Steam and liquid burst from cracks in the ground all around them, the force of the eruption enough to smack several snapping heads aside. Kurt continues to call the water upwards, and soon, the very ground beneath them shifts and lifts on the rising stream. A mammoth geyser blasts the Dragon Hawks and the ground they're standing on high into the air, far higher than the turtles could hope to snap.

"WHOA!" Blaine shouts, trying to balance himself on the teetering earth platform. "Hold on, everybody!"
Artie thrusts his hands into the earth to try and hold it together. As the underground river continues to gush to the surface, Kurt keeps the platform stable on a shifting pillar of water. Slowly but surely, he starts to maneuver them to the mouth of the canyon, where it opens into a valley that will allow them an easy exit.

"By Agni, we're going to make it!" Wes shouts excitedly.

Sadly, he has failed to account for their many other problems, like the massive overhanging cloud of carnivorous flying primates. The baboon birds begin to shriek as they detect a meal coming within reach.

"Your escape shall not be!" Lucy cries as her monkeys carry her down. "You are trapped like flaky croissant crumbs in a napkin of despair!" Twisting her face into something only an eccentric painter could love, Lucy clicks and screeches to the cloud.

The cloud answers, and pretty soon, it's raining apes.

"Keep the monkeys off my back?" Kurt says.

"Will do!" Blaine shouts. "Guys, they're scared of fire! Bend like you mean it!"

Blaine puts out not one, not two, but three wide streams of fire—one from each arm, and one from his mouth. Wes assists with fire whips, while David uses snapping kicks and slicing strikes to throw out expanding arcs. Nick and Thad join the dis-spear-ited Jeff in just throwing simple punches and kicks of flame. Even Other Nick gets in on the action, throwing out flashy, yet largely harmless showers of sparks (which seem disproportionately effective). All while Kurt keeps shuffling their backwards/bizarro bird bath further away from the terrapin terrors on the ground below.

They are cruising along nicely, so of course, it all has to come crashing down.

An unexpectedly low voice issues a proclamation of doom. "BOOM."

Blaine turns to see the baboon-birds now carrying another Chi-Ryu—the one the Hawks captured. He barely has time to register her identity before she pulls something out and hurls it at them.

"Look out!" Blaine says.

Kurt shifts the platform as much as he can, but it's not quite enough. Her bomb hits the side of the earth chunk and blasts it right out from under them. The Avatar shifts his water pillar to catch the group and cushion their fall, but doing so unbalances him, and the pillar topples over. Caught in an impromptu flood, the Dragon Hawks and their guests find themselves washed to the canyon's mouth.

Strangely enough, Other Nick is the first to recover, standing up and frantically checking his knapsack. "Oh no!" he shouts. "The stuff got wet!"

"Kurt!" Blaine shouts, kicking to his feet. "Bend the water off the paper. Hurry, before the ink runs!"

The Avatar springs to his feet and whips his arms and wrists at the soggy papers, sucking every ounce of moisture out of the pack and flicking it aside.

"Did we save anything?" Kurt asks.
Other Nick looks into the sack. "...yeah," he says. "It didn't smear too much."

"Phew!" Kurt sighs.

"That really would've sucked," Blaine says.

"Oh, and the rest of this trip has just been a bed of sunblossoms," Thad deadpans.

"The fuck was that?" Artie asks, sitting up and shaking the water off by putting himself into a short spin cycle.

"That," Wes says, brushing water out of his eyes, "was Lisa. I think."

"We captured her in the other car," David elaborates as he rises, shaking the water out of his pant leg and boot. "She is a lady of few words; 'BOOM' and 'Lisa' were about all we could get out of her."

"She likes bombs too," Other Nick says sadly. "But she doesn't like us."

"Clearly!" Kurt says. "Let's not bother her any longer than we have to. Exeunt."

The Avatar leads the way over the sloshing, soggy ground, tossing aside the excess water to make it easy (and in Artie's case, possible) for them to move along the ground without getting swept away. Just as they start to reach the open air, they spot something that brings them skidding to a stop.

"...oh no," Blaine says, looking down at the valley.

Even in the dim light of the moon, he can see the approaching company of soldiers, tanks, and rhinoceroses as they steadily march towards their position.

"Of course they sent for help," Wes says, looking slightly sick. "We were so close..."

"Oh, buck up!" Kurt says brightly. "So we can't leave that way. We'll just... find another one!"

"We're trapped!" Thad says. "We can't go forward because of the army, we can't go back because of the dragon turtles, we can't go to the sides because of the canyon and we can't go up the walls because of the blazing birds!"

The universe hears Thad's account of their problems, and promptly decides to add to them. The ground shakes, and the gang turns around. As if they heard themselves being discussed, the dragon turtles have decided to join the party and are rapidly stomping towards them, moving faster than Blaine would ever expect from a turtle.

"Any other ideas?" Blaine asks Kurt.

The Avatar answers with a clench of his jaw and a shift in his stance. Kurt's hands shoot up again, and the expanse of ground between the turtles and the Hawks suddenly erupts into a mass of mud and water, blasting up through cracks in the ground. With his river renewed, Kurt dashes forward, the droplets of moisture around him seeming to make him sparkle in the light of the full moon. Instead of allowing the water to rush out of the canyon, he gathers it all to himself, wrapping it around his body and hurling it at the oncoming turtles in enormous, crashing waves. The force of the water slamming into them causes the turtles to retreat into their shells as they are tossed about by the surprise sea.
"Alright," Blaine says, turning back to the others. "I guess we're going that way. Follow Kurt!"

The Prince leads the way, watching as his boyfriend unleashes the fury of a river spirit on the unsuspecting land turtles. His eyes are so focused on the sight of Kurt's beastly bending that he almost misses the enormous, soggy shape stepping out of the shadows to greet him.

"Blaine, look out!" Nick shouts.

The armadillo bear emits a mighty bellow of territorial fury.

Blaine skids to a stop, hesitating for just a second before letting loose with a bellow of his own—this one accompanied by a fire stream from his mouth that roars far louder than he ever could.

The bear recognizes that he'd best recognize, and promptly assumes the position, balling himself up again.

"Come on, let's go!" Blaine says, leading the group around the bear.

"Go where?" David asks. "Look! Even the Avatar is having a hard time fighting off all those turtles at once. We can't get past them!"

Blaine looks ahead, and sure enough, there's Kurt, desperately throwing water like a madman. A glance seems to suggest he's winning, but a closer look says otherwise. The turtles easily tossed about by Kurt's waves, but as much as he is shuffling them around and pushing them back, he doesn't seem to be actually hurting them. He's starting to look tired.

Even worse, Blaine can now see that the turtles apparently know how to work together; when Kurt freezes one of them, the others will use their fire breath to soften the ice so it can break free. When Kurt turns one of them over, the others will quickly run in and right him again.

"He needs our help," Blaine says. "We have to do something."

"Like what?" Jeff asks. "Firebending doesn't work on those guys."

"There's got to be something around here we can use," Blaine says thoughtfully. He scans his surroundings, and his eyes eventually fall upon a strange-looking gun mounted on a metal car. Tanks of some sort are strapped to the sides of the car, feeding into the cannon via pipes. "There!" he says. "We can use that!"

"Do we even know what that is?" Wes asks as they run towards it.

"I think I've seen it somewhere before," Nick says, tilting his head at the cannon.

"Let's see if it works," Blaine says, jumping up onto the car and aiming. It swivels and pivots up and down, so he turns it around and aims it at the turtles, pulls the trigger and... nothing happens. "Damn it! It doesn't shoot!"

David jumps up and peers into the barrel of the gun. "Clogged!" he says.

"How do we unclog it?" Blaine asks.

"You'd need a damn bomb to get all of this gunk out!" David says, disgusted.

"Oh!" Nick says, snapping his fingers. "I remember now! This is a—"

"BOOM!" comes the telltale call of the flying Lisa. She swoops overhead and lets loose with two
more bombs. The explosives land near the cart, but Lisa made the mistake of releasing the bombs too soon—the fuses are still burning. Other Nick doesn't miss a beat—he dashes in, snatches both bombs and hurls them into the cannon's barrel. A *THOOM* and an outpouring of smoke follow.

David jumps up and looks into the gun again. "…okay, I didn't expect you to take me quite so literally, but damn if that didn't *work."

"There's still one more problem," Wes says. "How are we going to get this thing moving?"

"I found a harness!" Artie says, sliding from the front of the car. "Who wants to pull?"

The Prince eyes the harness and smiles. "I think I know someone…"

So, dragon turtles. Large, tough, *infuriatingly* persistent. That's most of the notes Kurt has gathered on them so far.

Kurt dances about on the surface of his makeshift river, sloshing up another wave and rolling it to the nearest turtle, knocking it shell-first into one of its brothers, turning them over. Another turtle splashes towards his flank and tries to take a bite, but Kurt whips around and hoses it in the face, freezing the water as soon as it hits, encasing its head in ice. Swirling his arms around, Kurt makes a sort of reverse-whirlpool, thick one sticking *up* from the water. The convex vortex lifts the terrapin, twirls it around, and tosses it aside on Kurt's command.

It's all very nice and flashy, but it does precious little *good*. The turtles he flipped are already righted. The turtle he froze has already been melted free. The turtle he tossed just gets right back up again.

Infuriated, the Avatar skates away from the turtle line, musters up his river and throws a miniature tsunami, pushing the reptiles several yards back. And once again, it just isn't *enough*. The turtles get up and keep right on coming. Kurt is panting like a dog with dry mouth, sweating like an ostrich horse in the desert, and his skin has gone from porcelain white to flushed pink from exertion.

Well, whatever. He's tired, but he's far from whipped. So he just kicks up a wave and surfs right on forward.

Unfortunately, he doesn't realize how tiredness is starting to effect him. As he rushes forward to take on the turtles for round twelve, he fails to notice that he is rushing *right* into bending range for all of the guards trapped in the animal car. They waste no time in hurling copious amounts of fire in Kurt's direction, forcing him to turn in the middle of his surfing session and throw up a water shield to block them. He turns the shield into a shower of icicles and fires back, but the distraction comes at a critical moment; Kurt turns back towards the turtles just in time to see the orange light as it leaves the mouth of one that is *much* closer than he expected. He throws his arm up in anticipation of the impending roast, but just he is about to be flame-kissed, both fire and turtle are blasted aside by a powerful, high-pressure stream of…

*…foam?*

The blasted turtle bellows its outrage, thrashing about in the water. Kurt looks towards the source of the stream and sees none other than Blaine and his squad, riding on a mounted gun being pulled by an armadillo bear (which has Artie on its back).

It's not the weirdest thing he's seen, but it's up there.
"Come on!" Blaine says. "Let's go!"

Kurt doesn't need to be told twice. He surfs over and leaps onto the car. The water level in the canyon is still high enough to slow them down, so Kurt starts bending the water aside as Artie lashes the bear into motion. The guards in the animal car step up to try some bending, but Blaine blasts them with the cannon before a single punch is fired. The dragon turtles form a formidable obstacle course, but the armadillo bear is not afraid of them—it darts adroitly between them as Blaine takes aim and cannon-izes each of them in turn.

"What is that?" Kurt asks, looking at the gun.

"An extinguishing cannon!" Blaine says.

"We used them back home to put out coal fires!" Nick chimes in with a note of pride.

There is a chorus of pain and annoyance as Blaine buffets the beasts with high-powered suds. Once blasted, the turtles seem to forget about everything except the foam, stumbling about blindly and rubbing their faces against anything in range to try and get the stuff off.

"It hurts like dragon dong when you get it in your eyes. Or in your mouth, or your nose, or… pretty much anywhere," Nick elaborates.

As the bear pulls them deeper into the canyon, Kurt tries not to take satisfaction in the way the turtles are howling in pain and crashing into each other, but… he fails. Miserably.

What? It feels good to win.

"Excellent work, gentlemen!" Thad says proudly. "I knew we'd pull through in the end. Wasn't worried for a second."

A sudden crescendo of screeching reminds the group of another problem.

"Uh-oh," Blaine says, eying the heavens.

"We're all going to die!" Thad cries. "Save the rich people first—we drive the economy!"

"Oh, shut up!" Kurt says.

"STINK-RATS!" Lucy cries, swooping down from above, her entire flock of baboon-birds in tow. "My anger is cause for the overheat! I shall vent upon you like many angry sunbeams of rage!"

With that, Lucy herself joins the fray. The girl seems to be able to steer her baboon-birds with the clicking noises she makes, causing them to swoop in close enough for her to rain fireballs from her feet to their heads. Kurt snatches up some of the remaining groundwater and forms a shifting shield to absorb the punishment.

Blaine tries to shoot her with the cannon, but he can't get the trajectory high enough for it to hit her. Even worse, she starts clicking to her flock, prompting them to fly ahead and dive at them from all sides.

"Fire!" Blaine shouts, ducking a claw swipe. "Let's see some fire, guys!"

The Hawks frantically throw up a firebending defense to keep the birds at bay, but there is one final element to their offense.

"BOOM!" comes Lisa's distinctive call. She swoops in, this time with a cluster of bombs, lighting
and letting fly with all of them at once. Blaine abandons the cannon in knitting his hands together and unleashing a fast-growing fire net, which neatly detonates most of the bombs heading for them.

Keyword: most.

Other Nick manages to toss two of the bombs off the car before they detonate, but a third lands right underneath the cannon. Kurt sees it and snaps his hand down, trying to bend water onto the fuse. He succeeds in putting out the fuse, but not with water—the foam dripping from the cannon responds faster.

"Holy crap," Kurt says. "I can bend that stuff?"

"BOOM!" echoes the warning call of the bombing harpy.

"Don't question it," Blaine says, hopping back onto the cannon. "Just do it!"

He aims as far up as he can before unleashing the foam, and Kurt immediately sets to bending, curving the stream's trajectory so that it hits every bomb, knocking them aside and extinguishing every fuse. He then turns the stream on Lisa herself, blasting girl and baboon-bird alike with the sudsy white stuff, forcing her into a crash landing.

"Score!" Jeff shouts.

"Nice shot!" Thad agrees, quickly amending, "...you know, for a foreigner."

"I HAVE FURY!" Lucy cries. "Harm, you have my sister, and pay for that you shall, not in monthly installments, but in a sum of lumps!"

The girl clicks and screeches to her goon squad, and the baboon-birds recommence their aerial assault. This time, however, Kurt is ready. He bends the foam stream into a dome to catch the nearest birds. Once they're gone, he turns the stream into a spray wide enough to catch the entire flock in its shower. Soon, baboon birds are shrieking and crashing left and right, the flock rapidly thinning as Lucy howls with fury. With all of the fury she has, she leaps free of her handlers and tries a flaming suicide dive into the car. She doesn't even get close—the second she is low enough, Blaine nails her with the cannon, blasting her away from the group and leaving her in a soggy ball of white suds on the canyon floor.

"I HAVE DISGUST!" Lucy howls in agony. "The ejaculations of cannon have felled me! I am covered in the unpleasant white fluid!"

Blaine tilts his head. Kurt wrinkles his nose. The others adopt varying expressions of disgust.

"Oh, Agni," Wes says. "I wasn't thinking about it before, but now that she said it, I can't stop."

"What do you say we never speak of this again?" Blaine asks. "All in favor?"

"Aye!" comes the unanimous vote.

Both the motion and the Dragon Hawks are successfully carried off into the night.

A short while later, they've finally reached a place where they feel it's safe to stop and get out of the canyon. Unfortunately, the newest member of their group cannot come with them.

Blaine fondly pats the bear on the muzzle. "Sorry, buddy, but we've got to leave you here."
The bear grumbles fondly, not quite getting what he's saying. Blaine tries to walk off, but the bear just follows after him.

"It's no use," Nick says. "The bear is a total Blaine fanboy."

"It will follow him to the ends of the earth," Jeff says.

"Oh, man, this is gonna be so cool," Nick says, looking at the bear in awe. "We could be the Fighting Armadillo Bears! He'll be our new mascot!"

"Bite your tongue!" Wes says. "Pavarotti will peck your eyes out for such heresy!"

"We should name him!" Jeff says. "How about it? Ballsy?"

"Big Ballsy?" Nick suggests.

"Big Hairy Ballsy?" Jeff adds.

"You disgust me," Thad intones.

"How about Phil?" Other Nick suggests.

Several sets of eyes turn to look at him.

"He looks like a Phil to me," Other Nick shrugs.

"Are you sure we can't keep him?" Blaine asks Kurt. "Please?"

"Please?" Jeff and Nick echo.

"You are not helping!" Kurt grumbles at the Hawks. "Blaine, I know you have this insane love for... well, everything, but we honestly cannot accommodate this bear. It isn't possible. It would be bad for us, and it would be bad for him, too. You know that."

Blaine turns dejected eyes towards the bear. "Buddy, I know you want to come with us, but you just can't. You have to stay here. Look, you're free now! You can go anywhere!"

The group turns towards the two-ton clump of cuddly fun, thoroughly vexed.

Kurt sighs. "I hate to say this, but I think we're going to have to whip out the fire and chase him off."

"It's following us!" Thad whispers.

"Again," David says, "it's a bear. It has no idea what you're saying. Stop whispering!"

The group turns towards the two-ton clump of cuddly fun, thoroughly vexed.

Kurt sighs. "I hate to say this, but I think we're going to have to whip out the fire and chase him off."

"Kurt!" Blaine says. "We can't do that! That'd just be mean."

"Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind," Kurt says.

"The Avatar may have a point," Wes says. "If we can't talk to it, causing it pain might be the only
way to drive home the message that it isn't wanted."

"It is wanted," Nick sulks.

"Just… do it quickly," David suggests. "Pull it off like a bandage. Quick, painful, and decisive."

Blaine looks at bear. Bear looks at Blaine. Blaine clenches his fist and steps forward. Bear backs off with fearful eyes.

And Blaine deflates. "I can't. I can't hurt it again."

Kurt sighs and shakes his head. "Any other volunteers?"

"No!" Blaine commands. "No one is hurting it. I think… I might know how to handle this."

Backing away with careful steps, Blaine waits to make sure that the bear is looking right at him. Once he has its attention, Blaine takes a single step, falls on his back, and curls into a ball.

The bear (and several of the humans present) tilt their heads at this odd display, but Blaine remains in the position. After a few moments, the bear walks up to him. It sniffs him, licks him, even rolls him around with its paws (causing heart palpitations in the watching Avatar). When it becomes clear that Blaine has no intention of emerging, the bear groans and walks away, seeming almost disappointed. The Hawks stare after it as it goes.

"…I can't believe that worked," Kurt says.

Blaine uncurls, ruffled and a little dizzy. Wes and David help him stand up. "Turns out," he says, "you can talk to bears. Sort of. You just… have to know the right things to say."

Nick turns to Jeff, expression blank, as he doesn't even know what his emotions are doing. "He talks to bears. He is a bear whisperer."

Jeff shares his overwhelmed expression. "He tells them: 'Go free! Live in the wild, with your own kind! I will never forget our friendship.'"

Kurt rolls his eyes so hard that he comes dangerously close to pulling a muscle. "Blaine balls up in front of a bear, and you're impressed? Did no one see me fighting off seven giant monsters by myself just now?"

"That was pretty impressive," Blaine says.

"But in the end, we had to come in and save you," Thad says haughtily.

"You wouldn't have even been there to save me if I hadn't saved you first!" Kurt points out.

Blaine wraps an arm around Kurt's shoulder. "He's right. He saved our lives, and he deserves our thanks. So… thank you, Avatar Kurt."

"I suppose you're right," Wes says, giving him a smile. "Thank you, Avatar Kurt."

"I second that motion," David nods.

"Thanks dude!" Jeff says.

"You saved our butts, man," Nick says.
Thad sniffs the air. "I suppose I owe you a measure of gratitude, but… we saved you, as well! So that makes us even."

Blaine clears his throat.

"…nonetheless, you have my thanks, Avatar," Thad finishes sheepishly.

Other Nick walks up to the two of them. "Ummm… thank you, Avatar Kurt."

Kurt preens under the praise, happy to finally be recognized. "You are welcome," he says. "I'm happy to do it."

Other Nick turns from Kurt to his partner. "And thank you, Prince Blaine."

Blaine blinks at him. "What did I do?"

"You saved me from getting eaten, remember?" Other Nick says. "That dragon turtle would've snapped my head off if you hadn't saved me. So… thanks," he finishes with a smile.

Kurt grins and wraps an arm around his boyfriend for a congratulatory squeeze, but he feels oddly stiff. When Kurt looks over at him, instead of seeing a bright, pleased smile, Blaine looks pale and slightly sick.

"You're… umm… you're welcome," Blaine says uneasily.

If Other Nick notices his odd reaction, he doesn't show it. The mousey young man cheerfully turns and takes his previous place in their walking order. "…I'm just glad that we only had to fight the baby turtles."

Kurt's eyes bulge, Blaine pales even further, and the entire squad stops to indulge in a collective "WHAT?"

"Yeah," Other Nick says. "Did you see the cage they were in? It was way bigger than it needed to be to fit all of them. Taller, too."

"Now that you mention it..." Wes says. "I do seem to remember reading something about them being incredibly long-lived. They can survive for hundreds of years… and they don't stop growing."

Blaine gulps. "If those were the babies, then where is the mother?"

Kurt exhales. "I don't know, and I hope we never find out..."

Meanwhile, several miles away at a Fire Nation fortress...

Alfonse nervously approaches the lair of the beast, riding on the biggest feed trough he could find. Yes, riding. It takes two dragon moose to pull it, and even they seem to be having a little trouble. The meal is for a very special guest—not the Fire Lord herself (she'd never settle for such low-quality meat) but the monstrosity she rode in on, the thing that left footprints large and deep enough to be classified as potholes. The thing they almost had to widen the gate for. They couldn't put it in the stables. Even if they had cleared out every other animal and taken the roof off, this prehistoric terror wouldn't have fit. They had to put it in the tank hangar. And that's AFTER clearing out all the tanks.
So Alfonse approaches the hangar with dread, having no idea how he is actually supposed to feed this thing. He doesn't even know how he'll get close to it without passing out.

A trembling settles in his bones as he eyes the massive metal building. The doors are closed, but he can practically feel what's breathing beyond. It waits for him. Maybe it's really hungry. Maybe it's so hungry that it intends to eat the first thing it sees. Maybe when he goes to open the door, and the last thing he sees are teeth large enough to pass for swords.

The moose-pulled trough reaches the door. Alfonse dismounts and attempts to take a deep, calming breath.

The door shudders. There is a groan from behind it. Oh shit. Oh shit! It knows! It knows he's here!

"Fuck this!" he cries. Alfonse turns and bolts, leaving the trough in his dust as he scrambles to get as far from this monster as possible. His eyes are fixed upon the hangar to make sure the monster doesn't burst through the door after him, so he doesn't notice the Fire Lord's tiny assistant until she calmly body-checks his legs right out from under him, sending ass-over-end into a heap on the ground.

"Going somewhere?" she asks, hands on hips, suspicion in her eye.

"Ummm," he stammers. "I-I-I was just... I didn't... please don't..."

Becky looks at the trough parked in front of the hangar. "You forgot to open the door, doofus!" she scolds.

"You-you-you—that's... we... I..." Alfonse continues to sputter.

"You're bad at talking," Becky says, almost pityingly. "That's okay. I know how it feels. But you can't leave a job half-finished! Come on..."

She grabs him by the hand, her grip unexpectedly bone-crunching, and drags him over to the mechanism at the side of the door. "Go on!" she says. "Finish up, and you can go."

With a deep gulp, and unsteady hands, he grabs the lever, closes his eyes and pulls it with all his might. Gears and chains begin to churn and turn, metal grinding against metal, steam shooting from pipes as the massive door rises up. He feels nauseous with dread, yet he can't tear his eyes from the scene in front of him. The deep, dark shadows hiding the titan are as a vortex, pulling his eyes and his thoughts into the blackness, refusing to let him go.

Becky pulls out a tiny handbell and rings it. "Bao Za!" she says. "Dinner!"

A rumble.

And several panicked moos.

"Oh no!" Alfonse audibly realizes. "I forgot to uncouple the moose!"

The poor things buck and moo with trepidation, pulling vainly against their harnesses and each other, too panicked to work together. Another low, earthshaking rumble issues forth from the darkness, and finally, the moose start pulling in the right direction, running forth into the night, taking the cart with them. Alfonse wants to cheer. Yes! Run! You're almost to safety! You're almost—

CHOMP.
A spring-loaded shadow shoots from the darkness like a train with teeth. An horrific crunch, and the merest glimpse of horns, spines, and deep red eyes.

And then it is gone… along with any trace of the trough or the dragon moose that pulled it.

"There," Becky says, pulling the lever again. "Was that so bad?"

Alfonse is no longer capable of forming words. His eyes remain rooted to the darkness as the doors slowly close.

A single antler slides discarded through the dust. The door closes on it and snaps it in half with a crack that seems to echo through the night.

He doesn't realize he's fainting until he's already halfway down.

Becky rolls her eyes. "Baby."

Kurt keeps his eye on Artie as they ride back to the secret tunnel. The earthbender seems to be trying to slip beneath his notice by being quieter than usual, disappearing into the strangely ordered chaos of the Dragon Hawks.

No such luck.

As the others head into the tunnel, Kurt catches Artie by the shoulder before he can slide in after them. "You guys go on ahead and get changed," he says. "We'll catch up."

Artie grins like a man about to be executed and waves them on.

Once the Hawks are gone, Kurt gets down on one knee, looking Artie in the eye.

"Care to explain what happened tonight?" he asks, making sure Artie knows it is not a request.

"I…" Artie says. He sighs, and looks away. "I fell asleep."

"You what?" Kurt asks, incredulous.

"I know!" Artie says. "I didn't mean to, it's just—"

Kurt grabs his chin and angles the earthbender's face so the light catches it better. The moonlight makes even starker the contrast between his unusually pale skin and the deep, dark circles beneath his eyes.

"You're not sleeping," Kurt says.

"I sleep," Artie says. "…some."

"How much?" Kurt asks. "How many hours did you sleep last night?"

Artie purses his lips, taking several moments to reply. "…two," he finally admits.

Kurt gapes at him. "That's awful! Artie, do you have any idea what lack of sleep can do to someone? Are you insane?"

"Maybe," Artie mutters.

If he thought Kurt wouldn't catch that, he was wrong. "Excuse me?"
Artie shakes his head. "It's nothing. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Kurt sits down with him. "Why aren't you sleeping?" he asks.

The earthbender clenches his jaw. "It doesn't matter," he says.

"Yes, it does," Kurt says. "Are you having nightmares? What about?"

"No. Nothing," Artie says. He gives his head a quick shake. "Kurt, don't worry about it. I'll handle it. It will never, ever happen again. I promise."

He tries to slide around Kurt, but the Avatar isn't having it. Not tonight. He grabs Artie by the shoulder. "No," he says.

Artie looks at him, confused and slightly fearful.

"I'm sorry," Kurt says, "but that's not good enough anymore."

Artie blinks. "What... what do you mean? I don't..."

"I give you a lot of leeway, Artie," Kurt says. "I let you do things that I normally wouldn't let anyone do. You hide things, you go your own way, you keep more secrets than I can count. I did all that because, for whatever reason, I trusted you. Tonight, you broke that. Someone could've died, Artie. We all could've died. We trusted our lives to you and you blew it."

"I screwed up!" Artie pleads. "I admit it. I'm sorry."

"I know you are," Kurt says. "And that's why you're going to re-earn my trust by telling me everything that you have been hiding from me. Everything. Right now."

Artie is completely gobsmacked. "What? Kurt... dude, I can't..."

"You can," Kurt calmly insists. "And you will."

And this is where it all starts to shift.

A gleam of challenge appears in Artie's eye. "...and what if I don't?" he asks.

Kurt squints at him. "Artie, I'm trying to help you."

"What if I don't need your help?" Artie asks. "What if I refuse? What will you do?"

He can't believe this. Artie is actually calling his bluff. Tonight, of all nights, Artie thinks Kurt is bullshitting him. It is not so. And now is the time for Kurt to prove that, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Kurt looks at Artie for a long moment. "I let you get away with a lot," he says, "because I trusted you. You broke that trust, and you don't even want to earn it back?"

"Everybody screws up," Artie says. "I'm sorry. That should be good enough."

"Well, it isn't!" Kurt says. "I'm sorry, but I barely even know who you are! You lie, you steal, you do whatever you want."

"When have I ever been disloyal to you?" Artie asks. "When?"
"You haven't!" Kurt says.

"Exactly!" Artie shouts. "So why don't you trust me? How can this one little screw up be enough to throw us back to square one?"

"Because you still don't trust me!" Kurt says, frustrated.

Artie seems slightly shocked.

"Trust is a two-way street, Artie," Kurt says. "If after all this time, you still can't trust me with your secrets, why should I trust you?"

Artie says nothing.

"I'm trying to help you," Kurt says. "But I can't help you if you don't—"

"You can't help me either way," Artie says, sounding very, very tired. "Just drop it, Kurt."

"I can't," Kurt says. "Not tonight. I need you to talk to me, Artie."

"...and if I don't?" Artie says, challenging him again.

Kurt rises to the challenge. If Artie wants to call his bluff... then he is in for a surprise. The Avatar stares at him, unflinching. "I can't travel with someone I don't trust," he says simply.

The blow hits home. It hits perhaps too hard. Artie flinches like he was just bitchslapped. "So that's it?" he asks, shaking his head. "After everything we've been through, this is where you draw the line?"

"Artie," Kurt starts.

The earthbender silences him with a hand. "Naw, it's cool. I see how it is. That's your go-to threat, isn't it? Somebody pisses you off enough, they get kicked out of the club."

Kurt's eyes widen. "Okay, I know you did not just—"

"Oh, yeah," Artie says casually. "I went there. What did you think, Kurt? You think I'm gonna get down on my knees and beg you to let me stay, like Finn did?" He laughs. "Hate to break it to you, but my knees don't work, and I don't beg."

"This isn't you," Kurt says, trying to stay calm. "This is sleep deprivation talking."

"Think whatever you want," Artie says. "I see how it is now. You don't care about me. You kept me around because I was useful. Now that you think I'm losing that, you want to dump me like a sack of wet garbage."

"That's not true!" Kurt insists.

"Whatever," Artie barks, cocking his head back in challenge. "I don't need you. I don't need anyone. I've survived on my own before, and I can do it again. You don't want me around?" He raises his hands. "I'm gone."

Artie slams two fists into the dirt, kicking up a cloud of dust that momentarily blinds Kurt to his surroundings. The Avatar airbends it out of the way fairly quickly, but by the time it's gone, so is the one who made it.
"Artie!" Kurt calls. "Get back here!"

No answer.

"Come back, right now!" he calls.

Nothing.

"Shit!" he curses, stomping the earth.

"Kurt?" a voice calls from the tunnel. "Is everything alright out there? You guys are taking a while."

The Avatar takes a deep, calming breath, and tries to think about this rationally. Artie is just mad. That's it. He's tired and angry and not thinking straight. Tomorrow, he'll come back, and they'll both apologize and everything will be just like it was before Kurt somehow accidentally kicked him out of the group.

"Coming!" Kurt says, walking into the tunnel. He takes a second to look at the moonlight nightscape behind him, scanning for any signs of his friend. He isn't there, but Kurt won't lose hope. There's no need to panic.

Artie will come back.

He has to.

By the time Kurt actually makes it back to the basement, the Hawks are back in their normal attire. Blaine lingers just off to the side of the group, still looking pale and uncertain. The others are pouring over the papers laid out on the table.

"Ah, Avatar," Thad says. "So good of you to join us."

Kurt marches over to the table without a word.

"Where's Artie?" Blaine asks, because of course Blaine is going to notice someone is missing.

"He had something to do," Kurt says evasively. "We don't need to wait for him. He'll be back." It's not a lie if Kurt believes it.

"That's a shame," Thad says. "I was hoping we could chat about his place in the operation this evening."

"Hey," Kurt says. "You focus on your people, and let me worry about mine."

Thad just gives him a glare.

Blaine looks uncertain, but he presses forward anyway. "Alright, guys. Tell him what we've got so far."

"Mostly a bunch of Sun Warrior crap," Jeff says. "The ink's a little runny on a lot of things, but what we can read is just boring history crap—"

"History is not boring!" Wes says.

"—that doesn't really help us," Jeff finishes.
Nick steps forward, pointing to a piece of paper. "There is one thing, though…"

The paper in the middle of the table is slightly larger than the others. The ink isn't as runny, and even from a distance, Kurt can tell it's a drawn copy of the back of the Sun Warrior tablet they currently possess. There are people in poses around the edges, but in the middle, where there would normally be indecipherable glyphs, there are actual, readable words.

"A translation," Kurt says.

"Part of one, anyway," Other Nick says.

"Can we read it?" Blaine asks. "What's it say?"

"It's a poem… or a story, or something," Other Nick says. He clears his throat, and starts to read. "For all whom the light touches, that they may know and remember.

Zodai the Fourth, great king,
We sing of your madness, of your glory.
You who brought the dance to us,
The great power, the terrible power…
[Illegible lines]
You prayed to the Fire Gods,
With fever in your blood.

"Behold!" said you. "The armies of sand and stone.
In the shadow [illegible words], they sleep,
And so earn the ire of the Gods.
[More illegible lines]

Through our bodies, through our fire.
We danced, tireless in frenzy,
Strong in zeal, infinite in passion.
Hundreds upon hundreds,
Hours upon hours.
Our movements were the words of the world,
And she answered our call.

Behold!
The ocean breathes.
The earth [illegible].
[Illegible line.]
[Illegible] roars."

There is a long pause.

"Well, that's incredibly cryptic and unhelpful," Kurt sighs, throwing up his arms.

"Great!" David says. "So we went through that entire fiasco for nothing."

Kurt stares at him flatly. "If you really think that was a fiasco, then you haven't actually seen one yet."

"Wait," Blaine says, stepping forward. "Just because we don't get it right away doesn't mean there's nothing to get. We need to think about this. Look," he says, pointing to the piece of paper. "Those drawings are exactly like the ones on the back of the carving. That's what the poem is talking
about. It's a *dance*.

"What would Sue Sylvester want with a dance?" Thad asks.

Kurt shakes his head. "I don't know. Clearly the dance does something. 'Words of the world…' that sounds like bending to me."

"Maybe it's some kind of battle dance," Nick says. "Bust a move, get fired up, bust some heads."

"Maybe," Blaine says. "Maybe she…"

"What?" Kurt asks.

Blaine turns to him with wide eyes. "This is what she's teaching to the Navy!" he says. "She's giving mandatory dance lessons to the entire Royal Navy. This *has* to be the reason."

"Jeff," Wes says. "Your father is in the Navy. Do you know anything about this?"

Jeff shakes his head. "Until you popped up, we didn't even know the Fire Lord was toast."

Blaine flinches slightly.

"Oh!" Jeff says. "Shit, dude, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like…"

Blaine waves him off. "It's okay."

"Maybe we could try the dance ourselves?" Nick suggests.

"We don't know what it does," Wes says. "It could be incredibly dangerous."

"I don't think it'd work if we tries it," Kurt says, again pointing to the paper. "Hundreds upon hundreds, hours upon hours. That sounds like a lot of people, dancing for a long time."

"This is so frustrating!" Blaine says. "What is she up to? What does any of this have to do with the plague survivors?"

"Wait, who said anything about the plague?" Thad says.

"I intercepted a letter on the way to the Fire Lord," Blaine says. "It talked about both the dance and the plague survivors. But I have no idea how they might be connected."

"The plague…" Wes says. "Avatar, you are fighting the plague, correct?"

"As much as I can," Kurt says. "It's not easy."

"Do you mind if I ask why?" Wes asks. "I thought the Avatar was in favor of all things natural. Diseases and outbreaks happen all the time. They are part of nature. Why is this one different?"

Kurt pauses for a second. "That's pretty much it," he says. "You hit the nail on the head. This plague isn't natural."

Wes squints at him. "What do you mean?"

Kurt takes a breath. "According to my spirit sources," he says. "Someone *made* it."

Dead silence. It takes a second or two to process that sort of thing.
"How is that possible? Diseases are living things, right?" David asks.

Kurt nods. "They are."

Another pause, as everyone absorbs the implication of this.

"So someone created life?" David asks.

"Not… created," Kurt clarifies. "It's more like they… altered, or manipulated it."

"Like bending?" Other Nick suggests.

"Exactly!" Kurt says.

"So there is someone out there," Wes says, "who can bend life."

"I think so," Kurt says. "Unfortunately, I have absolutely no clue who, what, or where he, she, or it is."

"Well…" Thad says uneasily. "Best of luck to you in your search. Please don't be offended if I deign not to participate. I would rather like my life to remain unbent, thank you very much."

"Thanks for the well-wishes," Kurt deadpans.

"That's so twisted…" Nick says, slightly dumbstruck.

"There are a lot of twisted things in the world," Kurt says. "Sue Sylvester, for one. Speaking of…"

"We still don't know what to do about her," Blaine says. "Or what she's up to."

"At the moment, I think finding Sam is our best option," Kurt says. "We should focus our efforts on that. He'll be able to translate the rest and tell us what, if anything, it all means."

"There might be something else we could do," Wes says helpfully. "If what Mr. Abrams told us is true, there is about to be a mass migration of Naval Soldiers to Zedong. They'll almost certainly have no choice but to pass by here. If the Navy is being taught the dance, perhaps they'll be able to shed some light on its purpose."

"Are you just going to go up and ask them?" Kurt asks. "That might look suspicious."

"You forget," David says. "We have official military armor. We'll fit in no problem."

"I can show you guys how Navy dudes act," Jeff says. "We'll be the stealthiest stealthers who ever stealthed."

"Wait," Blaine says. "Didn't Quinn say impersonating a soldier is a capital crime now?"

Jeff shrugs. "Eh, don't worry about it. We'll be fine."

Blaine swallows. "I'd… uh… really rather not commit to anything." He clears his throat. "At least until we know all our options. Let's rendezvous with the others and see if they came up with anything, shall we?"

"Good idea, Blaine," Wes says. "Other Nick, pack all of this stuff up…"

The Hawks gather the slightly smudgy papers and stuff them back into Other Nick's pack. Once
they're all in their armor, they start to head out.

Blaine starts to follow them, but Wes pushes him back. "We should leave at different times," he says. "We don't want to draw too much attention to ourselves. You and Avatar Kurt remain here for a bit."

Blaine nods. "Good idea, thanks."

The Hawks exit, leaving Blaine and Kurt alone together at last. Though he would love to get up to some more hanky panky, his heart just isn't in it right now. Blaine's heart doesn't seem to be in a good place, either.

"What's wrong?" Kurt asks.

Blaine looks at him silently.

"And don't say nothing," Kurt says. "We know each other too well for that line."

Blaine lets out a weak laugh, but soon falls silent again. Kurt moves over to stand next to him, silently encouraging him to speak.

After a while, he does. "Have you…" he starts. "Has anyone ever… died for you?"

Kurt's face contorts in confusion. "Where did that come from?" he can't stop himself from asking.

"I'm sorry," Blaine says, shaking his head. "It's stupid. I shouldn't—"

"No," Kurt says, catching him before he can start to disengage. "I'm sorry, I was just shocked. It's okay. To answer your question… to my knowledge, no. Why?"

Blaine sighs. "That guy… Other Nick… we really need to find something else to call him," he mutters, before jumping back on track. "He almost died tonight. One split second too late, and he would've been turtle food."

Kurt nods. "That's true, but… you saved him. He's okay."

Blaine shakes his head. "Still… he could've died. And it would've been my fault."

Kurt blinks at him. "I don't follow."

"Kurt, I am the only reason he was there. I'm the only reason any of them are here. I don't have any idea what I'm doing, and I'm… I'm putting their lives at risk, and—"

"Okay, whoa, whoa," Kurt says. "Stop right there, okay? Just stop. You're wrong. All of those people are here of their own free will. You're not making them do anything. They're here because they believe in you and want to help you. If they put their lives at risk, it's because they choose to."

"I… understand that… sort of," Blaine says. "But that's not what it feels like. I just… I don't want anyone else to die because of me."

"Anyone else?" Kurt asks. "Who are you—" The answer practically slaps him across the face. "Your father. You still blame yourself for that, don't you?"

"No," Blaine says. A pause. "Yes." Another pause. "I don't know," he sighs. "I don't know how I feel. This is a lot to deal with."
Kurt nods. "You're right. It is a lot. And you're tired, and not thinking straight—" (Like someone else you talked to tonight) "—so maybe you should sleep on it. Don't try to wrestle with everything at once, okay?"

Blaine takes a deep breath and sighs. "Okay."

"Come on," Kurt says, holding out his hand. Blaine takes it with a faint smile, and they begin to walk

"Let's go see what our merry bunch of misfits have been up to."

The city they wander through is all atwitter about something, even this late at night. As the two of them get closer to the Inn, it becomes fairly clear what they are talking about.

A battle was fought here. There are scorch marks on the ground, and on several buildings. There is mud where mud should not be (far from a water source) and there are guards everywhere helping clean up the mess.

Without even caring who sees, Kurt breaks into a full run, and Blaine follows right along, both of them heading to the Inn in a mad dash to confirm their friends' safety. In the doors, down the hall, up the stairs, to the room, open the door, and…

Finn is reclined on the bed, both his shirt and his bandages removed as Rachel gently dabs what appear to be fresh burns on his injured shoulder. She coos and makes oddly soothing baby noises as she ministers to him. A closer look reveals several black burn marks on Rachel's clothes, as well.

On the other side of the room, a similarly scorched Mercedes reclines on the bed, a swollen foot elevated on a cushion. The Dragon Hawks that were left in town with them are all gathered around her, catering to her every whim. She beckons, and they bring her an ice cold glass of… pink stuff. "Is it just me, or is it hot in here?" she asks. The Hawks eagerly scramble around for something to fan her with.

Kurt steps into the room, making himself known at last. Every eye turns to him, and he has just one thing to say.

"What the fuck happened here?"

A/N: Action! Intrigue! Mystery! Exclamation marks! All these and more are in your future, as we find out what happened on the night of the full moon from the perspective of Finn, Rachel, and Mercedes. Who attacked them, and why, and how did they fight them off? Find out in the next chapter, Bad Moon Rising!

As a side note: I finally mentioned the villain of the series, and we're only 59 chapters in! XD The Lifebender is the overarching antagonist of the series. His/her/its identity is a secret, at the moment—figuring out who/what it is will be one of the central goals of Book 3. Intrigued? Is such a being a suitably frightening foe for our heroes? ;}
Bad Moon Rising

Chapter Notes

Media: Fic
Title: Solar Winds (Avatar: The Last Airbender Fusion, 60/?)
Rating: PG-13 for innuendo, swearing, violence.
Spoilers: None for either series that I am aware of.
Warnings: None.
Word Count: 9600
Summary: When a usurper sets eyes on the Fire Nation throne, Avatar Kurt and friends find themselves on the run with the deposed Prince Blaine in a country gone mad. Can they escape Lady Sylvester's wrath? Or will her minions snuff them out for good? Fusion fic!

Author's Note: I tried to write this chapter as a flashback, but I just couldn't. I'm tired of flashbacks. I want to go forward, dang it! So in this chapter; the plot moves forward. Hooray! :D

CHAPTER 60 - Bad Moon Rising

"What the fuck happened here?"

The question stuns the room into silence.

Rachel leaps off of Finn as though he were a poisoned cactus. The Hawks step away from Mercedes and studiously stare at everything except anything. Mercedes glares the ceiling into submission. Finn looks exasperated, Rachel's 'everything is fine' face is being blasted with enough force to strip the finish off of wood.

After a few seconds of silence, someone speaks. It starts off simple enough.

"We were looking for Sam," Finn says.

"With zero luck," Mercedes adds.

"Because you told the dude to make the posters wrong!" Finn says, turning over to glare at her.
"No, that was you, bubble-butt!" Mercedes says, matching his glare. "His lips are not that big."

"Yes they are!" Finn says. "And you made his hair-swoosh thing go in the wrong direction."

"What the Hills does it matter what direction his hair swooshes in?" Mercedes cries, throwing her arms up. "It swooshes! That's what people will remember! What they won't remember is seeing somebody with lips like a damn frog!"

"Oh, dear La..." Kurt sighs. His fingers are already massaging his temples, trying to rub the ache away. Blaine stands silent and wide-eyed, uncertain what to do about all this conflict. He turns to the Dragon Hawks, but sadly, they are too busy trying not to be blinded by flares of tension.

"Now, now," Rachel says calmly. "I'm sure the posters as they stand now are more than adequate. You both chose features that would make Sam a very distinctive character in someone's visual memory..."

"Oh, what would you know?" Mercedes asks. "You've never even seen him!"

"You don't even like him!" Finn shouts at Mercedes.

"I like Sam just fine!" Mercedes retorts. "You're the only one here I have a problem with."

"Well, you'd think if you liked him so much, you'd remember what he looked like!" Finn retorts.

"Okay, you know what?" Kurt says. "Why don't I just take a look at the poster for myself?"

Trent nudges Luke, and the big-haired Hawk pulls out a small poster, handing it to Kurt.

"It looks like Sam!" he says.

"See?" Finn says. "I was right."

"So was I!" Mercedes says. "Anyway, we were showing the posters, asking around. Everything was just hunky dory until Finn up and decided to flounce on us for no damn reason."

"Oh, yeah," Finn scoffs. "For no reason. That's totally why I did it. That's why everybody does everything. For no reason."

Mercedes shrugs. "You said it, not me."

"What?" Finn shouts. "You totally said it, just now!"

"Whatever," Mercedes says, rolling her eyes.

Pavarotti squawks in annoyance from his cage.

The Hawks suddenly find reason to abandon their intense academic scrutiny of the walls, floorboards, and ceiling.

"Oh, look!" Trent says, walking over to the cage. "Pavarotti is hungry. I should take him out to feed!"

"You should!" Flint says. "That is a sound idea. I will accompany you."

"I'll help!" Luke follows.
"Me too!" James joins in.

"Don't leave me alone with them!" Ethan calls.

And then there were five.

Kurt's ache-rubbing intensifies. "Oh, how I wish I could join them…"

Finn attempts to pick up the narrative. "Anyway, as Mercedes was saying, I got tired of walking with the group and decided to break off. I totally did it for no reason, and not at all because she was being a mean rock-headed mudslinger and constantly talking crap about me, like, even more than usual—"

"Oh, grow up!" Mercedes says. "Not my fault you can't take a joke. You waterlogs are too damn soft."

"Mercedes," Rachel says, continuing her painful, face-straining smile of peaceability. "Don't you think that perhaps your barbs were just a bit too sharp this evening? After all, we all make mistakes, and in the spirit of friendship, it is important that we acknowledge the hurt that we cause others and seek to mend it—"

"I am not apologizing," Mercedes groans. "I didn't say a damn thing I haven't said before. I don't know why jughead over here is suddenly feeling all precious about it."

"Maybe I'm just tired of your crap," Finn says. "Ever think of that? Maybe I just… have so much crap poured into me that I can't hold anymore!"

"So basically what you're saying is you're full of crap?" Mercedes smirks.

Finn gapes at her. Kurt tries not to laugh, but Finn hears him anyway. His face scrunches up in betrayal.

"I'm sorry," Kurt says, "but you walked right into that one."

"Maybe it's the moon!" Rachel says, as if poked in the butt with a sharp stick of inspiration. "Yes, that must be it!"

"The moon is making Finn bitchy?" Mercedes asks. "I guess I could buy that."

Finn glares at her. "Yeah, sure. So the moon makes me bitchy once a month. What's your excuse for every day of the year?"

Mercedes and Rachel both gasp.

"Oh!" Blaine shouts. "Burn!"

Kurt glares at him. "Not helping."

"Stay out of this, campfire!" Mercedes says.

"Hey!" Kurt says. "Don't take it out on Blaine just because Finn actually burned you for once."

"Ha!" Finn says, pumping his good arm.

"Anyway!" Rachel chimes in. "We were asking around for Sam when—for reasons that shall diplomatically be omitted from this telling—Finn split off from the group and went to the edge of
"town to soak in the river where no one could see him healing."

"My shoulder was really sore," Finn says. "Because someone tripped me with earthbending."

"Oh, Hills no," Mercedes says. "You are not pinning this on me. That was your own clumsy-ass fault."

"Yeah, right," Finn scoffs.

"Waterboy, if I had actually tripped you?" Mercedes says. "I would own that shit. I would flaunt it. Believe that!"

"Anyway!" Rachel squeaks, briefly rising on her toes with the force of the assertion. "Finn went to soak in the river at the edge of town, and I, being a concerned friend, followed to see if he was alright."

"Oh yeah," Finn says. "Thanks, by the way. I didn't have a chance to say it before, but I really appreciate you coming. It's nice to have a girl on the team who doesn't have a heart made out of rocks and, like, actually cares when people get hurt."

"Oh please," Mercedes scoffs. "I care when you get hurt. It's always good for a laugh, and laughter is a precious natural resource."

Blaine, it seems, has finally had enough of the fighting. "Now, come on, guys," he says, stepping forward.

"Don't," Kurt warns, but it's too late.

"There is no reason for all of this sniping and back-biting," Blaine implores. "We're all in this together. We should be able to put aside our differences and—"

"I'm not the one with a problem!" Finn says. "She's the one who won't drop it!"

"Well, somebody has to hold on to things around here," Mercedes says. "Seeing as you drop everything else!"

"I am not that clumsy!" Finn cries.

"Guys, please!" Blaine says. "Stop it!"

"Don't tell me what to do!" Mercedes shouts. "You ain't my prince!"

"Yeah, what are you, like, the King of Arguments?" Finn says. "I'm just defending myself!"

"You call that passive-aggressive bullcrap a defense?" Mercedes says. "Bender please."

"What would you know about defense?" Finn asks. "You just smash and destroy everything that bothers you!"

"If I did that, I would've smashed you the first time I saw you!" Mercedes shouts.

"You tried!" Finn counters.

"Guys!" Blaine shouts.

"Shut up, Blaine!" Finn and Mercedes shout in unison.
The cowed prince promptly shrinks back behind Kurt as Mercedes and Finn start shouting to, for, over and around each other. "Why are they doing this?" he asks. "They weren't like this before..."

Kurt sighs. "Think of it like a geyser. Water stuck beneath the earth... most of the time, it's fine, but every so often, the pressure rises and it just has to blow. Artie is usually pretty good at defusing these situations, but Artie... Has left the group. "...isn't here right now."

Any and all forms of coherent discussion have given way to chaos—both Finn and Mercedes are shouting, flinging their limbs futilely at each other to punctuate their anger. Rachel, seeing no other options, proceeds to sway back and forth and attempt to calm them by singing.

It doesn't work.

"What do we do?" Blaine says.

With an air of graceful authority, Kurt bends the water out of his pouch, brings it and front of him and chills it until little bits of frost are floating around in the sludge. Then he thrusts his hands out and sprays the solution all over everyone in the room, save Blaine and himself.

The chill shocks their systems so thoroughly that they can't even gasp in outrage.

"There we go!" Kurt says. "Much better. Now, Finn, Mercedes, both of you be quiet."

"You can't—" Finn starts

"I was just—" Mercedes begins.

"Don't make me slushy you again," Kurt finishes.

"B-b-but why did you spray me?" Rachel shivers.

"...you were in the way," Kurt says, waving her off. "Now... Rachel, seeing as you are the only remotely neutral party in this room, please give me a quick overview of the rest of the story. A quick one."

Rachel nods dutifully, taking a deep breath and pausing to assemble the facts in her mind. "Finn was soaking in the river and we were talking and it was really nice and quiet and peaceful when suddenly Quinn and her cronies came out of nowhere and attacked us and there was lots of fire and screaming and flipping and exploding and Finn was surprisingly competent even with one arm and I screamed for help and Mercedes came and so did the Dragon Hawks but Mercedes got knocked into a building by Puck and sprained her ankle and Santana tried to strangle me and Quinn burned Finn in the same shoulder but none of it really mattered in the end because the guards came and arrested them."

Kurt shakes his head, scrunching his face as his mind attempts to make sense of Rachel's word-vomit. "Wait... you said Quinn and her cronies are here?"

"They're in jail, dude," Finn says. "The guards arrested them."

"Why?" Blaine asks. "Quinn is the Fire Lord's chief enforcer. Why would they arrest her?"

"She couldn't prove who she was," Mercedes says with a shrug. "They were stuck in the jungle for two days, all dirty and tore up and freaknasty. When they saw Finn, they couldn't even wait to change clothes before they started whooping that ass."
"They didn't 'whoop my ass,'" Finn says. "I was awesome. Kurt, I was actually awesome!" he says excitedly. "I pulled them into the river and spat them out inside the city limits! And I was all defending and attacking and stuff, and with one arm, dude! One arm!"

Kurt finds that a little far-fetched, but he tries not to let it show. "That's… great, Finn," he says. "But you should be more careful."

"Don't worry, dude," Finn says. "Nobody saw me bending. It was cool."

"When the guards heard my screaming and came running to investigate, all they saw were a bunch of filthy, crazy, snarling lunatics attacking innocent, helpless Fire Nation citizens," Rachel says.

"Puck wound up on the bottom of a dogpile," Mercedes says with a grin.

"And Santana got sacked. Like, worse than I ever did in my worst game of snowball. It was brutal," Finn grins.

"With no proof of identity, the guards could judge them on nothing but appearances. Thus, they were dragged—kicking and screaming, in Quinn's case—to jail," Rachel continues.

"The Hawks helped us get back here," Finn says. "Then they totally ignored me in favor of crowding around Mercedes because she's super scary and bossy and they all kind of want to get with her because they're super-desperate."

"Take that back!" Mercedes says. "Desperation has got nothing to do with it."

"Well, I don't think they're attracted to your super soft, sparkly personality!" Finn retorts.

And… more chaos. Great.

As the two continue to bicker and snipe at each other, Kurt emits a longsuffering sigh, and smiles mirthlessly. "Rachel, honey," he says. "Will you do me a favor and take off your socks?"

Rachel hops on each of her feet in turn as she removes her socks, her head tilted in befuddlement.

"Now, please give one to Finn, and one to Mercedes," Kurt says, a calm smile on his face.

As Mercedes and Finn continue to argue with each other, Rachel calmly walks over to each bed and hands them one of her socks. The two take them without even realizing what they are, and continue to bicker.

"Mercedes, Finn," Kurt says with a smile

The two turn to look at him.

And just like that, the smile morphs into a take-no-shit expression of merciless stone. "Put a freakin' sock in it! We have other things to worry about."

Finn looks chastised. Mercedes just huffs in annoyance and turns towards the wall.

"So they're in town?" Blaine asks. "Like, right now?"

"Again, dude, in jail. Not free to walk around and terrorize us," Finn says.

"That's not really all that comforting," Blaine says.
"I'm guessing any imprisonment for them is a temporary setback, at best," Kurt says. "And I'd rather not find out how temporary. You guys said no one has seen Sam?"

"Not around here," Mercedes says.

"Alright," Kurt says. "Then we need to leave, immediately…" Except we can't, because Artie is still around here somewhere and if we leave now, we'll leave him behind. Damn it! "…after a good night's rest," Kurt corrects.

Blaine quirks an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Well… a good night's rest elsewhere," Kurt corrects his correction. "We shouldn't leave town, but we should leave… this inn!" he says. "Yes. If people start looking for us, I'm guessing the inns are the first places they'll check. We'll go hide out in the house we've been using."

"Awww, dude," Finn whines. "Do we have to stay in another creepy empty place?"

"I know," Kurt says. "It's weird. If it makes you feel better, we'll all sleep in the basement. We just… we can't leave town quite yet. It's late, we're all tired. Let's just… go get some rest and consider our options in the morning. Sound good? Great!"

He is out of the room before they even have a chance to reply, leaving them to exchange baffled glances in his wake.

As they exit the inn, Rachel and Blaine act as Mercedes's human crutches, leaving Kurt to walk with Finn, who looks surprisingly stable for someone recovering from being run through with fire.

Finn, despite his injury and his renewed conflict with Mercedes, seems bouncier and happier than ever. And Kurt is pretty sure it's more than just the moon that's energizing him.

"So," Kurt says. "I guess all our waterbending practices have paid off, huh? You're actually getting better."

"Well," Finn says, a little uneasy. "It wasn't that. I mean, it wasn't all that. I kind of… had some help from above, you know?"

"Ah," Kurt says with a nod. "Full moon. Right."

Finn cocks his head in confusion. "What? No, I mean… yes, but not just that, either."

Kurt shakes his head. "Then I don't know what you're talking about."

Taking a quick glance to see if anyone is looking, Finn reaches into his shirt. He pulls out a small, round stone, its surface polished to near-mirror sheen. It shines translucent blue in the moonlight. The color is very distinctive. Kurt would recognize it anywhere.

"Is that a moonstone?" Kurt asks.

Finn nods. "I found it last night when I was wandering around the city—"

"When you were what?" Kurt barks.

Finn winces. "Dude, you know I can't sleep on full moon nights."

"That doesn't mean you should just go wandering around by yourself!" Kurt hisses. "Especially
when there are crazy people stalking us and you have a serious injury! What is wrong with you?"

Finn grimaces. "Sorry, dude. I couldn't just sit there. Besides, it all worked out! I found this last
night, and thought it would be a cool offering to give to Tui, since I sort of promised her I'd give
her something nice. So I went and said a little prayer and dropped it in the river, and…" He breaks
into an excited grin. "It came back out!"

Kurt gives him a powerful fish-eye. "Really?"

Finn nods. "Yup. Beamed me right in the back of the head as I was walking away. Before I dropped
it in, I was kind of… you know… praying a little. I told Tui about my bending and how much I
sucked and asked her for help—"

"And you feel weird when Artie talks to the ground," Kurt mutters.

"—and this was how she answered!" Finn finishes, "I swear it's like I got better at waterbending
overnight. I mean, I'm still not you good, but I'm not a total klutz anymore!"

"What, because of the rock?" Kurt asks.

"I bet she charged it with moon juice or something," Finn says excitedly. "Here, feel it." Before he
can protest, Finn has grabbed his hand and pushed the rock against his palm. "Can't you feel its
awesomely powerful awesomeness?"

Kurt rubs the rock against his skin. "It feels… like a rock," he shrugs.

"Huh," Finn says, pocketing the rock. "Well, I feel its power. Maybe it's just for people who need
help. It's like… like… waterbending training wheels."

Kurt shakes his head. "Finn, I really don't think…"

He trails off. He just can't finish that sentence.

Finn is practically giddy with excitement. If he really believes that a moonstone (which, FYI, do
not come from the moon, by the way) boosts his waterbending powers, who is Kurt to tell him no?

…I really don't think you should let the stone do all the work," he says. "You'll need to practice
with it to really harness its power."

"Aw, dude, I totally will," Finn promises. "No way I'm gonna waste an opportunity like this."

Kurt gives him a pleased smile and turns back to the road ahead, only to see a helmeted soldier
walking beside him out of the corner of his eye.

"Word to the wise," the soldier says. "You might want to cut down on discussing other forms of
bending in public. People might get suspicious."

The guard pulls up his facemask, revealing David beneath the uniform.

"I'll take it into consideration," Kurt says. "Where have you guys been?"

"The other guards—by which I mean the actual guards—roped us into helping with the clean-up.
What'd we miss?" David asks.

"Long story short," Kurt says, "Quinn and her happy clappy crew tracked us here and went apeshit.
Their lack of self-awareness got them arrested, so we're safe for the moment, but we need to leave
soon."

"Yikes," David says. "No luck finding… ummm… what's-his-face?"

"Oh, here it is!" Finn says cheerfully whipping out the poster.

"No, Finn," Kurt corrects. "It's just an expression. He doesn't actually need to see his face—"

"Huh," David says, tilting the poster and his head at opposite angles. "He seems familiar…"

Kurt can only gape. "You are kidding. You have to be kidding me."

"Wesley!" David shouts. Seconds pass, and the other boy materializes next to them.

"Yes?" Wes asks.

"Is it just me, or is that…?" David asks, holding up the poster.

Wes's eyes widen in degrees. "That looks almost like that Norman fellow we picked up."

"The resemblance is uncanny," David says. "Though… Norman's mouth was not quite that big."

"Indeed," Wes agrees. "And his hair seems to be going in the wrong direction."

Kurt just heaves a sigh and snatches the poster from David's hands. "I am surprised, and yet, I am not surprised in the least."

Wes quirks an eyebrow at him. "What do you—"

"You're coming with us," Kurt orders. "And telling us everything you know about 'Norman.'"

Once they are all properly situated in the abandoned house's kitchen, Kurt starts the interrogation anew.

"What exactly happened with you and 'Norman?" he asks.

Wes begins. "Well…"

The woods are pitch-black dark, and Speedy moves so quickly that neither of them has any time for to bend up some light. The swift and speedy mount easily navigates around all obstacles, circumventing them easily even in the dense darkness of the starless night. Suddenly, it veers off course, and—

"No!" Kurt shouts, causing Wes's carefully constructed narrative to deflate like an overcooked soufflé. "No more long stories! The abridged version, if you please!"

"Well," Wes says, somewhat testily, "David, it appears I am a little too long-winded for the Avatar's liking. Give him the short of things, if you would."

"If you insist," David says, stepping forward. "Basically, our lizard smelled something with his tongue. It turned out to be a person. He said his name was Norman, and that he was lost, so we gave him a ride to the nearest village."

"Blond hair? Big lips?" Mercedes asks.
"Indeed," Wes says.

"Did he have a giant backpack?" Blaine asks.

"With lots of cool stuff on it?" Finn adds.

"No," David says. "He carried nothing but the clothes on his back."

"Huh," Finn says. "That's weird…"

"We took him to the nearest village, and he bade us farewell. That's the extent of our encounter," Wes shrugs.

"And this was about two weeks ago?" Mercedes asks.

"Indeed," David says.

"Great," Kurt says. "So he's probably long gone by now…"

"Do you know where he might have gone?" Blaine asks.

"He did ask us something," David says. "He wanted to know the fastest way out of the country."

"We told him there was very little porting being done, of the in or ex variety, due to the quarantine and blockade," Wes says. "But… what little there is can be found in Zedong."

Kurt finds himself shocked—mostly because this seems entirely too convenient. "All roads lead to Zedong," he says, pleased. "Well, I guess that settles it. We'll head to Zedong, sniff out Sam, and get this whole mess sorted out."

"It might not be that simple," David says. "Zedong is enormous. It's one of the largest cities in the Fire Nation—actually quite a bit larger than the Capital."

"Crowded as well," Wes says. "It's heavily industrialized. Plenty of opportunities—legal and otherwise—for those who are looking for them. Finding him there will be like searching for a needle in a haystack."

"Or a large pile of very similar needles," David finishes.

"We can cross that bridge when we come to it," Kurt says. "Quinn and her cronies probably won't stay in prison for long. We have to leave leave tomorrow morning."

"'We' as in everybody?" Wes asks.

"I don't see why you guys wouldn't come with us," Blaine says.

"There are an awful lot of us," David says. "It might look suspicious. Plus, I think we might be put to better use elsewhere…"

"Are you talking about your whole 'infiltrate the Navy' plan? I told you, I don't like that. If you guys get caught…" Blaine trails off.

"Blaine, please," Wes says. "It's a risk, yes, but so is everything we do these days. Nothing worth having is won without risk."

"I know that," Blaine says. "I'm fine with taking risks. I just… I'm not the one taking the risk here,
"Am I? It's you guys. All of you."

"We'll be fine," David says. "We have Jeff on our side. You wouldn't know it from looking at him… or talking to him… or interacting with him on any level, really… but he did have a military upbringing. He'll keep us on our toes."

Blaine takes a second to take this in. "…okay," he says quietly. "Just… be careful, alright? I just got you guys back. I don't want to lose you again."

Wes smiles. "We will exercise utmost caution, I assure you."

"Wait, wait, hold up," Mercedes says. "I don't mean to poke holes in your plan or anything, but exactly how do you expect us to get around? Unless y'all got a palanquin hidden around here somewhere and feel like carrying me, I ain't much for walking at the moment."

"I agree with Mercedes," Rachel says. "The thought of more endless days trudging around in the wilderness makes me want to find something very high and hurl myself off of it in despair, and I am largely uninjured. I can't imagine how it must feel for her."

Wes and David share a look. "I believe Thad is the person to consult on this front," Wes says. "We'll see if we can't get him to sponsor a little something on your behalf."

"It's worth a shot, I suppose," Kurt says. "You guys try that, and we'll rendezvous with you in the morning."

"Sounds like a plan," David says.

"Oh," Kurt adds, "and… if you see Artie, tell him I need to speak with him as soon as possible, would you?"

"Mr. Abrams is very rarely seen, but if we see him, we'll tell him," Wes agrees, and Kurt curses the earthbender's preternatural ability to camouflage himself.

Blaine's firebending buddies bid the group farewell and head out.

"What do you need to talk to Artie about?" Finn asks.


The group looks at him oddly.

Kurt stretches his arms and fake-yawns. "Well, I'm tired. Tonight has been thrilling and frustrating in equal measure. See you all in the morning!"

"Hey, don't forget!" Blaine says. "We need to wake up early and train before we head…"

And Kurt is already gone.

"…out."

"Something is up with him," Mercedes says. "But Hills preserve me if I can figure out what it is. Blaine, honey, help me with the steps would you?"

With that, the group settles down for the night.
At their training session the next morning, the first thing Blaine tells him to do is take his clothes off.

It's a promising start. Sadly, it doesn't lead to where Kurt would prefer.

"I've been going easy on you," Blaine says. "Ever since we got… together, you've lead me off track in every single training session we've had, and I've been letting you get away with it. And I think it's time we remembered who is the teacher here, and who is the student."

"Oh?" Kurt says archly. "And just how are we going to do that?"

"Simple," Blaine says. "We're going to spar. Firebending only. First burn to the torso wins, and the loser has to do whatever the winner says." The Prince takes off his top, turning away to deposit his clothes behind a large rock, giving Kurt a brief glimpse of his scar, which already seems less prominent than usual—less like he had a hole blasted in him, and more like the painter sneezed or something while drawing his back. Their training venue for the day is a decidedly less flammable outcropping of rocks, much more suited for indiscriminate fire-tossing.

"Sounds delightful," Kurt says, shrugging out of his shirt so that both of them are wearing nothing besides light pants. "I'm already thinking of my first command as King for a Day."

"Careful," Blaine says. "Crowns are heavier than they look…"

Kurt hates it when other people are right at his expense.

The fight starts out simple enough. Kurt has a strong grasp of the basics of firebending, and he uses them well. Fire whips through the air at his command, lashing off of his limbs, exploding from his fists and feet. Blaine is nimble and quick, dodging around most of the attacks with ease. Very rarely does he block, and even more rarely does he counterattack.

As Blaine springs up to stand on top of a boulder, Kurt pauses to catch his breath. "I thought we were supposed to be fighting!" Kurt taunts.

Blaine shrugs. "So did I," he says, crossing his arms. "Guess we were both mistaken."

Kurt growls and blasts the top of the rock with a stream of flame. The fire doesn't even lick Blaine's toes before he has jumped to another rock. Kurt chases him in a circle with continuous fireball-punches, but Blaine just merrily springs from rock to rock, sometimes even cutting little flips and somersaults just to piss Kurt off.

The Avatar gets the strangest idea that Blaine is playing with him. And Kurt does not like being played with.

So he gets a bright idea and starts blasting the tops off of rocks that Blaine hasn't even landed on yet, pre-emptively setting them on fire to take them out of the equation. He also starts tossing flaming arcs to try and catch his boyfriend in mid-air. Oddly enough, Blaine seems pleased by these developments, and starts catching the sides of the boulders, swinging himself around with his arms. His path becomes less predictable, and he starts contorting in mid-air to make himself harder to hit.

"Oh, come on!" Kurt says.

"I was just about to say that!" Blaine says with a grin. "Great minds think alike, huh?"

Kurt responds by letting loose with a full-blast firestream from each hand, trying to close them in
on Blaine like a pair of scissors. The Prince manages to slip under them, but he touches the ground in doing so.

This, it appears, is where the game ends. Blaine springs to his feet. "Good," he says. "Alright, I've seen enough. You've got a pretty strong grasp of the basics. Let's see how you handle more advanced techniques."

The Prince flicks his hands and fingers to loosen them up, and then all of a sudden, he is a flurry of motion, his hands whipping around and sending all manner of flaming shapes at Kurt in a continuous stream. Now Kurt is the one who is forced on the defensive—running to dodge as much as he can and, he is sad to say, blocking much more than Blaine did. He can only get off a couple of token counterattacks, and those are basically eaten alive by Blaine's offense.

Finally, Blaine throws an arcing fireball into the air and tries to bring it down on top of Kurt. The Avatar feints backwards as it slams into the ground and erupts into a pillar of flame. He's just getting ready to counterattack, when suddenly, the pillar of flame splits apart, and Blaine dives through it, sliding to a halt right in front of him.

That smug grin is even more infuriating up close.

It's over before it even starts. Kurt thrusts an open palm at his torso, but Blaine deflects the strike so that the fire discharges harmlessly over his shoulder. He elbows Kurt in the ribs, lights the tiniest flame on the tips of his fingers, and swings it across Kurt's ribs as he stumbles backwards.

Kurt hisses and clutches his side, and the fight's over.

"That's… you just…" Kurt stammers.

Blaine shrugs. "Won? Why yes, yes I did. Thank you for noticing."

"You're…" Kurt shakes his finger uselessly.

"Amazing? Handsome? The best in the world?" Blaine continues. "All true, all true."

There's nothing for it. "You win this round, Anderson. What would you have me do, O Prince?" Kurt snarks. "Give you a back rub? Polish your… shiny things?"

Blaine keeps right on grinning. "I want you to pay attention," he says simply. "I just gave you a vivid illustration of basic firebending's primary weakness. What was it?"

Kurt rolls his eyes. Of course Blaine would choose something so lame. He thinks for a moment. "Hmmm… it's… not nearly as useful when your opponent is two inches from your face?" Kurt ventures.

Blaine's smug grin transforms into a pleased smile. "Exactly," he says. "Firebending's bread-and-butter techniques—the ones everyone learns to use—are basically all mid-to-long range. It gets the fire away from the bender, and it forms a simple, but effective offense. Almost any firebender you meet is going to have a decent mid-range game. The simplest way to tell a true devotee to the art from a casual user is by doing what I did: closing in."

"Useful information," Kurt says. "I assume this translates into a lesson somehow?"

"It does," Blaine agrees. "Today, I'm going to teach you how a firebender takes out other firebenders. Today, I'm teaching you close-quarters firebending."
As much as he would've preferred some more interesting alone time with his boyfriend, Kurt has to admit he's a bit intrigued. Firebending, while certainly interesting and unique, has seemed a bit one-note to him so far. Learning a new facet of it—especially one that might help him take out other firebenders more effectively—is a tantalizing prospect.

Just one problem.

The slight throbbing in Kurt's side reminds him of his little burn. "Won't that be dangerous?" Kurt asks, wincing slightly.

"It will," Blaine says, marching over to his clothes on the ground. "Truth be told, both of us are probably going to get a little crispy around the edges today. It's part of the process; my father always said that pain is a harsh teacher, but her lessons are invaluable. And fortunately for you, I've thought ahead."

He returns to Kurt's side with a small bottle of ointment. He takes a tiny dollop on his fingers, and gently massages it over the angry red line in Kurt's skin. The relief is amazing—Kurt very nearly moans.

"I thought you might like that," Blaine says, continuing his rubbing. "At the end of today's session, we'll have the perfect excuse to give each other a nice long rubdown."

Kurt doesn't remember his mouth dropping open, but hey, there it is.

"See?" Blaine grins. "Best of both worlds. We make some actual progress in training, and then we get to the… distractions."

"Of all the teachers I've had in my life," Kurt says. "I have to say; you're definitely my favorite."

And so the lesson begins.

It's… interesting.

For one thing, Blaine was not lying about the burns. Kurt more or less expected as much. What he didn't expect is that most of his burns would be self-inflicted.

Turns out, there's a pretty justifiable reason that most firebenders never get much into close range training. It's hard.

Kurt hisses as he singes his knuckle. "Crap-nuggets!" he says, shaking his hand. "How do you make this look so easy?"

"Practice," Blaine says simply. "Try it again."

The second interesting thing about it is Blaine himself. He seems a much harsher taskmaster than Kurt expected.

The Avatar hops lamely on one foot, having accidentally stepped on an ember of his own making. "You know," Kurt says. "Some ointment would be really nice right about now."

"No ointment until the training session is over," Blaine says, shaking his head. "Every burn gives you more incentive to tighten your control. Push through the pain. I know you can do it."

The third interesting thing, the most interesting of all, is that once Kurt actually does push through and focus, it's like a rockslide that unexpectedly forms a staircase—suddenly, what seemed a
daunting, difficult climb up the mountain is now a casual stroll.

With a small fireball at the end of each hand, he swings the flames around, cutting streams into the air around Blaine. The Prince scrapes his foot along the ground, sending a short wave of fire towards his feet, but Kurt flips over it, combines his fireballs into one, and slams them on the ground in front of Blaine. The Prince bends the explosion around him, but Kurt turns Blaine's own trick against him, sticking a hand through the flames and raking a candle-sized flame across Blaine's chest.

"Ow!" Blaine says, rubbing the sore spot. "Watch the nipples! I like those."

Kurt smirks at him. "So do I! You're right, great minds do think alike."

At the end of the session, they both find themselves hissing and hobbling towards a nearby pool of water (a wise choice on Blaine's part). The Prince graciously decides to give Kurt the first rubdown.

"I have to admit," Blaine says, rubbing the ointment onto Kurt's shoulders. "I did not expect you to pick that up so quickly."

"Neither did I, truth be told," Kurt admits. "But once I got past the fear and the pain… it wasn't too hard."

"I think your waterbending background might actually be helping you here," Blaine says. "The fire just sort of… flowed around you. I've never seen it move like that."

"I bet there are a lot of things about fire that flow like water if you pay attention," Kurt says. "Maybe I should be teaching you."

"Who knows?" Blaine says softly. "Maybe you already are."

He wraps his arms around Kurt to pull him flush against him, and… unfortunately, this contact is a little too much, and both of them wind up hissing in pain. The rest of the rubdown is much the same, unfortunately—there is far too much cursing and sensitivity for any kind of sexiness. But Blaine's fingers are gentle and his smile is sweet.

And the cuddling session in the nice, cool water afterwards is not bad, either.

When they get back to town, Thad is waiting on them in front of the inn, standing beside a rather large, ornate chariot pulled by a team of four dragon moose. Behind him, the Dragon Hawks form a human conveyor belt, continually moving and packing things into the chariot.

"Well, I see someone here will be riding in style," Kurt says archly.

"Someone indeed," Thad says happily. "Believe it or not, this is for you."

Kurt's snark drops off of him in favor of shock. "…really?" he asks.

"Absolutely," Thad says. "Wesley and David came to me last night with your request, and I have decided to oblige you. I've planned out your entire trip! You will ride in the lap of luxury, rest in the finest inns, treated like kings and queens for the duration of your journey."

Shock transforms into skepticism. Kurt cocks his head back, staring at Thad carefully. "…okay, what's the catch?" he asks. "You've got an angle here."
"Kurt," Blaine says. "Come on. He doesn't have to have an ulterior motive."

"You're right," Kurt says. "He doesn't have to. But I'm pretty sure he does."

Thad's normally omnipresent grin dims just slightly. "No, your majesty, I am afraid he is right. I do have an ulterior motive." He sighs. "Truth be told, Mr. Hummel, I was wracked with guilt over my previous treatment of you and your friends. This is my attempt to make amends." The firebender offers his hand. "What do you say we put the past behind us and start anew?"

"See?" Blaine says. "Nothing wrong with that."

Kurt still isn't quite sure. There is something in Thad's eyes that he can't quite pinpoint. But since he can't think of a logical reason to refuse him, he has no choice but to accept the offered hand. "Very well," Kurt says. "We'll let bygones be bygones."

"Water over the bridge," Thad agrees. "Or… under the dam… something like that. It's not important. Now, if anyone asks, you are Josephus Harwood, one of the multitudinous Harwood cousins. This will serve as proof of your identity." Thad hands Kurt a small ring with emblazoned with an insignia of a dragon curled around a blazewood tree. "The Harwood family seal… or at least a mildly convincing counterfeit. Just a quick glance at it should be enough to inform those who need it of your identity."

Kurt slips the ring on his finger. It's a little loose, but it shouldn't be too hard to keep up with. "Well, thanks, I guess," Kurt says.

"Think nothing of it," Thad says, with a pleased smile. Kurt is just beginning to let his suspicion subside, when suddenly, Thad pivots to Blaine. "Now, as for you, my liege, I have a little something different in mind—"

"Wait, what?" Kurt says. "Umm, I hate to burst your bubble, but Blaine is coming with me."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Thad says lightly. "The Prince will much prefer my idea. Blaine is—"

"Blaine is right here!" Blaine interjects, waving his arm between them. "And he can decide for himself. What did you have in mind, Thad?"

"Well," Thad says. "I thought that instead of riding with Mr. Hummel—who has enjoyed your company uninterrupted for the past several weeks—"

"Hey!" Kurt says. "I'll have you know there were many interruptions…"

"—you could disguise yourself and come with the Dragon Hawks!" Thad finishes. "Think of it, sire. This would be an excellent opportunity for you to get to know your subjects and loyal servants—myself included. You could train the men to better their firebending! I could teach you to use that sword I've seen you carrying around."

"Yes, but who is going to teach me?" Kurt breaks in. "I have to master firebending, remember? Blaine is my teacher."

"Kurt has a point," Blaine says thoughtfully.

"There, see?" Kurt says haughtily. "So, thanks for the ride and everything, but I'm afraid Blaine is coming with—"

"Wes and David could teach you," Blaine interjects.
Kurt gapes at him. "But I don't want to learn from Wes and David!" he hisses. "Besides, they aren't as good as you."

"True," Blaine says. "But they are better than you, so they could probably sub for a few days."

Kurt plasters on a facesplitting smile of longsuffering patience. He turns to Thad, who smiles back with equal sincerity, ie; none. "Excuse us for a second," he says.

"By all means," Thad replies.

Kurt drags Blaine off to the side. "What is wrong with you?" Kurt hisses.

"I don't know," Blaine says. "I was unaware that anything was wrong with anything."

"Oh, you would be," Kurt says testily. "You are not supposed to just up and abandon me to hang out with your… your…"

"Soldiers?" Blaine suggests. "The people who are risking their lives for me? The people who willingly stuck their necks out and broke the law to find me and help me?"

"Yes!" Kurt agrees. "Them!"

Blaine shakes his head. "Kurt, I don't understand what the big deal is. It's not like I'm leaving forever. It's just for a few days. Wes and David are great firebenders, I'm sure they can fill in for a bit. And I really do want to do this. I need to, Kurt. This is the country I'm supposed to rule one day; these are my people. I need to get to know them."

Kurt crosses his arms and tries not to sound nearly as whiny and petulant as he feels. "I don't trust Thad," he says. "He's too… rich."

Blaine stares at him flatly. "Do I detect a hint of prejudice? Maybe even a bit of jealousy?"

"I'm being serious!" Kurt says. "I just… I feel like he's hiding something."

"My guess?" Blaine says. "He's doing this to curry favor. And honestly? It's working. He gives nice things to my boyfriend and he has good idea. What's not to like?"

Kurt rolls his eyes. "Oh, fine then. Prance off and hang out with your fire friends. Leave me with second rate teachers."

Blaine shakes his head smiling fondly. "Kurt…" he sighs. "I still don't know why you're making such a fuss about this, but if it means this much to you, then I won't go."

Kurt purses his lips. "Are you trying to use reverse psychology?" he asks. "Because if you are… then it's totally working, because now I feel like a heel."

Blaine chuckles. "I'm not trying to do anything, other than make you happy. It's only a few days. I'm sure I'll have plenty of other opportunities to get to know the Hawks." He smiles and clasps Kurt's shoulder. "Come on, we'll go tell Thad."

Kurt grits his teeth. Stupid sweet Prince of sweetness. All this sugar has blinded him. Made him delirious. That's the only reason he can think of for the next words that come out of his mouth. "… oh, fine," he sighs. "You can go."

The reaction is immediate. Blaine's face bursts into a joyous grin, and he hugs Kurt for all he's worth, actually lifting him off the ground (an impressive feat, given his height). "Thank you!" he
says into Kurt's shoulder. "Oh, Kurt, thank you so much!"

Kurt allows himself a wan smile as he hugs back. "You're welcome," he says gently. Anything that makes Blaine this happy couldn't possibly be bad...

He hopes.

It takes about an hour to finish getting everyone ready.

An hour of Thad being so insufferably smug that Kurt wants to punch his face inside out. An hour for Blaine to go inside to be fitted with piece of Wes and David's armor (since they won't be needing it at the moment). An hour of Rachel and Mercedes cooing over their shiny new chariot before going off (with generous donations from Thad) to buy some outrageously expensive clothing. An hour of Finn falling asleep against the chariot (having *again* stayed up all night, unable to resist the moon's pull). An hour of the Dragon Hawks excitedly chattering to each other in the background as they gather supplies and make preparations.

An hour of Kurt sulking outside with his arms crossed, wanting to take the whole thing back. Call him selfish, bitchy, territorial, whatever—it's all *true*. He wants Blaine, damn it, and he wants him all to himself.

The only thing that makes the whole ordeal even remotely sufferable is Blaine himself. Kurt doesn't see him much, but every time he does, Blaine is *beaming*. Every time he thinks of that smile, the frost forming on his heart melts completely, and he knows there is nothing to be done. It's not in him to crush that kind of happiness.

So he just grits his teeth and tries to focus on something else.

Something like *where the fuck is Artie, seriously, he should have popped up by now*. The earthbender is seriously starting to worry—errr, *annoy* him. With little else to do, he excuses himself at one point to search for him under the guise of taking a walk. He sees many things around the city—chickens, children, knife-wielding monkeys in chef's hats—but Artie is not among them.

This might be bad.

"Dude," Finn says as Kurt returns from his walk. "Have you seen Artie?"

Kurt tries his best to stifle the geyser of guilt erupting in his brain. "Not today," he says.

"That's weird," Finn says. "He's usually showed up by now. Maybe we should go look for him."

"We can't!" Kurt says. "We... umm... we have to go soon."

"We can't just leave him here," Finn says. When Kurt fails to respond, the tall boy's eyes widen in shock. "Dude, we can't just leave him here! No way!"

"Finn..." Kurt says.

"Leave who where with the what, now?" Mercedes asks as she hobbles over to the carriage on crutches.

"Kurt thinks we should leave without Artie," Finn says.

"Hold up, say what now?" Mercedes says.
"I did not say that!" Kurt says. "I just said…"

"I smell conflict," Rachel says. "What are we arguing about?"

"Kurt wants to dump Artie in the city because he's late!" Finn accuses.

"I do not!" Kurt says.

"Kurt, that's awful!" Rachel says.

"How are you gonna treat your boy like that?" Mercedes says.

"Not cool, man," Finn says.

"Everybody shut up!" Kurt shouts. The force of the yell stuns the group into silence. "Now, if you want to go look for Artie, be my guest. Just be sure to check over, under, around, and inside absolutely every single thing in the entire city, because he could be anywhere. That shouldn't take long, right?"

Nobody has anything to say to that.

"I don't want to leave Artie," Kurt says. "But the guy takes responsibility for himself. He comes and goes as he pleases, and at the moment, he is in a 'go' phase. I'm sure he's fine. He's a big boy, he can take care of himself. He'll find us when he needs to."

"But what if he's in trouble?" Finn asks. "Seriously, this isn't like him."

"I'm a little worried," Mercedes says. "He's been acting weird lately."

"I'm in no position to judge his normal behavior," Rachel says, "but Artie strikes me as a fiercely independent spirit. Kurt is probably right."

Thank you! Kurt says in his mind, more to the universe at large than Rachel, personally. "You see?" Kurt says. "Even Rachel knows that Artie can look out for himself. So there's no need to worry."

Finn stares at him oddly, and Mercedes still looks skeptical, but Kurt is saved from further inquiry by the timely arrival of Wes and David. He sends another thank you to the universe, and vows to try to kind of like them.

"Alright, everyone!" David announces. "It's time for departure. All aboard who are coming aboard!"

"Who wants to help me inside?" Mercedes asks.

Finn seems unsure whether or not he wants to move forward. Rachel starts to move, but she is beaten to the punch by Thad, of all people. "Allow me, madam," he says smoothly, bowing and kissing her hand. Mercedes looks a little less than thrilled, but shrugs and offers her arm. With calm elegance, Thad escorts her to the carriage. When it comes time to actually help her inside, he stands nobly by the door, smiles, and… snaps his fingers at the Dragon Hawks. Nick and Jeff promptly run over and hoist her up.

"Thanks for the… help," Mercedes says neutrally.

"Think nothing of it, milady," Thad says with a smile and a wink. "The Hawks shall communicate with your group through Pavarotti. Should you require anything at all, simply send a note with him,
and I shall personally see to it that your needs are met."

Mercedes is still skeptical, but if there is a way to her heart, it's through proper pampering. She offers him a small smile. "Very well, Mr. Harwood," she says. "Until we meet again."

Rachel and Finn can only gape at this weirdness. "Okay, wow," Finn says. "That's really… wow."

"I know," Rachel says, shaking her head. "There is nothing sadder or more off-putting than when someone is clearly smitten with you, but you simply do not and cannot return his feelings. There is nothing to do but pity the poor creatures."

Finn and Kurt both find themselves gaping at her, for different reasons. "Ummm… yeah," Finn says, very uneasily. "That's… uhh… yeah. Guys like that are totally just sad, y'know?" he laughs. Rachel chuckles with him and goes to hop in the car, and Finn's fake smile immediately drops. "Just… really… really… sad," he echoes, trudging over to the chariot himself.

"The lack of self-awareness is astounding," Kurt says, shaking his head. "She is a pot in a world of kettles."

An arm loops around his shoulder, breaking him from his reverie. "Well, new friend, it looks like there is some bonding to be done between us in the near future," David says cheerfully.

Wes's arm loops around him from the other side. "I, for one, cannot wait. I do so enjoy some good bondage."

"Who doesn't?" Kurt says through clenched teeth.

Wes smiles at him. "I'm sure we have much to learn from each other, but first…"

"There is someone who wants to say goodbye to you," David finishes.

With that, Kurt finds himself being forcefully guided closer to the door of the inn. He is stopped well short of actually going inside, however. The mid-morning sun makes it hard to actually see inside, and he stands there for about a minute before losing patience.

"Okay, are you going to let me go inside and actually see him, or…?" Kurt asks.

"Wait for it," Wes says simply.

"What exactly am I waiting for?" Kurt asks.

David nods to the door, and suddenly, Kurt has his answer.

There, in the shadow of the doorway, stand the silhouette of a figure in full battle armor, save for the helmet. The sun catches his dark armor as he steps from the shadows, gleaming off the plates. The suit moves with its wearer as if the two were always together, as organic and intertwined as a dragon and its scales. He walks with purpose and power. His back is straight, his shoulders are aligned, his head held high. His smile is proud and humble, calm and ecstatic at the same time.

Kurt is stricken speechless. The person who went into the inn and the person before him seem almost completely different. Nothing has changed, but everything has changed. He looks taller, stands prouder—Finn and Flint could stand on either side of him and seem small by comparison.

He's always known, on some level, what his boyfriend is, but he never really stopped to think about it. Now, however, there is simply no denying it. The goofy, sweet, giddy, beautiful boy that
he fell in love with is, in fact, *Crown Prince of the Fire Nation*.

"Blaine," Kurt says, unable to get out any more than that. He shakes his head.

Blaine laughs, still somehow maintaining his regal bearing. "Wow," he says. "Do I look that bad?"


Blaine blushes and bashfully looks down, and Kurt can't help but smile, happy to see that Blaine and The Prince are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. Blaine steps forward, smiling at Kurt. "Kurt, thank you so much," he says. "This means a lot to me, and I'm glad I have your blessing."

Kurt smiles at him, and for the first time since he made the decision, it's genuine. "You know what? I'm glad you totally emotionally manipulated me into agreeing to this—and don't even lie, because we both know that's exactly what you did. I think this is really going to be good for you."

Blaine smiles innocently. "Me? Manipulative? Surely you jest." The smile dims quickly, however, as he reaches up to grab Kurt's hands. "I am going to miss you. I miss you already and we haven't even left yet."

"We'll see each other in a few days," Kurt says, trying to assure himself as much as anyone else. "It'll be fine."

Blaine nods in agreement. "Until then…" he says. He leans in for a sweet, soft kiss, prompting a few wolf whistles from the peanut gallery of Dragon Hawks, blushing as he breaks off. "…I guess this is goodbye."

Kurt answers that with his own kiss; a hungry, possessive counter-argument to Blaine's gentle farewell. This prompts several more wolf-whistles, and a few gasps of outrage from passersby. "I will never say goodbye to you," he says.

With the kiss and the promise on both of their minds, they go their separate ways. Wes and David hop up to the front of their charity chariot and drive Kurt and friends to the first predetermined destination on Thad's Grand Fire Nation Adventure. Blaine hops up onto an ostrich horse with alongside his soldiers—his soldiers—and rides off to the grand Naval convoy, camped out not too far from here. As Kurt leans out the window and watches him go, he is suddenly stricken with a terrible thought.

It's like watching him go off to war. It's exactly what it would look like.

He could be going off to fight some horrible battle somewhere without him.

Going to lead his men and his country to victory or defeat. And he would—Blaine would absolutely lead the way, because that's just the kind of person he is. He would go first, put himself on the front lines, like an idiot—

He expels the thought from his head with as much mental violence as he can muster. He's being ridiculous. That would never happen—if Blaine were to march off to battle, Kurt would be right there with him. Besides, there is no battle, no war to be fought.

*Not yet, anyway.*

He'll see Blaine in a few days.

And Artie will totally come back on his own.
Everything will be fine.

A/N: So the gang splits up again, but not quite along the lines expected. So, what will come of this development? Is Blaine headed for disaster? Is Thad up to something, or is Kurt just being paranoid? And where the frack is Artie?

In the next chapter… bondage! Blaine bonds with his Hawks. Finn and Rachel bond with each other. Mercedes starts a long-distance relationship for reasons that might surprise you. Wes and David try their damnedest to bond with Kurt.

There might even be some villainous bonding in the near future. ;)

ANNOUNCEMENT and Preview

Chapter Notes

A/N: Going on a brief hiatus, probably until sometime around December. Need to get some school and other things in order. Until then… I'm going to leave you with a little something different: a sort of written teaser/trailer. I've never tried anything like this before, so we'll just have to see if it works or not. Enjoy!

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He's running.

Again.

He's always running.

The sky is grey and ominous. The forest is thick around him. Every step brings an obstacle; twigs snap beneath his boots, branches claw at his armor and his face. A drop of water hits his cheek—the first of the oncoming storm.

Distant voices filter through to his ears. Orders are issued, the search is organized. Already, he can hear the barking.

Bloodhounds.

He runs faster. And even as he runs, he knows it is a futile gesture. The dogs will follow his scent, no matter where he goes. It's only a matter of time.

He will be caught.

Kurt stares out the window at the darkening sky, absently stirring his cold tea, his mind miles away. He's so far gone that he doesn't even notice when Wes sits down across the table and stares out at the same storm.

"I fear for him," Wes silently admits.

Kurt huffs a breath through his nose. "You're not the only one," he says. "I can't help but worry about him."

Wes gives him a wan smile. "I assume you worry for his safety?"

Kurt nods.

Wes turns back to the window. "I fear for his spirit."
The rain picks up. The droplets hammer into him, each one a tiny nail of cold, piercing him even as they run off his skin.

He presses himself against a rock face and tries to catch his breath. The dogs are getting closer. The voices are spread farther apart—they're fanning out, expanding like a net.

The forest looks the same in every direction. He has no idea where he is or where he is going; the stormclouds deny him even the comfort of the sun, the surety of direction.

He is lost and alone.

He climbs. The trees are slick with rainwater, but he manages. If he moves quickly, perhaps he can throw the dogs off of his trail.

And yet, his progress is slowed. The net will eclipse him, surround him, ensnare him. It's only a matter of time.

He will be caught.

"What about his spirit?" Kurt says.

Wes smiles fondly. "Blaine has always been a bright spirit. Gentle, yet vibrant." He sighs. "I wish he could stay that way."

Kurt narrows his eyes at Wes. "I don't like where you're going with this. If we protect him, we can —"

"Protect him from what, Kurt?" Wes asks. "His ancestry? His title? His destiny? The entire world?"

Kurt can't think of anything to say to that.

"My favorite subject is history," Wes says. "And you are, essentially, the embodiment of such. And history, like you, goes in cycles."

"Not always," Kurt says.

"But it usually does," Wes says simply. "You know that as well as I. You know where this is going, Kurt. You know where Blaine's path leads—where the entire Fire Nation is headed…"

Wind joins with the rain. The trees groan and snap within it. Blaine finds himself beaten back by the gusts. The water and wind are too much for him—already a chill begins to settle in his bones.

He lands on the forest floor in a roll. Beneath the deafening howl of the wind, he hears the barking of the hounds, closer than ever.

He runs. He doesn't look back.

His limbs feel sluggish and heavy with cold. The rain soaks him, weighs him down. His breath comes in heaves and gasps.

A root catches his foot. He stumbles, but does not fall.

As he rights himself, the dogs start howling.
They've found him.

He forces himself to sprint. The rain stings as it hits his face. Water gets into his eyes, and his vision blurs.

He is so tired. He cannot keep this up.

It's only a matter of time.

He will be caught.

"You're talking about war, aren't you?" Kurt asks.

Wes nods silently.

"You're wrong," Kurt says.

"Am I?" Wes says. "History is filled to the brim with bloody conflicts over this throne or that. Nothing breeds war like a desire for power."

"No," Kurt insists. "It doesn't have to end like that."

A peal of thunder rattles the windows.

Wes sighs and stands up. "For Blaine's sake, I hope you are right. Because if you aren't…" He swallows. "I fear for him. I fear for what he must do—what he must become to win against a foe like Sue Sylvester…"

Lightning shatters the air above him. Blaine slides to a halt at the base of a cliff, and his heart sinks.

On any other day, he would scurry like a spider up the rocks. But the water and the wind and the thunder are too much. His fingers are starting to numb with the cold. To try and climb now would be to sign his death warrant.

He turns around just as the first dog leaps at his throat. His arm moves reflexively, and its teeth clack uselessly against his armor. He throws the creature down as two more burst through the bushes. They approach him with low growls and bared teeth.

"We've got him over here!" someone calls.

Blaine shakes his head and swallows thickly.

Yesterday, he rode in the sun. The Hawks were not his soldiers, but his friends. He smiled and laughed among his people.

Today, he stands in the rain. The Hawks are safe elsewhere (please Agni let them be safe). His people hunt him like an animal.

He is cold. He is tired…

"Do not move!" a voice calls.

Blaine lowers his head.
He is caught.

Kurt closes his eyes. The truth of Wes's words washes over him, and he suppresses a shudder.
"I fear the day his spirit darkens… the day his light goes out."

There are three of them. Two with swords. One bender. All male.
"Get down on your knees and put your hands behind your head," the bender orders. His eyes are as steel-hard as any sword.

Blaine is cold, sluggish and soaked. Fear closes its fingers around his throat. He cannot move or speak.
"On your knees, now!"

Lightning tears through the heavens, and suddenly Blaine remembers another bolt of thunder: one that saved his life.
"Are you deaf? Get on your fucking knees!"

He pushes past the fear. His father did not save him from it so that he might fall to it later. "No," he says simply, raising his head to look his pursuers in the eyes.
"Poster says dead or alive, son," one of the swordsmen says. "We're letting you pick."

"No one has to get hurt here," Blaine says, resolute. "Please, just walk away."
"Get down on the ground, or we will attack!" the bender says.

Blaine shakes his head. "I can't do that. I'm sorry."
"If you won't go down, we'll take you down," the bender says.

Blaine closes his eyes. "No, you won't."
"Fuck this," the other swordsman says. "You've got three seconds before I run you through. Three…"

The Prince clenches his fist, and makes a decision.

A fire roars forth from his heart.
"Two…"

It chases the chill from his body, turning it to warmth.
It chases the water from his clothes, turning it into steam.
It chases the raindrops from the air, turning them to mist.
"One!"

Blaine opens his eyes, and the forest burns.
He will *not* be caught.

~Chapter 62: Set Fire to the Rain

**A/N**: Hope that was suitably exciting. See you soon! ^_^
Exactly one day after Kurt and Blaine part ways, this is where their journey finds them.

In a luxurious room of The Soaking Toes Resort Spa…

"Finn Hudson, I swear by the moon and the tides, if you don't get out of my way right now…” Kurt growls.

Finn stands cross-armed in the door of their room. "No way, dude. You're not thinking straight."

"Move!" Kurt says, rearing his arm back and bending a flame in the palm of his hand. Finn is shocked, but remains steadfast.

"Okay, now I know you're not thinking straight. Calm down!"

"Do not tell me to calm down!" Kurt yells.

"Kurt, baby," Mercedes starts.

"No!" Kurt shouts. "Blaine is in trouble. We need to get to him!"

"I agree with you in spirit," Rachel says carefully. "But if you would just tell s what's going on—"

"ARGH!" Kurt says. "Wes! David! Get in here!" He glares at Finn. "Let's see you hold back all three of us. Because I know they'll agree with me on this."

"What is it?" Wes says, opening the door to be blocked by Finn. "What's wrong?"

"Blaine is in trouble," Kurt says, pulling out a piece of paper and thrusting it into his hands.

Wes and David immediately look horrified. "That’s…"

"I know," Kurt says.

Wes shakes his head. "No, you don't know. There's no way you could… this is…”

Several miles away, at Mu Bai County Prison…
Santana smiles as she retrieves her whip from the locker. Oh, how she's missed that marvelous crack. So satisfying. So painful.

The alarm starts to blare. Shit.

She quickly straps on her other whips and daggers, and grabs the only other thing she can carry—Puck's glove.

As she darts out of the room, a guard nearly takes off her face with a sword. She kicks him in the stomach and chokes him unconscious with her whip.

A second guard jumps out at her from the shadows.

Puck charges in and slams his forehead into the guard's nose.

"Ow," Puck says afterwards. "That shit hurts."

"Why'd you do it, then?" Santana asks.

Puck shrugs. "I don't know! I thought it'd look cool."

"Where's—" Santana starts.

"Back there!" Puck says. "Come on!"

She tosses him his glove, and he slams it onto his deformed hand with relish. The next guard that pops up in their path gets air-punched into a wall.

They reach the lobby. It's empty, save for unconscious guards. The alarms still blare. "I thought you said—"

"Whatever," Puck says. "Let's just go!"

They charge outside. Santana whips one guard's sword out of his hand and brains him with the hilt. Puck slams his fist into the door and blasts the metal off the hinges, taking out all the guards behind it.

They step out into the yard, and…

"Freeze!"

They are immediately surrounded by guards. Fuck.

Santana and Puck stand back to back, eying the many weapons pointed at them. "Where is that stupid little—"

Their question is answered fairly quickly. An explosion of dust obscures damn near everything. Suddenly, several guards fly up into the air, as if a quickly moving object just slammed into them at about knee height. Then several more. Puck and Santana take advantage of the confusion and start slamming and whipping until the rest of the guards are either down or fleeing.

As the dust clears a lone figure sits in the middle of the carnage.

"Not bad," Santana grudgingly admits.

Artie Abrams smiles up at her. "You ain't seen nothing yet…"
In a dense Fire Nation forest...

Blaine lands on his back. His head slams into the soil full force, the pain momentarily robbing him of his senses. The jolt leaves him feeling bleary and weak, but he remembers his resolve. He hasn't come this far just to fall now. A surge of energy fills him, but as he starts to get up, an arrow embeds itself in the dirt, dangerously close to his ear, and he deflates. It's over. He is helpless to fight back from this position.

"Don't move," a strangely familiar voice says.

Blaine complies for the most part, shifting his head just slightly to see his attacker.

"I should've known," Blaine says. "Of course it'd be you, with my luck."

The archer smiles at him. "Good," he says. "You remember me. So you know that I'm not lying when I say I see one spark, and I'm putting an arrow in your skull."

Blaine nods quietly, and closes his eyes to protect them from the falling rain. He hears footsteps as the archer draws closer.

"I knew," the archer says calmly, "from the second I set eyes on you that you were something special, but I was not quite expecting this."

Blaine grits his teeth.

The archer immediately detects the tensing. Blaine hears him draw his bowstring back. "Easy," is all he says.

And Blaine deflates again.

Well, fuck.

"Just get it over with," Blaine says quietly.

The archer says nothing.

A few seconds later, Blaine hears a twang from the bowstring.

The arrow flies…

Exactly one day after Kurt and Blaine part ways, this is where their journey finds them. How did they get there…?

One day earlier…

Kurt and company pull into the verdant yard of a rather posh-looking resort. The theme of the day seems to be flowers, birds, and steam, as some permutation of those elements is basically everywhere he looks. The carriage pulls to a stop, and he opens the door.

"WELCOME!"

And then, an orchestragsm. The second he steps out of the carriage, Kurt is greeted by a blast of sound from a horns, flutes, drums, violins, and La preserve us all, a harp. The volume is almost enough to blow him back into the carriage. And if that in itself wasn't insane, the bright, grinning
face of the innkeeper would send it soaring over the edge into Loonyville.

"Mr. Harwood!" the innkeeper cheers. A group of perfectly choreographed servants move in unison behind him. "We cannot tell you how pleased we are that you would choose to bless our humble establishment with your business! We are most pleased to host you, and we can only hope that your time here will be half as pleasurable as basking in your presence!"

He snaps his fingers, and the servants descend upon the carriage like a team of trained locusts, snatching all their luggage in one clean sweep and carrying it off to the inn. Wes and David seem to be considered luggage, by the way, as the servants all but bodily remove them from the driver's seat as they drive the carriage towards their stables.

"Ummm," Kurt says, still trying catch the echoes of that fanfare bouncing around in his skull. He adopts a superior posture. "Yes, I am sure your accommodations will be adequate, at the very least. If they are not, I will be sure to inform you immediately," he says haughtily.

The Innkeeper's smile does not dim, though his jaw seems to clench a bit tighter. "Yes, of course, Master Harwood. If you and your companions will follow me, I will personally show you to your rooms."

Kurt waves him on, and the Innkeeper scurries on ahead. Kurt starts to follow, when suddenly, his path is showered in lotus pedals. He looks up to see two teenage girls in front of him, carrying baskets of flower pedals. They smile at him (just like everyone else).

As he walks, they continuously sprinkle fragrant, colorful potpourri along the ground in front of him.

It's all a little unsettling.

"Wow," Mercedes whispers to Kurt. "Exactly how loaded is this boy?"

As the group enters the main building, the orchestra kicks in again with a sweeping, romantic theme.

"Very loaded," Kurt says.

"Bitch."
"Skank."
"Tool."
"Whore."
"Flat-chest."
"Better than a lopsided one."
"Oh, no you did not!" Santana growls.

Puck sighs and bangs his head against the wall. Prison never changes. It's one of the few constants pretty much across the board. It's always damp, it's always dark, it always stinks, and the company always sucks. He's not sure if he's thankful that Quinn and Santana are in separate cells, or if he wants them to just kill each other already so they'll shut up. They're in a four cell block—Quinn, Santana, Puck, and some drunk-ass old hobo they dragged in sometime last night are all in separate
Puck envies the hobo. Guy's been asleep the entire time, totally unaware of Quinntana's neverending bitch-off. He'd love to drink himself into a coma right now. Fuck that—he'd punch himself into unconsciousness if he wasn't chained up. They took all his shit—his armor, and his glove. Then they put his hand in a shackle and fastened it to the wall, just for good measure. Fuckers.

"...oh yeah?" Santana's voice breaks through Puck's angry internal monologue. "Well, yo' mama is so fat—"

"Don't you talk about my mother!" Quinn roars, and whoa. The fuck did that come from? She sounded like she was actually about to break out and tear Santana's head off for a second.

"Wow," Santana says. "Somebody's a little sensitive..."

"Wha'sappnin'?" a voice from Puck's left slurs. "Whuwetalkin'bout?"

"Just go back to sleep, old dude," Puck says. "Trust me, you're not missing much."

"Dun' tell me whattado!" the drunk slurs. "Yur jessa yung whipper... whipsnapper... snapperwhippin... you're just a punk!"

"Yeah, and you're just some old drunk asshole," Puck says. "We're in the same prison, dude, so I guess you're just as much a punk as I am."

The old man tries to get up, but he can't quite seem to get his legs to move right, so he just drunkenly pulls himself over to the bars to look Puck over. "Wha?" he says, looking confused. "Yer all jus' punks. Buncha yungins. Wha ye doin' in here? Whur's yer folks?" he slurs.

Silence greets that statement. Puck and Santana do not talk about their parents. One of those unspoken, mutual rules. They're fucked up, and they both know it. There's no reason to dwell upon it.

"I says whur's yer folks, dang it!" the old man repeats.

Their answers are short and to the point.

"Don't know, don't care," Santana says.

"Same," Puck shrugs.

"I'm certain that the Fire Lord will be along shortly to set me free," Quinn says.

"Farr Lord?" the old man says. "Yur's a princess?"

"No," Quinn says. "Sue is not my mother."

"But I'm sure you'd be happy to suck on her shriveled old tits if she asked you to," Santana snarks.

"Excuse me?" Quinn gasps.

And just like that, they're at it again.

Puck tries to kill the old man with his death glare. "Great job. You just set off another three hour scream-fest!"
The old man gives him an oddly intense stare. And then he grins. Fucking troll. "M'bad," he says, pulling out two pieces of fluff and sticking them in his ears. Then he rolls over and goes back to sleep.

Asshole.

The ride to the Naval Convoy hits an unexpected obstacle in the form of ice.

Namely, the ice between Blaine and the rest of the Dragon Hawks. The ice he was not aware of before, and seems to have no idea how to break.

The Hawks certainly seem to like him well enough. They all smile and nod at what he says, but the second he tries talking to them, it's a great big wall of awkward and discomfort. He just can't seem to get any of them to open up to him.

Any of them save for Thad, that is.

"…and Cousin Clara threw her wine glass at him," Thad chuckles. "When it missed, she promptly ordered several more—and proceeded to throw all of them until she hit her mark!" He bursts into hearty laughter, and Blaine gives him a tight, somewhat uneasy smile. "Mother later remarked that it was a rather tragic waste of wine—she should've just thrown the glasses."

Blaine nods. "I can definitely agree with… part of that," he says neutrally, quietly hoping that he never has to meet the rest of Thad's family.

It's not that Blaine is opposed to bonding with Thad; it's just that Thad is monopolizing all of his bonding time. He never seems to run out of hilarious family anecdotes or personal accomplishments to harp on about.

There is such a thing as too much, you know?

"Have I told you yet about the time my Auntie Margaret tried to pass mandatory spanking laws in her hometown?"

Okay, that settles it. Blaine needs to get rid of Thad. Like, now.

But how?

He looks down at his ostrich horse, and grins as an idea pops into his head.

Then, as Thad begins the story, Blaine takes a deep breath and promptly hurls himself off the beast's back, landing on the ground with a flop.

"Your Majesty!" Thad cries, immediately leaping from his own mount to rush over and check his vitals. "Are you alright?"

Blaine slowly opens his eyes, speaking with a slight slur. "What? Who are… where am I?"

"Oh, dear heavens!" Thad yelps. "He's knocked himself silly! He could have brain damage! Oh, Wesley will have my head for this…"

Blaine tries not to smile at Thad's blind panic. He reaches up and weakly grasps Thad's shoulder. "Wait… no, I think I remember now…"

The other Hawks have drawn to a halt, and are looking at him with concern. Nick and Jeff
dismount and help him to his feet. He smiles at them.

Then he takes a step forward and nearly falls over.

"Prince Blaine!" Thad says, rushing forward to catch him.

Blaine allows himself to be gently laid on the ground. "No, no, I'm okay. This used to happen to me a lot. I just get a little bleary after falls. I'm sure I'll recover in time."

"Are you sure?" Thad asks. "Is there nothing I can do to help?"

"Well," Blaine says. "There is one thing Wes and David used to do when I got like this, but I couldn't ask—"

"Ask!" Thad says. "Please, ask away! Demand, even! I live to serve, my Lord."

Blaine smiles at Thad's worry. "Scalberry juice," he says. "They'd always get me a cool glass of scalberry juice. Perked me right up. Oh, but I'll bet the only vendors for miles are the ones at the convoy…"

Thad puts a finger to his lips. "Say no more, my Lord. It will be done." He snaps his fingers. "Nick!" he yells. "Ride ahead and get—"

"Oh, and I forgot to mention!" Blaine interjects. "Whoever gets me some scalberry juice will have my eternal gratitude. I'd probably shower them with praise and riches when I became Fire Lord. I mean, it's just amazing. And… fucking delicious. I love the stuff."

And just like that, Thad pulls a one-eighty that would break a lesser man's neck. "I take that back! Nick, you stay here and tend to His Royal Highness," Thad says, hopping back on his horse. "A matter as urgent and delicate as this merits my personal attention. I shan't be long, my Lord!"

With that, Thad whips his ostrich horse into high gear and rides off into the distance, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

Jeff kneels down and pats Blane on the shoulder. "Are you okay to ride, your Majesticism?" he asks. "You can totally ride with me if you—"

Blaine answers his question by grinning and performing a handspring onto his own ostrich horse.

Jeff's jaw drops. "You're… you were faking?"

Blaine smiles. "Just a little. Thad is… quite loquacious," he says diplomatically. "And I'm happy to be his conversation partner, but I'd also like to talk to some other people. Occasionally."

"Which is a polite way of saying 'Thad needs to shut up,'" Nick points out. "It's okay. We were all thinking it."

Blaine laughs, but he soberes up just a bit for the next part. "Look, I know I'm a royal or whatever, and you're not used to talking to me, but I'm not used to talking to you, either. We're all flying blind here. But I want to get to know you guys. I want to know more about my country. If I'm going to rule it someday, I'll need a lot of perspectives to draw on to make the right choices. You guys can help me with that… you know, if you want." He grins. "So… what do you say?"

The Hawks share thoughtful looks.

And then Jeff smiles at him. "What do you want to know?"
Blaine smiles right back.

Operation Bondage has officially begun…

The pretty flower sprinkles and lovely orchestral soundtrack does little to lift the moods in Kurt's group. Everyone is worried about someone. Finn and Mercedes are worried about Artie, Wes and David seem a bit blue over Blaine, and Kurt gets to rest in the happy spot where both of those circles of worry overlap.

Rachel is the only one who is escapes the worry worm, remaining blithely unaware of everyone else's angst. "Do you think the orchestra would be willing to help me in my songwriting process?"

Kurt shrugs. "I don't see why not."

Rachel grins and claps "Yay! Rachel Berry, Legendary Heroine: the Musical comes closer still to fruition."

"You're writing a musical about your life?" Mercedes asks. "cause—and excuse me if I'm wrong—it really doesn't seem all that exciting so far."

"I am well aware of that!" Rachel says. "It's the classic hero's journey. The hero—or heroine—lives a mundane, normal life, before experience the all-important Call to Adventure. I am already well on my way to becoming a classic heroic character. A dramatization of my exploits is inevitable, and this is my way of getting ahead of the rush. Besides, the songs come much more easily if I write them soon after the fact, when the heat of emotion is still fresh on my skin. Oooh, that's a good line!" And just like that, Rachel makes a beeline to the complimentary writing desk and begins scribbling away.

"We shouldn't have left," Finn sighs. "Artie might be in trouble."

"Finn's right," Mercedes says. "This isn't like him."

Kurt throws his arms up. "What is 'like' him?" he asks, exasperated. "We don't know if he is 'like' him! None of us knows him!"

"Wait, what?" Finn asks.

"I'm serious!" Kurt says. "He might as well be a talking question mark for all the information we have on him! He could be a spy. Or an axe murderer."

Finn blinks at him.

"He could murder people!" Kurt says, emphasizing with chopping motions. "With an axe!"

"Kurt, honey, are you okay?" Mercedes asks carefully. "Is there something you need to tell us?"

"…yes," Kurt says, standing up. He takes a deep breath. "I'm going to soak in the hot springs. See you all later."

And just like that, he's gone.

Finn sighs. "Okay, who wants to go after him?"

Mercedes gestures to her foot. "I'm a little laid up."
Rachel ignores him in favor of her writing.

Finn shrugs. "I glow if I soak in water when I'm hurt. It's a healing thing."

Wes and David share a look. "We'll go after him," Wes says.

"You two stay here and… recuperate," Wes says, nodding to Finn and Mercedes.

They glance at each other. "…great."

"…can't see the light of day, because your head is so comfortably wedged between Lady Sylvester's buttcheeks—"

"That's Fire Lord Sylvester to you!"

Puck contemplates gnawing through his arm and leaving his hand stuck to the wall so he can escape this torture-fest. It's starting to seem worth it.

Except… not really. Not after all the trouble he went through just to keep the stupid thing to begin with…

"Of course, I wouldn't expect an Earth Kingdom slut like you to have any sense of propriety or loyalty," Quinn snits.

"Oh, get a little closer to these bars and let me show you how sluts do it in the Earth Kingdom. I will go all kinds of Omashu Heights Adjacent on your ass," Santana growls.

"Ye know what yer prolum is?" the old man suddenly says.

"I'm stuck in prison Bendover Action Blondie, the world's worst anal fister, and a guy who smells like the air between flabs of fat on a walruseal?" Santana asks.

"Lack o' discipline!" the old man spits. "My mammy and pappy used to beat me black, blue, purple, orange and turquoise if I stepped out of line. And look at me! I turned out great."

"Yeah," Puck says. "I can just… smell the greatness wafting off of you."

The old man ignores him. "Yup, discipline is the only thing that'll straighten out punks like you. If yer parents'd beat ya, ya wouldn've gone and run away."

"I ain't no runaway!" Santana says. "S. Lopez runs from no bitch."

"I wouldn't dream of dishonoring my family like that," Quinn growls.

Puck stays quiet.

"…oh-ho," the old man says, eying Puck through the bars. "It looks like I hit a nail on the chord, I did."

"Shut the fuck up, pappy fart," Puck grunts.

"Why'd ye do it, son?" the old man presses. "To elope with one of these pretty things?"

"HA!" Santana barks.
"Don't you have some vomit to choke on?" Puck says. "Or some alcohol poisoning to die of?"

"What, yer pappy beat ya too hard?"

"Fuck you!" Puck says.

"Yer mammy send yer precious flabby bottom to bed without dinner?"

"I said shut up!" Puck growls.

"Maybe they made yer cut your—"

"FUCK OFF!" Puck says. "There's no way—you can't know that! How did you know that?"

The old man tilts his head at him. "Yer ran away from home 'cause yer parents made ye cut yer hair?"

Puck blinks. Oh. "Uhhh… no," he says.


"No I didn't," Puck says.

"Yes, you did," Santana says. "You wouldn't have freaked if there wasn't something to freak about. You're too late, Puckerman. I have smelled weakness, and now I won't stop until I know for sure."

"Just back off," Puck says.

"Sorry," Santana says. "Don't know how. Why don't you save us all some trouble and tell us what mommy and daddy made you do that had you so upset?"

Puck says nothing.

Santana smirks. "I bet it was—"

"My hand," Puck says. "My mom tried to make me cut off my hand."

Silence.

"For real?" Santana asks.

"Why?" Quinn asks.

"You can't see it, can you?" Puck asks. "They took my glove."

"And I don't remember much about you naked," Quinn says. "Thank Agni for that."

"It's… ugly. Gross," Puck says stiffly. "It makes me look like a freak. She wanted me to cut it off. I didn't feel like it, so I booked."

More silence.

"You're still holding out on me," Santana says carefully. "But I'll let it slide for now." She pauses. "And for the record? You are a freak."

"Pfft," Puck scoffs. "I'm a superfreak."
A bit more silence.

"I'm sorry," Quinn says quietly. "About your hand."

Puck snorts. "Thanks. I guess."

"But you should've listened to your mother," Quinn says. "I'm sure she was only thinking of what's best for you."

Puck's got nothing to say about that.

"Ah, if only ya knew the problems what could be solved by kids listenin' to their folks," the old man grins, settling back against the wall.

They're quiet for a while after that.

Here are some of the things Blaine learns as he bonds with the Hawks:

As the son of sailor in the Navy, Jeff has lived all over the Fire Nation, and his laid-back nature is a necessity for 'going with the flow' as much as he does. He's the oldest of four kids, and his parents were apparently into theme naming; his siblings are named Jon, Jenny, and Jacob.

Nick, on the other hand, is an only child, and his parents' 'little miracle.' The son of coal miners, his parents were shocked when his mom got pregnant (she'd been told she was barren). They were even more shocked when they found out Nick was a firebender—both trace their ancestry back to the Earth Kingdom, and neither has had a bender in the family for generations.

Trent has a twin brother named Brent. They're pretty different—Brent is into 'inspirational experiences' which is a polite way of saying he's a stoner. Their parents are geologists, and they often go on lengthy adventures without the kids, meaning he and Brent were free to get into trouble a lot. Or rather, Brent was free to get into trouble and drag Trent into it at every opportunity.

Flint's parents are divorced. They split the kids between them—his little sister went to live with his mother, while he lives with his father, a metalworker. Flint has trouble relating to his father, and little interest in his work, so he passes most of his time by reading. He loves his little sister, and she pretty much owns him. She knows it, too.

It starts off fairly orderly, but as the conversation continues… things get a bit more hectic.

James plays a mean tsungi horn. Ethan is good on guitar. Oh, hey, did you know Luke could play drums? They could start a band. Jeff could sing. Nick could sing back-up. What are you talking about? Nick would totally sing lead. Screw you, Jeff. Flint plays a mean pair of bongos. Trent considers himself a bit of a lyricist. He once wrote a poem about the composition of igneous rocks. Jeff doesn't think that's the kind of subject matter he wants to sing about, but Igneous Rocks is a badass name for his band. Wait, who said it was Jeff's band? Nick's the one singing lead.

And so on.

Blaine can't stop grinning. Not only is he getting to know the Dragon Hawks… it seems the Hawks are getting to know each other as well.

Well, except one.

"Other Nick?" Blaine asks.
The quiet boy seems almost startled to be addressed. "Huh?" he says.

"Are you okay?" Blaine asks.

Other Nick shrugs.

"Don't worry about it, dude," Nick says. "It's not your fault. He never really talks that much."

Blaine scrunches his face up at that. "Why not?"

Nick shrugs. "Just… doesn't."

Blaine chances a glance at Other Nick, who looks a little lost. It doesn't seem right that he should be excluded from this. So Blaine tries to bring him in.

"Hey, Other Nick," Blaine says. "I was just wondering… what do your parents do?"

Other Nick shrugs. "Don't live with them."

"Oh," Blaine says. "Who do you live with?"

"Aunt and uncle," Other Nick says.

"Okay… what do they do?" Blaine asks.

Other Nick looks a little uncomfortable. "I… umm… I don't… know."

"Oh," Blaine says again. He's out of questions already. Every answer is a non-starter.

"See?" Nick says. "Just not much of a talker."

"Shy, probably," Jeff says.

Blaine looks at Other Nick, scrutinizing the mousy-looking boy. "Other Nick, is something bothering you?"

Other Nick shrugs, noncommittal.

"Because… I don't know about you, but there's something bothering me," Blaine says.

Other Nick raises his eyebrows.

"Why does everyone call you 'Other Nick'?" Blaine asks.

Other Nick shrugs. "Because Nick got his name called first. And we have the same name, so… I'm just extra."

Blaine points at him. "That right there? That's what bothers me. 'Other Nick' just makes you sound like a spare Nick, in case we lose one. And you're not a spare."

Other Nick blinks thoughtfully.

"Does being called that bother you?" Blaine asks.

"…a little," Other Nick admits.

The other Hawks exchange looks of surprise.
"Really?" Trent asks. "You never said anything."

"You never asked," Other Nick says. "You all just started using it, so I went with it. I mean, it just bothers me a little. It's not that bad."

"Well, now it bothers two of us," Blaine says. "So let's fix it. What would you like to be called?"

Other Nick considers this. "My aunt and uncle call me 'Nicholas,' but I don't really like that."

"Hmmm," Blaine says. "Let's split it up. 'Nick' is taken. I'm pretty sure you don't want to be 'Las,' so, how about…"

"Cole," Other Nick says, looking up. His face doesn't change that much, but his eyes suddenly seem brighter. "I could be Cole."

Blaine looks to the others. "What do you guys think?"

Nick cups his chin thoughtfully. "I like it!" he says.

"Dude, it totally fits," Jeff says.

"What with your black hair," Trent adds.

"A 'Cole' by any other name would burn just as bright," Flint says.

It feels suspiciously like a vote, but the verdict is unanimous. One by one, the agreements come in. "Well, that settles it. By the power invested in me as Fire Prince-in-exile, I hereby proclaim you 'Cole Hudson.'"

"Cool," the newly-christened Cole says, finally breaking into a smile. "I have a name!"

"You had a name before," Trent points out.

"Yeah, but this one's mine," Cole says. "Nobody else has it. It just… it feels nice." He looks to Blaine. "Thanks, Bla—err, your Majesty."

"You don't have to call me that," Blaine says. "And you're more than welcome."

Cole grins at him.

Blaine grins back. "So, Cole… I have a few questions for you…"

As it turns out, Cole lives with his aunt and uncle. His parents are islanders, living close to the quarantine line. They sent Cole to relatives on the mainland to keep him safe, but couldn't afford to come themselves. Cole mostly keeps to himself, and while his interests are narrow, you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who knows more about fireworks outside of a professional.

Cole has a pet cat owl named Doonesberg. Oh, Ethan loves cat owls! His is named Whisker. What breed? Snow tabby? Oh, those are so cool looking! Jeff's family dragon dog, Slick, used to chase cat owls night and day when they lived in the Northern Cove. Jeff lived in the Northern Cove? That's where Cole lives now! Did Jeff ever go to that restaurant by the docks, with the statue of the penguican that had—HOLY CRAP THAT WAS THE BEST PLACE EVER.

"Dude, I am blown away," Nick says, shaking his head. "I've never seen Oth—I mean… I've never seen Cole talk this much. Ever. You are a miracle worker."
Blaine grins somewhat bashfully. "All I did was give him a new nickname."

"Apparently, that's all he needed," Nick says.

Blaine shrugs and prepares to jump back into the conversation pool…

"Your Majesty!"

…when suddenly, the pool dries out completely, as Thad rides over the horizon.

"I'm sorry, the only thing I could find was Scalberry-Mango juice. Apparently, most people think scalberries alone are too tart. No accounting for taste, I guess…"

Blaine looks around at the Dragon Hawks, who all seem to have returned to awkward mode.

Huh.

Weird…

The lotus pedal kids are still camped outside of his room. They continue to shower the path in front of him with fragrant flower bits wherever he walks, smiling at him like they're afraid their lips will eat their teeth if they don't keep them separated. He tries to evade them, but they're quick little twerps. He fakes left and goes right, and they split up and run around him. Enough is enough.

"Okay, stop!" Kurt says. "Thanks for the potpourri, but I've had enough flowers. Go bother someone else!"

The grin twins nod and scurry off, and Kurt finally makes it to the steam-filled courtyard that houses the hot springs. The Fire Nation's geothermal profile ensures plenty of natural hot springs can be found around the country, but seldom few as nice as the ones at the Soaking Toes. Stripping down to his bare essentials, Kurt dips a toe in the water and quickly yanks it out. Apparently, Fire Nationals like their water just shy of boiling. After checking to make sure no one is watching, he quietly bends the water to a temperature less suited for cooking and sinks in to relax his troubles away.

His troubles are about a minute into dissolving when suddenly, two more troubles decide to hop in the water, landing with a splash.

Kurt opens his eyes to find Wes and David sitting across from him, looking a bit shell-shocked.

"This water is freezing!" Wes says.

"How can you sit in this?" David asks.

Kurt decides to answer his question with a question. "What are you doing here? No one asked you to come sit in my hot tub!"

"Tch. Frost tub is more like it," David shudders.

Wes takes a deep breath and exhales a bit of steam, heating up the water on his side of the tub. Kurt surreptitiously bends the heated water away from him, preserving his ever-shrinking happy place.

"What do you want?" Kurt groans.

"We noticed you were looking a little troubled," David says. "So we came to cheer you up!"
"This is a perfect opportunity for us to get to know each other," Wes adds. Kurt grits his teeth into a semi-grin. "Listen, boys, no offense, but... I don't actually want to know you."

"I know you're just worried about Blaine," Wes says. "So I won't take offense to that. We'll start with the basics: my name is Wesley, my favorite subject is history..."

Kurt slaps a hand over his eyes and sinks under the water in protest. As he looks up, Wes seems to be waiting for him to surface. Ha. They have no idea how long he can hold out down here...

After a few moments, David's head dips below the surface. His eyes say 'what the fuck?'

Kurt's eyes respond with a firm 'leave me alone!'

David surfaces.

The picture above the water is a little distorted, but Wes and David seem to be having a fairly animated conversation. About what, he does not know, and does not care.

At least, until they both suddenly dive under.

Wes opens his mouth and gurgles something completely incomprehensible, probably knowing good and damn well that Kurt can't hear him.

Rolling his eyes, Kurt surfaces. He waits until Wes and David follow, then enthusiastically shakes his head off all over them. "What?" he sighs.

"I think I understand what you're getting at," Wes says. "You don't particularly care about us."

"Well, seeing as I said those exact words, I'm impressed with your intuition!" Kurt says.

"Your sarcasm is hurtful, but, under the circumstances, understandable," David says. "You don't want to get to know us? Fine. But... I'm sure you wouldn't mind getting to know Blaine."

Kurt raises his eyebrows. "Go on."

"We've known Blaine since he was a little boy," Wes says.

"Well, littler," David grins.

"We have all sorts of endearing childhood memories," Wes says fondly. "Not to mention a few embarrassing ones. Perhaps you'd be interested in hearing some of those?"

Kurt thinks about this for a second. "Well played, Dragon Hawks," he says with a smirk. "Alright, you've got me hooked. Spill."

"I'll have your jobs for this!" Quinn shouts at the guards patrolling outside their cells. "You can't treat prisoners this way! I'm hungry, damn it!"

"We already served you lunch!" the guard says.

"It was disgusting!" Quinn says. "And not nearly enough! I demand more food at once. Preferably, something palatable."
"Like what?" the guard scoffs.

"Scalberries!" Quinn says, surprising even herself. "Yes. Something with scalberries in it. And pickled sea cucumbers."

The guard laughs. "You want a cherry on top, too?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Quinn says. "That's disgusting."

"Riiight," the guard says. "Yeah, sure. Coming right up. You just sit tight and wait here, and I'm sure your order will be right out." The only thing louder than his laugh is the sound of the door slamming as he leaves.

Quinn grits her teeth. Santana and Puck look at her like she has centipedes crawling out of her ears. "What?" she asks.

"You have some funky-ass taste in food," Santana says.


"Well, the same thing happens to me every time I remember that I slept with you, so I guess this makes us even," Quinn says. "Oh, wait, except not at all."

"Now, young lady, that was no way to ask for something," the old man says. "You've gotta be respectful! If'n you respect others, they'll respect you."

"I respect people who are worthy of it," Quinn says. "My parents, and my superiors."

"Respect fer authority!" the old man says. "Well, it's a start."

"Tch," Santana scoffs. "If by 'respect' you mean 'part legs for,' then yeah, she 'respects' authority."

"Better than opening up for anyone for the right price," Quinn says.

"I respect money, chica," Santana says. "And I lay out my terms beforehand. All my contracts are agreed upon by both parties. You, on the other hand, will do whatever the big people tell you, like a good little girl. Here's a little free advice, Quinny—grow a freaking backbone. The 'good little girl' thing doesn't work out so well in the long run."

"Oh?" the old man says. "Speaking from experience, are we?"

"Fuck you, dust-breath. Get your rickety ass back to dreamland afore I snap you in half," Santana snits.

Quinn gives Santana a scrutinizing once-over. "What would you know about obedience?" she asks, tone strangely neutral.

Santana rolls her eyes. "I don't feel like getting into it, so here's the lowdown—the more you bend over backwards for people, the more they come to expect it. And the more pissed off they get when you finally stand up for something. So unless you just want to be everybody's bitch for the rest of your life, I'd think about standing up sooner, rather than later." She smirks. "If you're lucky, maybe you'll get exiled, like me."

Puck raises his eyebrows. "You were exiled?"
Santana smirks. "Best thing that ever happened to me."

It seems to hit with Quinn, sinking in deep enough to at least get her to think for a bit. "I love my country, and I love my parents. I follow those two things without error. The day I go against them is the day I make myself a traitor, and that will never happen," she growls. "So thanks for the advice, but I don't think I'll need it."

Santana stares at her. "You really want to spend the rest of your life following orders and doing what everyone else wants?"

"What's wrong with that?" Quinn asks.

Santana just shakes her head. "It's a fucking waste," she says, sounding almost sad.

"Oh, you pipe down, missy," the old man says. "She's the only one here with any sense. You keep on keepin' on, young lady! You'll make a fine wife someday," he finishes with a slight laugh.

Quinn looks slightly nauseous, but remains steadfast. "You'll see," she says. "When Sue comes to pull me out of this disgusting pit, you'll see that loyalty is rewarded. You'll see…"

The Naval Convoy looks like a massive caterpillar of man, animal and machine curled upon itself for a nap. There are tents everywhere, and the place is positively littered with merchants, minstrels, and food-makers. It's late afternoon by the time they get there, so the military machine has already pulled off into a valley to set up camp for the night.

"Alright, we're here," Blaine says. "Jeff, you're the Seaman…"


"…what's the plan now?" Blaine finishes.

"Normally, we'd go somewhere to check in," Jeff says. "But since we're not actually registered, that probably wouldn't work too well. I suggest we just kind of filter in and act like we belong there."

"Wonderful advice, Jeff!" Thad says. "I'll take it into consideration. Now, everyone, just follow my lead, and—"

"Umm, Thad?" Blaine says. "Shouldn't we follow Jeff's lead?"

Thad stares at him in abject confusion. "But… Jeff is not the leader."

"But he is the only one who knows what he's doing," Blaine counters. "I think we should let him take point on this one. Lead the way, Jeff!"

"Sweet!" Jeff says, riding out in front without hesitation. "Follow me!" he says.

The Hawks oblige him. After a few moments of pouting, a put-out Thad trudges after them.

Thad continues to pout miserably through the entire ride into the valley. Blaine, on the other hand, is beaming and looking around like a kid in a candy store. All of it's so new to him. Various groups of soldiers clump together, laughing and joking at everything and nothing. Vendors spot him and try to hawk everything from good luck charms to broken clock pieces to aphrodisiacs. Big, friendly-looking bloodhounds bark excitedly at all the new sights, sounds and smells they are being subjected to as their handlers walk them through the encampment. Blaine can totally relate to
Jeff talks with a few soldiers and finds them a place at the edge of the encampment near the forest to set up their own stuff. They're in the middle of pitching their own tent on the outskirts of the settlement when Thad breaks out of his sulk. It's Blaine, of course, who breaks him out, but the odd thing is, this time he doesn't even mean to.

Thad just spots the sword on Blaine's belt.

"That's a rather… rustic blade, my Lo—errr..." he stammers.

"Yeah, you might want to cut down on the title-pimping," Blaine says. "Just call me 'Ozark' while we're here."

"Right," Thad says. "Well, 'Ozark…' I did not know you had skill with a blade."

"Oh, I don't," Blaine says. "Not really. Dad wanted me to focus on firebending, so I poured all my energy into that. This sword is just something I picked up along the way."

Thad gasps in shock and horror. "Such extravagant waste!" he says. "A weapon of such fine heritage deserves better treatment!"

Blaine cocks an eyebrow at Thad's unexpected burst of outrage.

"Thad," Blaine says. "It's fine. I'm not offended. In fact, you're probably right."

Thad catches himself. "Oh, my—I am so sorry, my Lo—Ozark, I don't know what came over me! I shouldn't have disrespected—"

"Thad," Blaine says. "It's fine. I'm not offended. In fact, you're probably right."

Thad looks thoughtful. "You know, I am quite skilled in bladework. I could give you a lesson or two. If you like, of course," he says casually.

Blaine lights up. "I'd love to!"

Thad matches his happiness. "Fantastic!" He turns to the other Hawks. "Hawks, finish setting up camp and see what information you can gather from the soldiers. 'Ozark' and will be at the practice fields."

Where the encampment is controlled chaos, the practice fields are ordered and regimented. There's a large circle of blackened ground where the firebenders practice, a smaller stretch of with practice dummies for weapons training, a set of sparring circles, and a long stretch of land with targets set up for ranged weapons. Blaine's eyes can't decide what to focus on—all the techniques on display are fascinating to him.

"The Harwoods skill with the blade is legendary," Thad intones. "Passed from father to son for generations. My grandfather earned the honorary title 'Dragonclaw' for his extraordinary war record during the Silver Flame Conflict. I carry with me now the very blade he used back then, the Red Whisper, forged from unbreakable Si Wong Steel…"

Without really meaning to, Blaine drifts away from the sound of Thad's voice. The Senior Hawk continues to talk as he casually wanders off without Blaine, who has stopped to watch some of the action in the sparring circles. Armored soldiers bat and swipe at each other with everything from clubs, to maces, to giant swords, to iron knuckles. Blaine finds himself getting into a few of the fights, pantomiming dodging and feinting with the participants.
When he realizes that Thad has wandered off without him, he tries to hurry up the field to find him, but he is once again distracted, this time by the target range. Though there are a few with throwing knives and shurikens, the majority of people practicing are archers. One archer in particular catches his eye. A fairly tall fellow, not too broad, but anything but weak, if the ease with which he draws the bowstring is any indication. Blaine watches in awe as he nails bullseye after bullseye without ever skipping a beat.

And then, all of a sudden, the archer's sharp eyes are on Blaine. "Like what you see?" He grins at the Prince, and pulls out another arrow. "Watch this."

This time when he shoots, the arrow lands well below the bullseye. Blaine frowns in confusion, but the archer just smirks. He quickly lets loose with three more shots, all of which land directly above the previous arrow, forming a perfectly straight line up the target.

Blaine smiles and gives him a bit of applause.

But the archer shakes his head and takes out one more arrow. This time, he pulls back and aims into the air, sending the arrow flying off into the sky. Blaine tries to follow it, but just winds up staring at empty air. The archer snaps his fingers, drawing Blaine's attention, and points to the target. It looks basically the same to Blaine. He stares at it for a couple of seconds, trying to figure out what is suppose to have happened, when it happens right in front of him.

The shot comes down and neatly severs every arrow embedded in the target, leaving only the arrowheads, before landing perfectly straight in the ground, wobbling only slightly.

Blane bursts into applause again. "That was amazing!" he says. "I definitely liked what I saw."

"Thanks," the guy says. "The feeling's mutual."

Blaine looks at him oddly. "But… I didn't do anything."

"I know," the archer grins.

Blaine tilts his head, but before he can inquire further, Thad comes barging back into his life.

"Ozark!" he says, marching up to Blaine. "There you are! Don't wander off like that. I don't like talking to myself…"

And before he can inform Thad that he was not the one who wandered, Blaine is being dragged off towards the sparring fields.

He looks back towards the target range, but the archer is nowhere to be found.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Steady…

Dripdrip. Drip.

Easy now… don't try to wrestle with it, just let it flow…

Drip.

Almost there…
"Crap!" Finn grunts, lamenting the water spilled all over his bed. He sends a glare at Mercedes, who remains completely unaware, due to being completely asleep.

"Awww, what happened?" Rachel asks, looking up from her writing desk.

"Snorecedes threw off my concentration," Finn says. "I almost had it, too. I'm getting better at this, I know it."

"You have to learn how to tune out external stimuli," Rachel says. "Maintain concentration on your task at all times. As an actress, I am well aware that anything can go wrong at a moment's notice. And yet, the show must go on."

Finn smiles at her. "How's your bending doing?"

Rachel blushed slightly. "I… ahhh… my bending. My bending is going. It is going in a direction. Very firmly. In a straight line with little deviation."

"…not well, I'm afraid," Rachel says. "That's actually the subject of the song I am writing, 'Ode to Frustration.'"

"Cool," Finn says. "Can I hear it?"

Rachel blushed again. "Well… it's not quite finished."

"It's okay," Finn says. "I'm sure it'll sound great if you sing it."

"Well," Rachel says with a smile. "If you insist…" She clears her throat.

"Oh, petulant winds of woe,
Why is it that you treat me so?
For when I tell you where to go,
A raspberry at me is all you blow.

He says that it is not a race,
But he's not the one in second place,
And though I wish it were not the case,
I long to punch his stupid… time card," she finishes sheepishly.

"Wait," Finn says. "That last one didn't rhyme."

"It's a subversion of audience expectations," Rachel says quickly.

"Oh," Finn says. "I don't know what that means. Is that all you've got? You've been writing for a long time."

"Well… I got a little distracted and… might have started drawing halfway through," Rachel admits.

"Oooh, let me see!" Finn says, bouncing up off the bed.

"Wait, no!" Rachel says. "It's not meant for public viewing ye—"
But Finn has already snatched the paper from her hands. He tilts his head at it, turning it this way and that. "...this looks like a drawing of Kurt being blown away in a giant tornado. And... is that supposed to be you sending down lightning from the clouds?"

"...yes," Rachel says sheepishly.

"...oh," Finn says. "So when you were singing, that was about... ohhhh," Finn nods. "I've got you." He smiles at her. "Believe me, I know how you feel."

"You want to punch Kurt in the face, too?" Rachel asks.

"Well, no," Finn says. "But I know how it feels to hang around someone who just seems better than you at everything. Including the things that you're supposed to be good at. It kind of sucks sometimes."

Rachel sighs. "I just don't understand it! I am, by the accounts of my singing tutors, a prodigious talent in all areas! I've never met with a skill I couldn't master, and yet this... this one thing that is supposed to be as deeply woven into me as my very spirit... this escapes me completely!" She thrusts a hand out to try and make a gust of air to blow the curtains. Instead, she sends the contest of the writing desk onto the floor. "See?" she growls. "It's just infuriating! And that he can do it without even trying..."

"Hey!" Finn says. "You just gave me an awesome idea! Remember what Kurt said about airbending and waterbending being similar?"

"Yes," Rachel says.

"Well, we both need a lot of practice. Maybe we could help each other!" Finn says. "We could practice together and help keep each other motivated and stuff. And since we both suck, it won't be nearly as depressing as practicing with Kurt!"

Rachel looks thoughtful. "That is an interesting idea..."

"Come on," Finn says. "It'll be great. Just the two of us, somewhere nice and private, getting all bendy with each other..."

Rachel's eyes go wide, and she blushes again.

"...oh, wow, that is not what I meant to say. I mean, well, it is, but it wasn't supposed to sound... the way it sounded," Finn says, turning bright red to match Rachel. "I mean... obviously that's not what would happen. Ever. At all. Under any circumstance. Because—"

Knock knock knock.

"Because HOLY CRAP, someone's at the door!" Finn says excitedly, blasting past Rachel to open the door to find a nervous-looking bellhop holding a message canister.

"This came for you just a few moments ago!" he says. "Your hawk is quite enthusiastic in his delivery!"

"Oh yeah," Finn says. "Sorry about the hole in the... whatever Pavarotti made the hole in."

"Oh, no, no! Think nothing of it!" the bellhop insists. "I am sure our insurance covers bird-related damages. There is no need to apologize—I am sorry for even the suggestion of the implication that this was in any way your fault or responsibility!" His panic level seems to be going up by the
"Umm, dude, it's okay," Finn says.

"I cannot believe I was so rude!" the bellhop says, breaking out into a sweat. "Here is your letter. Please accept it… along with this…” He looks around the hallway. "…complimentary wall hanging!" He steps out of the doorway for a second, and comes back with a giant picture of a dragon dog playing Pai Sho with a cat owl.

"Ummm, thank you?" Finn says, taking the letter and the picture.

"No, most gracious and esteemed guests, thank you!" the bellhop stammers. "Let me know if you need anything at all!"

"Okay, no prob—"

And the guy practically throws himself down the hallway. Finn looks after him for a few seconds, before quietly turning around and closing the door. "Did that seem weird to you, Rachel?"

Rachel nods. "It's almost as if they are afraid of us," she says. "But I can't think of why that might be."

"I can," Mercedes says.

Finn nearly falls over from spinning around so fast. "How long have you been awake?" he asks.

"Long enough," Mercedes says with a smirk. "What's in that letter?"

Finn blinks at her a couple of times. Somewhat impatient, Rachel snatches the letter from him, unrolls it, and begins to read.

"No new info so far. The official explanation is that the dance lessons will make soldiers more limber and agile. We have at least one testimony that this is extremely effective in the bedroom. No word on the field of battle. Everyone is fine. B is training with Thad.

_B is awesome, by the way._

_Nick_

"Well, that's good news," Finn says. "We should probably show this to Kurt."

"I volunteer myself for that task," Rachel says.

"I'll go with you," Finn says.

"Hold up, big boy," Mercedes says. "I need your help first.

"With what?" Finn asks.

"Does it matter?" Mercedes asks. "It's your fault I'm all gimped up to begin with! Now get your soggy butt over here and help me up."

"I'll just… go share the good news with Kurt," Rachel says awkwardly, scurrying out of the room.

Finn sighs and walks over to help Mercedes hobble out of bed. "Do you want some more ice for your ankle?"
"No," Mercedes says. "Help me over to the desk."

Finn helps her limp over to the writing desk, picking a few things off the floor for her. "What are you going to write?"

"A letter, doofus," Mercedes says. "The Dragon Hawks will be expecting a reply."

"Shouldn't we wait for Kurt?" Finn asks.

"This is a more... personal matter," Mercedes says. "Now quit hovering, nosey!"

Finn rolls his eyes and goes over to sit on the bed as Mercedes starts writing. For a few seconds, there is only the silent scraping of pen on paper. "Why do you think everyone here is so weird?" Finn asks, after a bit. "You don't think they know who we are, do you?"

Mercedes shakes her head, continuing to write. "It's not who they know we are. It's who they think we are..." She smirks as she finishes her introduction.

'Dearest Thaddeus... I've been thinking of you a great deal, and my curiosity has been piqued. I was wondering about a few things..."

Down at the hot springs, Kurt is drowning.

In laughter.

"Not exaggerating in the slightest," David grins. "It took three people on stilts with hedge clippers to cut him down."

"In his underwear?" Kurt says, incredulous.

"In his underwear," Wes confirms. "Needless to say, Lady Kiku was not amused."

Kurt clutches his sides, seizes with laughter, and promptly sinks underwater.

By the time he emerges, Rachel has somehow appeared at the water's edge.

"Well, I'm glad to see your mood has improved," Rachel says. "Allow me to bolster it further!"

She presents the letter with a flourish.

"Oooh," Kurt says, reaching out with an instantly-dry hand to take the paper.

Wes and David orbit around the spring's edge to read the letter on either side of him.

"Oh, thank La," Kurt sighs.

"See?" Rachel says. "Nothing to worry about. Blaine and the others are fine."

Kurt smiles at her. "Thanks for the good news, Rachel." He turns to Wes and David. "And... thank you two, as well. I definitely needed that laugh."

"We aim to please," David says.

"Any time, Kurt," Wes says. "Any friend of Blaine's is a friend of ours."

Kurt smiles at them. "Likewise." He offers his hand. "Friends?"
Wes and David shake his hand in turn. "Friends," they echo.

And the six of them head back to the room together.

Then, Kurt realizes the flower children have returned, and promptly scares them off again.

So the four of them head back to the room together to end the day.

It's probably the longest stretch of silence between the four of them so far. Puck has actually started to nod off when Quinn goes and breaks it—and not for the reasons he'd expect.

"I'm sorry," she says quietly.

"Say what?" Santana asks.

"I'm sorry," Quinn repeats.

"Are you feeling okay?" Puck asks.

"I let my temper get away with me," she says. "I should not have attacked so carelessly and thoughtlessly against the Avatar's little friends. I don't know what came over me, I just… I was so angry…"

"Whoa, whoa," Santana says. "What the fuck? You've been harping on about how this is all our fault this whole time, and now you're taking responsibility? What gives?"

"I've had the chance to think on the situation," Quinn says. "I acted rashly, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let my emotions control me. Lady Sylvester taught me better than that."

"Are you still talking about that bitch?" Puck asks.

Quinn shrugs. "Why not? She taught me everything I know. She practically raised me for these past few years…" She trails off. "I'm grateful, of course. My parents wouldn't have sent me to Chi-Ryu Academy if they didn't think it best."


"They wanted to ensure my potential was fulfilled, that's all," Quinn says, without any heat. "I don't blame you for not understanding. Your parents… well, I'm not sure of the situation, but they seem to have wronged you somehow, and I'm sorry—"

"Nobody asked for your pity, rugburn—"

"—but my parents are not bad people!" Quinn says. "They love me. I know it. They have high expectations of me, and I am determined to live up to them. I know I can make them proud," she says. "I just know it."

"So that's what it's all about with you, is it?" the old man says, chiming in suddenly. "Making mommy and daddy proud?"

"Of course," Quinn says. "What else would it be about?"

"Makin' yerself proud, maybe?" the old man says.
Quinn squints at him. "What happened to 'always obey your parents?'"

"Time and a place for everything," the old man says with a shrug.

Quinn starts to speak again, but the clang of the metal door opening cuts her off. As she has every time the door to their cell block opened, Quinn eagerly steps towards the bars, hoping to see a familiar face waiting for her outside.

This time, she isn't disappointed. It's not who she expected, however.

"That's the one," Becky says, pointing to her. "Let her out."

Quinn smiles, partly in relief, partly in triumph, as the guard opens her cell. She directs the smile at Becky as she steps out.

"Wipe that stupid grin off your face, Fabray!" Becky barks. "The Fire Lord is not happy with you. She wants to see you at once."

Quinn does as she is told, suppressing a slight shudder as she schools her face into stone. "Very well," she says. "What of my Chi-Ryus?"

"We already let them out," the guard says.

"Good," Quinn says. "Once we release Puck and Santana—"

Becky holds up her hand. "No way," she says. "Those two rot in prison forever. Fire Lord's orders."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Santana says. "Hold up, Tiny Tiffany, you want to run that by me again?"

"Don't speak to me, Earth Kingdom trash!" Becky barks. "I'll have you flogged."

Puck looks slightly panicked. "Hey, come on! Quinn, you can't just leave us here!"

Quinn looks at the two of them sadly. "...I'm sorry," she says quietly. "But I am loyal to the Fire Lord. Her orders stand. Becky, lead the way."

"Don't tell me what to do!" Becky says, immediately stepping ahead of her to lead the way out of the cells.

"You bitch!" Santana says. "I hope you stick your head so far up Sue's ass, you get stuck there!"

"If I die in here," Puck says. "I'm all over haunting your ass! I'll pop up in mirrors when you change clothes! I'll possess your bathwater! Anytime you're naked, I'll be there, spirit-perv ing all over you!"

Quinn gives them one last sad look, before steeling herself and turning to walk out of the room.

"Good luck out there, missy!" the old man calls. "Go on! Make everybody proud! You'll see where pride gets ya, soon enough! Hahahahaha..." It starts off innocent enough, but as Quinn continues to walk, the old man's laughter seems to grow in volume and intensity. Each step takes it up a notch, until it is less a laugh, and more of a screeching cackle of madness.

Quinn does not spare a single glance back at him as she walks. Her mission is always forward. What's behind doesn't matter.

The laughter follows her until the warden slams the door to the cell block, leaving her in blessed
silence.

Puck and Santana aren't so lucky.

"—AAAAAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" the old man cackles.

"SHUT UP!" Puck yells.

"HAAAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA—" the door slams. "—finally. I thought she'd never leave."

Puck's eyes bug out. Suddenly, Mr. Old Man seems a lot less old. And a little disturbingly familiar.

"Okay, what the fuck," Santana says. "You sound way different. What are you talking about?"

"Quinn is hopeless," the old man says, without hint of a slur or accent. "She's in this for sentimental and ideological reasons. There's no getting through to her. You two, on the other hand," the old man grins. "Y'all speak my language. I think we might be able to do business."

The more he talks, the more his familiarity nags Puck. "Alright, cut the crap. Who are you?"

The old man reaches up and pulls his beard away from his face…

"Motherfucker!" Puck says.

…revealing the smug mug of Artie Abrams under the disguise.

"Oh, Hills no," Santana says. "You picked the wrong prison, fool. I hope you brought sunblock, because it's about to get ultraviolent in here."

Artie holds up his hand. "Now, now," he says. "I didn't come here to fight."

"Good," Puck says. "You can sit still while I pound your face in…"

"Bitches, please," Artie says. "You can't get out of that cell, and you know it. If you had a way to escape, you wouldn't have panicked so hard just now."

Puck says nothing.

Santana growls wordlessly.

"Thought so," Artie says. "Now, I, on the other hand… well, I've broken out of far worse places than this. And I might just be willing to take you with me…" He smirks. "…if the price is right."

Santana snarls. "If you think we're gonna work for your happy-clappy little group after the shit you've put us through—"

"Not them," Artie says, cutting her off. "I don't… hang around with that crew anymore. You'd just work for me. With me, to be more precise."

Silence.

And then Puck cocks his head back, staring at Artie. "Doing what?"

"Puck!" Santana says.

"I'm just asking!" Puck says.
Santana glares at him. "We can worry about the specifics later. That's part of my conditions, you see. I want you to agree to this job ahead of time."

"You think we're gonna be your little slaves because you broke us out of prison one time?" Santana asks.

"Oh, no," Artie says. "Not slavery. You'll get paid."

Puck and Santana look at each other, communicating silently.

"Lay out your terms," Puck says.

Artie smiles. "In exchange for breaking you out," he says says. "I want a one-job guarantee. You do one thing, of my choosing, no questions asked. After it's finished, you're free to do what you want. But that's my price. Take it or leave it."

"What's the job?" Santana asks.

Artie smirks. "Ah-ah-ahh," he says, shaking his head. "I already told you, that's part of the deal."

Santana glowers at him. "We're already on a job," she says.

"I think it's safe to say that Sue Sylvester has effectively terminated your contractual relationship," Artie says, "as well as any reason to remain loyal to her. She offers you nothing. I offer you freedom and plenty of cash money to go along with it."

Puck and Santana have another silent conversation.

And apparently, they reach completely different conclusions.

"Deal," Puck says.

"Puck!" Santana says. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"What, you got a better plan for getting out of here?" Puck says. "We team up with this little shit or we spend the rest of our lives in a cell. That's a fucking no-brainer."

Santana looks over to Artie. "Don't think for one second I won't end you if you try to play us."

Artie looks offended. "What kind of person do you think I am, Santana?"

Santana looks him over. "An asshole."

Artie smiles a mile wide. "Got it in one! But here's the thing… I'm an honest asshole. I've told you how it's gonna work, and I stick by my word. It's not a trick—the job isn't hard. This is just a little test. A measure of trust, if you will."

A bit of water drips from the ceiling, hitting Santana in the forehead. She glowers at her surroundings, tries her best to melt Artie with her glare, and finally gives in. "Fine," she says. "I'm in."

"What's the escape plan?" Puck says.

"Let me worry about that," Artie says. "I'll take care of it tonight, while you're asleep. Be ready."
We leave in the morning."

With that, the earthbender rolls over onto the few scraps of cloth that pass for a bed in his cell, and promptly goes back to sleep.

Santana keeps glaring at him until she can no longer keep her own eyes open.

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"Clang."

"A bit more fluidity in the wrist."

"Clang clang."

"Much better! Now, don't grip the hilt so tightly. Caress it, like a lover. Don't strangle it, like my Uncle Albert and his tailor."

"Wait, who did what to a tailor?"

"Errr, nothing. Inside joke among the family…"

"Guys?" Nick calls, having followed the sounds and voices to their sparring circle. The other Hawks are not far behind.

"Nick!" Blaine says. "Hey, you guys are all done?"

Nick nods. "How's your swordfighting coming?" he asks.

"Under my tutelage, he's improved remarkably," Thad says proudly.

"You are truly a great teacher," Blaine says, patting Thad on the back.

"I'm well aware," Thad says. "But it's nice to hear you say it."

The Hawks indulge in a collective eye roll.

"Speaking of teaching… what do you guys say we get in a little firebending practice before the day's end?" Blaine asks. "I'm sure I could teach you guys a few tricks."

"That'd be awesome!" Jeff says.

"Well, come on!" Blaine says. He leads them over to the firebending circle, only to find a crowd gathered there for some odd reason. In the middle of the circle stands, a fairly burly guy with a handlebar mustache, a goatee, and a top-knot, making hair stick out from all four sides of his head like a human compass. He poses proudly, mooning to the crowd.

"Who wants a piece of THE PAIN?" he grunts.

With a mighty battle cry, a smaller soldier charges into the circle.

A few seconds later, he flies out, with a cry of a decidedly different kind.

"What's going on?" Blaine asks a nearby soldier.

"King of the Hill," she replies. "That jerk has been king for an hour now," she says, pointing to the hairy compass man.
"King of the Hill…" Blaine says. "How does that work?"

The soldier looks at him like he's lost his mind.

"That guy rules the circle until someone can knock him down a peg," Nick helpfully explains.

"Ah, got it!" Blaine says. "So, we're just waiting for somebody to take him down?"

"Pretty much," Nick says.

"Cool," Blaine says. "I'll go!"

"Yeah, we should probably—hey!" Nick says. "Bl—Ozark, you can't just"

"Sure I can!" Blaine says cheerfully, as he heads off to take on someone roughly twice his size.

There are many ways to go over what happens next.

In this case, the reactions of the Dragon Hawks as they observed the fight tell the story best.

"Oh, man," Nick says. "Oh, man, please don't die, please don't die, please don't—ohhhh."

"Whoa!" Jeff says, flinching back from the heat. "Did you know he could do that? I didn't know he could do that."

"I didn't know that could be done," Trent says.

"Judging by his face," Flint remarks, "neither did his opponent."

"Oooh," Cole says, getting into the fight. He starts bobbing back and forth. "Get him! Get him! Do that thing, with the fire, and the—YES! YES, DO THAT!"

"That looks decidedly uncomfortable," Thad says, sounding slightly sick.

"Can dudes bend like that?" Luke whispers to Ethan.

"Apparently so," Ethan says. "I've gotta say, he's really—oh! Oh! Ha! Yes! Climb him! Climb that jerk!"

"The bigger they are, the harder they—ooooooh," James winces, along with everyone else. "Oh, that was just… so wrong. And yet, so right."

And shortly thereafter, compass man runs from the circle crying, and the crowd bursts into raucous applause.

Blaine blinks after him. "Wow… I didn't think I hit him that hard."

"I'm pretty sure that was more from humiliation than pain," Nick says, slightly awed. "You spanked that guy."

"Long live the King!" Jeff says.

"King?" Blaine asks.

"You're the King now!" Thad says. "You own the circle, and must defend it against all comers."

"Oh," Blaine says, smiling. "Well, alright. Who wants to challenge my throne?"
There is a distinct lack of anything besides nervous coughing in answer to that question.

"Aw, come on," Blaine says. "I'll go easy on you."

"I'd prefer it if you didn't, actually," a gruff voice says.

Blaine looks over to see an older man stepping into the ring. He's got a short, graying beard, weatherbeaten skin, and surprisingly calm blue eyes that regard Blaine with something like curiosity. "I was just heading over here to teach that punk a lesson," the older man says, "but when I got here, you were there doing my job for me. And not a bad job it was, not at all."

"Thank you, sir," Blaine says.

"I trained a lot of these soldiers," the older man says. "And I've never seen anybody fight like you. What do you say to a friendly match, son? I'd like to see if this old dog's still got what it takes to wrestle with the young'uns."

Blaine bows to the officer. "It'd be an honor, sir."

Nick can't tell you how long they fight. After a while, the whole thing becomes kind of hypnotic—so much movement and light and heat, fire billowing out and spiraling through the air, rolling, roving, and roaring all the while. Blaine and the officer fight each other to a standstill—the older man's experience and skill making up for his lack of youth, countering Blaine's endless enthusiasm and quick thinking.

In the end, the only reason they stop is because of exhaustion.

"Enough!" the officer calls out finally, breathing heavily. The crowd bursts into applause yet again. "Son, you fight like the bastard love child of Agni himself. I've never seen anyone like you in all my years of service! What's your name?"

Blaine is bent over double, panting and dripping with sweat. He manages to pull his lungs back in long enough to answer the question. "Ozark… sir."

"Well, Ozark," the man says. "I'd like to shake your hand if you don't mind. The Gods don't hand out skill like yours lightly. You've got a great destiny ahead of you, boy."

Blaine grins and stands up straight, extending his hand. "Thank you, sir."

The officer clasps his hand firmly, and gives him a final pat on the back (which nearly knocks him over), and dismisses the crowd, leaving Blaine to try to remember how to walk or stand up properly.

"Dude," Jeff says, running up to him. "Dude. That was… you just… dude. Dude."

"I second that," Nick says.

Blaine grins at them. "Thanks… guys…”

"I want to be you when I grow up," Cole says.

"Aren't we… the same age?" Blaine asks.

Cole shrugs. "Still."

"Can you teach me how to do that thing where you exploded?" Trent asks. "That was amazing!"
"Maybe… later," Blaine says. "I'm feeling a little wiped right now."

The Hawks continue to clamor around him, congratulating him on an incredible performance (even if it can't really be called a 'win'). They form a nice buffer around him as they head back to the tent, keeping away his other admirers.

As he heads back to the tent, he gets the distinct impression that someone is following him, but he can't spot anyone but the Hawks tailing him.

It isn't until the Hawks enter the tent ahead of him that Blaine learns his tail's identity.

"Pretty good show back there," the archer says, leaning against a nearby table with a casual smirk.

"Oh," Blaine says, starting slightly. He grins. "Like what you saw?"

"Loved it, actually," the archer says. "I have to say, I knew from the second I set eyes on you that you were something special, but I was not quite expecting that."

"Thanks," Blaine says.

"OZARK!" a voice calls from inside the tent.


The archer straightens up. "Ozark, right?"

Blaine nods.

The archer smirks and starts to head off. "You're an interesting guy, Ozark," he says, giving him a small wink as he walks past him. "See you around…"

"Wait!" he says. "I don't know your name!"

The archer just keeps right on walking.

Blaine watches him go.

He's not sure why.

Back in the tent, the Hawks continue to sing his praises until he pulls rank and issues a royal edict that okay, seriously, they have to talk about something else now.

Then they move onto other things. Like Thad's increasingly red face as he reads one of the letters that came back with Pavarotti, and how quickly he burns the thing when the others demand to see it. And how Blaine gets all gooey-eyed when he reads what Kurt wrote for him.

And Thad wondering who this 'Cole' character is that everyone seems to be talking to.

When he lays himself down to sleep, he's out almost as soon as his head hits the mattress.

Overall, not a bad day.

Quinn is taken to a nearby fortress, where the soldiers have set up a makeshift throne room for the Fire Lord. After Becky goes in to announce her, she enters, her head held low, and bows before the throne. "Fire Lord, I apologize for my—"
"Save it," Sue barks. "You're demoted."

Her head snaps up. "…what?"

"You heard me," Sue spits. "We're fighting off an infestation of buzzard bees, and do you want to know why? It's because the bloated, stinking corpse of your failure can be smelt all the way in the Earth Kingdom!"

"But—"

"Don't speak," Sue says. "At this point, I question whether you can handle words without stabbing yourself with the sharp parts. You will spend the next week scrubbing floors, dishes, tanks, weapons, and anything else that needs scrubbing using colorful toothbrushes approved for children under 3. I don't trust you with anything more complex than that—you might hurt yourself. If you manage these simple tasks without killing or seriously maiming yourself or others, we'll see about graduating you to a fascinating invention called a mop. Doesn't that sound fantastic?"

"But Fire Lord—"

"That wasn't actually a question. Now, thank me for my mercy and get out of my sight."

Her anger and confusion threaten to bubble over, but she pushes them down. "…thank you, Fire Lord," she says, bowing again. She heads towards the exit with all the dignity she can muster. On her way out, she nearly runs into an attendant, entering with a stack of papers.

"Watch it!" the attendant says. "These were just printed!"

"What are they?" Quinn asks, taking one of the papers. She gasps aloud when she sees what's on it.

"Impressive, aren't they?" Sue says.

"They're perfect," Quinn says, awed. "Who made this?"

"Found it, actually," Sue says. "In Anderson's old crap. The irony is so disgustingly wrong that I am getting horny just thinking about it. In no time at all, that little brat will be squirming in my palm… no thanks to you."

Quinn grits her teeth. "Fire Lord—"

"Get out."

She leaves.

Night passes…

When Kurt awakens the next day, he looks out the window to find the sky overcast and grey. A wave of darker clouds moves towards them, sweeping over the sky like the sea turned upside down.

"This is less than ideal training weather," David says. "Best perhaps to put it off until it the storm passes."

Kurt dismisses him with a nod.

"Yikes," Finn says behind him. "That looks like it might be nasty. I'd hate to be stuck outside right
now."

Kurt glares at him.


"Just…" Kurt sighs. "Go get me some tea, would you?"

"Sure," Finn says.

Kurt turns and stares out the window, unable to explain the dread growing in his gut.

When Puck awakens the next day, something is off. Several things, actually.

For one, his hand is no longer shackled to the wall. And the door to his cell is open. As is the door to Artie's and Santana's.

Flexing his somewhat sore wrist, Puck stands up and looks around.

Artie's not in his cell.

"Santana!" Puck says, flexing his slightly sore wrist. "Hey!"

"What?" Santana asks, rolling over. "Go time already?"

"You were asleep?" Puck asks. "You didn't do this?"

"Ummm, no?" Santana says. "What are you talking about?"

"The doors are unlocked," Puck says. "And so's my hand. If you didn't do it, who did?"

"Gee, let me think—Four-Eyes McCreeper, maybe?" Santana says, standing up.

"He can't walk," Puck says. "How did he get around?"

Santana shrugs, flexing and stretching the kinks out. "Fucked if I know. How do walruseals get around on land?"

"I don't know," Puck says.

Together, they head out to the hallway. Two people lie in the corridor—one unconscious guard, and one equally unconscious Artie Abrams.

Santana regards him carefully. "Awww, he's so cute when he's asleep!" she mock-simpers. "Let's leave him."

Puck looks down at the sleeping earthbender. "No," he says. "I want to get paid." He crouches down next to Artie and starts poking at him.

"Fine," Santana says. "I'm going to go find our shit. Follow me when you've roused Stubbles."

With that, she turns and stalks off into the prison like a panther on the prowl. Great is the frustration and anger she needs to work out, and she's thinking the first guard she meets gets to be her therapy pillow, ripe for the punching.

Do NOT stand in her way today…
When Blaine wakes up the next morning, there is whispering and the world is shaking. Wait, no, that's his head. He's shaking. Or rather, being shaken.

He opens his eyes to find the pale, fearful face of Thad looking at him with no small degree of urgency.

"My Lord," Thad says. "You must flee. Immediately."

"What?" Blaine says groggily. "What's—"

Before he can say anything else, Trent and Jeff bodily lift him from his sleeping bag and stand him up. As his senses come to him, he slowly but surely becomes aware of the rest of the Hawks, awake and in various positions around the tent. They're already dressed in their armor. Many of them have their weapons out.

Nick stands by the entrance flap, carefully peering outside, his hand near the hilt of his dual dao swords.

"We'll hold them off for as long as we can," Thad says. Flint and Cole start to put his armor on, and Blaine can't make heads or tails out of what's going on long enough to stop them.

"What is this all about?" Blaine asks. "Why are you all so panicked?"

"Because of this!" Thad says, holding a poster up for him to look at.

Blaine's jaw drops. He can't… how did… where did they… "That's… that's me."

"We know," Thad says. "It's an incredible likeness."

Blaine looks at the picture, and has to fight not to choke. Oh, it's an incredible likeness alright. It's a perfect portrait of him, and she turned it into a wanted poster. The words underneath it read: 'wanted, dead or alive, dangerous criminal, skilled assassin, possibly connected to the death of the Fire Lord. Reward offered.'

There is only one place Sue Sylvester could have found this. And for a moment, Blaine feels that his hatred for her could power a thousand suns. "That poster… it's…"

"There's no time, my Lord!" Thad says. "We will defend you with our lives, but we cannot hold off an entire army. Not for very long. You need every second's head start you can get. Please, you must go!"

"Guys, they're coming!" Nick says.

"How many?" Thad asks.

"A lot," Nick says, his face paler by the second.

Flint and Cole finish the last of the straps on his armor. Jeff provides him with his sword.

Outside, the sound of marching footsteps and low, clamoring voices grows closer by the second.

"Go!" Thad says, pushing him towards the back of the tent.

"What about you guys?" Blaine asks.
"Do not fear for us. We…” Thad says, faltering for just a moment. "We knew it might come to this."

"They're almost here," Nick whispers. He steps away from the tent flap, putting his hand on the hilt of his swords. Blaine can practically hear the approaching soldiers' sheathed weapons clanking against their armor.

The Hawks ready themselves. Each face Blaine glances at looks sicker and more fearful than the last.

"Go, Blaine!" Thad says. "While there's still time!"

"Surround the tent!" comes the order from outside.

Blaine swallows thickly. "I can't let you do this," he says quietly.

"What?" Thad barks.

"I can't let you die for me," Blaine says.

Thad looks incensed. "You—"

In the next moment, several things happen. The tent flap flies open, and several soldiers burst through, weapons at the ready. "Freeze!" they shout. The Dragon Hawks move to face them. Thad makes to physically push Blaine out of the tent.

Blaine catches him and spins him around. In a split second, the Prince has Thad helpless, gripping him from behind, with his sword at the other boy's throat.

"Nobody move," Blaine growls.

He gives Artie a little credit. The looks of shock on the Hawks' faces are the real deal, thanks to the fact that he had no chance to warn them about this. If he didn't know better, he'd say Thad is honestly afraid for his life.

The lead soldier holds up a hand to stop the others. Blaine recognizes him—it's the petty officer he fought yesterday.

The one he couldn't beat.

Shit.

"Don't do anything stupid, son," the officer says. "You're surrounded by trained soldiers. If you kill him, you'll never make it out of here alive."

Blaine takes a deep breath. "What if I don't care about leaving alive?" he growls.

Nick's hand moves towards his sword again, but Blaine catches him. "Do it, and he dies!" he shouts at Nick. Blaine pins him with a glare and does his best to communicate his orders silently.

They are not to fight for him.

Nick gives him a subtle nod, and joins the lie. "You bastard," he says, the fear in his voice sounding remarkably similar to hurt. "You tricked us."

"Wasn't hard," Blaine says. Thad squirms against him—he sends a mental apology to the young
nobleman as he presses the sword more firmly against his neck. If the blade weren't so dull, it'd probably be drawing blood. "Hold still," he growls.

"Ozark," the officer says. "Don't be a fool, boy! If you surrender, you won't be harmed. We'll capture you and give you a fair trial."

"Yeah, I'm sure it'll be really fair," Blaine scoffs. He notices one of the other soldiers attempting to sidle around to his backside. "Hey!" he shouts. "Back off!"

"You're cornered, boy," the officer says.

"Well, that just makes me more dangerous, doesn't it?" He cocks his head back. "Maybe I should try and fight my way out. You saw me yesterday. How many do you think I could kill before you took me down? Rough estimate."

"We're soldiers," the officer says. "We're not afraid to die."

This throws Blaine for a loop. Fuck, he thinks. These are good people. These are loyal soldiers. He shouldn't be fighting them. None of this should be happening

He's dangerously close to faltering, when Thad of all people comes through for him with flying colors. "I am!" he says, his voice high and fearful. "I'm afraid to die!"

"Damn it, son!" the officer says. The soldiers behind him move to strike, but he stops them with a raised hand.

"Please don't let him kill me!" Thad whimpers.

"Order them to clear me a path," Blaine says. "Let me get to the woods, and I'll let him go."

The officer stares him down.

Blaine stares back, unwavering.

"Stand back!" the officer orders. "Clear a path to the woods. Do not attempt to engage him!"

They're not happy about it, but slowly the soldiers begin to part. Blaine keeps Thad held tightly the entire time, being sure never to expose his back. Some of the soldiers have to be ordered twice—it's disturbing to see faces that were friendly just one day ago looking at him with such raw hatred and contempt. He is condemning himself in their eyes, he knows it. To the soldiers here, this is just proof of his guilt. They will show no mercy.

It's worth it, he thinks, as he backs to the edge of the forest. The Hawks' lives will be spared. They can maintain their cover and get out of this unscathed.

And if that means he has to draw all the heat to himself, then…

"Back off!" Blaine shouts as a few soldiers get a little too close for comfort.

"Fall back!" the officer orders again. A wide berth is created between the soldiers and the woods. It's not much, but it might just be enough.

"Sorry about this," he whispers to Thad. "I can't let you guys sacrifice yourselves. Keep your cover, and get to Kurt in Zedong. If I make it... I'll meet you there."

"Blaine..." Thad says.
He reaches the edge of the woods.

He isn't sure what tips him off. A slight whistle, an odd movement in the crowd, a familiar glint of light off a pair of sharp eyes. Whatever it is, it's just enough—he pushes Thad forward as he himself bends backwards. An arrow flies right over his head as he dodges. He can feel the air pulled in its wake, so close is his shave with death.

His hostage is free. The Hawks are safe.

And for Blaine, there is only one thing to do. Before he knows it…

He's running. Again.

He's always running…

Kurt and Wes have little more to say to each other. Wes leaves shortly thereafter, leaving Kurt to brood alone in his thoughts.

He doesn't brood long, however. A speck of darkness amidst the grey clouds catches his eye, and it is only by the barest margin that he actually gets the window open before Pavarotti shatters it. The dragon hawk is soaked from the storm, but the message canister it holds is water tight. Kurt pops the cap on the canister. There are two pieces of paper inside.

The first is a letter, and his heart very nearly collapses as he reads it.

_He's on the run. We wanted to fight, but he wouldn't let us._

_He saved us._

_I'm so sorry._

_Nick_

His fingers are oddly numb and uncoordinated as he reaches for the second piece of paper.

What's on it makes his blood run cold.

"No," he says. "No, no, this can't be right. They…"

"Kurt?" Finn asks. "Kurt, what's wrong? You look like you just saw a gh—hey!"

Kurt ignores him, trying to march to the door. To his infinite frustration, Finn jumps into his path.

"Dude, where are you going?"

"Get out of my way, Finn," Kurt growls.

"Will you tell me what's going on?" Finn asks.

"Move!" Kurt says.

"What's wrong?" Rachel says, sticking her head in from the bathroom.

"What's meathead doing now?" Mercedes asks, hobbling in. She takes one look at Kurt's face at nearly falls over. "Oh, no. Kurt, honey, what happened?"
"We have to go, now!" Kurt says.

"Will you at least tell us what's going on? Dude, you're scaring me!" Finn says.

"Finn Hudson, I swear by the moon and the tides, if you don't get out of my way right now…"

Artie awakens to the wonderful feeling of Puck's hand across his face.

_BAP._

"Motherfucker!" Artie says. "Shit, that hurt!"

Puck winces. "Sorry. Nothing else worked, so I figured I'd try a little more force."

Artie rubs his cheek. "From now on, leave the figuring to me." He shakes his head, looking somewhat confused at his surroundings. The confusion doesn't last long, however. "Come on, pick me up. We need to find something with wheels."

"Dude, what the fuck did you do?" Puck asks.

"There's no time!" Artie says. "Those jerks will probably sound the alarm soon. We need to go!"

"Okay, okay!" Puck bends down and grabs Artie, hoisting him up onto his back. They exit the room and almost immediately run into a guard with a breakfast cart.

"Hey!" the guard says.

Puck laments the loss of his glove—without it, his powerfist only works on earthen substances. He's getting ready to take the guy out bare-handed when Artie decides to solve the problem a little faster. A couple of quick hand movements, and two of the earthen plates fly up and shatter against the guard's head, knocking him out cold. Jerking his hands backwards causes two more plates to come flying at them. Puck ducks reflexively, hearing a loud shattering sound, and can only assume Artie took the hit.

He's surprised when he looks up to find that Artie is just fine, and now wearing two stone gloves that look suspiciously like the plates that just broke.

"Welcome back, babies," he says, kissing his fists.

"You are weird as shit," Puck says.

"Well aware," Artie says. "Set me on the cart. We can use that to wheel me around."

Puck does as he's told, plopping Artie on the pile of earthware. "Alright, now how do we get out of here?"

Artie points his finger, and Puck takes off. In addition to navigating, Artie hurls plates at any guards they see with fucking _ninja_ accuracy, taking them out with expert precision. It isn't too long before they've found where Santana went to look for their stuff.

As they pull into the lobby, they are spotted by a group of three guards.

"You go check on Santana," Artie says, flexing his hands. "I've got this."

Puck doesn't know why, but somehow, he believes the little shit.
He takes off down the hall…

He doesn't want to hurt them.

But he has no choice. It's them or him.

He will not be caught.

"What the—"

The bender shields his face as Blaine lets out a wave of heat, turning rainwater into mist. He blindly fires a shot into the blinding cloud, only to see a shadow dart around him. He tries to turn, but the shadow trips him. Before he can regain his balance, his head is slammed into a tree. Lights out.

Blaine lets him fall carelessly to the ground, looking around for the other two soldiers. A growl from his left forces him to remember one part of this equation he didn't quite account for—the dogs can smell him well enough to not need their eyes.

One of the bloodhounds dashes in from his left. Blaine tries to kick at it, but it catches his foot in its jaws, trying to tug him to the ground. It's surprisingly strong—he has to resort to firebending to get it to let go. A bit of flame to its back, and it yelps and releases him. A bit more fire sends it yelping into the woods.

"He's over here!" one of the swordsmen calls. Shit. They must have seen his fire.

The swordsmen charge him from both sides. He feints backwards and calls up a wall of flame, sending it crashing towards them like an ocean wave. One soldier manages to dodge the wave completely. The other is not so lucky, and catches a great deal of it with his right side.

His scream makes Blaine freeze for a moment.

This is the first time he's ever really, truly, purposefully hurt anyone with firebending.

He has never felt worse.

As always seems to be the case, the slight moment of uncertainty is his undoing. While swordsman A falls on the ground and squirms, swordsman B pulls something off of his belt and blows into it. A bellowing sound echoes through the forest.

A hunting horn. Of course. They are hunting for someone, after all. It only makes sense that they'd have a way of sounding off when they found him.

Blaine is upon him in a second, cracking an armored elbow across his face and knocking him out cold.

There is a bit of blood on his armor, barely noticeable. It isn't his, but it makes him pause, yet again, to survey his handiwork. He's no stranger to blood. Cuts, scrapes, and bruises of all kinds accompanied his childhood.

But it's different when they're on other people.

It's different when you're the cause.

I can't do this, Blaine thinks. I can't be this person. I can't hurt people to save myself, I…
The air whistles, and an arrow slams into the dirt, right between his legs.

*Shit.*

He darts away from the shot, but another arrow lands in his path, seriously throwing him off balance.

The forest floor is slick with water. The sudden shift in momentum destroys his footing, and there is nothing he can do to even brace himself for the fall.

Blaine lands on his back. His head slams into the soil full force, the pain momentarily robbing him of his senses. The jolt leaves him feeling bleary and weak, but he remembers his resolve. He hasn't come this far just to fall now. A surge of energy fills him, but as he starts to get up, an arrow embeds itself in the dirt, dangerously close to his ear, and he deflates. It's over. He is helpless to fight back from this position.

"Don't move," a strangely familiar voice says…

Exactly one day after Kurt and Blaine part ways, this is where their journey finds them. And this is where they go from there…

Wes shakes his head, sinking to the bed. He seems caught between fury and grief, and completely unable to speak.

David takes over for him. "That's not just a picture of Blaine. That's his royal portrait."

Rachel gasps. "Oh my god! I… I don't know what that means."

Wes's voice is flat as he explains. "Every year, on his birthday, the Fire Lord made Blaine pose for a royal portrait," he says quietly. "No one really knows what he did with them—they were never hung where the servants could see them. Rumor has it, he kept them all on a wall in his private chambers, lined up from youngest to oldest. So he could watch Blaine grow up at a glance."

Kurt puts his hand over his mouth. "So this isn't just a poster—"

"This is statement," David says, "from Sue to Blaine. This is an arrow aimed directly at Blaine's heart."

"She is using a picture that his father commissioned and cherished to enable his own people to hunt him down like a dog…" Wes says.

There is nothing to say to that. Silence hangs in the air for a scant few seconds.

"We have to do something," Kurt says. "We have to find him."

"Where?" Wes asks despairingly. "Where would we even begin? We're hours away from the convoy. If Blaine is on the run, he could be anywhere, we…"

He breaks off.

David snaps his fingers. "I've got it!" He turns towards the window. "We can use Pavarotti to…"

A peal of thunder rattles the glass.

The window is open. The bird is gone.
The guards scramble into some semblance of order, trying to regroup and find the fugitives. While they're running around, Artie leads Puck and Santana to a stable.

"Well, look at this!" Santana says. "Stealing a mount to help our getaway. Aren't you smart?"

"No need to steal," Artie grins. "This mount already belongs to you."

She gives Artie a fish-eye of befuddlement, until all her questions are answered in one joyous exclamation from Puck.

"KILGORE!"

Puck runs up to his rhino, which recognizes him immediately, bellowing with excitement at being reunited with his master. Puck actually hugs the rhino. And the rhino lets him.

"What?" Santana asks. "How the fuck did you…?"

"I heard from Kurt about Puck's… special relationship with his mount," Artie says with a grin. "It wasn't hard to forge an order to get him shipped over here from Sho Fa. Think of it as a gesture of goodwill."

Over in the land of happiness and gumdrops, Kilgore playfully nudges Puck with his nose, knocking him over.

"Whatever," Santana says. "Let's blow this shit stack."

A half a minute later, and the doors are blasted off the stable as Kilgore the komodo rhino and his three riders blast off into the morning mists.

The storm on the horizon grows closer to them every second.

They charge right into it.

The arrow flies…

And Blaine hears a yelp, followed by a flop.

He opens his eyes and looks to the side. The other dog lies on its side, an arrow sticking out of it.

"You… you shot it," Blaine says.

"You should thank me," the archer says. "It was about to tear your throat out. Now, give me one good reason why I shouldn't have let him," the archer says casually. He seems casual about everything, Blaine thinks. Probably a side effect of being a marksman. Emotions make for unsteady hands.

Blaine tries to calm himself. He knows it's useless, but hey, the guy asked. "I'm not who the posters say," he says.

"Who are you, then?" the archer asks.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Blaine laughs mirthlessly. The raindrops tickle as they slide down his face. He's getting cold again.
"Try me," the archer says. Blaine hears the telltale stretch of a bowstring, and figures 'why not?"

"I'm Blaine Anderson," he says. "Prince of the Fire Nation, and rightful holder of the throne."

The archer says nothing.

"Yeah," Blaine says. "I figured as much."

"I thought he was supposed to be dead," the archer says.

"They never found the body," Blaine says. "You're looking at it."

The archer says nothing. Blaine can hear the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Look, I know I'm not in any position to ask for favors, but…" Blaine takes a deep breath. "I don't… I don't want Sue Sylvester to get her hands on me. It would be bad. Could you just… go ahead and kill me? Please?"

The archer says nothing. The voices grow closer.

And suddenly, something heavy flops across his chest. The shock of it causes him to try and sit up, but a hand pushes him back down.

"Lie very still, and be very quiet," the archer says. Blaine suddenly realizes that he is lying under one of the unconscious soldiers.

He closes his eyes, and lies as still as possible. Something wet and grainy is smeared across his face. The archer is rubbing mud on him, probably trying to hide his face. Suddenly, the unconscious soldier is shifted so that Blaine's face is right in his armpit. *Gross.*

Footsteps and voices.

"You there!" one voice says. "We heard the horn call. What happened here?"

"What do you think?" the archer says. "He happened."

"Where did he go?" another voice asks.

"That way!" the archer says. "Hurry! He's quick!"

More footsteps. This time, moving away from him. One set seems to break off from the others, lagging behind.

Another voice. "Do you need help wit—"

"I'm fine!" the archer says. "I can take care of these guys. Go with the others! They'll need all the help they can get to take this guy down."

The last of the footsteps fades away. For a few seconds, there is only the rain.

"Alright, that'll keep them busy for a few minutes. We need to hurry, though."

The archer laughs. "Good thing we took care of the dogs, huh?" he says, pulling the soldier off Blaine. "I don't think our little trick would've fooled them."

Blaine stares at the archer, completely baffled. "You're helping me?" he asks.
The archer nods.

"So you believe me?" Blaine asks.

The archer stares at him skeptically. "I didn't say all that, now did I?" He offers his hand. "Come on, we can talk later. Right now, we need to hide."

Blaine takes the offered hand and hoists himself up.

"A cave would be our best bet," the archer says. "There's probably one around here somewhere. Let's find it before they find us."

He starts to walk off, but Blaine stops him with a hand on his shoulder. "Wait," he says. "I... thank you. I don't know why you did that, but... thanks."

The archer shrugs. "I don't know about you being a Prince, but... I've got sharp eyes," he says, cracking a smile. "I saw your little heartbroken face at this," he says, gesturing to their surroundings. "And well... it was kind of adorable, to be honest. You're a good fighter, but you're no killer."

Blaine blushes just a bit. "I can't really argue with that."

They start walking.

"So," the archer says. "Ozark or Blaine?"

"Blaine," the Prince says. "And I still don't know your name."


"Nice to meet you, Sebastian" Blaine says.

Sebastian shakes his head with a smile. "The pleasure's all mine..."

And they walk deeper into the forest together, seeking shelter from the storm.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: DUN DUN DUNNNN.

Things have taken a dark turn for our heroes. Can Sebastian and Blaine escape the hunting party? Will Kurt find his boyfriend before it's too late? Is this really the last we've seen of Quinn? And what on earth is Artie planning with Puck and Santana?

Chapter 63 – Poison Arrow is next. ;D
From a treetop, Blaine manages to spot a small cave opening on a high ridge. Sebastian deems the place perfect, and they set towards it.

Climbing up the small cliff is a bit difficult, thanks to the rain and mud. Blaine doesn't expect too much trouble, but he's worried Sebastian might not be as experienced as he is. He's more than a little surprised to find Sebastian keeping pace with him easily. The archer's long, spiderlike limbs make it easy for him to reach for hand and footholds, and his fingers are strong and sure from years of drawing a bowstring. The two of them make it up the ledge in no time, quickly ducking into the cave.

Blaine takes breath and uses a little heat wave to dry himself off.

"Figuratively and literally hot," Sebastian says with a smile as he shakes the water out of his hair. "I'm almost jealous."

"Oh, you're not a firebender?" Blaine asks.

"Oh, believe me, I can bend," Sebastian says, slicking his hair back to get it out of his eyes. "Just... not fire."

Blaine grins. "I could try to dry you off, if you want. I'd have to be careful not to burn you, but..."

"Hey, if you're willing to share the heat, I'm all for it," Sebastian says.

Stepping closer, Blaine bends up a flame and gently projects the heat onto Sebastian. Not being a firebender means there's a good chance Blaine will burn him if he isn't careful, so his hands are slow, his breathing calm as he gradually warms his new companion.

"So," Blaine says. "I don't mean to knock on a gift rhino's horns, but I have to ask... why are you helping me?"

Sebastian's eyes sparkle slightly in the firelight. "You're cute," he says with a shrug.
Blaine snorts. "That can't be the only reason."

"You'd be surprised," Sebastian says. "People are always willing to do just a little bit more for the cute ones."

Blaine rolls his eyes. "Fine. So why else are you helping me?"

Sebastian's head tilts to one side as he looks at Blaine. "Honestly? I'm not really all that patriotic. All of this 'gung-ho, the Fire Nation is the best, we rise and fall as one' crap? It's just not me. But I *am* a pretty good judge of character. Sharp eyes, and all that," he smirks. "I know bad people, and you? You're not bad people. This is my way of killing two birds with one stone. I get out of the Navy, and I help a cute, undeserving fugitive escape to freedom right along with me."

Blaine huffs out a laugh. "Well, if you're gonna quit, I guess treason is one way to do it."

"Hey," Sebastian says. "I thought you were the true Prince. Technically, every soldier out there is committing treason against you."

"Oh, so you believe me now?" Blaine asks, raising his eyebrows as he moves the flame over Sebastian's arms.

Sebastian cocks his head back, smiling a little wider. "Still haven't said that. I'm a little on the fence. On the one hand…"

"What?" Blaine asks.

"Well, you are *crazy* sheltered, so that's one mark in the 'for' column," Sebastian says. "But on the other hand… you strike me as way too much of a cuddly puppy to be the son of a cutthroat like Arthur Anderson."

Blaine frowns. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Sebastian quirks an eyebrow at him. "You look offended."

"You called my dad a… a cutthroat," Blaine says, furrowing his brow. "Yes, I'm a little offended. The people loved my dad."

"Some of them, sure," Sebastian says with a shrug. "But I know plenty who *didn't*. The man was pretty ruthless."

"My father was a good ruler, and a good man," Blaine says resolutely, feeling his ire start to rise even as he tries to keep it down. "He taught me that fire should only be used as a weapon in the direst circumstances. It's not meant as a tool of destruction."

Sebastian's eyebrows nearly shoot into the ceiling. "Is that so?" he asks.

"Yes," Blaine says thickly. "He also taught me about… about sacrifice, and—"

"Hey, hey," Sebastian says, almost gently. "Chill, alright? Maybe he was a different man behind closed doors. I didn't really know the guy; all I know is what I've heard. I guess it's not my place to talk about him, so… sorry."

Blaine takes a breath, calming the surface of his inner sea. "It's alright," he says. "There will always be rumors, I guess."

With a final burst of heat, Blaine finishes drying out Sebastian's upper body, stepping back and
letting the flame die. Sebastian's eyes remain rooted on him, sharp in more ways that one—he feels like they're piercing right through him.

"What?" Blaine asks.

Sebastian gives him a half-smile. "I think that's another mark in the 'for' column," he says. "Thanks for the blowdry."

Blaine cracks a faint smile of his own. "No problem," he says. "So… now what?"

"Now," Sebastian says, turning to look out of the cave. "We wait. Eventually, they're gonna have to pull out. They're wet, cold, and running on a strict time limit. The Navy's due in Zedong in four days for whatever the New Fire Lord's doing."

Blaine feels his face darken before he can do anything about it.

Sebastian catches it out of the corner of his eye. "Whoa," he says. "I figured you weren't a fan, but wow. That was a pretty drastic change."

"She's responsible for all of this," Blaine says. "She killed my father, stole his throne, and now she's trying to have me killed, using that stupid picture—a picture my father had painted—as a wanted poster. I just…" He grits his teeth. "I've never met anyone so evil."

Sebastian assesses him carefully. "Well, look at that," he says. "There's some serious anger hiding under all that fluff. I never would've guessed."

Blaine averts his eyes, embarrassed about letting his emotions show so clearly.

"You hate her, don't you?" Sebastian asks.

After a moment of consideration, Blaine nods. No sense in lying about it.

"Good," Sebastian says. "That'll help."

Blaine starts to ask a question, but Sebastian quickly cuts him off.

"'Cutthroat' is not an insult when you're a ruler," he says. "Sometimes, a little ruthlessness is required. My history tutor taught me an old saying; 'When you play the game of thrones, you win, or you die.' Sue's not gonna stop until one of you is toast. That anger? That hate? That'll help you survive. And when the time comes, it'll make it easier to finish her off."

Blaine flinches a bit at the thought of killing… even if it is Sue.

"Oh, come on," Sebastian says. "How'd you think it was going to end? You were gonna throw her in jail? Do you really think that would help with someone that dangerous?"

"I don't… I don't know," Blaine says, leaning against the wall.

"'You win, or you die,'" Sebastian repeats. "There's no middle ground. I don't know why you're doing all this hand-wringing," he shrugs. "It sounds to me like she deserves it."

"How can you be so cavalier about this?" he asks. "How can you talk about taking someone's life like it doesn't mean anything?"

Sebastian shrugs. "You've lead a sheltered life. It's a different world out here; chock full of death and violence. The sooner you get used to it, the better."
"Are you… speaking from experience?" Blaine asks.

Sebastian regards him carefully. "What do you mean?"

"Have you… have you ever…?" Blaine blushes, somehow unable to even form the words. "Have I ever killed anyone?" Sebastian finishes for him.

Blaine hesitates, then nods.

"More than once," is Sebastian's simple answer.

Blaine is taken aback. "But… how? Why?"

Sebastian stares at him flatly. "Did you really just ask me how? You've seen me use a bow, right? These things aren't for funsies. They're weapons. They're designed to kill." He crosses his arms. "As for the 'why…' it was them, or me. I chose me. Always have, always will."

Blaine shakes his head. "How can you be so cold?"

"Hey," Sebastian says. "If you have to kill somebody, cold is the way to go. Hot is for guys who bludgeon their wives to death with hunting trophies. Cold keeps things more… controlled."

Blaine swallows, clenching his jaw. He's never really thought about any of this before, and he doesn't really want to be thinking of it now. Mostly because he's afraid Sebastian might be right.

Sebastian sores up a bit, turning to stare towards the grey day outside. "Look, I'll be honest with you. The first time I did it? Yeah, it sucked. It was pretty fucking awful, actually. But after that, it just… gets easier."

"It shouldn't," Blaine says.

"Maybe," Sebastian says. "But it does. Best and worst thing about humanity; no matter what it is, the more we do it, the better we get." He swallows. "And people have been killing each other for a long, long time."

Blaine sits against the wall, turning to stare at the sky with Sebastian. Neither has anything more to say on the subject.

The cave is silent for quite a while.

"We have to go!" Kurt says, walking towards the window like he intends to jump out of it.

"Kurt, honey, calm down!" Mercedes tries.

"No!" Kurt says. "Blaine is in danger and I need to get to him. We have to go! Get your stuff."

Wes and David share a look as Finn automatically starts trying to gather their meager possessions.

"Where are we going?" Rachel asks.

"To Blaine," Kurt says testily.

"And where is Blaine?" David asks.
"We'll figure it out when we find him!" Kurt says, purposefully marching around and tossing everything he finds that may or may not belong to them in the general direction of Finn. Despite his injured shoulder, the waterbender acquits himself admirably.

"Kurt, can you not hear yourself?" Wes asks. "You have no idea where Blaine is. What if Pavarotti has already gone to him? What if he's leading him here? If we left, what would happen to Blaine when he got here?"

Kurt immediately drops the armful of clothing he has picked up. "Oh my La, you're right. We're staying. We're staying! We're not going anywhere! Finn, put that down!"

"But you just said—" Finn starts, before Kurt cuts him off by slapping the armful of luggage out of his hands. "Ow!" Finn says, rubbing his shoulder. "Dude!"

Kurt ignores him. "We're staying. Okay. We'll stay here. Except… what if Blaine's caught? What if he already needs our help? What if we have only minutes before he is executed? Minutes we are wasting by not moving—"

"You might want to think about breathing at some point," David says carefully.

"I'm not worried about my breath!" Kurt says. "I'm worried about Blaine's! We have to go. We have to go now. We need—FINN! Pick up that luggage right now! What is wrong with you?"

"I don't have time for this!" Kurt growls, picking up the luggage himself. As he does so, Mercedes surreptitiously whispers something to Rachel, who nods resolutely.

"Here!" Kurt says, shoving the clothes into Finn's arms. "This time, try actually packing them!"

Finn sighs and carries them over to their bags, moving out of view just as Rachel steps in. "Kurt, I understand that you are very upset right now, and I would just like for you to be aware—"

"Rachel, I don't have time for—" Kurt says, starting to turn away.

To his shock, Rachel grabs him and forces him to stay put, preventing him from seeing Mercedes whispering to Wes and David. "—that you are not thinking rationally at the moment!" Rachel says. "If you would just take a second to calm down, I'm sure we can all put our heads together to come up with a suitable course of action!"

"I don't need your head!" Kurt says. "My head is perfectly fine by itself! I am the head of this group! You are… the… left foot! You don't tell me what to do, you don't—"

Rachel's eyes break contact with Kurt's just long enough to glance over his shoulder. That's all the warning he gets before Wes and David shove a pillow case over his head and pick him up.

"What the— MMMMPHMPHMPHMPH!" Kurt shouts, kicking at them fruitlessly. The two of them carry him over to the closet that Mercedes has opened, and promptly shove him inside. Mercedes closes the door and leans against it.

"Let me out of here!" Kurt says. "This is… this is mutiny!"

"We're not on a ship!" Mercedes says. "This is for your own good!"

"Worry about your own good if you don't open this door!" Kurt shouts, kicking the door several
"Is everything alright in here?" a servant asks, sticking his head through the open door.

"Just fine, dude!" Finn says, quickly running over to slam the door shut, nearly taking the poor servant's head off in the process. "Private conversations! Do not disturb! Thank you!"

"You're not thinking straight!" Wes says.

"Either Pavarotti has gone to Blaine," David says, "or he's gone back to the Dragon Hawks."

"Either way," Wes says, "we need to wait. Whether he brings us word of Blaine's capture or escape from the Hawks, or he brings us Blaine, we need to be here!"

"And you need to calm down!" Mercedes says, pressing herself harder against the door as Kurt continues to try and kick it open. "When you calm down, we'll let you out!"

"I can't calm down!" Kurt shouts. There's a second or two of silence as Kurt stops kicking the door. Then, a burst of fire from underneath it singes Mercedes's injured ankle. "Ow!" she shouts, hopping away from the door. "Oh, Hills no," she growls. "Boy, you don't calm down soon, I'm fixin' to come in there and calm your ass with my bare hands!"

"Ummm, Mercedes," Rachel says. "I feel that sort of thing would only escalate Kurt's stress level…"

"Bring it on!" Kurt challenges.

Wes and David step in to stand against the door in her place. "Everyone, please, just… take a breath!" Wes says. "Deep, calming breaths to relax mind and body."

"No!" Kurt says, throwing more fire at the door. It's less effective at deterring firebenders, but it's all he has to work with at the moment. "I won't breathe, I won't calm down, I won't just sit here, and I won't stop! I've already lost one friend because I didn't do anything, I'm not losing Blaine!"

There is a moment of silence as everyone attempts to take in what Kurt just said.

"Wait," Rachel says. "Which friend are you talking about?"

"Ummm..." Kurt stammers. "That's... I didn't. I didn't say that."

Mercedes and Finn look at each other, and for a rare moment, find themselves on the same page. Together, they march over to the closet, shove Wes and David out of the way, pull the door open, and grab the squirming Kurt between them, dragging him over to the bed and sitting him down.

"You're talking about Artie," Finn says. It isn't a question.

"That's not—" Kurt starts.

Mercedes cuts him off. "Don't even try to play. You're just digging yourself deeper."

Kurt looks suitably sheepish.

"You know something," Finn says, crossing his arms and looking down at Kurt. He's surprisingly imposing for one so hopelessly inept.

Kurt shuffles up the bed away from them, a tight smile on his face. "We really don't have time for—"

He tries to jump off, but he runs into the rather solid form of David. "On the contrary," David says idly. "Right now, we have nothing but."

"I find myself very interested in what you might have to say for yourself on this matter," Wes says, stepping in beside him.

Kurt looks around, desperate for support. "Rachel!" he says. "Surely you agree that this is no time to bring up…"

Rachel steps over to the foot of the bed, idly twirling the room key on her finger. "The door is locked," she says, looking at Mercedes with a smile. "There will be no further disturbances."


Finn does the same, as they speak in perfect unison.

"What happened to Artie?"

The newest iteration of the terrible trio is hiding out in a ramshackle old shed with enough chains, clasps, and spikes to give even the most dedicated sadomasochist pause.

"The first thing we'll need are cover identities," Artie says. "Puck, you are Boris Mravinsky, a stern man with a stoic countenance who carves through life like a glacier—slow, patient, but completely unstoppable."

"That sounds mildly badass," Puck says thoughtfully. "I can dig it."

"Santana, you are his lovely wife, Svetlana, a scrutinizing purveyor of antique sex toys—"

"Hold up!" Santana says. "You haven't even told us what we're doing yet."

"We'll know what we're doing when we get to where we're going," Artie says, rather confusingly. "And we'll need cover identities to travel safely. Now, you have a very distinctive face, so I was thinking we could add a beauty mark or two, maybe move them around in the mornings to confuse people—"

"Time the fuck out!" Santana says.

Artie crosses his arms and looks at Puck. "She is so rude," he says, shaking his head.

Puck shrugs. "You learn to live with it."

Santana cocks her head at the two of them. "Now look here, Slide-along Skippy. Puck might have the sweet, trusting brain of an alcoholic tree sloth, but not all of us are so naïve. I don't like being lead around by the nose. How do I know you're not leading us into a trap?"

"You were already trapped. Why would I break you out of one trap just to lead you to another?" Artie asks.

"I don't know!" Santana says. "That's the problem! I don't fucking know anything!"
"Well, we agree on that much at least," Artie says cheekily.

"Oh, don't even get smart with me, punk!" Santana growls. "I will kick the feeling back into your bottom half just so it hurts when I spank your ass."

Artie raises his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright," he says. "I'll level with you. I need to find someone. As assassins, I figure you two have experience tracking people. I, on the other hand, hunt for treasure and wealth. I sniff out the one for you, and in exchange, you sniff out the other for me. Everybody wins."

"Really?" Santana asks skeptically. "Exactly how much treasure will you be sniffing out?"

"As much as I can, believe it or not," Artie says. "I've been itching to unleash a little chaos lately. The Fire Nation has been rubbing me the wrong way since I got here, and I think it's time for a little payback," he says, grinning fiendishly. "You two are welcome to join in if you want."

Puck looks mildly intrigued by this prospect, but Santana shuts him down with a glare.

"Who are we looking for?" Santana asks.

"That comes later," Artie says.

"Uh-huh," Santana says neutrally. "I still don't trust you."

"Why not?" Artie asks. "I've been nothing but nice to you two!"

"I don't know what it is," Santana says. "But every time I look at you, I get the feeling that you're holding back, and my people instincts are fucking flawless. You're hiding something. And I don't like it."

Artie looks at her flatly, just a hint of force to his gaze. "We all have our secrets, Santana," he says. "I'll spill mine when you spill yours."

Santana narrows her eyes at him.

"You too, baldy," Artie adds as an afterthought.

"Hey, fuck you!" Puck says. "My hair's already started growing back."

"You want to disregard my advice? Fine," Artie says. "But that little prison break was a one-time thing. If you get caught again, you're on your own. So what's it gonna be?" Artie asks, holding his hands like two sides to of a scale. On the one hand: "Santana?" On the other: "or Svetlana?"

Santana stares down at him imperiously, arms crossed. After a moment or two, she smirks. "Valerie," she says.

"What?" Artie asks.

"My name is Valerie," she says sweetly. "I'm a fast-riding, hard drinking, take-no-shit ex-military bitch. I floss my teeth with stringy bastards like you, and I'm only hanging around because you buy me drinks and give me free rides."

Artie purses his lips, looking up at her. "Alright, I can work with that."

"See that you do," Santana says simply. "Come on, Boris. Let's get your rhino ready for a day of riding."
"Do not rush me, woman," Puck says in an odd accent that Artie recognizes as being from the coldest, northernmost parts of the Earth Kingdom. "I will come when I come."

"Funny," Santana says. "That's what your mom said in bed last night."

"OH!" Artie says. "Daaaaaammnn, son. She just gravelburned your ass something fierce."

"Hey! Don't talk about my mom!" Puck says sourly. He turns to Artie. "I thought you were supposed to be on my side! Bros before hos!"

Artie shrugs. "The laws of nature demand that I recognize a superior burn. It's nothing personal."

"Fuck you guys," Puck says, stalking out of the shed. "I'm gonna go look for animal skulls to put on Kilgore's horns."

"Lighten up," Santana says, walking after him. "It was just a joke…"

Artie watches them go. As soon as they are out of sight, he lets out a sigh and collapses against the wall of the shed, a wave of exhaustion creeping over him. Neither has commented on his hollowed-out, haggard appearance, and if Santana is any indication, they probably never will. They don't exactly look a hundred percent themselves, so it's easy enough to attribute his sunken eyes to being stuck in prison if they do ask.

No, he doesn't expect much from them. They're not his friends. His friends are elsewhere, as they should be. They shouldn't be around him right now. This is… it's for the best. His friends are out of danger, and he is neutralizing a potential threat by recruiting them for his own purposes, not to mention… confronting the reasons for his insomnia.

Hopefully, he'll be able to sleep again soon.

But that comes later. For now, he'll just lean back against the wall and doze for a bit.

Not long enough for the nightmares to set in, of course.

Just for a few minutes…

Sebastian leans against the cave wall, idly twirling a very shiny knife. "So," he says, breaking the silence. "Those guys who kept crowding around you back at camp… those your groupies?"

"They're…" Blaine says, struggling to find a good word for them. "They are some of the only people who know the truth about me. They're helping me."

"Ah," Sebastian says. "Your loyal soldiers?"

"Nah," Blaine says. "They're… they're my friends."

"Looked like more than that. They practically worshipped the ground you walk on," Sebastian says.

"They were just impressed with my bending," Blaine says. "That's all."
"Well, you are pretty impressive," Sebastian says. "I can't really blame them."

Blaine smiles at the compliment, but it quickly turns to a sigh. "I hope they're alright. I tried to make sure no one suspected them, but... I just... I don't know. I wish I could do something. I hate waiting."

"Waiting sucks," Sebastian agrees. A slow smirk morphs onto his face. "If it helps, I know of a few ways we could pass the time..."

"Really?" Blaine asks. "Like what?"

Sebastian looks at him with half-lidded eyes.

Blaine looks back.

Sebastian raises his eyebrows.

Blaine squints and tilts his head.

Sebastian waggles his eyebrows and smiles.

Blaine's eyes go wide. "What? Wait... you're not... are you... what?"

Sebastian laughs. "You are so innocent. I honestly cannot handle it."

"Wait, no... I mean... are you suggesting...?" Blaine asks.

"What, you mean sex?" Sebastian asks.

Blaine blushes. "Ummm, well..."

"It'd probably be a bad idea in a dirty cave with no protection," Sebastian says. "Plus, the noises you'd make might draw some unwanted attention."

Blaine's blush deepens, but feels relieved, nonetheless. "Well, good. That's... I'm glad."

"I was thinking more along the lines of some kissing, light groping, maybe a quick blowjob," Sebastian says without missing a beat.

Blaine chokes on an errant piece of air. "What?" he sputters between coughs.

"Wow," Sebastian says. "From the way you reacted to that, I'd almost think you were a virgin."

If any more blood rushes to Blaine's face, there's not going to be enough to keep the rest of him alive. "Ummm..."

Sebastian looks honestly shocked. "You are!" he says, pointing at him. "I don't believe it. Sex on a stick, bends like a dream, a Prince, and you haven't gotten laid yet." He shakes his head. "That is a crime. We should fix that sometime."

Blaine laughs, mostly because his brain can't quite wrap itself around words just yet. He's pretty sure this is the first time he's ever been... erm... propositioned. "I... ummm... you..."

"I've got my share of experience," Sebastian says with a wink. "You'd be in good hands. Trust me."

"I... I..." Blaine shakes his head, trying to get the gears turning in the right direction so he can
think again. "I… no. No. I mean, thank you, and all, but… no. I can't."

"Sure you can," Sebastian says. "Sex is easy, and—on the first couple times—pretty quick. Plus, I'll be doing most of the work."

"No, I mean…" Blaine stammers. "I have a boyfriend."

"Heard that line before," Sebastian says. "Funnily enough, people a hard time remembering that once we get started. Besides… it's just a little fun between friends. Who says they need to know?"

Blaine blinks, and lets out a breath. This is all a little much for him. He doesn't have an answer to that question. He's pretty sure there is one, but he doesn't have it. "I just… I don't want to," he finally manages to say. "No." He clears his throat. "Thank you for the offer, but… no."

Sebastian grins, honestly looking more amused than anything. "Suit yourself. Let me know if you change your mind."

"I won't," Blaine says firmly. "I love Kurt. I would never do anything to hurt him."

"Of course not," Sebastian says easily.

Blaine nervously taps his foot, trying to get rid of his blush and get out some of the nervous energy that has built up over the past minute or two. "My boyfriend is the Avatar, by the way."

Sebastian gives him that 'where's the punchline' look again. When Blaine doesn't relent, he laughs again. "Hill of a life you've got there, Blaine Anderson."

Blaine sighs. "Tell me about it."

They're silent for a couple of seconds.

Then, several things happen at once.

A screech heralds the arrival of a vivid red blur, which streaks through the air between them. Blaine's ability to recognize the blur is just a fraction of a second faster than Sebastian's knife-throwing reflexes.

"WAIT!" Blaine says.

Sebastian is too far into the throw to stop it entirely, but he does manage to purposefully flub the aim and send the knife into the ground.

Blaine sticks out his arm, and the bird flies over to land on it. "This is my dragon hawk, Pavarotti," Blaine says.

The bird squawks fondly at him and hops up on his shoulders, taking a second to turn and hiss at Sebastian.

"Nice to meet you, too," Sebastian deadpans, picking up the knife and sheathing it.

"Don't worry," Blaine says. "Pavarotti's like that with everyone. What is it, boy? What'd you bring me?" He looks for a message in Pavarotti's canister, but it's empty. "No letter? What, did you just come to visit?" he asks, scratching the bird behind his ears.

Pavarotti caws and hops off of Blaine, fluttering over to the edge of the cave where it stops and looks at him expectantly.
Blaine looks back, a bit confused. "I think… I think he wants us to follow him."

Pavarotti squawks and flutters its wings.

Sebastian looks skeptical. "Why? Did someone fall down a well?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Blaine asks.

"...just a story I heard," Sebastian says. "The forest is still crawling with soldiers. Do you really want to chance getting caught to go on a wild hawk chase?"

"Pav's a smart bird," Blaine says. "I trust him."

Sebastian shakes his head, fighting back a grin. "Every time I think you can't get any cuter…"

Blaine rolls his eyes, but sobers up quickly. "You don't have to come, you know. Nobody knows you helped me—you could go back to camp, tell the Hawks what happened, stay safe with them."

"Eh," Sebastian says. "'Safe' is overrated. Besides, someone has to look after you. At least until we get you back to your Avatar boyfriend," he winks. Sebastian stands up, straps on his quiver and bow, and nods to Blaine. "Lead the way, your majesty."

Blaine smiles, turning to his bird. "Lead the way, Pav."

Pavarotti takes flight, landing in a tree a short ways away from the cave. Blaine pauses at the edge of the cave, taking a breath to calm himself.

Then, he jumps into the rain again.

"...and then he just… left," Kurt sighs.

Finn looks heartbroken. Wes looks mildly disappointed. David looks slightly bored. Rachel looks like she's trying to think of a way to incorporate this into her play.

Mercedes just looks pissed.

"And that's it?" Mercedes says. "You just let him go?"

"It's not like I had a choice!" Kurt says. "He was just there one minute, and—POOF!—gone the next."

Finn glares at him, jaw clenched. "So that's all it takes for you to just… leave somebody in the dust like that?"

"I didn't want to leave him!" Kurt says. "I tried looking for him, I did! I couldn't find him!"

"Yeah, I'll bet you tried real hard," Mercedes says.

"But not nearly as hard as if was Blaine was missing," Finn accuses.

"Excuse me?" Kurt asks.

"You heard me," Finn says sulkily. "You'd freaking tear apart heaven and earth to look for your boyfriend, but when it comes to Artie? 'Whoops, he's gone! Oh well, no time to care.'"

Kurt stands up on the bed so he can look down at Finn. "Now, you listen here, Finn Hudson. I
made a mistake with Artie, I admit that, but at the end of the day, he is the one who chose to leave. **He** is the one who disappeared without even saying goodbye—to anyone—and he is the one who has chosen not to contact us at all since he left. If he comes back, I'll welcome him with open arms, but **first he has to come back.** He kicked himself out, okay? Not me.”

"Whatever," Finn says. "I just… I can’t… I'm going outside." He tries to open the door, seemingly forgetting that it's locked.

"But… it's still raining," Rachel says.

"I don't care!" Finn shouts, finally losing patience and just pulling the doorknob off. He slams through the door and stomps down the hall like an angry elephino.

Rachel gives Kurt a disappointed glance, and runs out after him.

Mercedes seems to simmer a bit, continuing to glare at him, before slowly hobbling over to her bed and lying down.

"Mercedes—" Kurt starts.

"I have nothing to say to you," she says flatly, closing her eyes.

"Alright," Kurt says, hopping off the bed. "You want to be like this? Fine! We'll all just… go in separate rooms and be mad at one-another! What a perfect way to spend the day when Blaine could be out there dying! Fucking fantastic!"

He stomps out of the room.

Wes and David glance at each other.

"You can try to defuse this if you want," David says with a shrug. He nods at Mercedes. "Personally, I think she has the right idea." He heads over to Finn's abandoned bed and flops down on it.

"You lazy, good-for-nothing lout," Wes comments idly.

"You nosey, nattering nanny," David replies fondly.

With a smile, Wes leaves David to his nap.

Rachel steps to the edge of the patio, looking out to see where Finn might have gone. It's hard to make out much of anything through the rain and mist, but…

"He went that way," a servant says, walking up to her with a parasol and pointing out into the mists.

"Oh, thank you!" Rachel says politely.

"Shall I accompany you?" the servant asks eagerly. "I offered for the larger one, but he would not have me."

"No, no," Rachel says. "I prefer to hold my own parasols. It makes me feel in control."

The servant looks at her oddly, and then all trace of eagerness drops off his face as he hands her the parasol. "Whatever, lady. I get paid by the hour, anyway," he says flatly, going to lean against the
Rachel gives him a low-level glare for his rudeness, and promptly heads off in the direction she was pointed in. She finds Finn sitting against a tree, curled up into a nearly perfect ball, soaked to the bone already and not seeming to mind at all.

"Finn," she says quietly.

He doesn't look up at her.

Rachel looks around. She doesn't really want to get her clothes dirty, but…

She kneels down beside him, putting a gentle hand on his uninjured shoulder. "Finn," she repeats.

Finn shakes his head without looking up. "Just leave me alone," he says.

"You shouldn't be out here in the cold like this," Rachel says. "You'll get sick."

Finn laughs. "No, I won't," he says.

At this, she notices a faint glow from underneath his shirt, where the water has soaked through to his shoulder.

"What if someone sees you healing?" she asks. "We could get caught."

"Nobody will see," Finn says. "Nobody else is coming out here. Nobody else cares."

"That's not true!" Rachel says. "I care."

Finn looks up at her at last, offering a faint smile. "That's what I meant. You're already out here. Nobody else cares."

"Oh," Rachel says. She can't fault his logic. "I'm sure the others care about you, they just… they've all got their own things to deal with right now. This is a difficult time for all of us."

Finn shakes his head. "They don't care about me," he says. "And I don't blame them."

Without even meaning to, Rachel sits down next to him, not even caring about how wet or dirty she gets. She shifts the parasol so that it covers both of them. "What do you mean?"

Finn stares off into the thick woods behind the resort, seeming to get lost in them. "When I first left with Kurt," he says quietly, with a soft smile, "I thought I knew everything. I think I wanted to be the Avatar more than Kurt did, because I thought I could fix everything. Just march into a village, solve everyone's problems, be a big hero." He sniffs. "I was stupid. And I got smacked down, hard, but not before my stupid-ness got everyone hurt. Looking back, I don't know why they put up with me for so long. I think Kurt feels sorry for me. Plus, his dad's married to my mom, so it would look bad if he came home without me. Mercedes only puts up with me because Kurt makes her."

Another sniff. "Artie was the only one who actually liked me. And now he's gone, and he didn't even say goodbye, and…"

Rachel squeezes his arm. "And what?" she asks quietly.

Finn sighs, leaning his head against the tree and closing his eyes. "I know I needed to get knocked down," he says. "So I could learn about being humble and small and stuff. But it's like… it just keeps happening. I keep getting smacked down, deeper and deeper, and I kind of wonder how far down I'm supposed to go before somebody says 'okay, you've been punished enough.'" His breath...
hitches. "Sometimes I think I should just… go," he admits quietly, "leave, disappear. Stop bothering everyone." And Rachel feels her heart cracking in two.

"Please don't think like that," she says, placing a hand on his cheek. "Everyone here cares about you, Finn, even if they don't always show it. Kurt cares. Blaine cares. Mercedes cares."

Finn huffs out a disbelieving laugh and tries to turn away.

Rachel refuses to let him, turning him right back and forcing him to look her in the eye. "...I care," she says, quiet, but full of intent.

Finn blinks at her, his eyes full of terrible, terrible hope, and it astonishes her how someone so big can seem so small. How someone so powerful can seem so vulnerable. "Really?" he asks. And she knows the question is only for her. It's her feelings he isn't sure of.

Their faces are mere inches apart.

So she decides to convince him. "Really," she says, with a soft, certain smile. And she closes the distance between them.

Their first kiss is nothing like Kurt and Blaine's. It is soft, slow, and sweet; a thing of comfort, given between friends. It is gentle, probing and unsure at first, but slowly, like water soaking through a shirt, the reality gets through to Finn. And he starts kissing her back, holding her, pulling her in close. Her tiny hands on his face, lifting him up. His enormous arms around her, keeping her grounded.

When they break apart, there is so much honest happiness on his face that it nearly kills her. "Really?" he asks, the question meaning so much more now.

'You can't keep him,' a voice in her head whispers. 'You will only hurt him. Your paths diverge—you will leave him.'

It doesn't matter, she tells herself. He needs her now. He wants her now.

And if she's being completely honest, she wants him too.

"Really," she says, her grin bright.

Finn breaks into a grin of his own, looking happy enough to burst. Strangely enough, it doesn't last long—he quickly goes from joy to panic. "Oh, holy crap!" he says. "You're totally soaked!"

She puts fingers on her face. Huh. So she is. She must have dropped the parasol at some point and not noticed.

"Rachel, I am so sorry!" Finn says. "I was being all sulky and I didn't even think about how you might get sick. Come on, let's go inside." He stands up, and she lets him pull her to his feet. "I'll dry you off," he offers sweetly, almost shyly.

"That would be lovely, thank you Finn," Rachel says. Though it's practically moot at this point, she retrieves the parasol and holds it between them as they go back inside. Finn puts his hand over hers on the handle, grinning the whole time.

They drop the umbrella at the feet of the dozing servant, and head inside with their hands still joined.
"Artie will be fine," Rachel says. "And so will Blaine." She squeezes his hand. "And so will you."

His smile says he might just believe her.

Pavarotti flutters from tree to tree. He moves swiftly, but surely, and mostly in one direction, so Blaine has to assume he knows where he is going. He and Sebastian stay just behind him. Blaine keeps his eyes on Pavarotti, while Sebastian stays on the lookout for sentries.

Suddenly, Sebastian grabs him by the shoulder and pulls him behind a tree. Blaine starts to ask him a question, but Sebastian clamps a hand over his mouth. "Shhh," he says, pointing to the other side of the tree and then holding up two fingers.

Blaine's eyes widen in recognition. Two enemies. They must be fairly close if Sebastian is worried about being heard.

Without a word, Sebastian draws two arrows from his quiver, notching one and holding the other in the pinky of his other hand.

Blaine's eyes widen. "What are you doing?" he whispers.

"Eliminating a threat," Sebastian whispers like it's the most obvious thing in the world. He draws the bowstring.

Blaine stops him with a hand. "You're not going to kill them, are you?"

Sebastian looks at him like an annoying child who just asked a particularly stupid question. "Again; what exactly do you think this thing is for?" he asks, holding up his bow.

Blaine is shocked. "They could be your friends!"

"They aren't," Sebastian says, drawing the bowstring again.

Again, Blaine stops him, this time with a hand on the shoulder. "Don't," he says. "You don't need to. They might not see us."

"And they might see us and call the whole force down on our heads!" Sebastian counters. "I'm not taking the chance."

"Can't we just knock them out?" Blaine asks.

Sebastian stares at him, completely flummoxed. "You really are totally naïve, aren't you?"

Blaine blinks at him.

Sebastian sighs. "Alright, you know what? I'll compromise with you."

He draws his knife and holds it low to the ground, slowly moving it out and turning it. Blaine is a bit baffled, until he realizes he's using the reflection to check the soldiers' positions without exposing himself.

Sebastian smiles. "We'll keep this simple. You sneak around that way," he says, pointing. "Get as close as you can. When you're in position, I'll scare the living daylights out of them with a couple of near-misses. You run in and finish the job. Sound good?"

Blaine nods. "Great. Just... make sure you miss, okay?"
Sebastian smirks. "I always hit what I aim for."

Before Blaine can say another word, Sebastian scrambles up the tree, vanishing into the branches with barely a sound. He swallows thickly, and remembers his breathing. He can do this.

Better hurt than dead, right?

He moves swiftly and silently. Blaine is fairly practiced at sneaking, having to maneuver his way around his fair share of guards to get in and out of the Palace. His armor is a bit heavy, and he snaps a few twigs, but the rain hides the sound easily enough. The soldiers seem to be wandering somewhat aimlessly. If Blaine didn't know any better, he'd say they have no idea what they are doing.

When he's close enough to hear them breathing, he stops, and waits for Sebastian. He has no idea where the archer is, but he has to assume Sebastian knows where he—

**THUNK THUNK.**

"Holy sh—" One soldier says.

"We're under attack!" the other says. "Get down!"

That's his cue.

Blaine darts out from behind the tree, kicking off a large root for an extra burst of speed. By the time the first soldier realizes he is coming, Blaine has a knee in his gut, followed by an elbow to the back of his head to finish the job.

The other reaches for his weapon. "You!" he hisses.

As he draws his sword, Blaine sends a fire wire out from two fingers, singeing his weapon hand and forcing him to drop it. The soldier backs off and pulls out a knife with his other hand.

In response, Blaine pulls out his short sword. "Mine's bigger," he warns, wiggling the sword.

The soldier lunges, but Blaine pivots around him and brains him with the hilt, knocking him out cold. He turns around, only for his blood to suddenly run cold.

The other soldier wasn't quite as knocked out as Blaine had hoped. He's leaning unsteadily against a tree, and the hunting horn is on its way to his lips. Blaine starts running, even though he knows there's no way he can get to him in time.

Just as the guy is getting ready to blow, an arrow shatters the instrument with enough force to embed splinters in his hand. The soldier stares at the bloodied appendage, too shocked to even cry out from the pain.

Blaine takes the opportunity to knock him out with his sword hilt.

"What the fuck was that?" a voice from above says. Sebastian drops from the trees to land beside him, and he does not look happy.

"That was—" Blaine starts.

"Is this fun for you?" Sebastian asks. "Are you playing with these idiots?"

"I…" Blaine stammers.
"Because this isn't a game," Sebastian says, closing in on him. "I'm risking my life to help you here, and you want to fuck around and say stupid shit like 'mine's bigger'?

"Sebastian, I'm sorry!" Blaine urgently, holding his hands up.

"And you barely even bent!" Sebastian says. "You're one of the best benders I've ever seen and you didn't even use it! This is not the time to be holding back!"

"I didn't want to hurt them!" Blaine says.

"Well, good for you!" Sebastian says, crowding his personal space. He's so close; Blaine can feel his breath when he speaks. "But don't expect them to show you the same courtesy, Prince."

Blaine swallows. "I'm sorry," he repeats.

Sebastian stares at him for a couple more seconds. "Next time," he says. "We do it my way."

And then he's walking away.

"I don't want—" Blaine starts.

"Don't worry," Sebastian says, seeming almost casual again. "You won't be doing anything. I'll take care of everything. Your conscience can stay clear."

Blaine swallows, wondering if that's really any better. Pavarotti squawks ahead of him, and he trudges on, leaving the unconscious soldiers behind him.

He doesn't let himself look back.

"I'm disappointed," Wes says from the doorway of the small parlor Kurt has commandeered.

Kurt doesn't even bother to look back at him. "Join the club," Kurt says. "You can take the minutes," he adds with just a hint of bite.

"I should clarify," Wes says, moving into the room. "I am not disappointed in your handling of the Abrams situation. I don't know either of you well enough to make a judgment on that."

Kurt rolls his eyes. "Then wha—"

"That you lied, Kurt," Wes says. "That you lied to your friends instead of owning up to your mistake. I would have expected the Avatar to own his mistakes and learn from them… not hide them. That's what disappoints me." He takes a seat on a large cushion near the window, just close enough to seem personal, but not so close as to seem invasive.

"You expect me to make mistakes?" Kurt asks.

"Of course," Wes says. "You are only human."

"Well, you're in the minority there," Kurt says, "I'm the Avatar. I'm supposed to be perfect."

"Do you really believe that?" Wes asks.

"No," Kurt says, "but that's what it feels like sometimes. I'm supposed to be this great fountain of ancient wisdom, with all the answers, all the time. But I'm! I just… I don't know everything."
"You seem aware of your shortcomings," Wes says. "Even comfortable with them. So why the lie?"

"Knowing that you've screwed up, and admitting it out loud are two very different things," Kurt says. "I don't know, I just... I wanted a chance to fix it. I honestly thought Artie would come back, and I would get to explain myself, and we could just... forget the whole thing. It seemed harmless to tell a little white lie, to keep Finn and Mercedes from worrying too much."

"Hmm," Wes says. "My mother has a saying about those. You know what else is little and white?"

Kurt looks at him, quirking an eyebrow.

"Seeds," Wes says. "And both have a way of growing once they are planted. It hardly seems harmless now, does it?"

Kurt breathes in through his nose. "I suppose not," he says, looking out the window again.

"Blaine will be alright," Wes says.

Kurt looks at him with a mighty glare. "Do you really believe that? Is that how you can just sit there and act like this is a perfectly normal day?"

"I believe it because I have to," Wes says. "I have no other alternative at the moment. If Blaine does need me, it would not do to worry myself into exhaustion before I even know where he is."

The Avatar clenches his jaw. "You're right," he says. "I just wish it was that easy for me. I can't lose him."

"Blaine is my brother," Wes says. "I lost him once already." He gives Kurt a small smile. "I'm glad he found you. Or... that you found him. That you found each other. You know what I mean."

Kurt can't help but smile at the tacit approval in that statement. "Me too."

"Let's wait until nightfall," Wes says. "If Pavarotti hasn't returned by then, we can discuss more proactive action. How does that sound?"

"Reasonable and logical," Kurt nods.

"In the meantime," Wes says. "Perhaps you should apologize to your friends?"

"Perhaps," Kurt says, pushing off the window, and turning to look at Wes. "You know, you're pretty good at this pep talk thing."

Wes looks positively chuffed by the compliment. "I have plenty of practice," he announces proudly. "Blaine was quite the moody teenager."

Kurt snorts. "Why do I find that so very believable?"

The two of them head back to the room, where Finn is demonstrating a shocking amount of uncharacteristic grace, gently moving his arms and bending the water out of Rachel's soaked clothes. Mercedes and David lie on opposite beds, seemingly dead to the world.

Finn catches his eye as he walks in, and quickly looks away. Kurt takes a deep breath and steps forward. "Finn, Mercedes, Rachel," he says. Mercedes opens one eye. Rachel pushes her wet hair out of her face. Finn keeps right on bending the water. "I'm sorry," Kurt says. "I shouldn't have lied to you. I didn't want to admit that I had screwed things up so badly, and I honestly thought I'd have
a chance to fix them. This is entirely my fault."

Mercedes opens her other eye and sits up, completely giving up the façade of slumber. "It's okay, baby," she says gently. "We all screw up."

"Yes, but not everyone's screw-ups put people in potentially mortal peril," Kurt points out.

Mercedes winces. "True."

"It's cool, dude," Finn says gently. "Artie is a badass. I think… if he hasn't come back yet, he must be on some kind of super secret mission, helping us out from behind the scenes and stuff. That totally seems like something he'd do, right?"

Kurt remembers what Wes said about believing in something because you have to. "Right," he says. "Nonetheless… if we get the opportunity, we'll send out some feelers and see if we can't find him again. He's been having some problems lately, and yelling at him about how those problems are affecting me… probably not the best way of handling that."

"All is forgiven, Kurt," Rachel says. "We're all just a little emotional right now." She smiles as Finn gently bends the water out of her hair and clothes. "But this just cements the fact that we need to stick together in times of trouble. After all, all we have is each other." Her smile changes slightly as she looks at Finn, and Finn seems almost bashful as he returns it.

"As Artie would say," Kurt says. "True dat."

Wes walks over to sit beside David, who is still lying down.

"Such a nanny," David says with a smile.

"You wish you had my mother hen superpowers," Wes says.

"So, what do we do now?" Finn asks.

"We wait," Kurt says. "Pavarotti has until nightfall to bring me either a letter or my boyfriend. If he doesn't show up… we'll go hunting for them ourselves."

"Sounds like a plan," Mercedes says.

The six of them fall into silence for a bit after that, but it's an easy silence, companionable and warm. They're worried about their friends, of course, but it's no longer all-consuming. They still have each other.

"I just wonder what he's doing," Finn says, as he finally bends the last of the water out of Rachel's dress. "Artie, I mean. Not that I'm not worried about Blaine, but… I just wonder what's going on in his head."

"He was having bad dreams, wasn't he?" Rachel asks.

"Yeah," Mercedes says. "But he wouldn't tell us what about. I can't imagine what kind of dreams would drive him to just run away like that…"

______________________________________________________________


He stands in a line. He and a hundred others like him. Identical building blocks. Cornerstones.
"We are the foundation upon which the Kingdom is built."

A hundred punches in perfect unison.

"We are the bedrock of society."

A stance shift, and two hundred more punches.

"We must be perfect. They depend on us to be perfect"

Two kicks.

"If a cornerstone is weak… if even one part of the foundation fails…"

Three kicks. No, wait, only two, he—

The Man stands in front of him, eyes accusing.

"…then all that is built upon it will fall."

He blinks.

Light. Dry. Dusty. He is outside.

There is a hand on his shoulder.

"I am sorry it has to be this way, Arthur…"

Oh Gods, no. No, no, no. Not this. It can't be him.

"I had such high hopes for you..."

It is. It is him. Oh, fuck.

He is going to die.

He blinks.


He is smaller.

The same hand is on his shoulder.

Shadows and shapes filter around him, indistinct, but happy.

The Man is so big.

"You are a very special boy, Arthur. The Earth King has sent me to personally invite you to his special school."

One step backwards. Two steps. He doesn't like The Man.

"What's wrong? Don't you want to be special? Don't you want to go to the Lake?"

There are other hands on him now. They pin his arms. He kicks and kicks. Tries to scream, but there is something in his mouth.
A sack is put over his head. Darkness.

He doesn't give up. Doesn't stop squirming until they force him to stop. It hurts. They are so big, and he is so small. He is so weak, and they are so strong.

He is scared.

He knows what comes next. His window of opportunity is narrow, but he seizes it.

He catches a glimpse of the man when they remove the bag.

He leaps for him. Wraps his hands around his throat.

And then…

The Man is suddenly someone else.

Artie is choking him from behind. Arms wrapped around his neck.

He squeezes and squeezes, giving nothing, taking everything.

The head turns red from exertion. Then purple. Then blue.

The struggles cease. With a final squeeze, Artie hears a satisfying snap, and the limp body is released.

The beginning is always different, but no matter what, every dream ends in the same place with the same person.

Artie looks down at his kill.

The empty eyes of Noah Puckerman stare back at him.

And Artie feels a hand on his shoulder.

"Well done, Arthur…"

"Arthur…"

"Artie…"

"Hey, Artie!"

Artie snaps awake, nearly jumping out of his own skeleton.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Puck says, holding his hands up. "Jeez, I'm sorry! I didn't know you were asleep."

"What… what are you talking about?" Artie says, shaking his head.

"You kind of looked like you wanted to kill me for a couple of seconds," Puck says lightly.

"Oh," Artie says, swallowing thickly.

"Next time, Santana can wake your cranky ass up," Puck says. "Come on, we're leaving."

"Right," Artie says. "Be out in a minute."
Puck gives him a nod and heads outside, and Artie takes a second to collect himself. He did not kill Puck. Puck is not dead. He does not want to kill Puck. He is not a murderer.

He will say it over and over. He will prove it to his subconscious, again and again, until it stops vomiting these stupid nightmares at him.

He is not a murderer.

He will say it until he believes it.

There are three this time. One of them is an archer, which seems to make Sebastian especially wary. They're hiding behind another tree. Again, Sebastian draws his arrows—one for each soldier. Again he draws the bowstring.

Again, Blaine stops him.

Sebastian looks at him flatly.

"I'm sorry," Blaine whispers. "But I can't just... sit by and watch you do this."

The archer looks almost pitying when he replies. "Then close your eyes."

He doesn't do that. But he does take his hand off Sebastian's shoulder.

The archer draws the bow.

Blaine swallows thickly.

Sebastian lines up his shot.

Blaine clenches his teeth.

Sebastian's fingers tense.

Blaine finally shuts his eyes.

And suddenly, the bellow of a faraway hunting horn echoes through the forest.

Sebastian raises his eyebrows, but keeps his bow at the ready.

"Finally!" one of the soldiers says. "I'm sick of this cold, wet forest bullshit."

"Agreed," a second soldier says. "I much prefer cold, wet, battleship bullshit."

"Thirded!" the third soldier chimes in. "Who wants to get drunk? Wait, better question; who doesn't?"

The two boys keep watch on the soldiers as they trudge out of the forest. It's over. For today, at least, the hunt is over.

"Phew," Blaine says, relieved for more reasons than one.

Sebastian seems to pick up on the subtext of his relief. "Saved by the horn, huh?"

Blaine doesn't know whether he's talking about the soldiers, or the two of them. Maybe that's the point. "Yeah," Blaine says. "Thankfully."
"We still need to be careful," Sebastian says. "We might run into a stray or two. But… for now, I think we're good."

"Good," Blaine says. "Let's keep going. There's no telling how long it'll take us to get wherever Pavarotti's going, and I don't know about you, but I can't get there fast enough."

"I'll drink to that," Sebastian says.

The two walk in silence for a few minutes.

"It's a good thing the Navy has such crappy tackers," Sebastian says, "or we might've been toast."

"They didn't really seem to know what they were doing, did they?" Blaine asks.

"Totally clueless," Sebastian says. "They relied on their dogs to do all the work."

"Heh," Blaine says. He scrunches his face. "What happened to all the dogs, anyway?" he wonders aloud.

Sebastian shrugs. "The rain must have thrown them off our scents."

"Well, thank Agni for the rain," Blaine says.

"Yup," Sebastian agrees. "Thank Agni…"

Nick stays on lookout through the whole day.

After Blaine's little stunt, no one had any real interest in questioning them, and the few who did were suitably deterred by Thad's master-level bullshitting. The rich jerk does come in handy sometimes.

He can't even begin to express his relief when he hears the horn blow so close to camp. After all that time? There's no way they found Blaine. They're calling off the hunt. They have to be.

Nick surreptitiously moves closer to the trackers as they come out of the woods, trying to listen in on their conversation.

"…fucking bastard!" one of them curses. "Traitorous swine!"

"Calm down, Joe," another one says.

"Fuck you!" Joe replies. "You aren't the one who lost a dozen purebred bloodhounds! I swear, when I find the traitorous little shit who shot them—"

"How do you know it wasn't the fugitive?"

"Fuckin' arrows, McGee!" Joe curses. "I didn't see that shit carrying a bow. Plus, we were chasing him! I swear all these arrows came from behind. It had to be an inside job."

"But who?" McGee asks. "All the soldiers he hung out with were here at camp the whole time. I saw them."

"I don't know," Joe says, "but whoever it is, he better watch himself."

Joe stumps off, and McGee shakes his head and walks elsewhere.
Nick furrows his brow in confusion. Someone shot the dogs? But who else would help Blaine? And why?

Kurt stares out the window. On an overcast day, it seems like the world just skips sunset entirely, and goes directly from day to night. It was day a few minutes ago, but the sky is darkening rapidly, along with the moods of pretty much everyone in the room.

Kurt looks over at Wes.

"Just… a few more minutes," Wes says.

Kurt shakes his head. "No. We can't stay here anymore. It's time to take action."

"But Kurt," Wes starts.

"I agree," Rachel says, walking into the room. "We can't stay here anymore, and not for the reasons you might think."

Finn follows after her. "We just saw an armed guard come in and tack another one of those Blaine posters to the wall. If Blaine comes here…"

"Oh no," Kurt whispers. "These posters are probably everywhere by now."

"Blaine won't be able to show his face without getting the guard called," Wes says.

"There is no safe place for him," David whispers.

A distant rumble of thunder underscores the silence that follows.

"Start packi—" Kurt orders.

"Way ahead of you," Finn says, already shoving things into their bag.

"I'm already ready," Mercedes says. "Come on, let's blow this bathhouse."

The fearful servants bring their carriage around, not even bothering to protest having to drive it in the rain. Kurt bids the staff an imperious farewell as they board, Wes and David again hopping up front to drive.

It's as they are pulling out that something finally goes right.

"Whoa!" Kurt hears Wes say. "Is that…?"

"It is!" David confirms. "It's Pavarotti!"

Kurt doesn't even wait for the carriage to stop before hopping out into the rain. "Where?" Kurt demands. "Where's the bird?"

Pavarotti squawks from on top of a fencepost, looking unusually mellow.

"You!" Kurt says. "I have half a mind to roast you and eat you, you little deserter!" He knows he is talking to a bird and that it probably won't get a word of this, but he doesn't care, damn it! This needs to be said. "Where have you been all day?"

Pavarotti squawks again, seeming to look at something past him.
And then, he hears something wonderful.

"...Kurt?"

Kurt spins around so fast, he would have drilled into the ground had he kept going. "Blaine?"

He hears footsteps sloshing through the mud, coming faster and faster. He reciprocates, running towards the sound and making plenty of his own splashes. He can barely make him out through the darkness, but there is no doubt in his mind. It's him. It's him.

They fall into each others arms with so much force, it's slightly painful. Nothing in his life has ever hurt quite so good.

"Kurt," Blaine says, clutching him like his life depends on it. "I can't believe it…"

"I thought I'd never see you again," Kurt says, squeezing him right back. "Blaine, I was so scared."

"I'm here," Blaine says, laughing. "I'm okay!"

"Thank the gods!" Kurt says. "And Pavarotti, I suppose."

Blaine chuckles, and pulls his face out of the crook of Kurt's shoulder long enough to smile at him. "Well, as long as you're giving thanks, I've got one more for you…"

Kurt squints at him, and Blaine nods further into the darkness. Another voice calls out from the growing shadows.

"Hey! Where'd you go? Is there a reason you took off running, or…"

Blaine bends up a little flame. "Over here!" he says.

A tall, somewhat lanky character stalks out of the shadows. "Ah, there you are," he says with a smile. "And I guess that explains the running. Your boyfriend, I presume?"

"Yes," Blaine says proudly. "Sebastian, this is Kurt Hummel, Avatar, and love of my life."

Kurt has to pause in his judgment of this new character to indulge in a slight blush. "Aww, Blaine…"

"Kurt," Blaine continues. "This is Sebastian Smythe, the best archer I've ever seen. He saved my life."

"Did he?" Kurt asks. He can practically feel Sebastian's eyes raking over him, assessing him. He offers his hand. "Well, you have my thanks."

Sebastian seems to come to a conclusion about him. "It was no trouble," he says, taking the offered hand and shaking it with a smile that could not be more plastic if it was manufactured by an Earth Kingdom toy company.

The two boys size each other up for just a second more, and Kurt decides that he has never quite wanted to punch someone in the face so badly in his entire life.

It's an odd feeling.

Blaine of course, misses this entire exchange. "Come on," he says, still overjoyed from the reunion. "Let's get inside and get warm."
And after exchanging quick, enthusiastic hugs with Wes and David, he hops into the carriage, only to be practically dogpiled by all the other people who want to give him a hug.

Kurt and Sebastian follow behind.

Pavarotti hops into the carriage as it passes by.

And overhead, the thunder rolls.

A/N: Going to try something a little different here; instead of my normal chapter ender, I'm going to try a Merlin-inspired teaser of things to come. These may or may not appear word for word in the next chapter; they're more to give a general idea of what's ahead. Let's see how this works…

Coming up…

"My beautiful Mercedes," Mercedes reads aloud. "I can't tell you how elated I was to receive your letter…"

"So, are you two, like, a thing now?" Finn asks.

Flashes of fearful servants flinching like abused animals fill her mind.

"Something like that," Mercedes says, the wheels of plotmaking turning in her mind.

Puck's face is turning purple.

"What?" Puck asks. "The fuck are you staring at?"

Artie, on the other hand, is white as a ghost. "You're… are you… feeling okay?" he asks.

"I'm fine," Puck says, as blood starts leaking out of his eyes and nose. "What's wrong with you?"

"Yeah," says the figure in green robes standing just off to Puck's left, staring out at Artie from beneath his wide brimmed hat. "What is your problem?"

Artie shakes his head. "I'm just… I'm just tired," he says.

"Well, go to sleep," Puck says. "You're freaking me out."

"I couldn't agree more," the figure in green says, not even flinching as Puck walks through him. The glint of his wicked gaze is just visible through the shadow of his hat.

"Get some rest, Arthur."

"I'm onto you," Kurt says to Sebastian. "You really think you can just walk in here and take him out from—"

The knife embeds itself in the wall next to his head, and Kurt flinches involuntarily. Sebastian walks up, smirking as always, and pulls it out.

"I always hit what I aim for," he says casually, plucking the beetle from the end of the blade and dropping it at Kurt's feet as he walks away.
The beetle twitches twice, horribly, before it finally dies.

~CHAPTER 64 – Fucking Perfect
Fucking Perfect, Part 1

Chapter Notes

I had to overcome the biggest case of writers block with this chapter. It just did not want to come out in any kind of satisfying way. Hopefully, writers blocks are like kidney stones in that once you go through the painful process of passing them, you're safe for a while. The next few chapters are all build-up. And I'll just go ahead and say I can hardly wait to write the sequence they're building up to. It's going to be a blowout. ;) Sorry for my long absence. I hope this was worth the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Surviving a near-death experience has a way of invigorating a guy in a way that nothing else quite manages.

Kurt learns this firsthand in that the second they stop to set up camp, Blaine corners him and demands to 'speak' to him alone.

He is as eloquent as he ever was.

"Ow!" Kurt hisses.

Though a bit louder than Kurt would like.

"Sorry," Blaine says against his neck in between kisses.

"Are we making out, or are you trying to eat me?" Kurt jokes, leaning his head to the side to give Blaine better access to the sensitive parts of his—oh, there we go.

"Can't I do both?" Blaine asks, and Kurt can feel him grinning against his skin.

"What has gotten into you tonight?" Kurt asks, shrugging the rest of the way out of his shirt and pulling apart the folds of Blaine's own robes for better access to warm flesh. Good gods, is he always this hot? Is this a firebender thing, a sex thing, or a Blaine thing?

"I'm alive," he says happily, taking a break from his steady mission to map out Kurt's body with his mouth to grin at him. "I'm alive, Kurt! I like being alive."

"Well," Kurt says. "That makes two of us." He pulls Blaine in and kisses him on the mouth. "Let's be alive together, shall we?"

Blaine answers firmly in the affirmative.

And he does it with no words at all.

He's just that good.

When he wakes up the next day, Kurt experiences something truly remarkable. It doesn't last long, but if he lives to be two hundred, Kurt doesn't ever think he'll forget it.
For a tiny moment of time, Kurt's life is perfect.

He opens his eyes to catch fresh morning sunlight pouring in from the mouth of the cave where they slept. It hits Blaine and frames his face like it's drawn to him, sinking into his skin like it belongs there. He almost glows with it. Kurt takes in little smile on his face, watches the gentle rise and fall of his chest, the way every line of his body sings peace, and it just... fills him up. It starts in his heart and grows at lightning speed. In a matter of seconds, it has filled him completely, pressing out against his skin, making him feel like he could burst.

He's so happy he aches.

At some point in the night, a bit of leaf fell into Blaine's eyelashes. Kurt reaches over as carefully and quietly as he can to the bit of plant, but the second he makes contact, Blaine turns over, wraps his arms around him and just squeezes, and Kurt wonders if you can literally die from happiness. The fulfillment demands release, and Kurt can't help but sigh.

Alas, all moments, even the perfect ones, must come to an end.

In this case, it's the sigh that does it, catching a little dust from the ground and carrying into Blaine's nose. He scrunches, sniffs, and promptly sneezes right into Kurt's face.

Kurt blinks and wipes his face, only to find Blaine smiling sheepishly at him. "Good morning?" he tries.

"The best," Kurt replies.

It's a high like no other.

So needless to say, it all goes downhill from there.

Finchel and Wevid have already jaunted into town by the time Kurt gets finished with his morning cleansing. In the wake of adding Blaine to their group, they decided it'd be best to split into two—one group to go into town and buy necessary supplies, and one to stay in the wilderness with Blaine, where (hopefully) no one would spot him. Today, Finn has taken on the role of Fake Harwood, the signet ring worn proudly on his pinky because it wouldn't fit any of his other giant sausage fingers. Rachel, Wes, and David accompany him.

Which leaves Kurt as part of the 'stick with Blaine' group, along with Mercedes. And, of course, Sebastian.

Now, far be it from Kurt to be petty or jump to conclusions, but...

Well, he doesn't like Sebastian.

He doesn't like his omnipresent smirk. He doesn't like his smarmy charm. He doesn't like the hungry eyes he turns on Blaine when he thinks no one is watching. He really doesn't like how the rest of the group is absolutely not picking up on any of this; how they have no secret desire to knock him unconscious and dump him in the back of a passing farmer's produce wagon.

But far and away, the thing he dislikes the most is that he has absolutely no real, concrete reason to dislike Sebastian at all. The guy has done nothing but help. He saved Blaine's frigging life, for heaven's sake.
And yet, Kurt hates him anyway. How inconvenient.

Oh well. He can address that later. Right now, Blaine has a surprise for him.

After his somewhat rude awakening at the hands of Kurt, Blaine seemed to be stricken with an idea, practically bouncing to get it out of him. He shooed Kurt from the cave and sought out Mercedes, telling him to come back after he got done washing up. So back he marches, wondering what sort of crazy things Blaine and Mercedes could get up to.

He wonders if Sebastian will be there, too. He hopes not.

Come to think of it, he hasn't seen the smirky little twerp since he woke up. It's probably too much to hope for that he wandered off into the wilderness and got adopted by a family of gorilla skunks who mistook him for one of their own.

"Morning."

Speak of the douchebag.

"Good morning to you as well," Kurt says as Sebastian slides out from behind the trees as if skating on a trail of his own sleaze. "And where have you been?"

"Scouting," Sebastian says simply. "Gotta get the lay of the land around here. Never know when it might come in handy."

Kurt rolls his eyes. "Right, well, by all means, scout away. Please, don't let me stop you."

"I'm scouted out," Sebastian says, stretching a bit. "Where are you off to?"

"Not that it's any of your business," Kurt says. "But I'm going to see Blaine. He has a surprise for me."

"Oh, really?" Sebastian says.

"Yes, really," Kurt says cheerily. "He's positively full of surprises, you know. He's very romantic like that. Hopelessly old-fashioned—not that I'm complaining, mind you. It's wonderful that he thinks of me so much."

"Mmmhhmm," Sebastian agrees easily. "He must be quite the catch."

With little more to say on the subject, Kurt determinedly stomps into the cave where his boyfriend awaits with a surprise sure to sweep him off his feet.

"Kurt!" Blaine says, jumping out of the entrance to intercept him. "You're here, awesome! We just finished."

"Ooooh, I can't wait!" Kurt says, clapping excitedly. "Should I close my eyes?"

"Ummm..." Blaine says.

"What am I saying? Of course I should. It'll make the impact of the surprise more stunning when I see it all at once." He closes his eyes. "Alright, Anderson. Lead the way."

"Well... okay," Blaine says, still sounding a little uncertain. Oh, the poor thing. He's insecure. He should know that Kurt will be more than happy with anything Blaine gives him. He's always so thoughtful about this sort of thing.
"Why are his eyes closed?" Mercedes asks.

"To… increase the impact of the surprise?" Blaine says. "Oh, we're here, by the way. You can open your eyes now."

A split second before he does exactly that, he hears the distinct sound of a snicker from behind him. Choosing to ignore the ill-manners of the jealous third wheel, Kurt opens his eyes to behold the glorious romantic sight of…

…a target range.

"How romantic," Sebastian snickers. "My heart is all aflutter."

Kurt wonders at the geological activity in this area. Like, say, whether or not a hole suddenly opening up in the ground to swallow Smug bastard would be justified.

"Kurt, ummm, you look a little upset," Blaine says. "Were you expecting something else?"

"No," Kurt says firmly, placing his best pageant smile on his face. "This is wonderful. What is it, exactly?"

"Target practice!" Blaine announces, once again immensely pleased with himself. "This is how it works: the lovely Mercedes has created pillars of earth with targets on top. She will move them in, out, and around the walls, ceiling, and floor of the cave. Your job is to hit those targets. You can use whatever you want, but you can't step outside of this circle," he finishes, pointing to a circle of rocks about as wide as Kurt doing a split.

"Sound fantastic," Kurt says, stepping inside the circle.

"Ready?" Mercedes asks.

"Born that way," Kurt says.

"Get it, boy!" Mercedes says.

The targets come in all manner of shapes and sizes. Some of them pop straight up from the ground. Others start laying down and arc up like the rising and setting sun. Some rise up and start zig-zagging like a giddy jitterbug. Others rotate around him like he's in the eye of a hurricane. There's no telling what direction they'll pop up from, so Kurt has to rely on his ears as well as his eyes. And just to please his currently-present mentors, he relies mostly on fire and earthbending.

Once the last target has gone down, Kurt pauses to take a breath. "So, how'd I do?"

"Pretty good!" Blaine says. "Forty-five targets out of fifty."

"I expected better," Mercedes says.

"It's early," Kurt grouses. "I'm just warming up."

"Maybe you should stretch a little," Sebastian says. "Work out the kinks. In the meantime… does anyone mind if I try? I could always use a little practice." His voice seems innocent enough, which Kurt just knows means that he is guilty… of… something.

Mercedes quirks a brow. "You're not a bender," she says.

Sebastian shrugs. "Most people aren't. We get by just the same. Come on, just for fun?"
"Sure, why not?" Blaine says. "Do you mind, Mercedes?"

She shrugs. "Fine with me." She lowers the targets back into the ground, and prepares to run the course again. "Ready?"

Sebastian draws his bow, notches an arrow, and nods.

"GO!"

Sebastian pulls and shoots arrows faster than anyone Kurt has ever seen. He grabs handfuls at a time, holding them between his pinky and the bow, allowing him to nock an arrow and draw the bowstring with a single motion. They sail easily through the air, slamming into the targets with enough force to embed themselves into the rock. Not a single arrow is wasted.

From an objective standpoint, it's a thing of beauty.

From a more subjective one, it brings his blood temperature to a low simmer just shy of boiling.

"Fifty out of fifty!" Blaine says, awed. "A perfect score!"

Mercedes whistles. "Damn. Kurt, honey, I hate to say it, but you just got told."

Sebastian smirks. "Ah, don't be too hard on him. He's not used to having to conserve ammo like I am, so he probably doesn't practice as much. Don't worry, Kurt. I'm sure you'll measure up to me… someday."

Yeah, Kurt definitely hates Sebastian. And he will find a reason if it kills him.

"Reset the targets," Kurt says. "I'll show you who measures up…"

About a minute later…

The air outside is filled with dust and debris. Kurt's pretty sure he can hear Blaine coughing in the background, even if he can't see him.

"…I don't care what you say," Kurt says later, as he brushes the dust off of his clothes. "My score was perfect!"

"Yeah," Mercedes says, pausing to cough for a bit. "Right up until the point where you caused a cave-in."

"So?" Kurt says. "The cave fell, big deal. That just means that I hit every target."

"And nearly killed us all!" Mercedes adds.

"Whatever," Kurt says. "The point is I hit all the targets. And I did it very fast."

"It was" cough "pretty impressive," Blaine says.

"Thank you, Blaine," Kurt says. "So, what do you think of that, Sebastian?"

"Well, I guess that's one way of doing it," Sebastian says. "But it's a little like using a tsunami to wash your dog. The point of sharpsniping is that you hit your target, and only your target. If you're trying not to draw attention, you need precision. You're trying to take out the guards, not the village."
Blaine winces. "Oooh, that's a good point actually. Not that you usually have a problem with this, but we really do need to be careful and avoid collateral damage when we can."

Kurt glares at his boyfriend.

"What?" Blaine asks, honestly confused. "It's true. We don't want to hurt anyone unless we have to."

"That wasn't hurting anyone!" Kurt says. "They were stone targets!"

"But the principle—"

"ARGH!" Kurt says, throwing his hands up and stomping off.

Blaine looks after him, completely baffled. "What did I say?"

"Nothing, sweetie," Mercedes says, patting him on the back. "Kurt really hates losing. He'll calm down soon enough."

"I hope so," Blaine says.

"Better luck next time!" Sebastian calls after him with a grin.

Asshole.

He takes his frustrations out on a few large rocks, using waterbending to cut them into neat little slices that would be perfect for frying, were they actually edible. He feels a bit calmer as he heads back to where the cave used to be, arriving just in time to see Pavarotti swoop down from the heavens and drop a scroll in Mercedes's hand.

"Ah," Kurt says as he approaches. "That must be the Dragon Hawks. I wonder if they've found anything useful…" He reaches for the letter.

Mercedes snatches it away. "They haven't."

Kurt side-eyes her. "How do you know?" he asks. "You haven't even opened it yet."

Mercedes considers this for a moment, unfurls the scroll, skims it, and rolls it up again. "They haven't."

"Uh-huh…" Kurt says carefully. "Well, I'm sure they've done something worth reading about."


"Right," Kurt says. "Well, if you say so…"

He turns to walk off, keeping her in his peripheral vision. Mercedes quickly turns and bends up a nice, flat stone for her to write on. The momentary distraction is just enough for Kurt to lash out and water-whip the letter out of her hands and into his own.

"Hey!" Mercedes shouts.

He unfolds the letter, and makes it as far as…
My Sumptuous Chocolate Lavabloom,

…before the ground opens up and swallows him whole, leaving only his hands (and the letter) above the soil.

The scroll is snatched from him just as he erupts from the ground like a pissed off geyser.

"What is your problem?" Mercedes says, shoving the letter in her belt. "Nosey-ass dumbdrop! Why you gotta be up in everybody's business all the time?"

Kurt scoffs at her. "Really, Mercedes? Did you really just ask me that question?"

She crosses her arms. "I see nothing wrong with that statement."

Kurt rolls his eyes. "Of course not. So… which of our new friends has suddenly developed a taste for chocolate?"

He's pretty sure she's blushing. It's harder to tell, but if you really look… "You saw that?"

"Don't worry," Kurt says. "I didn't read your precious love letter."

She shakes her head. "It's not what it looks like."

"Uh-huh," Kurt says, totally believing her.

"It's…" she sighs, looking around. "Alright, don't tell Blaine about this, but I think there is something up with Thad and his little buddies."


"Well, you've seen the way people act when they think you're a member of Thad's family," Mercedes says simply. "They pretty much fall all over themselves to do whatever you want."

"Yes, I've noticed," Kurt says. "Am I a bad person for enjoying it? Just a little?"

Mercedes looks at him flatly. "Yes. But then… so am I, a little. That's not the point."

"What is?" Kurt asks.

"Well, I've been laying around with a busted ankle, and it got me to thinking…" Mercedes says. "The Dragon Hawks act the same way around Thad. Like they have to do what he says."

Kurt thinks back on this a bit. "He does boss them around. He seems like the kind who is used to everyone doing what he says. Not hard to see why."

"Yeah, Thad is bossy, that's not the weird part. The weird part is that they listen to him," Mercedes says. "I've heard them talking. They don't actually like Thad. And yet they do whatever he says."

"Huh," Kurt says.

"Don't you think it's a little suspicious that Blaine's buddies went up to that school and he just happened to have a bunch of boys at his beck-and-call, ready to do whatever?" Mercedes asks.

"What exactly are you trying to say?" Kurt asks.

"I don't know," Mercedes says. "I'm just saying it's a little iffy."
"So you're pretending to be in love with Thad to milk him for info?" Kurt asks.

"Not 'in love,'" Mercedes says. "Just 'interested.' He goes to an all-boys school, remember? The possibility is all the excuse he needs to get all poetic."

"So I see," Kurt says. "Learned anything useful?"

"No, but it's early on. Give me a little time," Mercedes says. "You know how my nose for gossip is. I'll sniff out something sooner or later."

Kurt smiles at her. "Speaking of sniffing… is it just me, or does the New Guy smell like the welcome mat at a brothel?"

"Meow," Mercedes chuckles. "Catty much?"

"I don't like him," Kurt says. "I don't know what it is, but something about him just rubs me the wrong way. Do you not think he's a little off?"

Mercedes shrugs. "He seems harmless to me, but I haven't been paying that much attention."

"Where is he?" Kurt asks.

"He and Blaine mosey'd off to practice knife throwing," Mercedes says.

Kurt has to push his back down his throat before he can speak again. "You let them go off alone?"

"Okay, baby, think about what you just said," Mercedes says. "They. Alone. Those two words don't exactly go together."

"You know what I mean!" Kurt says. "I don't trust him."

"He saved Blaine's life," Mercedes says.

"Yes, but for what nefarious purpose? Is he trying to help, or does he just want to wrap his wicked clutches around my boyfriend?" Kurt asks. He mimics 'wicked clutches' for effect.

"Risking life and limb for a lay," Mercedes says skeptically. "Somehow, I doubt it. But…" she says thoughtfully. "Then again, he is a guy…"

"Exactly!" Kurt says. "See? You know how men are."

"Kurt, I was joking."

"Oh."

"You need to relax," Mercedes says. "Do you really think Blaine is going to cheat on you with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Deadly?"

"It's not Blaine I'm worried about," Kurt says. "What if Sebastian… I don't know… tricks him or something?"

Mercedes quirks an eyebrow at him. "Into what? Having sex? What's he gonna do, dress up as a chair and hope Blaine sits on his—"

"LA LA LA!" Kurt says, covering his ears. "I don't need details, thank you very much! Just… show me where they went."
Mercedes rolls her eyes and points.

"Thank you."

Kurt marches off to save his man from evil. His sixth and seventh senses tell him that Something Is Up, and sure enough, when he finds them, Sebastian has his hands all over Blaine.

"Like this," says the smarmy douche, stepping behind Blaine to grab his wrist and mime the proper throwing motion. "Just swing your arm like this. When you get to the right point, all you have to do is let go. No flicking."

"Okay." Blaine says, nodding. Sebastian steps back, and Blaine swings his arm down and across, and a small knife flies out of his hand and embeds itself in a tree.

"Not bad!" Sebastian says. "Moving targets are a little harder to hit, of course, but you get the hang of it eventually."

"Ummm… what kind of moving targets are you talking about, exactly?" Blaine asks.


"Kurt!" Blaine says happily. "Of course we don't mind. Come on! Sebastian's teaching me knife-throwing."

"Amazing," Kurt says. "Wherever did you pick up such a skill?"

Sebastian shrugs. "My family used to travel a lot. I had a lot of downtime during trips, so I amused myself by throwing things at walls. I got pretty good."

"Huh," Kurt says, studying his wrist with his best nonplussed expression. "Fascinating. Did you know I can pull water out of living things, dehydrating them into shriveled husks which promptly turn to dust?"

"…no," Sebastian says, squinting at him.


"Indeed it is," Kurt says cheerily. "Just… something to think about."

Kurt smoothly flicks his hand towards and away from a nearby vine, which quickly shrinks and crumbles into nothing. Sebastian looks a little unsettled. Naturally, he doesn't know that the trick only works on plants. And Kurt has no intention of telling him.

Sadly, the brief moment of uncertainty passes all too quickly, and Sebastian is back to grinning in no time. "That's pretty incredible," he says. "It must be amazing, to have all that power inside you. And to think that you were born that way… I mean, I always thought I was lucky being born rich. I came out with a silver spoon. Blaine got a golden one, being royalty, but you," he says, pointing at Kurt. "You were born with an entire cutlery set of pure diamond. You're on a whole other level."

Kurt refuses to fall for Sebastian's flattery, though he can't help but admit, "It is pretty great. Sometimes."

"Oh, of course," Sebastian says. "Power comes at a price. You've got destiny to worry about. Huge, world-saving responsibilities way beyond anything we could understand. All that power, all that
history inside of you… it's like you're not even human." He shakes his head in awe. "People like Blaine and I, we couldn't even imagine what it's like to be you."

Kurt smiles politely at him. "What are you trying to say, exactly?"

Sebastian shrugs. "I'm simply giving you a compliment. I honestly don't know how you even relate to normal people like us."

Kurt squints, but keeps his smile intact. "Well, I'm not that far above everyone—"

"Not yet, anyway," Sebastian interjects. "You're still young, after all. But you're getting stronger all the time. Why, I bet it's just a matter of time before you're even better at Firebending than Blaine!" He grins, and nudges Blaine with his elbow.

Blaine looks a little shocked by this. "Huh. I never thought of it like that…"

"Yup," Sebastian says, crossing his arms. "Kind of puts things in perspective, doesn't it? We can brag all we want, but at the end of the day, Kurt's gonna leave us all in the dust. It's destiny."

Blaine's brow furrows in thought, and it suddenly becomes very clear what Sebastian is angling for. Son of a bitch. "Oh!" Kurt says suddenly. "Blaine, honey, Mercedes wanted to talk to you."

"She did?" he asks. "About what?"

"Ummm… things," Kurt says. "Yes. Things. That exact word. Mention things to her and she'll fill in the rest. Sebastian and I will catch up with you soon."

Things being Kurtcedes code for 'please distract this person with inane conversation.'

"Okay," Blaine says, dutifully marching off to talk to Mercedes. Kurt watches him go, before turning back around to glare at Sebastian, who is, infuriatingly, still smirking at him.

Enough is enough. Normally, Kurt would have more patience for this kind of thing, but Sebastian is just rubbing him in every wrong way there is. He skips right to the point. "I don't like you."

Sebastian raises his eyebrows in amusement. "Oooh, fun. I don't like you, either."

"I don't like the way you speak to my boyfriend. I hate your smiley rodent face. And I don't appreciate the faint trail of slime you leave on everything you touch," Kurt says.

"I don't like the way you speak. Your girly voice grates on the ears," Sebastian says. "And your pudgy little dough-face? Major boner-killer. My dick shrivels up faster than that vine you sucked dry."

Kurt feels the blood rush into his face, but he keeps his cool. "I don't want you around Blaine. I don't want you around at all."

Sebastian shrugs. "Tough. I saved Blainey-boy's life. I'm invested now. Guess we're stuck with each other."

"Hardly," Kurt says. "I am getting out of this country as soon as possible, and Blaine is coming with me. The only one who will be left in the dust is you."

Sebastian's eyes widen just a bit. "Oh, really?"

"Yes, really," Kurt says. "Even if we have to leave the Dragon Hawks behind as well."
Sebastian looks thoughtful as he walks over to the tree to retrieve his knife. "I see…" he says.

"Don't think I don't know what you're up to," Kurt says. "I'm onto you. I know what people like you are—"

THUNK.

The knife embeds itself into the tree next to his head, and Kurt flinches involuntarily. For a moment, he is too stunned to react, his eyes flicking between the blade and the boy who threw it.

"There's only one thing you need to know about me," Sebastian says as he walks up to Kurt, pulling the blade from the bark. He holds it in front of Kurt's face, allowing him to see the beetle speared on the point. "I always hit what I aim for."

With that, he plucks the beetle from the blade and drops it at Kurt's feet as he walks off.

The beetle twitches twice, horribly, before it finally dies.

Blaine will believe him. Blaine has to believe him. Has to know that when Kurt says someone is potentially a dangerous psychopath, he does so with good reason.

Though he might ask to hear those reasons. To which Kurt would reply… he threw a knife at my head.

Except… Sebastian would probably just play it off as aiming for the beetle. Say that it was some kind of poisonous, Fire Nation superbeetle that lays eggs in your eyes or something. Damn that twisted little chipmunk-faced…

As Kurt steps back into camp, he notices the chariot is parked there, meaning Wevid and Finchel are back. Sure enough, Finn is nearby, forlornly offering apples to the two dragon moose. "No offense," he says, "but it's just not the same with you guys."

Finn! Surely Finn will believe him! He'll believe anything.

…which is something Sebastian could take advantage of just as easily as Kurt. Damn it!

"Finn!" Kurt says cheerfully. "You're back! How was your trip into town?"

Finn brightens immensely. "It was great! Dude, you should have seen me, I was awesome."

Greetings and salutations, one and all! My name is Finnigus Fondlebottom Harwood the 47th, Marmaduke of Canteloupe and Junior Grand Initiate of the Order of the Society of the Super Secret Sunflower (shhh! It's a secret). Verily, I spake to thee in this way on this day on the instruction of my lovely wife, Raquellia Lemonadia Harwood (the 1st). An actress of the theatress, she hath informed me that in order to affectuate a most complete transformation of one's character, one must transfidulate even one's thoughts to the manner of the character of which one wishes to have… become.

I presumeth the mantle of a nobleman on this day forthwith, for my brother doth be camping in the wilderness with his boyfriend. The responsibilities situated upon my shoulder are most great, and thusly I mustly not allow myself to shank them.

My lovely wife and I are accompanied by companions Wesselessington and Davidigan, mine
"faithful dudeservants since I was but a tiny Harwood sprout. We are entrancing upon this town (the name of which etudes me) for the purposeful purchasement of certain necessary supplies. Utiliating my vast fortune and the power of my family's singlet ring, we shall accentuate the atonement… attainment…"

"Owwww," Finn whispers. "Rachel, this is giving me a headache."

"Shhh!" Rachel says through clenched teeth, smiling at an attendant as she wanders by. "You're doing fine. Keep going!"

Finn squints his eyes and concentrates.

Anyway, we're going to buy stuff. I mean, erm… we intend to attain various knickerbockers and doowhatsits. My companions have informed me that they wish to do much of the procuring (how very sportly of them!) and thus it is primarily mine purpose to stand erect and look extremely important and dignificated.

"Is everything to your liking, my lord?" an attendant asks.

"Oh, verily!" Finn replies cheerfully. "I am especially impressed by the sanctification of your facilities. So clean!"

The attendant gives him a bit of a side-eye, but Rachel is quick to jump in.

"We are pleased indeed with our time here thusfar," she says. "If there is anything that displeases us, rest assured we will let you know as soon and as loudly as possible."

"Of course, milady!" the attendant says, bowing and scampering off.

Finn gives her a pleased smile and reaches over to squeeze her shoulder. She smacks his hand.

"Ow!" Finn says.

"We must maintain our composure, dear," Rachel says carefully. "Displays of affection are to be kept behind closed doors. It isn't proper in public."


I am immenselessly thankful for the support and care of my lovely wife. Without her, I fear I would forget myself, in a most serious and literary sense. Truly, she is a beautiful moonflower, and the radiatiance of her glow lighteth up the shadowy darkness of my dark places.

Alas, as amusing as our mental conversating has been, I feel my brain approacheth exhaustion and has a case of the vapors. I shall retire to the bedchamber of my mind, that it might regain its composture.

Finn spends the remainder of his time in the store playing a song in his head.

Rachel recommends that he transpose it to harpsichord just to make it sound fancier.

It totally works.

"…wow," Kurt says carefully. "That sounds… intense."

"Oh, it totally was. My head still hurts a little," Finn nods. "Rachel's pretty intense sometimes, but
she's also right a lot of the time." He grins. "She's pretty great, actually. Like, really, really awesome. Totally, super, amazing, outstanding—"

"That's nice Finn," Kurt interrupts. "Quick question… what do you think of Sebastian?"

"The new guy?" Finn asks. "He's alright."

"Nothing odd about him?" Kurt asks.

"Well, he seems kind of weird," Finn says, "but everybody in the Fire Nation seems weird to me. Why?"

Kurt sighs. There's really not much point in pursuing this with him. Finn just isn't naturally suspicious. "No reason. Anyway, now that you're back, I imagine we'll be leaving soon, so don't get too comfortable. Is Rachel around here?"

Finn points, and Kurt follows the path of his finger.

Perhaps Rachel will be his ally in this. She, too, has an ear for gossip, and is ever-watchful and suspicious of anyone who might be out to steal her spotlight. He just needs to frame Sebastian in the right light, and Rachel will be all over him like a dragon hawk on a ratsnake.

Unfortunately, Sebastian yet again beats him to the punch.

"…always be yours, my love, I will always be yours."

Rachel's voice is powerful and clear, resounding even in the terrible acoustics of the forest. She finishes her song with a flourish, and Sebastian bursts into hoots and applause. "That was beautiful, Rachel!" he says. "Your voice is stellar. I'd give anything to be able to sing like you do."

"It is, isn't it?" Rachel says, bowing courteously. "Perhaps I could give you lessons sometime!"

"Would you?" Sebastian asks. "Oh, that'd be great! Thank you so much!"

"It's my pleasure," Rachel says. "As a natural talent, nothing pleases me more than to see another develop to their full potential. It is my duty as an artist to develop lesser talents!"

Kurt coughs subtly to announce his presence, and Rachel turns to him with stars in her eyes. "Oh, Kurt! Sebastian just asked me to perform a song for him. He wants lessons! Isn't he sweet?" she asks.

Behind her, Sebastian winks at him.

"The very sweetest. I feel like falling into a sugar coma just looking at him," Kurt says, suppressing his growl. Then, an idea hits him. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"What do you mean?" Rachel asks.

Sebastian's eyes go a little wide.

"He wants lessons," Kurt says. "Why not start right away? Time is precious! You never know if you're going to get another chance. No time like the present!"

"Kurt, your wisdom is truly matchless," Rachel says, turning resolutely to Sebastian. Before he can protest, Rachel bounds over, tittering excitedly and dragging him off to some secluded corner to
develop his vocal range. He sends a small glare at Kurt as he is pulled away, at which Kurt allows himself to indulge in a smirk of his own.

Still, Rachel already has an extremely favorable impression of Sebastian. Which means the only potential allies he really has left are Wes and David. They are dedicated big-brother types who will instantly raise their hackles at anything that might endanger their little buddy. True, Sebastian has done a lot to ingratiate himself to them by saving Blaine's life, but Kurt is fairly sure he can undo that if he convinces them that Sebastian only saved him to get into his pants.

At the very least, he can get them to keep an eye on him, so any other suspicious behavior can be reported to the proper authorities, IE, the local Avatar.

To his endless frustration, Wes and David have also been hijacked. But not by Sebastian.

Wes and Mercedes are sitting near the rubble-formerly-known-as-a-cave, speaking in hushed tones.

"...since you asked," Wes says. "I've known Thad since I was a little boy. We grew up in the same town, attended Dalton together. His nanny used to invite me to their estate to play all the time."

"Mmmhmmm," Mercedes says, looking thoughtful. "Did you ever meet any other Harwoods?"

"Well," Wes says. "I... don't remember, really. I mean, there were always people milling about on the estate. Their compound was huge. But I don't recall ever meeting his parents. I did see his little brother, Theodore, once or twice, but that was years ago, and he was just a baby. I doubt he even remembers me."

"Alright," Mercedes says. "So... how did Thad treat you?"

"What sort of question is that?" Wes asks. "We were friends. He treated me like a friend..."

Kurt wants to keep listening in, but another hushed, familiar voice tickles his ear and leads him to wander in a different direction. In a small, secluded corner surrounded by short, rocky spires, Blaine and David are speaking quietly. From their hushed tones, Kurt can guess that it is intended to be a private conversation.

He inches closer to listen in. He'll feel guilty about it later, he's sure.

"...asking me for?" David says. "Surely you knew him better than anyone."

"That's the thing," Blaine says. "I just... sometimes, I think I didn't know him. We had firebending practice, but outside of that, I barely saw him."

David looks a little worried. "What brought this on, exactly?"

Blaine sighs and leans against a rock. "I just... heard some people talking about him. Saying things. Like... maybe he wasn't the nicest guy in the world."

David chooses his next words carefully. "Niceness is... a rare quality in a ruler."

"Just... tell me what you thought of him," Blaine says. "Be honest."

David sighs. "Blaine, your father was... well, to be quite frank, he could be terrifying at times. He had little patience for anything that threatened his nation, and even less for things that threatened you. There's a good reason Wes and I were so frightened of being found out when you went on your little adventures. When he came to us on that night... I honestly thought he was going to kill
us on the spot."

"Oh…" Blaine says quietly.

"Oh, don't be like that," David says. "Even if your father was scary, he struck me as a very fair and wise man most of the time. His legacy was just a bit… confused."

"What do you mean?" Blaine asks.

David massages his forehead. "Look, I'm sure there is someone else who knows about these things better than me. Maybe you should ask Wes about this."

"Maybe I will," Blaine says. "But right now, I'm asking you. Why, exactly, was my father 'confusing'?"

David pauses for a second, and takes a deep breath. "All I really know is what I've heard. My parents used to talk when they thought I was out of earshot, and they'd say things."

"What kind of things?"

"Things like…" David sighs. "Like sometimes it seemed like there was no Fire Lord. That your father died with his wife, and the Palace was haunted by his ghost."

Blaine squints. "That's ridiculous. My father was very much alive."

David rolls his eyes. "I don't think they meant it literally. Before your mother died, they said your father was dynamic, charismatic, a true leader, beloved among the people. And after, he was… well, not much of anything, really. He just sort of faded from the public eye."

Blaine nods. "He definitely changed after she died, but… I guess I didn't really think about how that would look to everyone else." He furrows his brow. "But that still doesn't explained why Se—I mean… why these people called him a cutthroat."

"Look, maybe you should ask Wesley," David says. "He's a history lover. He might be able to shed some more light on what your father used to be like."

"Maybe so," Blaine sighs. "Thanks, David."

"Are you alright?" David asks.

"I'll be fine," Blaine says simply. "We'll probably be heading out soon. Go ahead back to camp. I'll catch up to you in a minute."

"Okay," David says. "Just… remember, I'm here if you need me." Kurt hears his footsteps drawing closer. With little time to spare, Kurt presses himself against a rock and melds into it. The eye-hole he leaves open gives him just enough space to catch David as he walks past, looking deep in thought.

Kurt decides to wait a few seconds before emerging from his rocky camouflage, so as not to make it totally obvious he just eavesdropped on his boyfriend's angst.

When he does pop out, he finds Blaine forlornly staring off into space.

"Hey," Kurt says. "Mercedes said she saw you go this way. Are you alright?"

Blaine instantly brightens up. Kurt can't tell if his smile is forced or not. "I'm fine. Just… thinking
about some things. That's all."

Kurt walks up to Blaine with a smile and takes his hands. It's only after he opens his mouth to speak that he doesn't actually know what to say. Especially if he doesn't want to reveal the fact that he was listening in.

So instead, he just pulls him into a hug.

Blaine hugs him back, his smile a little more genuine as they break apart. "What was that for?" he asks.

Kurt shrugs. "You looked like you needed it."

Blaine shakes his head in amazement. "Could you be any more perfect?" he says.

"I can always try," Kurt says, intertwining their fingers. "Now, come on. It's time to leave—we have a lot of ground to cover."

They walk hand-in-hand back to camp, where everyone else is already preparing to leave. Wes and David are putting the reins on the dragon moose. Finn is carrying various heavy things without an ounce of complaint, his shoulder apparently not bothering him at all. Rachel and Sebastian are milling around under the direction of Mercedes, covering their tracks and hiding evidence of a campsite as best they can.

Kurt smiles at the scene. Not even Sebastian can ruin it for him. Fire, Earth, Water and Air, working in perfect concert. Friends and allies all around.

There is but one thing that can ruin the scene, and when Kurt realizes what it is, it stabs right through him.

Artie should be there with them, helping them out, grin ning and acting like a fool. And the fact that he isn't just seems to sour the whole thing in Kurt's mind.

It's almost funny, really. Because Artie is essentially the one person Kurt knows would have seen the same things in Sebastian that he sees. That he would have picked him out as a scumbag at fifty paces, seen right through his phony charm and easy lies. Artie would blow any plans Sebastian had wide open for all the world to see—at the very least, he wouldn't have much of a problem making Sebastian disappear at Kurt's request (No! Bad Avatar! We do not put hits on people!).

"Are you okay?" Blaine asks. "What's wrong?"

Kurt smiles at him. "I'm worried about Artie."

"I'm sure he'll be okay," Blaine says gently. "He's bound to turn up somewhere."

Suddenly, Kurt realizes that Blaine didn't hear his little confession. And he just doesn't have it in him right now to give it a second time. "I hope so," he says sincerely.

They break apart to help the others pack, and soon, they're all on the road again.

To Kurt's infinite pleasure, Sebastian chooses to ride outside of the carriage, and spends most of the trip chattering to Wes and David. For the most part, the trip to the next town is largely uneventful.

Well, there is the brief delay caused by the random con artist throwing himself in front of their carriage.
"Well," Kurt says. "My finances have recently taken a hit. I can't afford to pay you off right now. I suppose I'll just have to kill you. I'm terribly sorry."

Suddenly, the man feels much better. Good enough to run, in fact.

And Rachel's small panic attack at Pavarotti attempting to bring his meal into the carriage so he could eat on the go.

"The poor bunny," Rachel sniffels. "You could still see the horror on his widdle bunny face!"

And that pathetic attempt at highway robbery…

"This is a stick-up!" says the rhino-riding bandit, brandishing his longsword…

…which is promptly knocked out of his hand via an arrow from Sebastian's bow. "No, actually, it isn't," he says.

The bandit gulps. "You're right! How silly of me. My mistake. Carry on!"

And then he promptly rides into a tree.

But, yeah, other than that, it's pretty uneventful.

When they pull off the road to set up camp for the night, Kurt catches sight of Sebastian, smiling once again. His smirk has changed considerably since the ride began. He's definitely incubating something in that devious little brain of his, but what it is, Kurt doesn't know.

Unfortunately for him, he doesn't have to wait long to find out.

Sebastian springs it on them that night as they sit around the fire, happily slurping on some stew Mercedes cooked up.

"...honestly," Sebastian says. "The main reason I joined the Navy was to keep travelling. My parents used to go all over the world. I love travelling."

"That sounds awesome," Blaine says. "I've never been outside of the Fire Nation, and I'm amazed at what I've seen of it. To travel the whole world… that must have been awesome."

Sebastian nods. "I guess you'll find out for yourself pretty soon, won't you?"

Blaine blinks at him. "What do you mean?"

Sebastian grins and nudges him. "Aw, come on. Don't be shy! You and Kurt are going off to the Air Temples together. He told me all about it. I bet you can hardly wait."

"Wait. You're going where?" Wes asks Blaine.

"I'm going where?" Blaine asks.

Kurt promptly chokes on his soup, sending himself into a coughing fit.

"The Air Temples!" Sebastian says with mock excitement. "Kurt told me all about it. As soon as he can, he's getting out of the Fire Nation and heading to the Air Temples. And you get to go with him! You're a lucky guy, Blaine," he adds, shaking his head in awe. "Even I've never seen a real Air Temple."
"Hang on a second!" David says. Finn and Mercedes look a little worried. Rachel just looks confused. "Blaine, were you ever going to tell us about your plan to… to elope with the Avatar?"

"No," Blaine says. "I mean… yes. I mean… I couldn't tell you, because I didn't know!"

"You didn't know?" Wes asks. He turns to Kurt. "Wait, so you didn't even tell him where you were taking him? That's practically abduction!"

"Hey!" Mercedes says. "You need to calm down."

"I was not abducting him," Kurt says. "I figured it was common sense. I need to learn all four elements, ergo, my next step is to go to the Air Temples. I've got a long way to go before I've mastered firebending, and Blaine is my teacher, ergo, he comes with me."

"That's some heavy-duty presumption you've got going on there," David says. "You know, the whole world doesn't revolve around you."

"No, I revolve around it," Kurt says.

"Guys, calm down!" Blaine says. "Just... let's all take a deep breath and settle down for a second, okay?"

Wes and David follow Blaine's orders, though they still seem to bristle with outrage.

"Now, what Kurt says makes a lot of sense," Blaine says. "I guess we just never really talked about it. I know it comes as a shock to you guys, but I'm sure the Fire Nation can survive without me for a little while."

"Blaine!" Wes says. "How can you think that?"

"What?" Blaine says. "It's true. Once we take care of Sue, there won't be much left on the home front for me to worry about. There's no reason I couldn't go with Kurt."

"Um... about that," Kurt says. "I don't know if we're going to be able to take care of Sue before we leave."

And that is the thing that stuns Blaine into silence.

Fortunately, Wes has plenty of words to make up for it.

"Before you leave?" Wes says. "You would leave an entire country in the hands of a tyrant? What the fuck kind of Avatar are you?"

"Whoa!" Finn says, dropping his soup. "Dude, chill."

"Wes, think about this," Kurt says. "Do you really think Blaine is going to be able to get rid of Sue with a bunch of schoolkids when she has an entire army?"

"Well, he also has you," Wes says. "Or, at least, we thought he did."

"I'm not an army!" Kurt says. "Even if I was, a war with Sue could take months, or even years."

"Oh, so that's why you're leaving Sue in charge," David says. "Deposing her doesn't fit with your time table."

"It's not that simple!" Kurt says.
"I begin to see a disturbing pattern in your behavior, Avatar," Wes says, his voice frighteningly even. "In which you use people for your own ends, only to abandon them when they become an inconvenience."

That is the grain of rice that tips the scales. "Excuse me?" Kurt growls.

"Don't you talk about my brother like that," Finn warns.

"Wes," Blaine pleads.

"What? It's true!" Wes says.

"You better watch your mouth, hot stuff," Mercedes says.

"Don't presume to give orders to us, dirtbender!" David says.

"Talk to my friend like that one more time and see where it gets you," Kurt says.

"Everyone, please!" Rachel says. "There is too much anger clouding the air! Communication is impossible in such a hostile environment."

"Oh, will you stuff it, airhead?" David says.

"DON'T FUCKING CALL HER THAT!" Finn shouts.

And then, without even meaning to, Finn provides the spark that lights the fuse.

He stands up.

The chain reaction is immediate.

David stands to meet him.

Mercedes stands to back him up.

Wes stands to even the odds.

Rachel stands out of sheer panic.

Sebastian stands so she doesn't step on him.

Kurt and Blaine stand in unison.

Without even meaning to, Wes breathes out a tiny flame in his fury.

Finn sees the flame and pulls a rope of water from the soup cauldron.

David lights dagger-sized jets of flame at the ends of his fists.

Mercedes pulls up a mound of earth.

Wes pulls an orb of flame from the campfire, holding it at the ready.

And suddenly, Kurt and Blaine are standing between them.

"That's—"
Everyone stops.

Breathing is heavy. Muscles are tense. Nostrils flare and fists clench. Elements continue to stand at the ready. Every person around the fire is a point in the circle of tension. The moment of stillness brings clarity, and suddenly, they see the end of the path they were on.

They were about to fight.

Slowly but surely, they drop their stances. The water soaks into the ground, the earth moves to its former position, the fires flicked out, and everyone stands down. The air is still electric with tension, but the threat of violence, for the moment at least, is gone.

"This is..." Blaine says, faltering for a bit. "This is something that Kurt and I need to discuss."

Wes and David nod and start to walk towards him.

"Alone," Blaine clarifies.

"Now wait just a minute," Wes says.

"For what?" Kurt says. "What do you think I'm going to do, spirit him off into the night?"

Wes and David glare at him, but they remain silent.

"Just... stay here," Blaine says. "Stay here, and try to calm down."

"No fighting!" Kurt says, pointing to Finn and Mercedes. "We will be right back."

With an uncertain glance at each other, Kurt and Blaine walk away, leaving their seething friends glaring at each other across the campfire.

"Awkward," Sebastian says quietly.

They find a quiet place underneath an overhanging cliff. Kurt stomps up a couple of earthen stools to sit on, and they both sit and look at each other.

Neither quite seems to know what to say.

"Okay, I guess I'll start," Kurt says. "Did you really not know?"

Blaine laughs mirthlessly. "Not know what? You're going to have to be more specific. Apparently, there's quite a lot that I don't know."

"Blaine it was always my intention to get you out of this country," Kurt says. "You may or may not have noticed, but it's full of people who want to kill you."

"It's also full of people who need me," Blaine counters. "Should I just turn my back on them?"

"Blaine, for heaven's sake," Kurt says, trying to keep himself calm. "You're acting like you would never be able to come back. As soon as we solve this whole plague mess, I will be happy to come back here and help you in the fight against Sue."

"So this just comes down to whose problem gets solved first?" Blaine says. "That seems like a silly
thing to fight over. Kurt, we both want the same things. Why does the order matter?"

"Because it does," Kurt says. "The plague isn't just an Earth Kingdom problem, it's an everywhere problem. The more time I waste solving the little things, the more out-of-control the big one gets!"

"So this is just a 'little thing?'" Blaine asks.

"No," Kurt says. "It's a big one, but it's not the big one. I have a responsibility to the entire world. I have to spend my time going after the thing that's causing the most damage."

"I get that," Blaine says. "But I have a responsibility to the Fire Nation. Wes, David, the Dragon Hawks—they need me."

"I need you," Kurt says. "The world needs you."

"I can't just abandon them, Kurt," Blaine says. "I can't just leave them here where Sue can… can…"

"Can what, Blaine?" Kurt asks, throwing his hands up. "Where Sue can what? All she's doing right now is hunting for you! In the grand scheme of things, she hasn't even done anything that bad yet!"

He knows it's a mistake the second it comes out of his mouth. In vain, he puts a hand over his stupid, traitorous lips, but by then it's too late. Blaine's entire face is slack with hurt and disbelief.

"I didn't mean that," Kurt says.

Blaine is already walking away. He could not turn away from Kurt fast enough.

"Blaine, stop," Kurt says.

"Stop what?" Blaine says, his voice quivering. "I'm not doing anything. I'm just walking around."

"You're upset," Kurt says.

"Why would I be upset?" Blaine asks. "It's not like there's anything to get upset over. It's not that bad."

"You know I didn't mean that!" Kurt shouts.

"What did you mean, Kurt?" Blaine shouts, wheeling around. The tear tracks look out of place on his angry face.

Kurt stops to breathe for a second. "All I meant was…" He sighs, massaging the bridge of his nose, desperately hoping his next words get through to him. "Sometimes… you can't save everyone. Sometimes, you have to choose. And it's my job to choose whatever does the most people the most good."

It's all he can really say for himself at the moment. He turns pleading eyes to Blaine, imploring him to understand, studying him for his reaction.

After a moment Blaine crosses his arms and takes a deep, shuddering breath.

Kurt does the same.

They are silent for a few more moments, and Kurt finally realizes something.
"We're both too emotional to do this right now," Kurt says.

Blaine's jaw clenches, but he nods.

"We can talk about it tomorrow, when everyone has calmed down," Kurt says.

Blaine nods again.

Kurt walks towards him slowly, like an animal he's afraid to scare. "You know I didn't mean that," he says, quiet but firm.

Blaine closes his eyes and nods.

Kurt pulls him into a hug.

Blaine's arms remain crossed, but he doesn't pull away.

"You know I didn't mean that," Kurt repeats.

He feels Blaine nod into his shoulder.

They stand like that for several minutes, with only the sound of the night around them.

Things seem marginally less tense when they return to camp. At the very least, everyone is sitting down, where before, they were standing up. They go right back to standing, however, when they see the boys' faces.

"What happened?" Mercedes asks. "Are you—"

"We're too tired and too emotional to think straight right now," Kurt says quietly. "We will talk about it again tomorrow, when everyone has calmed down."

"That… sounds like a good idea," Wes says quietly. "I think we will all do better with a night's rest. I… apologize for my lack of control earlier."

"We're all a little touchy right now," Kurt says. "But we're not going to break up over this. We've come this far together—it would be stupid to break up now." He isn't sure if he is speaking to the group at large, or Blaine and Blaine only. The night kind of sucks like that.

"Where's Sebastian?" Blaine asks, his voice rough. After Kurt gets over the slight bristling at hearing his boyfriend express concern about that thing, he notices that Sebastian is, in fact, missing.

"He went to scout ahead," Mercedes says. "Said he'd meet you in town."

"Right, in town," Kurt says, his mind returning to the matter at hand. "Okay. Wes, David, you guys stay with Blaine. Mercedes the campsite pretty much requires an earthbender, so you stay here too. Finn, Rachel, you're with me. Finn, you're driving the chariot. Let's go."

The gang starts shuffling around, and soon, everyone who needs to be is in place and in costume. Rachel takes the role of Kurt's wife, Finn takes the role of chauffeur, and Kurt takes the role of nobleman.

As they head out, Rachel puts her hand on Kurt's shoulder. "Kurt, please don't take this the wrong way, but you look awful. Are you alright?"
Kurt sighs and sticks his head out the window. Looking back, he sees Blaine, staring quietly and miserably into the dying campfire. Wes and David sit beside him, clasping his shoulders and muttering quiet assurances.

"No," Kurt answers. "But I will be."

He sniffs.

"We will be."

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Chapter End Notes

Well, that was tense! I'm not even going to tell you what's in the next chapter—you'll just have to wait and find out! :D Thoughts and reviews are always appreciated!
Chapter Notes

We're coming up on something big soon. It isn't the finale of the story, but it is a major turning point that leads into the conclusion. Yes, believe it or not, this story has an ending! We're slowly making progress towards it. In the meantime, enjoy this chapter, in which I create a ship that I never expected to exist, spark a bromance, and top it all off with some Klaine flangst. That's fluffy angst, in case you didn't know. :P

Also, it has recently occurred to me that I'm writing this more like a television show than a novel. I'd imagine a novel would need to be much more concise. XP

Blaine's night is long and restless, filled with half-remembered dreams and catapult awakenings. When he finally sees enough sunlight to give up on sleep, he quietly thanks the heavens that Mercedes's earth tent did not collapse on them during the night.

She seemed a little angry when he went to bed.

And she hasn't quite calmed down yet, if the note she left is any indication.

"Gone to murder breakfast. Hope you like paste."

Ouch. He pities whatever unfortunate woodland creature gets in her way this morning.

Wes and David are still asleep, having slept on either side of him like protective buffers. Blaine rolls his eyes. He doesn't need protecting. Not from Kurt.

Maybe it's time he clues them in.

"Hey," he says, poking each of them in turn. "Wake up."

"What…?" Wes says groggily, squinting at him.

"s goin' on?" David asks, sitting up. "Another dragonfly revolt? The emperor will be displeased…"

"What?" Blaine asks.

David blinks, and shakes his head. "Sorry… weird dream."

"Is something wrong?" Wes asks, sitting up as well.

Blaine sighs. "It's about last night. I think we need to talk about it."

He sits on the small pallet and looks at his friends with trepidation.

"Of course," Wes says, looking a little more awake. "You can talk to us about anything."

"Speak your mind," David says.

Blaine cringes a bit. If only they knew what he was about to say.
It takes courage to stand up to enemies.

It takes perhaps even more to stand up to friends.

"Okay, here goes," Blaine says. "What you guys did yesterday was not cool at all."

Wes tilts his head in confusion. "What?"

David looks positively scandalized. "Excuse me?"

"The whole thing was just a simple misunderstanding. A miscommunication," Blaine says. "It was you guys who nearly turned it into a fight."

"Well, excuse us for trying to defend you against your kidnappers!" David says. He turns to Wes. "I bet they've brainwashed him. Or he's just been in their company so long that he's suffering from… from… Stockboy Syndrome!"


"Whatever," David says. "The point is—"

"That!" Blaine says, pointing at him. "That's exactly the point. Why do you think they were trying to kidnap me? Why do you think I need protecting from these people?"

"We're supposed to protect you," Wes says simply. "It's our job."

"No, it isn't," Blaine says.

Wes squints. "I'm pretty sure it is, actually…"

"No," Blaine says firmly. "My father is dead. You're no longer employed by the Fire Nation. No one is making you do this, no one is paying you."

"Fine," David says. "We want to protect you."

"But I don't need protecting!" Blaine says. "Least of all from Kurt. And I definitely don't need you two firebombing the people who saved my life. You're not my bodyguards anymore. I don't need bodyguards. I need friends."

The two have the grace to look a little ashamed at Blaine's admonishment. Blaine takes this as his cue to continue.

"Wes, that was a seriously shitty thing you said to Kurt. Why would you accuse him of just using people and throwing them away?"

"I was caught up in the heat of the moment," Wes says quietly. "It felt true at the time."

"If all he did was keep people around because they're useful, he would've dumped me at the first town we passed," Blaine says. "After we escaped, I was hurt so badly I could barely stay awake for more than a few minutes at a time. Even after Finn healed me and helped me get back on my feet, I had lost my fire. I couldn't bend, I couldn't really train Kurt, I couldn't do anything. But they took care of me anyway."

Now, Wes looks properly ashamed. "…oh," he says quietly. "I… I didn't realize."

Blaine turns to his other friend. "And David… dude. I cannot believe you stooped to name calling.
You used racist slurs! I thought you were better than that."

David crosses his arms. "I am not racist! How dare you accuse me of that?"

"Then explain yourself," Blaine says.

David looks at him flatly. "Think about this from my perspective: I had just learned that a bunch of foreigners wanted to take you out of the country you were born to rule, and that they wanted to do so without your knowledge or consent!"

Blaine remains steadfast. "Those foreigners are my friends, same as you guys. Friends trust each other. I trust you, and I trust them."

"How do you know you can trust them?" David asks. "Who knows what nefarious purposes they had in mind for you?"

Blaine quirks an eyebrow at him. "Are you listening to yourself? I mean, don't you think you're just being a little bit racist?"

"I am not racist!" David says. "I just… have a hard time trusting outsiders."

"He's right, Blaine," Wes says easily. "The word you're looking for is 'xenophobic.'"

"Exactly," David says. A pause. "Hey, now, wait just a—"

"They're no different than us," Blaine says. "They were there for me when you guys couldn't be, and they did it for free. If that isn't worthy of trust, then I don't know what is."

David still looks irritated, but Blaine can see the beginnings of guilt starting to seep in. "I'm… oh, fine. I'm sorry. I just…"

"We don't like the idea of someone taking you away from us again," Wes says. "I don't like the thought of you going where I can't follow."

Blaine smiles. "And I'm thankful for that, really. I'm lucky to have friends like you guys. I'm lucky to have all of my friends. Now, I want my friends to be friends with each other. Is that so much to ask?"

"I suppose not," Wes quietly admits.

David's stiff posture slackens just slightly. "Perhaps 'xenophobia' is a reasonable term for my behavior." He shakes his head. "I'll… try to work on that."

Blaine nods. "When Kurt gets back, I want you guys to apologize to everyone. Okay?"

"Okay," Wes agrees.

David nods. "Okay."

Blaine smiles. "I knew I could count on you guys to do the right thing."

Wes smiles back, and David rolls his eyes.

"Our little moral center. What would we do without you?" he jokes.

"In all seriousness," Wes says, looking a bit more sober. "Have you given any more thought to the
Avatar's plans?"

"You don't really intend to leave us, do you?" David asks.

"I don't know," Blaine says. "I mean... Kurt makes some good points, but this is my home. My responsibility. I can't even imagine leaving it, especially in the hands of someone like Sue." He sighs. "I think Kurt and I should discuss it some more, now that we've all calmed down. I'm sure we'll think of something."

"I certainly hope so," Wes says.

They sit in silence for a few moments, watching the beams of sunlight streaming in from the entrance of the tent.

"I'd go with you, you know," Wes says suddenly. "If you left. I'd follow you to the darkest corners of the earth."

"As would I," David says. "I mean... I wouldn't like it, but I'd do it."

Blaine laughs, but it dies quickly. "And if I needed you not to?"

They don't really have an answer for that.

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Kurt lies flat on the ocean's surface. All around him, the still waters of an endless sea reflect an endless sky. Clouds float lazily through the blue, and mist hangs always at the edges of his vision. The sun is bright overhead.

Suddenly, the clouds begin to grow. They expand throughout the sky, remaining pure white even as they eclipse each other. When white has covered blue entirely, the clouds swirl, forming a funnel that reaches towards Kurt like a heavenly finger dipping into the ocean. The Avatar watches as the funnel spins to a stop just above him. Bits of puff slowly form into an image that brings a smile to his face.

Avatar Gaga floats lazily above him, naked save for a few strategically placed cloud coverings. The funnel cloud forms into her hair, making it seem as though she wears all the heavens as a headpiece.

Kurt chuckles to himself. Only she could possibly pull that off.

"Hello, Kurt," she coos.

"Hello, Avatar Gaga," Kurt says, smiling up at her. "What brings you here?"

"You, of course," she says lightly, her fingers trailing streams of fog as she points at him. "Your spirit calls for release, like an animal in heat." She gently strokes her fingers along his cheek. Her touch is cool as the morning dew. "What troubles you, my dear?"

Kurt sighs. "Lots of things, really. I don't know if I could go over them all. We might be here for years."

Her laugh is a gentle melody, echoing even in the vast nothingness. "All dances have a first step. Take it, and let us see where the music leads us."

"Hmmm," Kurt says. "Alright... I suppose my biggest issue at the moment is Blaine."
"Ah… love," Avatar Gaga says. "The first and final song."

"It seems like we just got together, and now it seems like we might lose each other just as quickly," Kurt sighs.

"And what greater crisis is there than that of two young hearts entwined?" Gaga says teasingly.

"Hey, this is way more than simple relationship drama," Kurt says defensively. "I'm going to the Air Temples soon. I need Blaine to come with me, so I can continue to learn firebending. But he wants to stay in the Fire Nation, and he wants me to stay with him, to fight in a war to take his throne back."

"Mmmm," Avatar Gaga says. "That is vexing."

"I can't get involved in a war," Kurt says. "According to Blaine, Sue is incredibly powerful on a personal level, and even if she wasn't, she has an army. Fighting her could take months or even years, and the plague would be spreading the whole time."

"Hmmmm," Avatar Gaga says, stroking her chin. "It seems you have already made your choice. You know what you must do."

"I do," Kurt says. "My problem is convincing Blaine to come with me. I need him."

"Do you?" Gaga asks. "Is there no other in this world who could teach you?"

Kurt crosses his arms. "Well, I guess there might be, but…"

"Then you do not need him," Avatar Gaga says. "You want him. It is important to understand the difference."

"Fine," Kurt says. "So I want him to come with me. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything, but I just… I don't know how to make him see reason."

"Perhaps he already does," Avatar Gaga says. "Perhaps you both see it from different sides."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kurt asks.

"You are different people. You come from different places. Your hearts, joined as they are, are tied to different things," Avatar Gaga says. "Blaine is the Prince of the Fire Nation. His destiny is tied inextricably to it. He feels it inside, surely as he feels your touch outside."

"So, what?" Kurt asks. "I have no choice but to leave him?"

"Your choice has already been made," Gaga says. "And now Blaine must make his. He must choose his own destiny, his own path, and it may not lie with yours. Your destiny is larger than any one Nation."

"Great," Kurt says. "That's just great. Destiny. It's my destiny to save the world, my destiny to be the Avatar, my destiny to do whatever needs to be done no matter how much I hate it."

"Such is our burden," Avatar Gaga says gently.

Kurt throws his arms out, splashing in the shallow water. "Seriously, what is the point of me, then? Destiny is the one in charge; I'm just a sponge for Destiny to drag through the mud of every Nation until she decides to hurl me against the wall to splatter like a modern art project. What's the point of life if Destiny has already decided everything?"
"Kurt, you mustn't think like that," Gaga says. "The nature of destiny is a mystery even to the Avatar. Not everything is set in stone. Some things can be changed, some cannot."

"How do we know which is which?" Kurt asks.

"We don't," Avatar Gaga says. "That is why we must live as if every choice we make matters."

Kurt sighs, shaking his head. "I just… I'm supposed to be the most powerful person in the world."

"Eventually," Avatar Gaga says. "You're not quite there yet."

"Then why do I feel so powerless?" Kurt asks.

Avatar Gaga stares down at him for a long moment. A grin sparks to life on her face as she drags her fingers through the swirling clouds above her, forming a ball. Swirls and splashes of color ripple through the little sphere, mostly blue. When she dangles the cloud orb just above him, Kurt sees it for what it is: a globe. A model of the world. "Tell me, Kurt," she says. "What is your desire for the world?"

"…to save it?" he tries.

"Apart from that," she clarifies. "What impact do you wish to make? What legacy do you want to leave?"

Kurt considers this carefully. "Well… I've been through three different countries now," he says. "They've all got their problems. The Water Tribes have major-league gender issues. The Earth Kingdom could not be more homophobic if they tried. The Fire Nation is free from those for the most part, but they more than make up for it in xenophobia. I haven't met the Air Nomads yet, but I'm sure they have their issues."

"Bender supremacy, spoiler alert," Avatar Gaga says lightly.

"Great," Kurt says, rolling his eyes. "And as if those issues weren't enough, all four Nations seem completely wrapped up in their own problems, indifferent, untrusting, even hostile towards the rest of the world." He stops for a second. "I know it sounds like I'm slagging on the world, but I'm really not. There's a lot of good, too. I've seen it. People can change if they really want to, and when a person opens up their mind, it's incredible what can happen. I've seen bravery, and selflessness, and wisdom from the wildest places. The Nations... there's so much they could teach each other if they would just listen," he sighs. "Earth, Fire, Air, Water... long ago, the four Nations lived together in harmony. That's what I want," Kurt says, nodding to himself. "I want the world to be one again."

Avatar Gaga graces him with a beatific smile. "A noble goal. You should get on that."

"Oh, sure," Kurt says. "I'll put it on my to-do list, right after my grocery shopping. Seriously, this stuff seems like it's woven into the very fabric of the Four Nations. How am I supposed to change entire cultures?"

"It is a conundrum," Avatar Gaga says. "I look forward to watching you figure it out."

Kurt glares at her. "You are the worst spirit advisor ever."

She pouts at him. "Oh, fine. If you're going to be snippy about it, I'll stop teasing. Here is my advice to you—lead."
Kurt blinks at her. "O…kay?"

His predecessor curls her nimble fingers around the globe floating between them. "The world is very big," she says, tapping the surface. Abruptly, the 'oceans' vanish, leaving several floating bits of land. "But all big things are made of smaller things, and those of pieces smaller still." She taps the Fire Nation, a little reddish puff. Suddenly, the red is joined by other colors, forming a small rainbow pattern. "Change rarely occurs all at once—rather, it starts in one place, and ripples outwards." As she speaks, the colors begin to filter through the islands around the Fire Nation, slowly reaching across the entire world. "But it will go nowhere, unless it starts with you."

Avatar Gaga reaches down and taps him on the nose, and Kurt feels something shift. He shifts his head to look at himself, and is shocked at what he finds. His red Fire Nation garb has been replaced by a tapestry of color. Relics and styles from every Nation now adorn his body, shockingly without looking gaudy or flamboyant in the slightest.

Kurt stares at the fabric for a long moment. "Huh… so if I want to encourage friendship and understanding between the Four Nations… maybe I can start by encouraging friendship and understanding in my own group?"

Avatar Gaga smiles at him. "That sounds like a marvelous idea."

Kurt smiles back at her, feeling a bit eased. "Alright… I think I can do that," he says. With a small chuckle, he adds, "Maybe my support of the international buddy program will be the thing that makes Blaine see the light."

Gaga's grin slips just a bit. "You must be careful with that word, Kurt. Your attempts to 'make' Blaine act in a certain way have not come up well in the past."

"…touché," Kurt winces.

Avatar Gaga sinks slowly into the clouds, her form disappearing even as her voice lingers. "Blaine's choice is his alone," she says.

The pieces of the globe suddenly shift again, forming into the boy of Kurt's dreams, the boy of his current reality, and what he hopes will be the man of his future. Blaine smiles at him and reaches out a hand. Kurt takes it tenderly in his own.

Suddenly, the clouds darken. The sun seems to vanish, and the world is lit by an eerie, reddish glow. Dark grey snowflakes fall gently from the clouds, and Blaine's smile is sad. "Whether it is your destiny to be together for a lifetime, or a moment," Avatar Gaga says, "you must cherish the time you have together."

Dream Blaine runs his thumb over the back of Kurt's hand, and his heart clenches. Slowly but surely, Blaine begins to pull away.

"When the time comes, he will choose," Gaga's voice echoes. "You must be prepared for whatever he decides."

Their hands slip, until only the tips of their fingers are still linked. A bolt of lightning cracks through the heavens, and Blaine's lip trembles.

"You must be ready to let him go."

And Blaine's hand slips from his.
Kurt awakens the moment that contact is broken, sitting up and flailing out to grasp a hand that is no longer there. His dramatic spasm scares the crap out of Rachel, who catapults out of her bed, fully prepared to wield a mighty pillow against any potential intruders.

"Rape!" Rachel shouts. "Fire! Robbery! Terrorism! Unwanted proselytizing!"

"Rachel, calm down," Kurt says. "It's just me. I was having a dream."

"...oh," Rachel says, blinking and shaking her head. Her hair looks vaguely like a spider in traction with several broken legs. "A bad one, I presume?

"Well..." Kurt sighs. "It started out alright, but it took a very dark turn towards the end. As dreams go, I'd say it was medium-bad."

"I'm sorry," Rachel says. "Do you want to talk about it?"


Rachel sits on the bed beside him, looking at him with concerned eyes.

"What do you think went wrong last night?" he asks.

She is thrown by his question, but only for a moment. "I think we were all a bit tired and cranky, and things just got out of hand," she says. A pause. "The strict isolationist culture pervading the Fire Nation causing its citizens to immediately mistrust and assume the worst of anyone or anything foreign might have exacerbated things just a bit."

"Might have," Kurt repeats. "I swear, even hinting at the fact that you're from another country around here will make everyone look at you funny. Bending something other than fire is basically inviting a lynch mob." He looks at Rachel. "I'm a little surprised at how trusting you are, considering the circumstances."

Rachel crosses her arms proudly. "My daddies raised me very well. I won the Sho Fa City Unity Prize three years in a row for my heartwarming version of 'Please Don't Set My Hair on Fire Because It's Curly,' a beautiful ode to respecting each others' differences."

"Impressive," Kurt says thoughtfully. "I think you and I have something in common here. I have an idea I'd like to run past you..."

He and Rachel work on making their master plan a reality for an hour or two before he heads over to awaken the slumbering giants and head back to camp.

"Rise and shine, boys!" Kurt says happily as he strides into the room where Finn and Sebastian slept last night. "A new day is dawning, and it's time to..."

Finn groans and chooses to hide under his pillow.

Sebastian does nothing... because Sebastian isn't there.

"Finn!" Kurt says as he marches over to the bed. Finn tries to pull the pillow tighter around his ears, but Kurt yanks it from his hands and tosses it aside. "I thought I told you to keep an eye on him!"

"I did!" Finn says. "I had both eyes on him. And then... I didn't. Because they closed, because I went to sleep."
"Ugh!" Kurt throws his arms up. "I need a leash for that little—"

"Why'd you want me to watch him, anyway?" Finn asks.

Kurt sighs. "It's… don't worry about it right now. Let's just get back to Blaine."

"Don't we want to wait for… ummm… dude?" Finn asks.

"No," Kurt says. "I have a sneaking suspicion I already know where he is."

Outside, they find Rachel rolling up a large banner near the carriage. "Oh, Kurt! I just finished the—"

"Great!" Kurt says, grabbing the banner and stuffing it into the luggage compartment. "We need to hurry. Get everything in here."

"But—" Rachel says.

"No time!" he says, ushering her into the carriage. "Just get in."

He and Finn hurriedly stuff the rest of the supplies into the luggage compartment. Then, Kurt tops it all off by stuffing Finn into the carriage alongside Rachel.

"Dude, what are you—"

"I'm driving," Kurt says simply. "Hang on tight…"

When Mercedes returned with her kill, the four of them ate in silence. Blaine almost started the apology party early, but Pavarotti arrived and Mercedes quickly excused herself to attend to the letter he brought. They'll just have to apologize to Mercedes when they apologize to everyone.

In the meantime, Blaine has retired to a small clearing to get in a little morning meditation. He swears he's inches away from enlightenment when his inner and outer peace are suddenly assaulted.

"Morning, stranger."

Blaine opens his eyes. He gets just enough time to make out a cloaked figure before said figure launches at him in a blur of motion. They tumble end-over-end for a few moments, but when they stop, Blaine is on the bottom with a knife at his throat.

"Whoops," Sebastian says, smiling down at him from underneath the hood. "Looks like poor, defenseless Blaine just got killed for his carelessness."

Blaine smiles back. "I'm not quite as defenseless as I look," he says, bringing the lit flame at the end of his two fingers just close enough to tickle Sebastian's chin.

The taller boy grins as he feels the heat. "Well, well," he says. "Look at you, Mr. Killer Instinct! I'm impressed." He hops off of Blaine and sheathes his knife, reaching down to help the Prince up.

"What's with the cloak-and-dagger act?" Blaine asks as he dusts off his backside.

"This is for you," Sebastian says, pulling off the cloak. "It's part of your disguise."

"You got me a disguise?" Blaine asks.
"Well, we can't have you walking around as-is," Sebastian says, thrusting the cloak into his hands. "Your face is a liability. Even if we keep you out of town, there's still a chance some random jerk could wander through the woods and spot you. This is just one piece of it. Here," he says, pulling out a large straw hat and the biggest, bushiest fake mustache Blaine has ever seen. "Try them on."

A few seconds later, Blaine is mustachioed, cloaked, and shaded from the sun by his nice new hat.

"The very picture of a peasant farmer," Sebastian says, nodding approvingly. "Well, mostly, anyway. The armor kind of ruins the effect a bit."

"You're right," Blaine says, divesting himself of the disguise. "I should probably take it off."

"Want some help?" Sebastian asks with a smirk.

At that moment, a mighty crash echoes through the woods. The moose-drawn carriage smashes through the bushes, sending limbs, leaves, and small woodland creatures flying through the air as it skids to a halt. The moose look slightly traumatized. And in the driver's seat sits none other than…

"Kurt!" Blaine says happily. "Look, Sebastian got me a disguise. Isn't that thoughtful?"

Kurt jumps off the carriage and lands in front of him, a tight smile on his face. "Incredibly so," he says. "Almost as thoughtful as disappearing from his bedroom without telling us."

Blaine tilts his head at Sebastian. "You didn't tell them where you went?"

Sebastian shrugs. "I told Finn I was going out. Or at least, I thought I did. He groaned and threw his hand at me, so I assumed he heard."

"He heard no such thing," Kurt says. "Isn't that right, Finn?"

No answer.

"Finn!" Kurt repeats.

The carriage door opens and a white-faced Finn emerges, walking shakily with an equally-traumatized Rachel attached to him with the tenacity of an affectionate croctopus. "Uhhh… what?" Finn says flatly.

"I was just telling everyone how worried we were when Sebastian vanished for no reason," Kurt says.

"Oh, yeah," Finn drones, staring straight ahead. "Super worried."

"Terrified," Rachel emerges just long enough to add, before burying her face in Finn's chest again.

"Are… you two alright?" Blaine asks.

"Fine!" they answer in unison.

"I was just… a little startled by Kurt's driving," Rachel says. "Finn was helping assuage my fears by holding me and offering to use his body fat as a shock absorber."

"Yeah, that," Finn says flatly. He blinks, and shakes his head, regaining a little color. "Wait, what?"
"Sorry," Sebastian says, holding his hands up in surrender. "I'm not really used to this whole 'teamwork' thing."

"Really?" Kurt asks. "I would have thought being in the military would have taught you that by now."

Sebastian's hesitation is slight, but not slight enough to slip past Kurt. "I was never a very good soldier," he says easily.

"Be that as it may," Blaine says. "We need to work as a team in order to get through this. We should stick together."

Sebastian's smile is almost as tight as Kurt's. "I'll try to remember that in the future."

Kurt claps him roughly on the shoulder. "I'm glad," he says, giving him a few more comradely smacks for good measure. "Speaking of sticking together—I've been thinking about yesterday."

"Me too," Blaine says. "Kurt, I—"

"Blaine, we—" Kurt says in unison.

They both falter to a halt. "You know what?" Kurt says. "Let's get everyone together. We can all air our thoughts at once and hopefully put this behind us."

A few minutes later, the circle of friendship is reassembled, even if the 'circle' is clearly divided. On one side, Mercedes, Kurt, Finn, and Rachel. On the other, Wes, Blaine, David, and Sebastian. It's not quite battle lines, but it's still a little close for comfort.

"Okay, we'll go first," Blaine says. "Wes, David, I believe you have something to say?"

Wes and David step forward. Wes goes first. "I apologize for my words last night," he says quietly. "I was being irrational, and I spoke with the intention to hurt. I am sorry, Avatar Kurt. I hope you can forgive me." He ends his apology with a Fire Nation bow.

Kurt gives him a gracious nod. "Thank you, Wesley. I accept your apology."

"I'm sorry too," David says. He looks at Rachel. "I'm sorry for calling you an airhead." At Mercedes. "And you a dirtbender." At Finn. "And you a pissbending sack of wet hair."

Finn scrunches his face up. "Wait, I don't remember that."

David blinks. "Huh. Must have loaded that one without actually firing. Well... ummm... sorry for thinking it?"

Wes shakes his head, massaging the bridge of his nose.

"It's cool, dude," Finn says.

"We're straight," Mercedes says.

"All is forgiven," Rachel says.

"Thank you," David nods.

"And last but not least," Blaine says. "I'm sorry I sat there and let that get so out of hand. My friends were fighting my other friends and I didn't know what to do. I froze. Again," he adds under
"Blaine, it's alright," Kurt says. "Everyone is just a little at fault for what happened last night—"

"Except me," Sebastian says.

Kurt tries his damnedest to stare a hole in his head.

"What? I'm just saying," Sebastian says with a shrug.

"Anyway," Kurt says. "Our little near-scuffle brought to light something very important that we all need to address." He steps into the middle of the circle. "There is a very clear divide between the Nations, a divide that extends even to us. And that just does not sit well with me. So, with Rachel's help, we've come up with something special that I think the whole group could benefit from. Rachel?"

Rachel prances over to the carriage and opens one of the luggage compartments, pulling out a rolled-up banner which she unfolds with a proud "TA-DA!"

Everyone stares at the banner, which is… completely illegible and covered in multicolored splotches.

"Is it supposed to say something?" Wes asks.

Rachel looks at the banner. "Oh, no! Kurt, in your haste you must have forgotten to put the lids on the paint jars."

Kurt facepalms. "Great, " he mutters, walking over to the banner and incinerating it with a little firebending, prompting a squeak from Rachel. "Is everything else ruined, too?"

They stick their heads into the luggage compartment.

"Damn it!" Kurt says.

"Let this be a lesson to you," Rachel says. "'Haste makes waste.' Especially when that haste causes you to drive like a possessed gorilla goat."

"Okay," Kurt says to the group at large. "Looks like Friendly Fire Day is delayed for a bit."

"'Friendly Fire Day?"' David repeats.

"A day of friendship," Kurt says, "and fire, obviously."

"And friendship with fire," Rachel says. "It is an exercise intended to forge bonds between people from different cultures."

"Once we get to the city, I'll explain some more," Kurt says. "According to our itinerary, we will arrive in Zedong this afternoon. But Mercedes's communiqués with the Hawks seem to suggest that they will not be arriving until tomorrow, with the rest of the military. Friendly Fire Day is what we came up with to fill the time gap, and hopefully bring us all closer together."

Blaine looks at his boyfriend thoughtfully. "Huh… I like the sound of this."

"I'm not so sure," David says.

"Oh, come on," Wes says, nudging David. "It's worth trying, at least."
"That's the spirit!" Kurt says proudly. "Once we get to the city, we can get everything situated. Until then, I encourage you all to adopt a spirit of open-mindedness and cooperation. And not just because it's the theme of the day—it'll also get us packed and out of here faster."

They pack and head out fairly quickly, the work helping to ease the still-present tension just a touch.

As they trundle on down the road, Kurt notes a shift in the scenery. He's noticed it for the past several days, actually, but it was considerably more understated then. Now, it's impossible to ignore.

The balance of the world around him is shifting. For every inch they move towards Zedong, nature recedes, and industry begins to rear its head.

Trees and grass are replaced by bare rocks and craggy cliffs, lined with pulleys and pipes. Brackish, murky water runs in the streams. A cloud of barely-perceptible haze hovers over them, making even the sun seem dimmer and slightly decayed.

Kurt doesn't exactly expect the city to suddenly reverse this trend, but even he is shocked when they actually come within eyesight of the place.

_Huge_ was an understatement. Zedong seems to go on forever. The city is an endless field of ramshackle buildings of all shapes and sizes, stretching out towards a small blue line that may or may not be the ocean. Large factories dot the landscape, with massive smokestacks pouring huge clouds of smog into the atmosphere.

In some ways, it's amazing to see what humans can accomplish when they put their minds to it. But in other ways, it's horrible. This place is _destroying_ the nature around it, and Kurt is pretty sure he's not okay with that.

"Whoa," Finn says. "That's… different."

"Wow," Blaine says. "I knew Zedong was heavily industrialized, but I didn't realize it was… like this."

"What are all these?" Kurt asks. "What could they be making?"

"All sorts of things," Blaine says. "Parts for ships and trains, mass-produced tools, clothes…"

"Weapons," Sebastian adds, unusually quiet.

"It's awful," Rachel says. "Where are the trees? The animals? The birds?"

"They're there, somewhere," Mercedes says. "Nature's tougher than she looks."

"Even with the Dragon Hawks," Finn says. "How are we supposed to find Sam in _that_?"

Kurt takes a long look at the city as they head down the hill towards it. "The city may be big," he says, "but all big things are made of smaller things. We'll just have to take it one piece at a time."

It isn't too hard to find a hotel and get everyone parked. Blaine's disguise is effective, not only because it hides his appearance, but because he changes his demeanor to match. He makes himself small, does not make eye contact, keeps his head low and his posture slouched. In the midst of a group like Kurt's, with so many eye-catching individuals, Blaine manages to slip under everyone's
It helps that there are approximately eleventy kajillion people in Zedong. If you want to hide, they
don't make it too hard.

Once they are situated, Kurt gathers everyone in the main room. Kurt and Rachel stand on either
side of a table with two small bowls on it.

"Here's how it's going to work," Kurt says. "In these bowls everyone's names, divided into two
groups: Fire Nation, and Outsiders. Rachel and I will draw one name from each bowl. Whoever we
draw will be working together for the remainder of the day, scouting the city and getting the lay of
the land."

"While working together, you are each expected to learn something about your partner," Rachel
continues. "Suspicion and fear stem primarily from ignorance, so we will combat ignorance with
knowledge!"

"Hold up," David says. "That can't possibly work."

"There are five Fire Nationals to three outsiders," Wes says. "The ratio is uneven."

Sebastian raises his hand. "I volunteer to take myself out of the equation," he says. "I'm not much
of a 'partner person.'"

"Nonsense!" Kurt says, smiling at Sebastian. "Believe it or not, I've already thought of this.
Because of your unique reputation as a world traveler, we have decided to count you as an outsider
for the purpose of this exercise."

"...great," Sebastian says flatly.

"I'm still not sure about this," David says warily.

"Come on, David," Blaine says. "We're all in this together."

"Are we?" David asks.

"Yes, we are," Kurt says. "And we have to stick by each other. If we band together, there's a chance
we'll all make it out of this okay. But if we start tearing apart from within... there's no hope for any
of us."

That seems to hit the mark. David purses his lips in contemplation.


"Fine," David says. "Let's get this over with."

Rachel smiles imperiously, adopting an officious stature. "Avatar Kurt, would you please draw the
first name?"

"Why, yes, yes I would!" Kurt says, reaching into the bowl and shuffling the names around. "Our
first pair of the day is going to be..." He draws a slip, and holds it up for all to see. "Mercedes
Jones, and..."

Rachel swirls the names about and comes up with her own. "...Wes Montgomery!"

"Step over here, if you please," Kurt says, gesturing to the side. Mercedes and Wes follow the arc
of his arm and wind up standing side by side near a bed. Wes bows respectfully to Mercedes, his expression neutral, though his posture is unusually stiff (and this is someone with normally impeccable posture). Mercedes eyes him skeptically, but after a few moments, he seems to pass muster, and she gives him a nod.

"Our next little group will be…" Kurt says, drawing out the suspense. "Finn Hudson, and…"

Rachel swirls her hand around far longer than necessary. "…David Thompson!"

Finn and David head to stand beside Wes and Mercedes, albeit reluctantly. Finn keeps his hands in his pockets, looking a little wary. David has his arms crossed, halfway between bored and annoyed. They do not look at each other.

"Thirdly, we have…" Kurt takes a second to build up the suspense, almost ruining the surprise by smirking at the next draw. "…Seabiscuit Slime—whoops, ink must have run, that's supposed to say Sebastian Smythe—and…"

Rachel wastes no time in drawing her own name. "Rachel Berry!" she says excitedly.

Sebastian smiles tightly. "But Avatar Kurt!" he says. "Rachel and I have already spent so much time together. Surely I should partner up with Blaine. My worldly knowledge—"

"Nope!" Kurt says cheerfully. "All decisions made by the bowl are final. The wisdom of the bowl is absolute and cannot be questioned or refuted. You and Rachel are partners, end of story."

"Oh, I'm so excited!" Rachel says. "I have so many questions."

"Why am I not surprised?" Sebastian says, tilting his head in annoyance. Rachel walks over to join him as he stares at her like she's a particularly annoying donkey fly.

"Which means…" Kurt says, clutching a hand to his heart. "Well, it looks like Blaine and I are partners!"

"What a fascinating coincidence," David deadpans.

"A silver piece says there were only six names in those bowls," Sebastian says.

Kurt quickly incinerates the contents of both bowls (oh, but firebending is so useful) and steps over to Blaine, who looks quietly amused. "Well, that's everyone. We'll split up and meet back here in a few hours. Pavarotti just delivered the latest letter from the Hawks, so he will be around if we need to get each others' attention. Everybody clear?"

Various murmurs of assent confirm that they are.

"Fabulous," Kurt says. "Now, we shall cross the bridge of friendship and understanding. See you on the other side!"

Each of the four pairs goes to a different district in the city. Wes and Mercedes head for a somewhat upscale residential area, while Finn and David wind up going to the slums. Rachel and Sebastian tackle the business district, and Kurt and Blaine hit an open-air market.

The following is an account of each of their adventures.
The upscale residential area is easily the 'greenest' part of the city. Trees dot the sidewalks, and little flowerbeds can be seen in a few windows. There are even small courtyards in some of the larger buildings with fountains and koi ponds. That's not to say it's a botanical paradise—the plants do look a little dingy, and the water is not the cleanest—but compared to other parts of the city, this place is heaven on earth.

As Mercedes and Wes walk down the street, a slightly awkward silence hangs between them. Mercedes isn't sure who is supposed to start this little game of theirs.

Apparently, neither is Wes. "So," he says finally. "Miss Jones—"

"Mercedes," she corrects quickly. "Don't be making me feel old, now."

"Mercedes," Wes nods. "Would you like to share first, or shall I?"

"You go first," Mercedes says simply.

"Very well," Wes nods. He opens his mouth. Shuts it. Opens it again. "Errr… what, exactly, would you like to know? I know a great deal about the Fire Nation, and I'm not sure where to begin."

Mercedes rolls her eyes and looks around. In front of one of the buildings, she sees a gathering of kids excitedly running around with sparklers. Balloons and streamers hang from the doors and windows. It's a party.

"I bet there ain't no party like a Fire Nation party," Mercedes says. "Tell me about your celebrations."

"Gladly!" Wes says excitedly. "Let's see… well, there's New Year's, which we celebrate with fireworks and ceremonial burnings of incense. There's also usually a parade of some sort, though the cities that can't afford such a spectacle usually replace it with a part in the street. Scalberry ale, though it is delicious any time of the year, is especially associated with New Year's, as the strong flavor seems to 'burn away' the taste of the old year."

Mercedes smiles, and opens her mouth to ask a question.

Unfortunately, Wes is on a roll, and there is no stopping him. "Then there are the Fire Days Festivals—which are also celebrated with fireworks—but last for almost a week. The people wear masks of various spirits and historical figures, and are treated to a variety of bending displays from local firebenders. This celebrates our connection to fire, and reminds us regularly of its power and beauty."

Mercedes tries to jump in again, but she must be having an off day, because she just isn't quick enough on the draw.

"And of course, in more rural areas, we have Lilybloom. Did you know that Fire Lilies always bloom on the same day every year? It's a very interesting phenomenon, and celebrated widely. Well, I suppose it's only the same day every year if you operate on a solar calendar…"

Mercedes sighs. She has a long day ahead of her, she can already tell.

Meanwhile, in the lower class areas, Finn and David march briskly through the streets, keeping their eyes peeled for trouble. The buildings, raggedy and decrepit as they are, seem specially designed to create pockets of thick shadows to hide muggers, rapists, flashers, and sellers of counterfeit merchandise.
Finn is a little unsure of himself. He's not sure how they're supposed to do this. "Ummm, so… yeah. Fire dude, do you want to—"

David answers yes before Finn even finishes the question. "So, we're supposed to learn about each other's countries?" he asks. "Well, let me tell you about mine. The Fire Nation has the second-highest gross domestic product of any of the four Nations, just barely behind the Earth Kingdom despite being a fifth of its size. Its per capita GDP is the highest unless you count Ba Sing Se as a separate entity from the Earth Kingdom, which I do not."

Finn is a bit confused. He wants to ask David a few questions. Like why the Fire Nation is buying products for gross dominatrixes and if percapita is something you can eat, because Finn had a pita once and it was pretty good.

Unfortunately, dude will not shut up.

"Before the quarantine and blockade cut off trade, our net exports were greater than those of the Water and Air Nations combined, again lagging just behind the Earth Kingdom despite our vast size difference. The Earth Kingdom and Air Nomads regularly use technology originally invented by the Fire Nation, whereas the Fire Nation's imports were mostly luxury items and novelties."

The questions just keep piling up. Who keeps track of all this stuff? Where did David read all of it? 'cause he's pretty sure you'd have to be in, like, a jillion places at once to actually check all of these numbers. At least, he thinks they're numbers. Finn was never very good at sticks. Errr, sadistics. Statistics. Whatever.

"Speaking of technology—we pioneered the art of mass production, enabling us to produce large quantities of high-quality goods while minimizing cost and manpower, greatly increasing our…"

The wall of questions builds up clear to Finn's mental ceiling, and the pressure creates a headache.

Finn can't help but groan out loud.

Dude totally ignores him.

"…and in the northern parts of the country, they celebrate Juku Day, both to commemorate past eruptions and appease the mountain spirit so as to avoid future events," Wes continues.

His prattling has pretty much turned into a string of gibberish for Mercedes, but try as she might, she cannot get away from him. If she speeds up, he speeds up. If she turns a corner, he follows right after her. It shows that he is paying attention to her; so how is he not aware of how annoyed she is?

"People will perform dances in elaborate costumes, and toss treasured items into the mouth of the volcano as offerings to the spirit of Juku. It usually takes place shortly before the Solstice Ceremonies. Oh, how could I forget those? I'd imagine that everyone has some sort of celebration on the Solstice, Fire Nation celebrations are especially lively. We have—of course—fireworks, but there are also special plays performed as messages from the spirits, as well as shrines set up for prayers…"

"…invented the steam engine and the internal combustion engine," David says, tapping his fingers as he lists of item number eight thousand and twenty-eleventh on the official list of reasons why the Fire Nation is awesome. "We are certified by the Association of Ale Aficionados to have the strongest ale in the world consumable without permanent liver damage…"
"...mostly confined to the rural areas—in the more cosmopolitan settings it is considered bad form to burn effigies, even of people we really dislike," Wes continues.

"...the most well-equipped army and navy in the world, as well as the most stylish..."

"...are not really supposed to eat the fireflies, but having a glowing mouth is amusing to small children, so..."

"...best education system, the smartest teachers, and the neatest handwriting..."

"...in some areas, it is no longer legal to keep salamandrake plants for this reason. We're lucky the Festival of Smoke only takes place once a year, or we might have to deal with people on hallucinogens fighting invisible monsters on a dialy basis..."

"...the most active commerce system, the most reliable public transport, the cleanest toilets—"

Finn's brain pressure reaches the breaking point, and he explodes. "DUDE, SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

David blinks at him.

"I thought we were supposed to be understanding each other!" Finn says. "All you're doing is spouting crap about how the Fire Nation is better than everyone."

"I know," David says with a shrug. "I'm trying to help you understand that fact."

"No, you're not," Finn growls. "You're just bragging and trying to put all the other Nations down."

He stomps off, trying to get away from David before the firebender boils his proverbial water.

"I am not!" David pursues him. "I'm not saying that you suck, I'm just telling you how we are awesome. It's not my fault the facts make every other Nation look like chumps!"

"What facts?" Finn asks, his voice getting a little louder. A few heads turn to look at them, but the boys don't seem to notice the attention. "Seriously, where do you get this crap? The Official Fire Nation is Awesome Book? Oh, yeah, I'm sure whoever wrote that isn't biased at all!"

"It's biased, you giant nincompoop!" David says.

"So you admit it!" Finn says, pointing an accusing finger.

"I admit nothing! I was correcting your atrocious misuse of language! There is no way any of my statistical sources would state anything but the absolute truth, and how dare you imply otherwise!"

David shouts.

"How do you know?" Finn shouts, stepping forward. "Of course, how could I forget? Because the Fire Nation knows everything! Because—"

David steps forward to match. "It certainly knows more than you, you great blubtering—"

A gruff voice inserts itself between them, slicing through their shouts as quickly and neatly as the
giant scissors at a ribbon-cutting.

"Ahem."

Finn and David turn to find themselves surrounded by some very unsavory-looking characters. Clad in dark clothes with belts and zippers in odd and seemingly useless places, their bodies are covered in scars and tattoos. One guy has half a mustache. One girl has a hook for a hand.

They're all pretty scary, but it's the leader who really puts the fear of fire into them.

It is a rare day when Finn Hudson meets someone who is actually larger than he is.

Today, apparently, is a rare day.

As his lackeys look to him for guidance, a bald, burly tower of muscle smiles as Finn and David, cracking his knuckles.

"You lost?"

"...tying little bows on the ends of the strings and then releasing the balloons into the sky, to represent the hero's ascension into the Heavens," Wes says. "Now, it is quite likely that he did not actually fly to the afterlife on a giant fireball as the legend claims, but…"

And that is just it. It, it, it. She's tried to ignore him, she's tried to give him countless hints, but he just will not take it. Mercedes turns on the firebender, ready to stuff a sock into his mouth, when suddenly, said mouth finally gets a clue.

"Oh, my!" he says. "I've been talking this entire time, haven't I?"

"Finally!" Mercedes says. "He gets it! Hills sake, boy, you are the biggest motor mouth I've ever met!"

"Please forgive me," Wes says sincerely, bowing deeply. "I just… I know a great deal about my country. I'm very passionate about it, and it is a very rare day that I get to share this knowledge."

She wants to stay mad at him, but he looks so damn sincere… plus, he apparently intends to stay doubled over until she absolves him.

"Well, at least you figured out to stop," Mercedes says. "Even if it took you a little too long. I ain't even mad; it's a rare day that I meet a self-aware jerk."

Wes stands up straight again. "I truly am sorry," he says. "Please, tell me something you celebrate. I promise to remain silent until you deem it fit for me to talk." He mimes zipping his lips, and Mercedes chuckles.

"You don't have to take a vow of silence. Just… don't talk as much. Think you can handle that?" Mercedes asks.

Wes nods, his lips remaining sealed.

Mercedes laughs, "Alright, let's see… what kind of holidays did we do back home? Well, we did new years, but that wasn't much more than lighting lanterns and making promises to ourselves that not a damn one of us would keep. We did birthdays by making mud pie."

Wes squints at her, cocking an eyebrow.
"Not made with real mud," Mercedes assures him. "Just chocolate. It only looks like mud. Little bits of crispy chocolate crumbs in creamy filling… mmmmm-mmm. It was a thing of beauty."

Wes goes slightly starry-eyed, and rubs his stomach. Mercedes laughs in spite of herself. He's pretty good at this mime act.

"Let's see, what else..." she says thoughtfully. "Well, we did have Shore Day, but that wasn't an official holiday and... well, it wasn't much of a celebration either, I guess."

Wes tilts his head, his eyes questioning. He seems to have picked up on her tone of voice, because he looks just slightly sad.

"Shore Day..." she sighs. "Okay, I know it sounds like a Water Tribe holiday, and... well, it definitely had to do with the Water Tribes. Me and the rest of the village, we'd all go down to the shore and throw rocks into the ocean. The biggest, dirtiest ones we could find. The idea was to make the biggest splash possible—obviously, being an earthbender made things a little easier for me. I won most years."

Wes smiles and gives her a golf clap.

Mercedes finds herself laughing again. "Thank you, thank you," she says graciously. Her voice softens. "It was mostly a way to blow off steam for us. When the pressures of living the way we did got to be too much, we'd just head down to the shore and deliver a big ol' fuck you to the ocean."

At this, Wes looks very confused.

She tilts her head. "You don't know about the war, do you?"

Wes shakes his head.

She sighs. "Look... I really don't want to get into it now. Long story short—big war between the Northern Water Tribe and the Earth Kingdom over oil in the North Sea. My parents, and all the adults in my village, worked on the biggest oil rig, Black Mud Island. That's where the final battle of the war took place."

Wes's mouth falls open for the first time since he zipped his lips. He seems to know where she is headed—his eyes are already full of sympathy that she doesn't want.

"Everybody died," Mercedes says quietly. "Everybody. Civilian, Military, Earth Kingdom, Water Tribe... not a soul survived that battle. Nobody even really knows what happened there. All I know is the Earth Kingdom lost ten times as many people as the Water Tribe in that fight. The war was over then. We withdrew from the North Sea, and that was that. I was just a baby. I don't even remember what mama and daddy looked like." Her voice thickens at the end, and she cuts herself off.

Wes puts his hands behind his back, solemnly bowing his head. "I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I did not mean to bring up painful memories."

She waves him off under the guise of nonchalance, dutifully cramming her emotions back down under the surface where they belong.

They walk in silence for a few moments.

"Forgive me if I'm being inappropriate, but I must ask," Wes says, and Mercedes immediately
knows what is coming. "Finn is from the Northern Water Tribe, is he not?"

Mercedes nods. "He is."

"It must be difficult to travel with him, considering," Wes says.

Mercedes sighs, trying to find the right way to say it. "In my mind, I know that Finn was just a baby when it happened, and he had nothing to do with it, but..." She clenches her fist. "His father was credited for their victory at the final battle. So Finn got to grow up as the golden boy. Everybody loved him, praised him, and gave him everything, no matter how much or how little he deserved it. Whereas I got stuck as one of two earthbenders who got to take care of an entire village of kids, most of which were older than me." She takes a breath and lets it out, trying to exhale most of her anger with it. "It's hard not to resent that."

"I'm sorry," Wes says. "Again."

"Oh, quit apologizing," Mercedes says, rolling her eyes. "You didn't do anything."

"Oh, but I did," Wes insists. "I keep bringing up things that are clearly painful for you to talk about. I'm depressing you."

"I am not depressed," Mercedes tells him flatly.

"Not yet," Wes says. "Heaven only knows what will happen if I am allowed to keep talking."

Mercedes huffs out a laugh again. She can't seem to help herself with this boy.

"I feel honor-bound to try and cheer you up," Wes says quietly. "Let me think..." He looks around, spotting something that pleases him. "Please, come with me."

He marches over to the side of the road, heading towards a fenced-off courtyard. He opens the fence and graciously bows to her as he holds the door. This time, there's a little blush accompanying the laugh. Honestly, what is with this boy?

"What are we doing here?" Mercedes asks.

"This will be a learning exercise," Wes says haughtily. "For me, anyway. For you, I hope it will be a nice little reminder of home. You see, I enjoy a good lecture as much as the next Daltonian, but I am primarily tactile. I learn by doing. So here is what I want to do—you describe your favorite Earth Kingdom celebration, and I will try to recreate it for you, right here."

Mercedes gives him a good, long side-eye. "Are you serious?"

"All the time," Wes says soberly. "I am a very serious person."

She actually snorts at that. Real attractive, Mercedes.

"Please," Wes says. "It will be fun for both of us. I promise. What do you say?"

At this point, she wonders if Wes learned the 'earnest puppy face' from Blaine, or vice versa. "Alright, hot stuff," she says finally. "Let's see what you got."

Back in the circle of life and death, David smiles brightly at the gathered gang members. "Hello, gentlemen!"
"Gentlemen?" the leader scoffs.

"Oh, and ladies, if there are any present. It's somewhat ambiguous," David adds.

The giant leader shakes his head. "Boy, you are lost. Little pampered-ass punks like you shouldn't wander so far from home." He stretches his neck, cracking it so loud that it sounds like firecrackers going off. "Might get hurt."

David keeps on beaming. "You'll get no argument from me!"

"Yeah, we don't want to be here at all, we promise," Finn says. "We'll leave really fast. Like, right now. Come on, dude, let's—"

"Now hang on a second," the leader says. "See, we're concerned about you. Lots of shady characters around these parts. Dangerous people. We'll be happy to offer a little protection on your way out… for a price."

Finn slowly inches his way toward the edge of the circle. "Well, ummm, prices are bad, because we're super poor, and we don't have anything—" A pair of hands slams into his back and knocks him onto his face.

He stands back up quickly. A little too quickly, in fact; to his horror, the moonstone falls out of his shirt, landing on the ground with a clack.

"What have we here?" the leader says, picking up the shiny, smooth stone. "This looks like something to me."

"Great," David says. "It's yours! Glad you like it! We'll just be going—"

"No!" Finn says suddenly.

And all eyes in the circle are on him. "Excuse me?" Baldy McSteroids grumbles.

"Excuse me?" David echoes.


"You know, punk, I don't think I will," the huge man says.

"And I, for one, respect your decision!" David says to him, before turning to Finn to whisper "What are you doing?"

Finn ignores him. "Please, just give it back."

"Get a load of this guy!" the leader says, sneering at him. "He brings his ugly ass into our neighborhood, lies to us, refuses our generous offer of protection, and tries to boss us around."

"Just give it back," Finn says firmly. "We'll leave, I promise."

"Oh, you'll leave alright," the leader says. "They'll carry your ass out on a stretcher. Boys and girls, whaddaya say we teach these dipshits how dangerous this neighborhood can be?"

And suddenly, the circle starts steadily getting smaller, and Finn realizes only too late that he can't really fight these guys. If he waterbends in public, he is screwed. So, basically, he's about to get the crap beaten out of him. Maybe he'll get lucky, and they'll only beat him half to death. Or, like,
three-fourths of the way to death, or—

Suddenly, David perks up and points behind the leader. "GUARDS! HELP US! WE'RE BEING ROBBED!"

"The fuzz!" the leader says, snapping his head around and coming face to face with…

An old woman and her dragon dog, peeing on a tree.

The old woman takes one look at him and pulls out a can of pepper spray, shaking it menacingly. "Try it, I dare ya."

"Hey, there ain't no—AAAAAAHHH!"

While Mr. Watermelon Biceps is distracted, David runs up and jabs a fire-knife into his hand, scorching it and forcing him to drop the moonstone into David's open palm.

"RUN!" David shouts. He sweep-kicks a fire wave at two thugs, knocking them over. Finn doesn't need to be told twice—he jumps over the fallen punks, and David follows shortly thereafter.

"GET 'EM!" the leader orders, and the gang springs into action.

The benders book it down the sidewalk as fast as they can. The gang barrels after them, wielding everything from pipes, to knives, to metal chains and hook hands (seriously, that chick is super scary). Finn isn't exactly known for his high land speed, but he's making pretty good time at this point.

Then, he hears a yelp.

Turning his head to look back, he sees that the gang is throwing things at David. Most of them seem to be missing, but for whatever reason, David is limping. It doesn't take Finn long to spot the knife sticking out of his leg.

Shit.

Finn makes an about face as quickly as he can and charges towards David.

"What are you doing?" David asks. "We're supposed to be running away from the murderous thugs!"

"You kind of suck at the running part," Finn says, grabbing David and unceremoniously hoisting him up on his shoulder.

"G'hey!" David says. "What are you doing?"

"Helping!" Finn says, taking off again just in time to avoid being tackled to the ground. A couple of gang members are literally hot on his heels—practically stepping on them, actually.

Fortunately, David is there to protect his vulnerable heels. Since Finn has him thrown over his shoulder, Artie-style, David is in a prime position to flame it up at their pursuers. He gives a few nice, wide swipes to scare off anyone too close, and punches fireballs at them once they're far enough away.

They seem to have a good thing going. Unfortunately, the people behind them are only part of the problem. See, the thing about gangs is that they are typically neighborhood kids. Growing up
around here, they obviously know the place better than Finn… as clearly demonstrated when two of them step out of an alleyway to block his path.

Finn has far too much momentum to stop or change directions. "Hang on!" he tells David.

"To what?" David asks.

Making a mental note to apologize later, Finn shifts David so that he acts as a human shoulder pad, and charges right through the miniature blockade, knocking them aside easily.

"OW!" David says. "Watch where I'm going!"

"Sorry!" Finn says. He's just happy they made it through.

His happiness is short-lived. Ahead of him, a fucking wall is suddenly slammed open. Baldy McSteroids himself is the demolition man, stepping forward into Finn's path and daring the waterbender to try and charge him.

Finn does not submit to peer pressure. He changes directions and darts into the street. Several more gang members dart off of both sidewalks to pursue him. How many people are in this gang?

Suddenly, Finn realizes something very important.

"Crap! We really are lost!" he shouts. "How do we get out of here?"

"Fucked if I know!" David says. "Just keep running!"

Finn spies an alleyway that seems to be empty of people who want to kill him, and charges inside. It is there that he finds his salvation in two forms. The first form is that of a large puddle of water.

He knows it's a little risky, but he's quickly running out of options. He just a hand at the puddle and flicks his wrist upwards, calling it into the air. Then, he flicks both hands to the side, turning the water into a rapidly expanding cloud of fog. The mist quickly fills the whole alleyway, allowing Finn to grope for the second salvation thingy.

The gang charges into the alley without fear or care, and promptly find themselves introduced to several objects present in most alleyways. Trashcans, dumpsters, bits of discarded old scrap metal and lumber—unable to see, they slam full-force into all of the above, sending themselves bouncing and tripping all over the place.

"The fuck?" one shouts. "Where'd all this fog come from?"

"That fucking firebender probably steamed everything up!" another one replies.

"Come on, you fucktards! They're getting away!" cries a third.

Their short-lived setback does little to slow them down, and they quickly charge out the other side of the alleyway… leaving Finn and David to heave a sigh of relief from beneath the sewer grate they broke open.

Finn takes a second to catch his breath before putting David down.

"Not bad, waterbender," David says, limping over to lean against the wall. "I'd have appreciated a more sanitary hiding spot, but beggars can't be choosers."

"Thanks," Finn says, following after him. "Here, let me see your leg."
He kneels down and starts groping at David's leg, which prompts a skeptical look from the firebender. Finn ignores it and examines the knife. *Yikes.* It went in pretty deep. Dude is lucky it didn't nick an artery.

"Oh," David says suddenly. "Here's your rock, by the way." He pulls out the moonstone and offers it to Finn. "Why, exactly, were you willing to get curb-stomped for this?"

"It's a moonstone," Finn says as he reverently takes the little rock with a thankful smile. "You know. Waterbenders, all about the moon. This is almost like a little piece of her. It means a lot to me, so..." He quietly tucks it into his shirt. "Thanks."

"Well, I could see you weren't leaving without it, and we needed to leave, so—whoa, whoa, what are you doing?" David asks as he sees Finn's hand moving towards the knife.

"I have to pull this out now," Finn says, not unsympathetically. "Not gonna lie—it's probably gonna hurt like shit. Try not to scream. We really don't want to have to escape again."

"Oh boy," David says. "Alright..." He takes a deep breath. "I'm ready. Just get it over wi —MMMHMHMIMFHFGHGD!" David slams his mouth shut and clamps a hand over it as he tries to muffle the pained gibberish spawned from Finn's rather graceless yanking of the blade. His leg promptly gives out from under him, and he falls over.

"Whoa, easy, easy dude," Finn says, catching him easily. With one arm, he holds David up—with the other, he draws the clean water out of his pouch and runs it over the wound. The sense of relief is palpable; where before the healing, he was board-stiff, once Finn gets the juice going, the guy practically turns to goo.

"There," Finn says, standing up with him. "Try it out."

David gives his leg an experimental shake. No pain. He puts a little weight on it. It holds up just fine. "Well, I'll be," he whispers, grinning at Finn. "That's pretty amazing." A short laugh. "Definitely one thing we firebenders can't do. Thanks, Water Tribe."

Finn shrugs and grins back. "Anytime."

It takes a couple of seconds of silence for them to figure out they are having A Moment. They fear the power of the moment, and quickly kill it with great viciousness.

"Fuck, we're in a sewer," Finn says. "It stinks in here."

"Let's get out of here," David nods. "I'll light the way."

He sparks up a makeshift torch, and the two head off into the darkness together.

Mercedes sits down at the small picnic table as Wes deposits an armful of freshly harvested flowers in front of her. "I really hope these won't be missed too much," he says. "I tried to go for the little flower bins that looked like they hadn't been tended in a while."

She peruses the selection. "Hmmm... these aren't exactly like the ones we have back home, but they'll do."

"Wonderful," Wes says. "Now, how does this go?"

"Like so," Mercedes says, picking through the flowers, sorting them into similar shapes and sizes.
"Petal Day celebrates spring, and all the wonderful gifts of the earth. We use the flowers and their petals to represent different things that the earth gives us. Like these," she says, picking up a long flower with several tiny blooms along the stems. "These little petals would represent seeds. So we'd take them and spread them like seeds, see?" She runs her hand up the stem, scraping off all the petals and tossing them into the light wind, where the breeze catches them and spreads them across the courtyard.

"I think I get the idea," Wes says. He grabs a similar flower and gets a handful of petals for himself, happily tossing them into the air. Unfortunately, he tosses them against the wind, meaning that most of them blow back into his face. He remains surprisingly impassive, nonchalantly spitting out the few petals that got into his mouth.

"Close enough," Mercedes laughs, peeling a stray petal off of his cheek.

"So what would we do with these?" Wes asks, picking up another flower.

"Well, these have larger petals. They look kind of like triangles, so we might take those as rocks, or tools," she says, taking the triangular petals from the second flowers and putting them on the stems of the first ones to make a bunch of flower shovels.

"Fascinating," Wes says, and he actually seems to mean it.

And before she knows it, the two of them are arts-and-craftsing their way through their entire floral supply. They make flower tools, and flower weapons, and little flower houses. They even make a model flower garden out of little flower pieces. As time passes, the things they make get more and more frivolous. They make a wreath, and then downsize to necklaces and bracelets. Most of them are worn by Mercedes, but Wes gets a nice little flower crown and wears it with pride. The more she makes, the more she is reminded of home. This was always a day she looked forward to—a day where everyone would drop the hustle and bustle of living and just kick back to appreciate the beautiful things in the world. Even the boys would get involved; they acted like they were allergic to flowers the rest of the year, but when Petal Day rolled around, it was all about the flowers; crowns, jewels, gold, all made of petals and locked in chests for them to fight over with their flower swords and shields.

She remembers her grandmother making her the most elaborate flower crown she'd ever seen. It was the first Petal Day after she turned 13, and grandmamma had been working on it all day. Every piece was laid carefully, in patterns so carefully and perfectly arranged that any royal would be proud to have it sit on their head. She sat Mercedes down in front of a mirror and crowned her Petal Princess. And that's exactly how she'd felt—like royalty, like she was the prettiest thing in the world.

She told her grandmother as much, and she'll never forget how she responded.

"You are the prettiest thing in the world," she said, brushing her hair and smiling at her in the mirror. "And don't you forget it. I want you to always remember how you feel right now, Mercedes. Because grandma is about to tell you a little secret—this is how love should make you feel."

And it is at this point in her reminiscence that she comes back to reality, as she feels something press gently on her hair. She reaches up to find a little flower tiara sitting on her head. She turns to look at Wes, who seems to be blushing slightly.

"I'm sorry. Did I startle you? I didn't mean to. I mean, I hope I wasn't being too presumptuous, it's just... I thought it would look nice on you. I mean, I still think that, but I'm not sure what you think."
"Well," Mercedes says. "I'd need to look at myself to judge. I don't guess you have a mirror around, do you?"

"No, but…” Wes looks around, spotting something. "Here! Let's try this."

He leads her over to a large glass window, where she gets a chance to look at herself for the first time since she started decorating herself. The flowers aren't the freshest in the world, and the craftsmanship is definitely beginner level, but it's a nice effort. The colors go together, and nothing seems out-of-place or gaudy. She looks pretty.

"I like it," Mercedes says.

"I'm glad," Wes says. "You look beautiful."

It is such a simple thing to say, tossed out so casually, but there's something about it that causes the air to shift. Something that flips a switch inside Mercedes, causing her to look into the glass a little harder. She finds the reflection of the boy standing beside her, and through the reflection, she meets his eyes.

And all of a sudden, she feels pretty.

Oh. Well. That's... unexpected.

She smiles at Wes's reflection without thinking about it.

He grins back.

But not unwelcome.

They hold each other's gaze for a moment.

Then a naked man walks up to the window and pulls the curtains shut. "Keep your eyes to yourselves, perverts!"

"AH!" she squeaks, covering her eyes. "Oh, Hills no!"

"Agni's underpants!" Wes says, cringing away from the sight. "Have some decency, man!"

"Mountains have mercy!" Mercedes says dramatically. "That image is burned into my mind for eternity."

"My eyes!" Wes says. "I feel like I should go wash them out with soap."

They quickly exit the courtyard, hurriedly walking down the street and away from the site of their trauma. It's only after she puts some distance between herself and that moment that the absurdity of it hits her.

"Honestly, the nerve of that man," Wes says, scowling. "Walking up to an open window stark naked and calling us perverts! What was he doing in there anyway? What…” He trails off, noticing that Mercedes is shaking beside him. "Oh, no. He just ruined Flower Day for you forever, didn't he? You'll probably never be able to look at a flower again without thinking of… of twigs and berries, and…"

She has to stop for a second, or she's gonna fall over.

"Wait a second… are you… are you laughing?" Wes asks.
She nods. She's laughing way too hard to do anything else.

"Well… I suppose it was a little funny," Wes says, trying and failing to suppress a smile.

She nods again.

"And incredibly absurd," Wes continues, stopping for a second to giggle. "Certainly the last thing I would ever expect."

Another nod.

"And would you like to know what else is absurd?" Wes asks.

She catches her breath long enough to say. "What?"

"We're still wearing our flower costumes," Wes says, bursting into laughter.

Mercedes looks down, and sure enough, both of them are decked out in floral jewelry. Walking down the street, in public, in the middle of a vast industrial city, wearing flowers all over. They'd make a great pair of political protesters. As it stands now, they're a couple of weirdoes and they're drawing a lot of stares from passersby.

"I guess we can take them off now," Mercedes says.

"Oh, nonsense," Wes says. "I rather like them. What do you say we march back to the hotel together, our heads held high like the proud potpourri people that we are?"

Mercedes cocks her head back and adopts her best regal posture. "It would be my pleasure. Sir?" she says, offering her arm.

"Madam," Wes says, linking his arm with hers.

They trail petals through the city their entire way back.

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Rachel and Sebastian

Rachel and Sebastian march briskly through the business district. Sebastian leads, Rachel follows. The pace of their conversation matches that of their feet.

"Have you been to the Earth Kingdom?" Rachel asks.

"Yes," Sebastian answers.

"Ooooh, tell me about it."

"There are rocks. Lots of them. Rocks and people."

"What are they like?"

"Rocky."

"The rocks are rocky or the people are rocky?"

"Yes."

"Fascinating! Have you ever been to an Air Temple?"
"No."

"Have you ever met any airbenders?"

"Yes."

"What were they like?"

"Snobs."

"...really?"

"Yes."

"But... that doesn't make sense. I thought the airbenders were supposed to be enlightened and unconcerned with worldly measures of status."

"They aren't. But they think they are. And they think that makes them better than us."

"Why would they think that?"

"It beats the Hills out of me."

"...huh."

Silence.

"Mercedes says that a lot."

"What?"

"The Hills.' She swears by them, curses with them, all sorts of things. It must be a popular Earth Kingdom expression."

"...it is."

"You must have spent a lot of time in the Earth Kingdom."

"You could say that."

"Interesting."

"Not really."

Silence.

"You must have been away for a very long time."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, you use Earth Kingdom idioms, but I haven't heard you use any Fire Nation ones."

"What, you mean like 'by the Sun's utters!' or 'in the holy light of Agni's diamond-studded strap-on?'"

"Errrr, something like that."
"Yeah. I've been away for a while."

"Where?"

"Where what?"

"Where were you when you were away?"

"…all sorts of places."

"Can you be more specific, or—?"

"So, Rachel, tell me about Blaine."

"Blaine?"

"Yes. I mean, he's the guy I'm standing by. The ostrich horse I'm betting on. I'd like to know a little more about him."

"Well, that's certainly understandable. Sadly, I don't know much. I know that his mother was a famous actress before she caught the Fire Lord's eye. I know that he is the sweetest sweetheart who ever sweeted, and that he cares deeply about his friends and his country. But any more than that, you'll have to ask him yourself."

"Well, I'd like to, but Avatar Kurt is kind of monopolizing his time lately. I mean, I know they're boyfriends and all, but it'd be nice to get a few minutes alone with the guy."

"I suppose you're right. Perhaps I'll see if I can't distract him for a bit so that you and Blaine can have a moment together?"

"Oh, that'd be great! Thanks, Rachel."

"Always happy to help! Now, I have a few more questions about your extensive travels—"

"Errr… so, Rachel, why don't you tell me about yourself?"

A gasp.

"I'd be delighted! It all began seventeen years ago, when my fathers found me on their doorstep in the middle of a thunderstorm. There was naught more than a note attached, the name 'Rachel' written on it. Though the winds howled and the storm rumbled, my cries could be easily heard above the din. Even my screams of infant fussiness were somewhat melodic, and my daddies knew I was destined for greatness. I was enrolled at the Sho Fa Academy for Prodigious Youth at age five, and received lessons in numerous dance styles including tapdancing, ballet, modern interpretive, postmodern expressionistic, breakdancing…"

As Rachel continues to speak, Sebastian surreptitiously slows his pace so that he's walking just out of her field of vision. With expert quickness, he tears two tiny strips of cloth off of the hem of his shirt, rolls them up, and sticks them in his ears.

He smiles and nods at Rachel the rest of the way through her massive monologue, basking in blessed silence.

---

Kurt and Blaine
They lose themselves in the market.

The hustle and bustle of the city, the hundreds if not thousands of people constantly shuffling back and forth through the streets, the endless movement of life… it's easy to get lost in it. To fade into the background and simply become part of the collective. Kurt does not feel like testing this, but he honestly thinks that Blaine could forego his disguise here and be none the worse for it. There are so many people around—who is going to pick out his face from the masses?

It's teeming with life. It's everything Kurt loves.


Blaine grins at him. "Are you sure about that? I mean, after you save the world, you'll be a huge celebrity. Everybody will want to meet you. If you live in the city, you'll never get a moment's peace."

"Well, all great public figures have their adoring fans," Kurt says lightly. "I suppose I'll just have to figure out how to deal with my adoring throngs when they show up."

Blaine laughs. "I guess so. Do you look forward to it?"

Kurt smiles at him. "It'll be a nice change of pace from everyone hating my guts."

Blaine keeps smiling, but falls silent. Slowly but surely, his smile saddens. "I know I already apologized for this, but Kurt, I am so sorry that I let Wes and David talk to you like that. I don't know what I—"

"Blaine," Kurt says softly. "It's fine. They were only trying to protect you. I'm happy you have such devoted friends. Hopefully, after today, we'll all be friends."

Blaine grins again, though his eyes still hold a bit of melancholy. "This was a really good idea," he says. "A day of friendship between Nations… sometimes, you're so smart, I don't even know what to do with you."

Kurt grins. "Well, I had a little help from Rachel, but the idea was mostly mine, so thank you for the compliment."

They walk in relative silence for a few minutes, continuing to bask in the sights and sounds. A group of escaped turducken flutter through the air. One nearly lands on Kurt's head until Blaine shoos it away. Vendors from both sides of the street loudly hawk their merchandise, their voices blending into an odd, but not unpleasant sort of pseudo-rhythm.

"I'm sorry too, by the way," Kurt says. "For upsetting you last night. Even if I didn't mean to… sometimes I just… I get so caught up in being right that I forget that I'm also supposed to be good. Or at least nice."

"Good isn't always nice," Blaine says, quiet but thoughtful. "I know it was just a heat of the moment thing. I'm over it now. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing to forgive."

Kurt sighs with relief. "Good. I'm glad." He chuckles. "Our first real fight as boyfriend and boyfriend. I'd say we handled it pretty admirably. What's your assessment?"

"We are bastions of maturity and wisdom," Blaine says haughtily. "The leaders of tomorrow."
Kurt giggles. "We are like wily old men in spry young bodies."

"Much better than the alternative," Blaine says. "Goofy teenagers in old people's bodies? It'd be a nightmare."

They walk in silence for a few more seconds. Blaine appears to be trying to get up the courage to say something.

"But... I mean... things aren't really settled, are they? I mean, I still don't know what's going to happen now," Blaine says softly. "I can't—"

Kurt silences him by putting a finger over his lips. "Not now."

Blaine's eyes widen. "Mmmm?" he says through his closed mouth.

"I want to treat you to something," Kurt says. "I want us to have a nice little day out. A date, if you will."

Blaine's eyes widen in intrigue. "Mmmm."

Kurt spies a vendor off to the side and quickly darts over to buy something. He returns with a bright bouquet of multicolored flowers, which he happily presents to Blaine.

"Awwww," Blaine says, looking delighted. "These are gorgeous."

"Gorgeous flowers for a gorgeous young man," Kurt says happily, practically beaming with pride when Blaine blushes at him compliment.

"I didn't get you anything," Blaine says. "I mean, I would if I could. I should, even, but I—"

"Shhh," Kurt says. "You can treat me later. Right now, I want to treat you."

So he does.

It's the first time that Kurt has splurged entirely for someone else. He doesn't get many chances to splurge—especially with someone else's money—so he seizes the opportunity by both horns and rides that shit into the sunset.


"They contrast rather nicely against each other," Kurt says. "Contrast makes the colors more vivid. The more colors, the more they all stand out."

Blaine chuckles and smells the flowers. "They smell nice, too."

The next thing that catches his eye is a stall selling little stuffed animals.

Kurt buys him a flying bison, an armadillo bear, a polar bear dog, and a dragon.

"Adorable!" Blaine proclaims.

"Yes. But so many different flavors of adorable," Kurt says. "Honestly, there are just so many cute things in the world. I wish I could buy them all for you and bring them here."

Blaine just squeezes the animals in beside his bouquet. "So they can smell the flowers," he
explains. "As opposed to just my armpit."

The pattern continues along this trajectory, and Kurt is fairly sure that Blaine doesn't suspect a thing. Slowly but surely, Blaine finds himself being decked out in little knickknacks in a wide color palette. It's nothing incredibly nice or elaborate—the street vendors aren't going to be the ones with expensive merchandise. But he gets an imitation Air Nomad bracelet, a nice blue necklace, a hat that strongly resembles a recent Earth Kingdom fashion that has started catching on in the southern parts of the country.

It's all topped off by the meal.

Kurt does his very best to find things that are eaten in other parts of the world, and succeeds admirably, for the most part. Granted, the various meats are dressed in typical Fire Nation style, IE; smothered in so much spice and heat that the flavor of the original thing is pretty much unidentifiable. But it's an admirable effort. As Blaine eats, Kurt foregoes his own meal in favor of explaining how these things are prepared in other parts of the world.

When they finish the meal, they take a walk towards the docks. The afternoon is segueing into evening, so the hustle and bustle is losing its hustle and settling for simple bustle. After a few moments walking in silence, Blaine turns towards him with a soft smile. "Don't think I don't see what you're doing here," Blaine says.

"Oh?" Kurt says innocently. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You're trying to sell me on the rest of the world," Blaine says. "You're trying to… seduce me with the delights of other Nations."

"Nonsense," Kurt says, waving him off. "Though—hypothetically speaking, if I were doing that—would it be working?"

Blaine shakes his head, but not in a 'no' way. More like a 'what am I going to do with you?' way. "Kurt, it isn't that I don't want to go with you. I would… love to see the rest of the world. I can't even imagine what wonders must be out there. It's just… I have so many responsibilities here. I can't just leave Wes and David and the other Hawks."

"Why not?" Kurt asks. "I'm not trying to be whiny, I'm just asking. They aren't wanted. They would be safe from Sue."

"But they know about Sue," Blaine says. "They know the truth. If I leave, they'll still know that she sits on a stolen throne. It's… it's hard to explain, but it isn't in a firebender's nature to do nothing. The philosopher Infernicus said 'the fire that idles, dies.' Me asking them to sit around and do nothing while Sue does… whatever… it's like putting a lit torch down next to a patch of dry leaves and asking it not to burn anything."

"I'm sure your friends have more willpower than that," Kurt says.

"And if they don't? And they strike against Sue, and I'm not here to protect them?" Blaine asks. "And it isn't just them. We still don't know what Sue's big plan is. Anyone… everyone here could be in jeopardy."

Kurt can't really say much to that. In silence, they walk the rest of the way to the docks, and find themselves staring out at the ocean. The sun sets behind them as the sea darkens in front. Kurt sighs softly. "You know, I don't think I'll ever get tired of seeing the ocean."

"It's beautiful," Blaine agrees softly. "This is only… I think… the third time I've seen it. When I
was really young, before my mom died, we took a vacation out to Ember Island. I remember looking at the ocean and just being completely awestruck. I asked my dad if it went on forever."

"And what did he say?" Kurt asks.

"Yes," Blaine says. "And no. He told me it was like the seasons. A cycle. It never begins, so it never really ends, but it just goes around and around." He laughs. "I didn't really know what he meant. I thought that if I went out there, I could sail on and eventually find another Fire Nation. Another Blaine. We'd be friends."

"Well, I'm pretty sure there's only one Fire Nation, and I'm positive there's only one Blaine. But there is an awful lot out there," Kurt says softly. "Every other place in the world." He gently takes Blaine's hand. "You could see it all. With me."

Blaine looks touched, but Kurt can see the conflict as it washes over him.

"A day of friendship between the nations," Kurt says. "You like that idea, don't you? Why not make that day every day? You could be the face of the Fire Nation to the rest of the world. You could build so many bridges, make so many new friends. I can't think of a better ambassador—you're just so darn lovable."

Blaine laughs, but he sobers up quickly. There's so much going on in his eyes that Kurt can hardly stand to look at them. "Kurt, I… I don't know… I just—"

"Hey," Kurt says. "It's okay. Don't be upset. I'm not trying to put any pressure on you. You don't have to decide anything right now."

"…thank you," Blaine says quietly.

"When we find Sam, we'll know more, and then we can talk about this again. Until then… let's just focus on us," Kurt says.

"Another good idea," Blaine says, squeezing his hand. "You're just full of them today, aren't you?"

"I do try," Kurt says coyly.

The two of them slip into silence as they continue to stare out at the darkening sea. Instead of watching the sunset, the boys stare out at the horizon. For Kurt, it is his destiny, the holder of ships and countries and islands that all cry out for his help. For Blaine, it is the unknown, the vast, impenetrable darkness of the future, uncertain and ever-changing.

For Kurt, it is the thing that will soon carry him away. Quite possibly from one of the people he loves most in the world.

For Blaine, it is the thing that will soon come for him. Like a tidal wave, he will be swept up in the future whether he likes it or not. All that is unknown is who will be left with him when the water recedes.

As the sun sets behind them, the boys step closer together for warmth. Their shoulders touch, and they quietly lean on each other for support.

The world darkens around them.

When they get back to the hotel, they find Finn and David talking quietly outside of the door.
"…wait, wait, wait," David says. "You're telling me there's there is no ball involved?"

"Nope," Finn says. "Just this little black slidey thing. You have to hit it with a stick."

"And these sticks," David says thoughtfully, "everybody has one?"

"Yep. Everybody has a stick, and everybody wears pads and helmets, and there's still at least one guy who gets a tooth knocked out in every game. It's awesome. Everybody beats the crap out of everybody!" Finn says.

David looks thoughtful. "Alright, I can't say anything for sure without seeing a game, but I think that maybe, just maybe, this might be the greatest sport of all time."

"Hey!" Blaine says cheerfully. "You guys seem a lot friendlier than when you left."

"I take it your trip went well?" Kurt asks.

"'Well' might be stretching it a bit," David says, "but it was certainly… interesting."

"And… uhh… full of excitement," Finn adds.

"I have to admit, I was kind of worried about you two," Blaine says. "It seemed like you weren't really into the idea at first."

"Oh, pffft," David says, waving him off. "You don't need to worry about us. Finn and I are just fine. Right, Finn?"

"Right!" Finn says. "So, uhhh… can you explain the rules of Kwee Ball like one more time?"

"Kuei Ball," David corrects. "And this is the last time. I'll try to go slow for you…"

"Wait," Kurt interrupts. "Why are you two outside the room?"

Finn and David share a slightly queasy look. "The atmosphere inside the room is… a little weird," David says diplomatically.

"You'll see when you go in," Finn says.

Kurt and Blaine share a confused look, but ultimately decide to brave the weirdness together. They take a deep breath and head inside together.

Right away, something seems odd.

Wes and Mercedes sit on opposite sides of the room. Both of them have bits of plant stuck to their clothes. Both are very pointedly not looking at one another. Wes's face is buried deep in a book. Mercedes is studiously writing a letter. There is a definite air of tension in the room, which Blaine picks up on right away.

"Are you guys alright?" Blaine asks.

"Splendid," Wes says easily, not looking up.

"Marvelous," Mercedes says, continuing to write. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you're sitting on opposite sides of the room and not speaking to each other," Kurt says. "That seems to suggest some level of discomfort between you."
"You guys didn't fight, did you?" Blaine asks.

"Of course not!" Wes says, adopting an expression of shock as he continues to look down at his book. "We had a wonderful time."

"It was great," Mercedes says, continuing to write. "We're just… trying to concentrate. We both have things we need to do, so we're cultivating an atmosphere of silence."

"Uh-huh," Kurt says neutrally. He casually leans over to look at Mercedes's letter, only to find a page covered in scribbles that mean absolutely nothing. She's just wasting ink.

Blaine takes a glance at what book Wes is reading and has a hard time deciphering the title, on account the book being upside-down.

The two turn to nonverbally share these oddities with each other. Kurt points to Mercedes, Blaine points to Wes, and they lean around each other to get an eyeful.

"Curious," Kurt says. "So, Mercedes, who are you writing to?"


Mercedes looks at Kurt, surprised. When she notices Kurt staring at her letter, she quickly wads it up and throws it in the trash. "Well, that was just a first draft, and I really wasn't… I was trying to…"

Wes starts and drops the book. Blaine puts his foot over the title and stares at Wes pointedly.

"Well… it's… it's about…"

Across the room, Wes and Mercedes meet each other's eyes. Small smiles bloom on their faces. They both turn ever-so-slightly red.

And then they promptly fall over to roll on the floor with laughter.

"O…kay," Kurt says. "Well, that is not what I expected."

"We're fine," Mercedes says, after taking a few seconds to calm down. "We just had a… really interesting day."

"Incredibly enlightening," Wes says, picking himself up and dusting himself off. "I had a wonderful time."

"As did I," Mercedes says.

Wes gets a smug little smile on his face. "As a matter of fact… I wouldn't mind doing it again sometime."

Mercedes quirks an eyebrow at him.

"If… that's alright with you of course," Wes adds nervously.

She smirks at him. "I might be able to squeeze you in sometime."

"What?" Blaine asks, the beautiful, oblivious boy.

Kurt is just about to tell him, when a sudden commotion erupts from outside.

There is the crash of a door opening. Rapid footsteps. Muffled voices filtering through the door before it suddenly bursts open to reveal the panicked form of Rachel, a panting Sebastian coming up behind her as Finn and David look on in confusion.

"Oh my god oh my god you guys I can't even know what's happening you have to—"

"Okay, Rachel, calm down," Kurt says. "I don't speak Superturbowordsmash. Please separate your speech."

"Okay," Rachel says. "Quick, everyone inside!" She quickly dashes into the room. Finn, David, and an out-of-breath Sebastian bring up the rear and close the door. "I got here as fast as I could—"

"Which is pretty damn fast," Sebastian interjects.

"—because I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it, and I know you won't believe it, either, but you need to see it to disbelieve it, so—"

"It's okay, Rachel," Blaine says gently. "Breathe. What do we need to see? What's so unbelievable?"

Rachel takes a calming breath and pulls out a rolled-up piece of paper from her robes, unfolding it. "I found this next to Blaine's wanted poster. They're all over town."

Kurt looks at the piece of paper, and he cups a hand over his mouth.

There, staring back at him, are three familiar faces. Two enemies, and one who he thought was a friend.

Wes reads the poster aloud.

"WANTED"

Famed Earth Kingdom Bandit, Artie Abrams.
Bounty Hunter Santana Lopez.
Bounty Hunter Noah Puckerman.

These fugitives are wanted in connection with a number of crimes, including robbery, assault, and murder. They are considered armed and extremely dangerous. If you see them, do NOT engage them. Contact local authorities immediately.

A reward is offered for any information leading to their capture or demise."

The entire room is speechless.

Well, except Sebastian.

"I don't get it," Sebastian says. "Do you know these guys?"

"Yeah," Finn says quietly. "Well, I mean one of them. We know him really well. I mean, we knew him… except… no, we still do, he's just—"

"Two of them are assassins out for Blaine's head," Mercedes says. "But one of them is our friend."

"They wouldn't work together," Blaine says, shaking his head. "Maybe they just all escaped from prison at the same time."

"Maybe," Kurt says quietly.

"Maybe they were seen together once, and they were just assumed to be partners," Rachel says.

"Maybe," Kurt agrees.

"Or maybe," Sebastian cuts in, "you didn't know him as well as you thought."

Kurt tries to ignore him. He knows Sebastian is just saying this to upset him. But the words stab through him like a spear of solid ice, cutting right to his core.

"Maybe," he whispers.

He stares at the poster, at the familiar face of his friend. In his mind, he screams questions at the drawing. 'Artie, what are you doing? What are you thinking? Where are you?'

The drawing does not answer him.

**A/N:**

*UP NEXT* – What happens to a dream, deferred?

"Go away."

As Artie continues to deny himself sleep in a desperate bid to escape his nightmares, the strange visions he refuses to acknowledge begin to bubble over into the waking world.

"Where? My place is here with you."

When the line between memories and dreams begins to blur, how do you tell what you've experienced from what you've invented?

"You're not real."

When the distinction between dreams and reality begins to break down, how do you tell what is from what isn't?

"I am as real as you are. We both know that."

When all the walls start to fall…

"You're just a vision. You're in my head."

…will the framework hold together…

"You're right. I am in your head. *That doesn't make me any less real.*"

…or will the whole thing come crumbling down?

"I am not a murderer."
"No… you're worse."

CHAPTER 66 – Dream a Little Dream
Dream a Little Dream, Part 1

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: This chapter contains mild graphic violence and minor character death.
I’m starting to think that what time of day I post these chapters has far more effect on
whether or not I get any feedback than the actual chapter’s content. :P Anyway, I’ve
decided to try to post shorter chapters more frequently for a little while. This means
that there will be more ‘part’ chapters, but hopefully it will get the story moving along
closer. No Klaine for a couple of chapters, but don’t worry—I’m just bringing
everyone together for the next main event.
Also, I would just like to take this opportunity to state that I am not the Glee writers.
My characters all have purpose within the narrative, yes, even Sebastian. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two days earlier, on the very night Blaine and Kurt reunited…

Artie likes to think he has a nose for treasure. That you could blindfold him, tie his hands to his
feet, throw him in a room full of copper coins and he would drag himself with his teeth
the one
gold piece they threw in. He likes to think his ability is supernatural.

But really, it isn't. Anybody can find treasure. Most of it is pretty obvious.

Example: that night, Artie, Santana, and Puck spot an armored carriage, trundling happily down
the road with an armed escort composed of several soldiers, komodo rhinos, and their riders.

Anything that heavily guarded is valuable. Period. The only questions are: 1. How valuable? and 2.
How do I get me some?

And there is one surefire way to answer both questions…

They head the caravan off, perching on a cliff above the road it travels, waiting for it to come by.
The moon is still mostly-full, but the rainclouds obscure what little light it has to offer. The guards
carry lamps and lanterns, making them fairly easy to spot, but Artie wants to know they are coming
before he sees them. So he engages his tremorsense, placing his hands on the ground and
concentrating.

"I still don't get why we don't just charge in and take the stupid thing," Puck asks. "Rock'em,
sock'em, rob'em. One two three, just that easy."

"The best thief is in and out before you know what he's about," Artie says simply. "Just stick to the
plan."

"I can't help but notice that your 'plan' involves us risking our butts, while you sit on yours,"
Santana says.

"Sitting on my butt is hardly a new thing for me," Artie says flatly.
Santana rolls her eyes. "You know what I mean."
"Look, as long as you stick to the plan, you'll be fine," Artie says simply. "I'll be up here watching over you like a protective spirit. I'm your Artiean Angel."

"Aren't angels supposed to be nice?" Puck asks.

"Hills if I know, I've never met one," Artie says. Down below, Artie feels the caravan trundling through the mud, and he grins. "Places, everybody! We 'bout to rock this party in the most literal sense."

Though they both give him dirty looks, Puck and Santana do as they're told. Once they're gone, Artie presses his hands deeper into the mud, feeling out the ground beneath him. The fault lines and weak points in the cliffside are easily identified, even with the soggy ground muting his senses a bit. This will be pound cake.

When the caravan is right where he wants it, Artie cracks his hands and gets to pounding, knuckle-punching precision lines of force into the cliff, which rumbles in reply like an oversized cat getting a back massage.

The caravan sputters to a halt, the guards drawing their weapons as if they intend to fight the earth. That's a losing battle if ever there was one. "Mudslide!" the leader says. "Everybody, get back!"

The rhinos grumble, buck, and bray, the dragon moose start pulling away. The guards start shaking, the earth starts quaking, the cliff starts breaking, and…

CRASH.

…it's time to start taking.

The landslide completely covers the road in an impassable wall of debris.

"Sir, the road is completely covered in an impassable wall of debris!" calls out one of the rhino riders.

"Horseradish!" the leader spits. "It's just a little dirt! The Earth ain't nothing to us! Why, back in my day, we knocked down entire mountains for fun and profit! And you want to complain about a little mud? Get over there and find a way around!"

Several soldiers shuffle forward to poke and prod at the landslide, leaving their rear much more vulnerable. The poor sap who happens to be furthest from both the carriage and the torches is the tragic victim of phase 3 of the plan—Santana wraps a rope around him and pulls him into the bushes. A few whumps later, and he's out cold, leaving Santana to initiate phase 2.

Yes, phase 3 technically starts before phase 2. It's a complicated plan.

Santana slides silently through the shadows like they're made of butter, slipping into the undercarriage of the carriage with ease. While Oldguy McBackinmahday prattles onto his soldiers about the Great Landslide of 794, she easily slips the keyring from his belt, replacing it with one of Artie's broken shackles. Then, she slices neatly through the leather straps keeping the dragon moose reined in. Naturally, she does this without them even knowing about it.

With that done, she taps on the ground a few times.

Artie catches her cue, cracks his knuckles, and commences phase 3, version 2.

The cliff rumbles again, dropping another present for the group. This one is a little smaller than its
last one, but much more threatening—a big old chunk of granite that shatters on the ground right next to the dragon moose, sending their newly-freed hides fleeing for cover.

"HEY!" the driver says. "Flossy! Mossy! Come back! It's okay! Daddy will protect you from the avalanche monsters!"

And he's off chasing after them.

"Hey, get back here!" the old leader says. "You call that an avalanche? My morning poop is more of a mudslide than this namby-pamby mess!"

Okay, gross.

"Boss, we need to get out of here!" one of the rhino riders says. "This road ain't safe!"

"Safe!" the boss says. "You know what else ain't safe? Taking on twenty seven Earth Kingdom soldiers with nothing but my bare hands and boxer shorts! Whiny little punk… I oughta strap you in and make you pull this thing!"

"Actually, that's not a bad idea," says another rider. "Why don't we just hook it to a rhino? Ain't no reason they couldn't pull it."

"Well, would you look at that!" the boss says. "We got somebody with a brain over here! Get over here, son, and we'll strap you up. I wouldn't trust the rest of these numbnuts not to drive the dang thing off a cliff."

"Yes, sir!" the soldier says. He's strapped and secured in no time, his rhino at the ready. "Ready when you are, sir!"

"Move out!" the boss orders.

The new driver turns the carriage around, lashes the reins once, and shouts, "Hi-ho, Kilgore! Away!"

And away it goes, charging forward full-tilt and nearly bulldozing several soldiers who were standing a little too close.

"What the—hey! Slow down, son! Life is not a race! You gotta take the time to appreciate things! Why, back in my day, before they even invented speed—"

The golden oldy's story is cut off by another rumble from the cliff—this one sounding more like a hungry monster's stomach growling. The intestinal turmoil is not relieved until the cliff suddenly vomits another landslide, this one seeming to overtake both carriage and rhino, burying them under tons and tons of debris.

"Son of a bitch!" the boss says. "That things' worth more than me and everyone of my ancestors stacked on top of each other! Don't just stand there, numbnuts! We gotta dig it out!"

They'll dig, alright. By hand and foot, by rhino claw, by sword and spade. It will take them hours to get through the pile.

Once they're done, it'll take them about ten seconds to remember why they were digging in the first place. Five more to realize they dug through the whole pile and found nothing under there but more mud.
Two minutes to find the bound and gagged soldier in the bushes, whose uniform has been stolen.

One minute for the leader to realize his keyring is gone.

Thirty seconds to finally understand that they've been robbed.

"They've got to be miles away by now," one guard sighs.

"Sir, what do we do now?" another asks.

That he decides in less than a second.

"Well, I can't rightly tell ya," the leader says, taking off his helmet and tossing it into the avalanche. "Y'see, after many years of… distinguished service…" he grunts, unstrapping his armor and tossing the pieces onto the helmet. "…while on a routine escort mission…" When done with the armor, he promptly starts taking off his clothes as well. "…Captain Reginald B. Rochester died in a tragic avalanche. Never saw it coming. Nothing anyone could do." With finality, he tosses his socks and boots onto the pile and pulls some mud over them. "Well, it's been nice knowing you boys. See ya in the afterlife. Put something nice on my grave!"

And he skips off into the night, never to be seen again.

Several days later, his long-lost-twin-brother-that-nobody-ever-heard-about, Rogernald C. Rochester, will mysteriously turn up at his house to 'console' his grieving widow.

As for his tombstone, his soldiers decide on a simple, touching epitaph.

_Here Lies Captain Reginald B. Rochester._
_Back in his day, they had real tombstones._

Artie and Santana take to the inside of the carriage to inspect their booty, while Puck in his stolen guard uniform drives the carriage. His helmet is on, and his facemask down, so as not to expose him and his rather distinctive head to any passersby.

"So, what the fuck is that thing?" he asks.

Santana holds the lantern up to get a better look. "It looks like a tiger statue."

Artie casually knocks on the priceless artifact, grinning at the telltale clang. "A solid gold tiger statue."

"Ho-oh-ly shit!" Puck says. "That is a shit ton of gold. I don't think I've seen that much gold in my entire life."

"Not surprised," Artie says flatly. "Given what I've seen of you, I'm surprised you guys ever got paid for anything."

"Hey, shut up!" Puck says. "We're new at this."

Artie looks at Santana, incredulous. "New?" he repeats.

She rolls her eyes. "Puck…"

"Oh, shit," Puck says. "I wasn't supposed to say that, was I?"
Santana shakes her head, and to Artie's surprise, she actually smiles. "You know what? Forget it. I'm in too damn good a mood to care. Gold has that effect on me."

"So... what, you guys aren't actually assassins?" Artie asks.

"We used to be bounty hunters," Santana says, "but Punchinello over here kept liquefying all our marks by accident. It's a lot harder to prove we got the right scumbag when they've been reduced to salsa roja by Puck's fist. He juicercized so many of our bounties that we figured we might as well list ourselves as killers for hire."

"Well, I can sort of see the logic," Artie says.

"It'd have worked out great if Puck could on-purpose kill people nearly as good accidentally kills them," Santana says lightly.

"Hey!" Puck says. "I'm not... that bad."

"You really are," Artie says. "But don't worry. I'm glad you two are such colossal fuck-ups. I know a few people who'd be a lot less alive if you weren't."

"Well, as long as we make you happy," Santana says flatly.

"So this is really what you want to do for a living?" Artie asks.

Puck shrugs. "Hey, gotta do something, and let's be real—my hammerfist ain't good for much else."

"Assassin work pays better than bounty hunting," Santana shrugs. "Plus, there's less competition, which means there's less chance of some bitch sneaking in and stealing our mark right out from under us."

"Fuckin' Zizes," Puck sighs, almost wistfully. "How do you magnificent?"

"Shut the fuck up!" Santana shouts. "I fucking told you; do not mention the Z-word in my presence." She takes a second to compose herself. "Anyway, I can think of a lot worse ways to get by than being paid to ice scumbags."

"Yeah, except Blaine isn't a scumbag," Artie says. "He's actually a pretty fucking awesome human being. I mean, do you fools even realize what you've done? You fucked over the leadership of an entire country. You just politically destabilized twenty-five percent of the world!"

Puck shrugs. "Look, we're not from the Fire Nation. All we know is what we were told. Sue Sylvester says Fire Lord Anderson is a namby-pamby douchebag and his son is even worse. They get smoked, Sue gets crowned, we get paid, life goes on."

"It's a dirty business," Santana says. "But we do what we're paid to do. Giving a shit is not part of the contract."

"Ah," Artie says lightly, leaning back against the walls. "So you two are basically whores. Got it."

Silence.

"Wait, what?" Puck says.

"Hold the fuck up!" Santana says. "We are not whores! We don't take money for sex!"
"Yeah," Puck says. "I have sex for free!"

"It's a petty distinction at best," Artie says lightly. "You can club a guy to death with a dildo, and I used to know people who got off on playing with knives. Sex, murder—it doesn't matter what you're used for. What matters is that you're used. You're a thing—a weapon to be bought, sold, and discarded."

"You want me to cram your legs up your ass and make you a pretzel, Stubby?" Santana asks. "Seriously, where do you get off?"

"Yeah," the golden tiger says. "You're one to talk!"

"Chill, children," Artie says. "I'm not trying to—"

He blinks. Squints. Thinks.

Several things just happened.

One of them was not like the others.

But for some reason, he is having a hard time figuring out which one it was.

He shakes his head. Whatever. "Look, I'm not insulting you. I'm insulting your chosen profession. If you don't like the implications of what you are, be something else."

"Man cannot change his nature," the golden tiger says. "Can silver will itself into becoming gold?"

Artie rolls his eyes. "Nobody asked you."

"I didn't even say anything!" Puck says defensively.

Artie blinks again. Something isn't right here. "Umm…"

"Oh, now I get it," Santana says. "Is that why you're here? You trying to help us see the light, get us to turn our lives around, set us on the straight and narrow?"

"I seek no end, I merely speak my mind," Artie says simply. "I gave you truth; you can do what you want with it. I mean, as bounty hunters, you at least had the freedom to go after whoever you wanted. Nobody to order you around, nobody forcing you to drag your ass to a foreign country just so they can throw you in jail…"

"He's got a point," Puck says. "I mean, things weren't great back home, but they weren't this fucked up."

"Whatever," Santana scoffs. "Forgive me if I find it hard to buy a path of redemption being touted by Hoverbutt the Bandit." She leans against the golden tiger, which purrs and nuzzles against her. "Anyway, what are we going to do with this fucking thing? We can't just carry it around with us."

"Pull off the road for a little bit," Artie says. "I've got an idea…"

Puck steers the carriage to the side of the road, and they unload the tiger statue.

Artie stares at it for a few seconds, trying to get a feel for the shape of it so he can pick a proper disguise.
The statue stares back at him, blinking impassively.

"Hold still," he tells it. The shape will be thrown off if it moves.

Santana stops moving. "There. You happy?"

With the speed and skill of a master potter, Artie bends the earth up and around the statue, forming and shaping it into the visage of a very stout stone dragon.

"Nice!" Puck says.

"What is the meaning of this?" the statue cries, its voice muffled by the earthen sheath. "Are you trying to suffocate me?"

"Oh, quit complaining," Artie says lightly.

"...that was a compliment, dude!" Puck says. "I was totally sincere."

"I wasn't..." Artie sighs. Leave it to Puck to make things all about him. "Whatever. Let's load this thing back up and get out of here."

"Fine by me," Puck says, yawning a bit. "I'm sleepy."

Artie laughs. You have no idea. He uses earthbending to shove the heavy statue back into the car and secure it. Once it's in place, they're back on the road again, riding in silence this time. Santana is giving him a weird look, but not saying anything. Puck has fallen mostly quiet, as well.

The stupid tiger, however, will not shut up.

"Release me!" it yells. "I will not stand for this indignity! I am a proud and noble creature, not some doll to be tarted up in costume! I demand that you—"

"Oh my god, shut up!" Artie yells.

The carriage slows down. Santana's weird look doubles in intensity. "Umm... who the fuck are you talking to?"

Artie massages his forehead. "I'm talking to the—"

Ding, ding, ding!

Now he gets it.

He looks at the dragon/tiger statue, gape-mouthed in shock.

The statue is silent.

"...the carriage," he says after a moment or two, looking down. "Yeah. This thing is really noisy. It's driving me apeshit."

"...right," Santana says warily.

Something prickles at the back of Artie's neck, and a cold dread settles into his stomach. "Let's just hurry and get to town. I have a bad feeling."

A feeling we're being watched.
Naturally, he doesn't say that last part out loud. Because that would sound crazy.

And the last thing he wants is to sound crazy, right?

Unbeknownst to Finchel, Artie, Puck, and Santana arrive in town just after they do.

"You guys check into the hotel," Artie instructs as they get into their disguises. "I'm gonna scout out the city, see if I can't find any other valuables to snatch."

"Kleptomaniacal much?" Santana says.

"Hey, you stand to profit from my sticky fingers," Artie counters. "You could be a little more appreciative."

"Whatever, dude," Puck says. "Where are you gonna sleep? You can't just walk into the hotel. Well, I mean, you can't walk at all, but you can't just slide in, either... I mean—"

"I know what you mean," Artie says simply. "Don't worry about me. You take care of you. I'll take care of the rest."

He goes underground before they can reply, popping up in a nearby alleyway. He puts hand to ground and waits to feel their footsteps fading away. Once he feels relatively safe and alone, he scoots back against the wall, and leans his head against it.

The weird feeling from before has only gotten worse.

It's hard to put words to it. He feels... hazy. Fuzzy. Like there is a thick bank of fog hovering around his mind, forcing his thoughts to drive slow lest they crash into each other. It's not like the typical feeling of exhaustion he felt before... it's almost like there is something between Artie and his own mind.

And the worst thing is, he has no idea what he can do about it.

He's pretty sure the talking tiger statue had something to do with it.

Errrr, well, the non-talking tiger statue. Because tiger statues don't talk.

Except for this one. It spoke pretty clearly. Just... no one else heard it.

Which meant that it wasn't really talking.

Was it?

Fuck, now he just has a headache.

He'll just need to be more careful in the future. Be more vigilant, keep his eyes open for things that don't fit. He'll be fine. He can get through this.

"You don't believe that. But by all means, keep lying to yourself. It's amusing."

Artie's eyes snap open. His senses are suddenly on high alert, scanning every direction for threats. The alleyway is empty. The streets are deserted. The city is quiet.

Or so it seems.
As he turns his head, a flash of green cloth passes through the light of a torch, vanishing out of sight just as he turns to look at it.

Green?

Green doesn't belong in the Fire Nation. This is definitely a red state.

Oh. This is another one of those things. Like the talking tiger. It doesn't fit, therefore…

"It isn't real," Artie says quietly. "There's no one here."

The night is silent around him.

His neck itches. The cold feeling has not gone away. He feels a pair of eyes on him, he just knows it. Just to be sure, he puts his hands on the ground and tries to feel out the spy.

Someone is nearby! They're moving quickly-but-carefully through the streets, in stark contrast to the slow, careless footsteps of the local guard patrol.

This is the one who's been watching me. It has to be.

And Artie has no intention of letting them get away. His fingers dance on the dirt to get a feel for his position. Once he's fairly sure he knows the area around him, he darts off after them. The streets are mostly empty this late at night, so he doesn't bother tunneling—he simply scoots across the stone sidewalks and dirt streets, skimming over the earth like a spinning rock over the surface of the sea.

It isn't long before Artie is close enough to see the fleeing figure. Tall. Fairly well-built. Lanky, but not in the awkward way that Finn is. It's difficult to make out more than a silhouette, but it's definitely a male. Artie silently stalks him as the figure continues to sneak through the streets, trusting the darkness of night to keep him hidden.

His mind wanders as he tracks the fellow. Who is he? Why is he here? Is he from the Earth Kingdom? A spy of some sort? If so, why wear green, when it would make you stick out so much?

The figure passes close to a torch, and suddenly, Artie feels like an idiot. He isn't wearing green. There is not a fleck of it on him.

Which means one of two things. Either A. Artie has been tracking the wrong person, or B. There was never anyone wearing green, and his mind is playing tricks on him.

Is it bad that isn't sure he wants to know which one is true?

Suddenly, the figure stops and turns, staring into the darkness. Artie freezes. It's the best thing in a situation like this. In a night this dark, he isn't likely to be distinguishable from the rest of the shadows if he stays still. If he moves, however, it's a different story.

Sure enough, the figure stares into the shadows for a few seconds more, then turns and heads onwards. As he turns, Artie sees that his face is covered with a mask of some sort. It looks vaguely like a fox.

Weird.
As he continues to stalk the figure, he begins to notice more and more about him.

"Look how silently and swiftly he moves. He has been trained."

Oh, definitely. He's good. Not quite pro, but way better than your average civ.

Though he is wearing a bow and arrow, his outfit is nothing special—typical Fire Nation civilian attire.

"But those boots are military issue. The kind a guard or soldier might wear."

Artie squints to get a closer look at the boots. Well, what do you know? They are.

"What an interesting fellow. I wonder what he's doing here?"

Artie only has to follow him for a few more seconds to get the answer to that question.

It's not a good answer. And it only brings up more questions.

Foxmask happens upon a pair of guards on patrol, and immediately takes to the shadows, upping his stealth even more. Artie watches them carefully from a side street. Both guards carry lamps on their belts, making them easy to spot in the darkness.

With greatest care, the masked man bends over and picks up a stone. He cocks his arm back, but instead of throwing it at the guards, he hurls it at a nearby building. To Artie's surprise, the rock rebounds off the wall perfectly and slams into one of the guard's helmets with a loud clank.

"AH!" the hit guard says. "I'm under attack!"

The rock lands on the ground in front of the second guard, who bends over to pick it up. "The fuck? Who's throwing shit at us?"

"It came from over there!" the first guard says, pointing towards the rock's ricochet point. "Come on!"

They draw their weapons and head towards the alley next to the building the rock bounced off of.

"Clever use of misdirection. And a very nice throw, at that. This one is skilled. I like him."

'Skilled' he can agree with. 'Like,' however, is up in the air. Artie definitely doesn't like the way the guy pulls out his bow and notches an arrow as he watches the guards go into the alley. He doesn't like it, yet he feels powerless to stop it.

"We know you're in here!" the first guard says, his sword drawn and held at the ready. "Come out!"

"This is technically assault, but if you come peacefully, we might let you off with a warning!" the second one says, following just behind him.

The masked man's footsteps are completely inaudible as he lines up his shot.

There are two arrows.

The first breaks the spear-wielder's lantern, extinguishing the flame and causing him to spin around in shock.
The second pierces clean through his neck.

He gurgles as his throat fills with blood, his shocked fingers releasing his spear. As the other guard turns around to check on the odd noises that his friend is making, the masked man charges through the darkness and grabs the spear, hurling it full-strength into the sword-wielder's chest.

The blow knocks him clean off his feet, driving the air out of him and causing him to drop his weapon in shock. But it does not kill him, not right away. He leaves a smear of blood in the dirt as he weakly attempts to crawl away from the man. He does not get far. The masked man marches over to the injured guard, rips the spear from his chest and plunges it into his neck, finishing him off.

Artie is speechless.

"Good call delivering the coup de grace on that second guard. The spear wound was fatal, but he might have called for help if left to die. It's always better to be sure."

"Will you shut up?" Artie whispers. "Two people just died! This isn't the time for—"

The masked man hears him, his head snapping to look at him like a nervous meerkat searching for predators. The fading light of the second guard's lantern glints off the eyes of the masked man as he turns.

They are cold. Sharp. And green.

Before another thought can cross Artie's mind, the man draws another arrow and lets it fly at him. He thanks the earth for blessing him with lightning-fast hands, because he just barely manages to knock the thing off course on sheer reflex, sending it flying into the ground. It would've gone straight through his eye if he hadn't deflected it.

Artie quickly bends up a mound of stone to take cover behind, but fox-man has no intention of launching a fourth arrow. He pulls a scroll from inside of his shirt and tosses it onto the nearest corpse. Then, he scrambles up the wall and vanishes.

"Ah, so this killing was intended to send a message. I wonder what he's written there…"

Artie is about to investigate, when suddenly, it occurs to him to wonder who the fuck is talking to him.

Again, his senses flare to life. The strange, hazy feeling lifts, having come upon him without him even realizing it. His awareness expands to scan the world around him… and there is no one. The streets are empty. It is only when his eyes return to the alleyway that he sees him for the first time.

The hidden man.

His top is long and flowing, a garment of dark green and black, reaching nearly down to his knees. On the front is the Earth Kingdom symbol; a large golden circle, surrounding vivid green, which itself surrounds a small, golden square. His pants are black, flared and covering his shoes. His hands are held behind his back, his posture perfectly straight. A wide-brimmed conical hat hides his face in deep shadows, obscuring his features entirely. He is utterly still, but Artie knows the man is staring at him.

Watching him.

Artie is in no mood to slide through other people's blood, so he goes underground, tunneling to the
end of the alleyway and popping up behind the man…

…only to find that he has vanished by the time Artie arrives.

"Shit!" Artie curses. Not even the tiniest sign of the man remains. Artie has somehow missed him entirely. He is just about to put his fingers to the ground to check for fleeing footsteps when the note catches his eye. It rests on the second guard's chest, just shy of the gaping spear-wound. Being careful not to get any blood on him, Artie slides up closer and unfurls the note, holding it in the lantern's light in order to read it.

To the Fire Lord:
I have what you—

"What the—HEY!" a voice shouts.

There's no time to think. Artie drops the note and dives, dives, dives, vanishing under the earth just as he hear the metallic twang of the sword slamming the dirt above him. He emerges in a nearby basement, his heart pounding, his lungs struggling for breath.

The guy saw him. It wasn't just a glimpse, either—Artie was sitting next to a goddamn light source for earth's sake.

Outside the door, he hears several guards calling out to their fellows, and can't help but gulp in dread.

This is bad.

On the second floor of a hotel room, as they are just about to settle down for bed, Puck decides to get all conversational with her.

"So, Santana," he asks. "What's your take on our new BFF?"

"I thought that was pretty obvious," Santana says, sitting on her bed. "I don't like him. I don't trust him. He freaks me right the fuck out."

"He is a little weird," Puck says, sitting on his own bed. "He says some seriously random shit. Like… maybe he's not all there in the head, you know?"

"He's hiding something," Santana says with a nod. "Something important. Part of me thinks we should just take our golden kitty and ride off into the sunset."

"Only part of you?" Puck asks. "Like, just your boobs? What's the rest of you say?"

"A few things," Santana says. "Like that we owe him for busting us out. That he's had several chances to screw us over and he hasn't done it yet. And that we've made more bank with him in one night than we have in the entire rest of our time in this stupid country, combined."

"Hmmm," Puck says.

"What do you think?" Santana asks.

Puck shrugs. "I don't know. I mean… back on the train, guy could've killed me. He almost did. And nobody would've really blamed him if he did, but… he didn't. He let me live. And I don't know why"
Santana remains silent on this front.

"He's just… weird," Puck finally seems to decide upon. After a second, he adds. "Pretty smart, though."

"I know," Santana replies. "That is the main thing that worries me."

They lapse into silence, and Puck is getting ready to blow out his candle when the stillness of the evening is abruptly shattered, along with their window.

"WHOA!" Puck says, jumping out of bed. "What the fuck?"

Santana flips over into a combat-ready crouch, but there is no ass for her to kick. She darts over to the window to look outside. A group of guards marches by, all of them clearly agitated about something.

"I heard something over here!" one of them says.

"Spread out!" says the leader. "Check the alleys, and then we'll start searching the buildings. Remember; stay together! Do NOT go off alone!"

"Yes, ma'am!" the gathered guards chorus, bowing to her.

"Huh," Santana says quietly. "I think I know who broke our window."

"Me too," Puck says. Santana turns around to see him holding the rock that broke the glass. There is a message carved into it.

_Get to rhino, pronto. Meet you there._

"Think we have time to sneak out onto the street?" Puck asks.

Downstairs, a door is kicked open. The sounds of footsteps. "Nope," Santana says. She wraps her hand in a blanket and clears the rest of the broken glass out of the window, while Puck pushes one of the beds against the door.

"Let's go!" Santana says, hopping out the window and shimmying up the wall to the roof. Once she gets a decent foothold, she lowers her whip so Puck can grab on, and promptly hoists his ass up. He's always sucked at climbing. It's fairly smooth sailing from there. The fuzz is out in force, but their eyes are on the ground, making it all too obvious who they are looking for. Pucktana are able to slip right over their heads.

Inside the stables, they head to Kilgore's stall. No sooner than they set foot inside does Artie suddenly burst out of a bale of hay.

"The fuck, dude?" Puck asks. "What's going on out there?"

Artie slams a fist into his open hand, blasting the dirt and hay off of him. "Sorry," he says. "I'll explain later. Long story short; I witnessed some impromptu human ventilation and got caught too close to the aftermath. We're made. It's time to evade."

"Sounds like your problem to me," Santana says lightly. "We're not the ones who got caught with corpses."

"You really think they're not looking for you?" Artie asks. "We escaped together. As far as the Fire Nation is concerned, we're peas in a pod. Now get out of your disguises."
"What? Why?" Puck asks.

"The city's on lockdown. We're not getting out without a fight, and I don't want you to ruin your nice clothes," Artie says.

The three of them quickly rouse a cranky Kilgore. Puck soothes his grumpy soul with some hay and a horn massage (ew) while Santana fastens the carriage to him. Artie goes through the oddest ritual, slamming the ground over and over again with his hands, bending up a bunch of perfectly square stone plates. When he's got a few dozen of them, he fuses the plates to the roof of the cart like shingles, and catapults himself up there.

"Ready when you are!" he shouts.

Santana hops inside the carriage to protect the cargo.

Puck, of course is in the driver's seat.

"Alright, buddy! Take the shortest road out of this shithole!" Puck orders.

Kilgore roars, rears, and rockets straight forward, smashing through the stable walls. Artie has to duck to avoid being scraped off the roof.

"O…kay," Puck says. "Not what I had in mind, but I like it. Hyah!"

Kilgore starts charging down the street, and it isn't long before they've got plenty of unwanted attention.

"That's him!" one of the guards shouts as Artie cheerfully waves from on top of the carriage. "That's the murderer!"

"Stop in the name of the Fire Lord!" shouts another.

"Sorry," Artie says. "I'm an unstoppable force. Can't be helped."

The guards swarm in from all around. The ones coming in from behind stand no chance of catching up, but they occasionally launch the odd arrow or fireball. Artie's earth plates prove to be a surprisingly versatile shield—he can arrange them into a variety of shapes, shuffling them around each other en masse with relative ease. Neither arrow nor flame can penetrate his defense.

Unfortunately, that's not all they have to worry about. Some of the guards come in from the sides and jump onto the carriage, trying to go all barnacle on their asses. Santana scrapes them off with little trouble, most of them meeting the business end of her whip, and failing that, her foot.

Puck takes care of things in front. The guards occasionally try to set up a blockade. Kilgore easily slams through most of them. Anything that looks like it might be trouble for Kilgore gets a blast from Puck's fist to help push it aside. At the edge of the city, the guards make a lame attempt to close the gates. Puck's air blast makes them buckle. Kilgore's charge blows them clean off their hinges.

Santana smacks the last of the cling-ons off the side, and Artie affixes his earth plates back onto the roof as the last of the arrows fall well short of their mark.

"That was pretty easy," Puck says.

"I don't think we're done yet…" Santana says.
Artie peers off into the night behind them. Sure enough, three tiny little points of light can be seen bobbing on the trail behind them. "Riders at six o'clock!"

Their tail is three rhinos, with two riders apiece. One driver, and one firebender.

This could be trouble.

The enemy rhinos gain ground rapidly, having no carriage to pull to slow them down. Artie blocks a fire blast with his earth plates, and counters by hurling a few of them at the riders, discus style. The firebenders manage to blast the discs out of the air before they hit, however.

One of them moves close enough to try and attack the carriage directly. He aims for the wheels, either not noticing or just not caring that he is well within Santana's range.

All-in-all, it's a beautiful thing to watch. Santana takes a flying leap off the end of the carriage, sails through the air, and lands foot-first in the firebender's face, kicking him off his mount and landing right behind the driver. She wastes no time in getting him in a chokehold, trying to wrestle him off as well.

The other two firebenders take notice of her, and aim to roast her while she is distracted. Sadly for them, she is the distraction, as far as Artie is concerned. He hurls a couple more sharp-edged stone plates at the baddies, neatly beaning the one closest to Santana and sending him sailing off. Santana wins her fight, flipping the driver off the rhino and taking the reins for herself. She pulls them sharply to the side, steering the rhino into his closest buddy and jumping free just as the two crash into each other.

The sole remaining firebender tries to fricassee her as she flies through the air, but Artie forms a semi-spherical shield to cover her six, allowing her to land safely.

One driver and one firebender left to shake. This bender is clearly the best of the bunch—he has no trouble defending against Artie's plate attacks.

Maybe it's time to try a different form of assault.

Gathering up all the plates save the ones keeping him from sliding off the roof, Artie slams them together and smashes them into shrapnel, blasting the resulting cloud of sand and sharp stone shards at the last firebender. He tries to deflect with his flames, but there's just too much stuff coming at him too fast. The stone shower renders rhino and rider momentarily blind, and they wind up crashing into a ditch.

Artie casually slides to the edge of the roof and plops down next to Puckerman. Santana reaches through the barred window, and all three of them exchange high fives.

A job well done.

Back in town, with the supposed murderer identified and having escaped, the guards cancel the alert. When Finchel and Wevid awaken the next morning, they will go about their business and leave town without even realizing their friends and enemies were so close to them.

It's not the first time this has happened, and it probably won't be the last…

They wind set up camp for the night pretty far from town. Since they've already got a roof to put over them, Artie uses his earthbending to secure the carriage so that it doesn't roll away, and they all stay in there, the crouching-tiger-hidden-in-dragon shoved off to the side. They've still got one
lantern with enough oil to keep it burning for a few more hours, so they just congregate around that while they wind down from the chase.

"So, what exactly happened back there?" Santana asks. "Do you get framed for murder on a regular basis?"

"Nah," Artie says, shaking his hand in a so-so gesture. "Once or twice a year, at worst. I just saw some punk getting his stealth on, and figured I'd follow. Wound up witnessing two of the worst amateur tracheotomies in medical history."

"Amateur what?" Puck asks.

Artie rolls his eyes. "Naw, not me. You're welcome to him, though. I hear you like the dangerous types."


"A couple of guards," Artie says. "Guy lured 'em into an alleyway and just smoked 'em. Arrowed one, and speared the other with his dead buddy's weapon."

"Damn," Puck says. "That is ice cold."

"Why, though?" Santana asks. "Not even hardcore psychos kill for no reason at all."

"He was sending a message," Artie says. "He had a note. I didn't get to read it all—that's what got me spotted. All I know is that it was addressed to the Fire Lord."

"In that case, I've changed my mind," Santana says. "I think I like this guy. Anyone who wants to stick it to that bitch is okay in my books."

"Whoa, whoa," Artie says. "A couple of seconds ago, you were comparing him to a hardcore psycho. Now you like the guy? Do murderers just have a thing for each other or something?"

"I'm not a murderer, prickwad," Santana says. "I'm an assassin."

"Assassins are murderers," Artie says. "Your job is to kill people in cold blood. How can you just wake up every day and say 'for the right price, I'll end somebody's life?'"

Santana shrugs, averting her eyes. "The more death you see, the less it means to you, I guess." Her eyes grow distant as she stares into the lantern light. "I still remember my first kill. Total accident. Chased some douchebag onto a boat. He jumped overboard, so I tried to whip him back onboard. Managed to wrap my rope around his neck, and then…" She snaps. "It was over just like that."

Artie winces. "Ouch."

"He probably didn't feel much, to be honest," Santana says. "But I did."
"You clearly didn't like it," Artie says. "So what happened between now and then?"

"I grew up," Santana says simply. "The guy was a scumbag, and to be perfectly honest, the world is probably better without him in it."

They lapse into silence for a few seconds.

"You said you 'grew up,'" Artie says quietly. "You were younger then? By how much? How old are you now?"

It's too far. He can tell almost instantly. The second the questions leave his mouth, Santana shuts herself off. She's closed for the night. "Fuck off, scooter," she snits. "Mind your own damn business."

Artie raises his hands in surrender. "Sorry. Didn't mean to pry."

Well, he did, but he didn't mean to be so careless about him.

Silence reigns again, and Artie finds himself looking at Puck. "You got real quiet all of a sudden," he says lightly. "What's on your mind?"

Puck looks up at him, making eye contact for just a second. "My first one was a huge jerk," he says. "He was a guard captain. Corrupt as all fuck. Took so many bribes, the guy could walk around with no armor and still clank like a bag of pots in an earthquake. He turned a blind eye to drug dealers, slavers, wife beaters… anyone who could pay. Walked around like the fucking Earth King, thinking his title made him invincible. But it didn't protect him from me. I just walked up to the dude and decked him one." He fiddles with his glove for a couple of seconds. "I was still pretty new to my powerfist, so I didn't realize how strong I was. Let's just say the aftermath was not pretty. I wasn't really allowed back in that town after that, but I'm not sorry. Dude was an asshole."

"Judge, jury, and executioner," Artie says. "Sounds like you both ignored the law to me."

"Well, sometimes the law isn't good enough," Puck says, quiet but firm. Artie notices him fiddling with his glove, and tries to change the subject.

"How do you do that, anyway?" he asks. "Your fist thing. How does it work?"

Silence.

"Uh, hello?" Artie says.

"None of your business," Puck says grudgingly, and Artie smiles, shaking his head.

"Alright, alright, I guess that's enough sharing and caring for the evening," he says, leaning back. "I guess now it's my turn."

"Your turn?" Santana asks. "To do what?"

"Remember what I said?" Artie asks. "You spill your secrets, and I'll spill mine. That was the deal. You spilled, so now I'll do the same—the three of us are headed for Zedong, one of the biggest cities in the Fire Nation. Our mission is to locate someone, a very dear friend of mine by the name of Sam Evans."

The reaction he gets is far from what he expects. He expected confusion. Questions.

"What is it?" Artie asks. "What's wrong? Why do you guys look like you just got caught strangling puppies?"

The two non-assassins have a silent battle of wills. Puck loses, and is thus stuck with the burden of telling the truth. "Uhhhh… look, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but… we uhh… we kind of met that guy already."

Artie tilts his head to the side. "What? When?"

"When we were chasing you guys," Santana says quietly. "Saw him tearing down wanted posters. Quinn tried to squeeze some information out of him, but he lied to us to throw us off. When Quinn found out, she… killed him."

The revelation drives the air right out of him. For a few seconds, Artie is completely and utterly speechless. "No," he says thickly, when his voice recovers. "You're lying. You're full of shit."

"Sorry, dude," Puck says with a shrug. "It was out of our hands—"

"Bullshit!" Artie shouts. "You could've stopped her, you could've done something! You… you…"

He trails off, his train of thought derailing as the strange feeling washes over him again. His chest is heavy, like his lungs are full of sawdust. The fuzziness returns, that strange hazy feeling taking over. The mental fog moves in and suddenly, Artie is separated from his feelings. The grief is still there, but it seems… muted. Distant, somehow.

"Well, that settles that, I suppose," the stone dragon says.

Artie does not look at the dragon. He knows that is where the voice is coming from, but he also knows that's where it isn't coming from. It can't be.

"Wait until they're asleep. It'll be easier to kill them that way."

He isn't going to kill them.

"You should. If you leave the weapons lying around, they will only cause people to be hurt. It's time to dispose of them."

They're not weapons. They're people.

"They are weapons. They have but one purpose."

Artie shakes his head and clenches his eyes shut tighter. He just wants the stupid things to stop talking to him. He wants the voices to stop.

Voices.

Oh, fuck. He's hearing voices.

He's hearing… wait, he is hearing something.

"Dude," Puck says. "Are you alright?"

Puck's voice clears through the fog like the midday sun. The stone dragon falls silent. Unfortunately, the fog was all that kept Artie from feeling his emotions, and without it, the grief returns full force.

"No, I'm not alright!" he barks. "Sam was my friend, you fucked up dilhole!"
Puck has the decency to look a little ashamed.

"For what it's worth," Santana says, softer than Artie would've ever imagined her capable of, "I really am sorry. He seemed like a decent guy. There wasn't anything we could do about it."

Artie crosses his arms, as if trying to squeeze the sorrow out of his chest. "...how did he die?" he asks quietly.

"Dunno," Puck says. "Quinn took him out into the woods. We didn't see it."

"All I know is two people walked into those woods, and only one came out," Santana says. Something clicks in Artie's mind. "The woods..." he says. "She took him into the woods. You guys didn't see her kill him."

"Well, I guess not," Puck says.

"So he could still be alive," Artie says.

"I doubt it," Santana says. "She said it was the law. That he had to die. You've seen how Quinn is."

"True," Artie says, "but I also happen to have some info you guys aren't aware of. I happen to know that a couple of Blaine's friends found a man in the woods claiming that his name was Norman. He had no possessions, so they gave him a ride to the next town. You guys took Sam's stuff, didn't you?"

Puck looks thoughtful. "Yeah, we did."

"Which means they found him after you guys did," Artie says. "And he was still alive. Which means that Quinn definitely did not kill him."

"She let him go?" Puck asks. "Then why was she all sad when she came back?"

"Maybe she didn't let him go," Santana says. "Maybe he escaped."

"But she didn't chase after him," Puck says. "She must have done it on purpose."

"Huh," Santana says, a small smile of amazement blooming. "Well, what do you know? It seems I underestimated our little Quinnie. Looks like she has a rebellious streak after all."

The sense of relief that passes through him nearly causes him to pass out right there on the spot. "He's alive," Artie says happily. "And he's in Zedong. That's where we're headed. You two are going to help me find him. And once you've done that, you guys can do whatever you want."

"Pfft," Santana says. "I'll believe it when it happens, four-eyes."

Artie smiles, tempted to lean back and just let the relief wash over him. How sweet it would be to just float on this feeling for the rest of the night, let it buoy him into dreamland, insulate him from the dark corners of his own mind? If only he believed that's what would happen...

"I'll take first watch," he says, scooting over to the carriage door. "You guys get some rest."


"Night, dude," Puck says, a little quieter than usual.
Artie hops out of the carriage and lands on the ground, which happily absorbs the energy from his impact without harming him, buckling and casting waves outwards. He sits on the slightly moist ground. The moon is setting. It's just a few hours until dawn. He'll only need an hour, maybe two at most to keep him going for another day.

He's close. He knows he is. He just needs to hold out for a little while longer…

See, after his argument with Kurt, Artie was torn. Part of him wanted to make Kurt sweat, to make him see how much they needed him, to make him sorry for ever questioning Artie's loyalty.

Another part of him wanted to apologize. To go up and beg for forgiveness, to lay out all his secrets and be free of the burden of carrying them. Because despite Artie's best intentions, Kurt was right—he had put people's lives in danger that night. His insomnia could have killed someone. If one of the Dragon Hawks had died… oh, man. Blaine would never recover from that. Blaine would never forgive him.

Unable to settle on which side he wanted to side with, Artie spent the night quietly following his friends around, always staying just out of sight, listening to their conversations. Yeah, it was a little creepy, but creeping is part of his job as a thief. He just couldn't bring himself to confront Kurt again after all that was said between them.

It wasn't until they went into the basement with Wes and David to discern Sam's whereabouts that the plan began to form in Artie's mind. He knew that Quinn, Puck, and Santana were in prison. He knew that if anyone could find Sam, they probably could. He also knew they probably wouldn't stay in prison for long.

He knew that every night, he had a different disturbing dream. A dream that always ended the same way—with Artie killing Puck.

So he decided on a little gamble. He tossed together a hobo disguise, doused himself in alcohol and got himself thrown into prison. His mission was simple.

Get the assassins on his side.

It was surprisingly easy, all things considered, which bodes well for his master plan.

If Puck and Santana are no longer assassins… if they aren't trying to kill Blaine anymore, then Artie has no beef with them. If he gets them to give up this crappy job, to possibly even become friends with him, then he'll have no reason to kill Puck. When he's awake, or when he's asleep. His mind will rest at ease.

In a way, Santana was right. He is trying to get them to see the light. The same light that he saw—the light that made him want to be more than a thief, more than a con-artist, more than a jailbird who had given up on life. The light that made him want to be better than he was, that makes him want to be better still.

That Kurt would question that light… it hurt.

But Artie will make him see. He'll find Sam in the vast urban jungle. Kurt and the gang will come home after a long, hard day of searching, and Artie and Sam will just be sitting there waiting for them. And everyone will start talking and laughing, and Kurt will apologize, and Artie will apologize, and there will be hugs and explanations and introductions, and his restless mind will finally be at ease.

Finn, Kurt, Mercedes, Blaine… even Rachel. They're the closest thing to a family he has in this
world. The only thing he has worth fighting for. They are his light. And no matter how dark the shadows in his mind gets, he will cling to his light. He won't go back in the dark.

He's been down that road before.

He's *never* going back again.

As Artie muses on his thoughts, the silence of the evening is broken by the sleep-addled voice of Puck. Artie listens as the half-conscious boy lets out some musings of his own.

"I wonder why she let him go," Puck says thoughtfully.

"Who knows?" Santana slurs. "Maybe she was in love with him."

"No way," Puck says. "That's stupid." He scoffs. "In love with him… she just met the guy." He trails off for a few moments. And then, almost wistfully, he says, "I wonder what she's doing now."

And finally, just before he goes to sleep…

"I hope she's okay…"

Miles away, behind the cold, metal walls of a Fire Nation fortress, Quinn Fabray sits in front of a mirror, brushing her hair in dim candlelight.

It is late. Past midnight, for sure. She should be asleep, really, but she has only just finished the massive list of tasks that she was given for the day. Her nightly ritual is fairly long and involved, and she is willing to skip every step… except this one. Every night, she brushes her hair before bed. It's a ritual of comfort more than practicality—brushing your hair before bed hardly keeps it styled through the night. No, Quinn brushes her hair as a silent reminder that she still has it.

Her hair is a symbol, you see. In the Chi-Ryus, the standard punishment for a screw-up is having your hair and eyebrows burnt off. That way Sue can tell, at a glance, which of the girls present has gone the longest without making a mistake. Which of them is the most dependable, the most dedicated, the most talented, and the most likely to succeed at whatever task she is given. All these things can be measured by hair length.

And Quinn has the longest hair of any Chi-Ryu.

She stares at it as brushes out the tangles built up over the day. Stares at the smudges of dirt and grime a day spent scrubbing, cleaning, and moving the filthiest things that could be found. This is her punishment; reduced to manual labor, taken from the heights and plunged to the depths. But she will not let it bother her. She does her work with dignity, carries it out to the best of her ability, and does not complain. That is her duty as a soldier.

Occasionally, her girls will show up to try to sneak her little care packages. Bits of food and water to keep her going through the day. She accepts these. When the girls try to help, she turns them away. This is not their punishment, after all. But the care packages, she takes. She's grateful for them, really. She *has* been feeling strangely hungry lately.

She's been feeling strange in general, to tell the truth.

She tires. She aches. She tells herself that the stress on her body is the price of failure—her inability to capture the Prince is damaging her health.
But it feels like there is something more. Something she isn't quite getting.

Either way, she tells herself, it will all be fine once she catches the Prince. All she has to do is suffer through a few more days of this punishment, and surely Sue will see fit to restore her to her position. Sue must still think fairly highly of her, after all. Quinn failed. She screwed up, and she is being punished for it. Yet she still has her hair. Perhaps it is a sign of Sue's faith in her.

Or... perhaps a sign that the Chi-Ryus no longer work like that. Their purpose is different now.

Regardless, she still has her hair, and so she brushes it. It is a tangible reminder of how hard she's worked, how strong she has remained in the face of challenges that broke countless others. How she earned her spot at the top of the proverbial pyramid. It is her comfort in lonely, dark moments like this one. "Look at all you've done," it says.

Her hair brushing is the only reason she is still awake. And oddly enough, it is the only reason she witnesses what comes next.

A commotion arises outside of her door, crashing and yelling. Quinn abandons her brushing and rushes out her door, ready to meet whatever threat awaits. What she finds is not a threat, but an out-of-breath messenger, lamely attempting to squirm out from under a small dogpile of guards.

"I have an important message... for the Fire Lord!" he grunts. "It's a matter... of National... security!"

"We have official channels for these things!" one guard says, reaching down to place the messenger in a headlock. "If you desire an audience with the Fire Lord, you need simply file a request, wait three weeks for it to be processed, confirm the request, wait two weeks for confirmation of your confirmation, and then it will only be three to four more months, presuming that you—"

Quinn rolls her eyes and marches over, shoveling the guards aside and helping the messenger up. "Let me see this," she says, snatching one scroll out of his hand "I know the Fire Lord. I will judge whether or not this merits her attention."

"But you're technically not—"

She ignores the complainer as she unfurls the scroll and scans its contents.

When she realizes what it means, she very nearly drops it from shock.

"Where did you get this?" she demands, turning to the messenger

"It was found on a dead soldier," the messenger says nervously. "All the details are in this letter." He hands her another scroll.

The guards look at each other nervously.

"Thank you," she says. "You are dismissed. All of you. I will deliver this letter to the Fire Lord myself."

She marches off without another word to them, heading deeper into the fortress.

As she goes, she rolls up one scroll in favor of reading the other, the one that explains the situation. Two guards found dead. One got an arrow through the neck, the other, a spear. The earthbending thief, Artie Abrams, was spotted fleeing the scene. He, Puck, and Santana fled the city that night.
It's certainly an interesting situation. She'd never have expected this from the cripple, of all people…

As she approaches the door to the Fire Lord's temporary bedchambers, she eyes the elite guards on either side of it. She knows what she is about to do is insanely presumptuous and extremely dangerous, but it's a risk she is willing to take. The Fire Lord is definitely going to want to see this.

She approaches the guards. "I need to speak to the Fire Lord," she says simply.

"The Fire Lord is not to be disturbed," the guards say.

"It is a matter of National security," she says. "I would not be here if it was not of utmost importance."

"The Fire Lord is not to be disturbed," the guards repeat, a little more forcefully.

Quinn sighs. "Very well," she says, "hold this for me."

She hands the scrolls to one confused guard, who takes them reflexively. Then, she promptly turns to the other, her hands striking out like lightning, slamming into nerve clusters in his neck and shoulders, nervebending him into unconsciousness almost instantly.

"G—hey!" the first guard says, tossing aside the letters.

The letters make all the difference. In the slight delay it takes him to toss them away, Quinn steps inside his defenses, batting aside a flaming punch and countering with a single well-placed nerve strike, knocking him out as well.

With that taken care of, she casually picks up the scrolls and dusts them off, before knocking on Sue's door. "Fire Lord Sylvester!" she says. "I have urgent news."

She hears a crash, an explosion, a bit of rustling, another explosion, and several more crashes before the door suddenly flies open. Sue stands before her in a bathrobe made of genuine skinned firetiger, her hair in a cap made from a hollowed-out pufferfrog, her face covered in green goop, with one cucumber still over her left eye. Her right eye stares death and dismemberment at Quinn.

"You have exactly five seconds to explain yourself before I sentence you to torments that will make you scream in such a way that cacophonaries from miles around will migrate to this area, mistaking your shrieks of pain for the sexiest mating call they have ever heard in their little birdy lives—"

Quinn thrusts the letter into Sue's face, giving her time to read it. She's already memorized its contents herself.

To the Fire Lord,
I have what you seek, but I know its value. Your reward is not enough. Send a messenger to the city of Mu Bai tomorrow night. They must come alone, in a white cloak with a red circle on the hood. They will not find me—I will find them, and give them my demands.

When all I ask for is mine, the one you seek shall be yours. Not a moment sooner.
If your messenger does not appear, there will be more bodies. As many as it takes to get your attention.
I'll be waiting.
~The Four-Tailed Fox
"What in the name of Agni's syphilitic discharge is this?" Sue asks.

Quinn smiles at her.

"This is our ticket to victory. It seems the Prince has a traitor in his midst."

TO BE CONTINUED

Chapter End Notes

Up Next—Artie’s plan hits a snag as his grip on reality starts to slip. Puck and Santana find themselves torn as to whether or not they should trust their new companion. Meanwhile, Quinn investigates the mysterious Four-Tailed Fox. Who is he, and what is he after? (oh, like you don’t already know who it is. :P)
Reviews make my day, so feel free to leave your thoughts. ^_^
The next morning, Kurt and company await the eventual arrival of the Dragon Hawks in an old warehouse by the docks. Sebastian volunteered to act as their envoy and usher them in, leaving the rest of the group to pass the time until they arrive.

For Kurt, of course, that means firebending training. And since Blaine has two extra firebenders on hand, Kurt gets to have extra fun.

Wes throws a couple of flaming straights, which Kurt bats aside with ease. From behind him, David throws a couple of crescent kicks. Kurt barely flips out of the way, landing a little off-balance. Wes seizes the moment and attacks with a double-fisted fireball. Kurt tries to block, but the force of the blast knocks him end-over-end, landing him in a steaming pile of disgruntled ass-in-the-air Avatar.

Pineapple upside-down Blaine offers him a hand up, which he gladly takes. "Feel the heat," Blaine helpfully instructs. "You might not always see an attack coming, but you can almost always feel it. Trust your skin, not your eyes."

"That would be so much easier if my skin wasn't already overcooked," Kurt says.

"Ah, you're fine," Blaine says easily. "You're nowhere near well-done. I'll stick a fork in you when you are."

"I'd much rather you stick something else in me," Kurt says with a wink.

Blaine's throat is suddenly a picture-perfect replica of the Si Wong desert. "Ummm..." he says with a crack in his voice. "AHEM. Let's run it again!"

Blaine ducks out of the way, and Kurt gets ready for another round of roasting.

In stark contrast to the roar and crackle of the flames, things in the back rooms of the warehouse are as still and silent as the surface of an underground lake. Finn nearly bites a hole in his lip as he focuses every brain cell on the singular task in front of him. His muscles are taut, his movements smooth, his focus pure.

At least, until Mercedes abruptly barges in. "What's going on in here—"

Fortunately, Rachel comes to her rescue. The girl literally latches onto Mercedes from behind, clamping her mouth shut. "Shhh!" she says. "You'll ruin his concentration!"

Mercedes thinks about teaching Rachel a valuable lesson about putting your fingers next to someone's teeth, but she lets it slide when she sees what Finn is doing.
The boy is waterbending like his whole life is on the line. Well, metaphorically speaking—he's not practicing combat moves. But he is practicing his control, and he's doing it with an intensity she's never seen from him before. It's an exercise she's seen Kurt do—the water snakes around him, spirals through the air, squishes itself into a ball, spins out into a rope, all in time with Finn's hand movements.

When he runs through the last move, he bends the water back into his pouch and practically falls over as his muscles relax again. "Done!" Finn says. "So… how'd I do?"

Rachel adopts her most officious expression and inspects the ground around him. Finn forgets to breathe for a few moments while he awaits her verdict.

He is rewarded with a wry grin. "As dry as a bone," Rachel announces proudly. "You did it!"

"I did it?" Finn asks, expression blank. And then he's grinning so hard that Mercedes is amazed he doesn't blow his teeth out. "I DID IT!"

Rachel becomes a ragdoll in his arms as he sweeps her up into a bear hug and dances around the room.

"I DID IT! I DID IT! HOLY CRAP!" Finn says.

"Good job," Rachel chokes. "Why don't you… show Kurt?"

"Oh, great idea!" Finn says. He kisses the top of her head and deposits her on her wobbly feet, bursting out of the door and into the hall. "KURT!" he yells as runs "KURT! I NEED TO SHOW—AH! HOT! HOT!"

"Finn! Watch where you're going!"

"AH! AH! PUT IT OUT!"

"Hold still!"

Mercedes shuts the door and gives Rachel a good long side-eye.

Thus, Rachel takes it upon herself to elucidate. "Finn and I have been practicing together in secret," she says with a grin. "The stylistic similarities between air and waterbending, as well as our comparative skill levels, allow us to create a positive learning environment free of judgment."

The earthbender blinks away the shock. "Huh. Well, I'll be a badgermole's breakfast. It looks like it worked—for him, anyway."

"I quickly deduced that most of Finn's bending obstacles were mental, not physical in nature," Rachel says. "He sorely lacks confidence. Fortunately, confidence is something I have in great abundance, so I have opted to share. I believe my results speak for themselves."

"Mmmm-hmmm," Mercedes says. "So, how's your bending?"

Rachel's smile tightens just a touch. "Well…"

She gets into position, whirls up a ball of wind, and…

A second or so later, Mercedes looks like she just stuck her head over her geyser. She currently sports the world's wildest up-do, and suddenly, it becomes very clear why most airbenders are
"I am so sorry!" Rachel says. "I assure you, I was not aiming at you, or even your direction, I have no idea—"

"Don't worry about it sweetie," Mercedes sighs, lamely trying to pat her hair down and wondering if she should just give up and go get a hat. She looks like human turnip, for earth's sake. "At least it didn't explode this time. That's… better."

"But it still isn't good enough," Rachel sighs. "I just don't understand what I'm doing wrong."

"Why don't you just ask Kurt?" Mercedes suggests. "He'll be happy to help you. There's nothing wrong with needing a little help now and then."

"I do not need his help," Rachel insists.

"You need something," Mercedes counter-insists. "Because this? This ain't gonna fly. Well, it might fly, but only when you don't want it to, and in the wrong direction."

"I appreciate your concern," Rachel says, pumping herself up with pure pomposity. "But I prefer to progress at my own pace. My growth as a bender should mimic my growth as an artist—it must be organic to my process, and untainted by outside sources."

"So you'll let Finn help you but not Kurt?" Mercedes asks.

"Well," Rachel says. "Finn is very different from Kurt. He's…"

"Incompetent?" Mercedes asks.

"I was going to say 'less refined,' but I suppose that fits," Rachel says sheepishly.

Mercedes sighs. "Just ask him, girl. Trust me—it's less dangerous for everyone involved." She licks her hands and tries one more time to smooth down her horror-hair. "How do I look?"

"As flawless as ever," Rachel assures her. "Not a lock out of place."

Mercedes smiles. "Come on, girl. Let's see what those knuckleheads are up to."

They happily join hands and march out of the room together.

"Holy shit, Mercedes! What happened to your hair?"

"Rachel!"

"Sorry!"

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A little later…

Wes throws two punches at once, sending a flaming X at Kurt's midsection. He counters with a right hook, slicing right through it. David sends a firewave rolling at his feet, but Kurt flips over it, landing on his hands and kicking a fireball at David. Wes tries to fire-whip him, but Kurt merely flips back onto his feet and lets loose with a two-handed stream. The blast pins Wes down and forces him to focus all his energy on blocking it—unfortunately, it also takes all of Kurt's concentration to keep it going, leaving him wide open.
Or so David thinks.

The firebender summons up a flame between his hands, takes a second to build up its energy, and hurls it at the Avatar’s rear. With one hand still busy cooking Wes's goose, Kurt frees one-arm and whips it towards the fireball, taking control of it. With a single swift snap, he curves the fireball around him and sends it screaming back towards his owner without even looking. David is floored by the unexpected counter—in a figurative and literal sense.

With that taken care of, Kurt redoubles his efforts on Wes, who finally gives out under the continuous blast and falls.

Kurt breaks the attack, and the room bursts into applause.

"Woo!" Finn says. "Kick ass, dude!"

"Get 'em, baby!" Mercedes says.

"Bravo!" Rachel says. "Encore, encore!"

Kurt bows to his adoring public and helps his slightly smoky sparring partners back to their feet.

"Well done, Avatar!" Wes says with a bright smile. "An aggressive strategy—you're really starting to think like a firebender."

"What was that weird move you just did?" David asks. "That little arm whip? I've never seen anybody do that before. It looked weird… almost like…—"

"Like waterbending," Blaine says as he approaches, his brows scrunch ed in adorable concentration. "That looked more like waterbending than firebending, and yet…"

"And yet it worked!" Kurt says smugly. "See? I told you before—the bending arts are closer to each other than you might think."

Blaine's scrunchy concentration face becomes even scrunchier. Kurt is just starting to worry that he is offended, when he suddenly bursts into an eager smile. "Can you teach me that move?"

Kurt is about to answer, when the moment is abruptly shattered by a skyward screech. Diving in through an open window, Pavarotti swoops down and lands happily on Blaine’s shoulder, receiving a chin scratch and a little snack for his trouble.

"Hey there, buddy!" Blaine smiles.

"If the dragon hawk is here," Kurt says. "That means…"

The door at the far end of the warehouse flies open.

"The Dragon Hawks have arrived!" Thad says, leading the procession through the door. Behind him, the Hawks and Sebastian are happily chattering away, and Kurt has to physically suppress a growl. Of course Sebastian has already charmed his way into the Dragon Hawks good graces. They probably all got friendship bracelets and matching BFF tattoos on their unmentionables to boot.

Kurt wipes the scowl off of his face, however, when he sees Blaine literally bouncing on his heels with excitement. As the Hawks march towards them, Blaine lasts approximately three seconds before he rockets forward to greet them.

"Guys!" he shouts, practically jumping in the middle of them.
"!", comes the jumbled trainwreck of simultaneous greetings, who all promptly break rank to give their adored Prince a group hug. Kurt is loath to admit it, but it's kind of adorable—they look like a pile of puppies climbing all over each other. The fact that Sebastian is excluded and Thad is sputtering at the outskirts only adds to the cute.

The clusterfuck of firebenders is able to exchange a set of "I/we was/were so worried about you!" and mutual assurances of fine-hood before Wes abruptly charges in and brings the Hammer of Order down on their friendship orgy.

A minute or two later, and everyone is properly seated and positioned for another Official Meeting of the Most Officious Order of Dalton Dragon Hawks. Wes, David, and Thad sit at the head of the room on the tallest boxes, presiding over the various scattered Dragon Hawks and other lesser mortals down below. Blaine stands beside them, of course.

"First and foremost," Wes says, "it is an immense relief to see you all here, alive and in one piece."

"Yes, the Dragon Hawks were quite worried about their Prince," Thad says. "It's good to see His Majesty in person again. I suppose we have Mr. Smythe to thank for that."

"Well, I can't take all the credit," Sebastian shrugs. "Only most of it."

"Oh, don't be so modest!" Thad says. "I say we extend an official thank-you to Mr. Smythe for his service to the Fire Nation in saving Blaine's life. All in favor?"

"Aye!" the Dragon Hawks shout.

"Motion carried!" Thad says. "A round of applause for Sebastian Smythe, Savior of the Day!"

The Hawks clap, Sebastian bows, and Kurt's brain vomits all over itself and explodes. Where was his thank-you?

"Now," Wes says. "On to business. Do the Hawks have any new intelligence to report?"

"The False Fire Lord herself will be arriving today," Thad says. "She is to give a speech to the gathered troops tomorrow morning in the courtyard of the Navy Headquarters. That's all we've been able to learn, I'm afraid."

"Hmmm," Wes says. "She will be right here in the city."

David nods. "This will be our first real opportunity to strike at her. Any suggestions on taking her out?"

Blaine pales.

"Bombs, perhaps?" David says thoughtfully. "Or we could sneak in and poison her food! Oh, wait, no, she probably has a food taster. Maybe just a good old fashioned knife to the back?"

"Information!" Blaine blurs.

"How are we supposed to kill her with information?" Thad asks.

"What I meant was," Blaine explains, "we should get more information on the situation. You know, in general. Then we can… think about… a course of action," he finishes, clearing his throat.

"Good thinking, Blaine," Wes says. "Which is an excellent segue into the reason we're all here—"
Sebastian raises his hand. "Yeah, I've been meaning to ask; why are we here?"

Wes, David, and Thad share ponderous looks of puzzlement as they think about the question.

_Finn_, of all people, beats them to the answer. "We're looking for my buddy Sam so he can use his super Sun Warrior language skills to read an ancient tablet that we stole from some evil dude that Sue was buds with that will clue us in as to her super secret evil master plan."

"…ah," Sebastian says.

"Well put, Water Tribe," David says, with a golf clap of honest appreciation. "With that in mind, we respectfully cede the floor to Avatar Kurt, so that he may explain to us his plan for finding Mr. Evans. Avatar?"

Kurt hops up on top of the big box and clears his throat. "Before we split up, Mr… long-haired Dragon Hawk—"


"Luke," Kurt corrects smoothly, "helped us out by drawing a poster of Sam. Each of you will have one of these posters. The plan is to tackle the city district-by-district. We move in, fan out, show the posters and ask everyone if they've seen our fish-lipped friend. Then we meet and share our findings before moving onto the next district. That way, we don't get too far from one another and we can investigate leads together. After we've done that, we'll move onto the next district, and so on, until we find Sam. Any questions?"

Sebastian raises his hand, of course. "What will Blaine be doing during all of this?"

Kurt tilts his head and smiles like a rat-viper getting ready to tear his throat out. "Blaine will be with me, of course. We happen to make an excellent team. Is that a problem?"

"Well, no," Sebastian says. "I mean, assuming you want him to end up on the bottom of the biggest, sweatiest dogpile in Fire Nation history."

Kurt is pretty sure his teeth are cracking from the force of his smile. Maybe he can stab Sebastian with the shards. "Whatever do you mean?" he asks.

"Blaine's face is all over the city, we all know that," Sebastian says. "A disguise was enough to fool the common folk, but today, we've got soldiers everywhere. Soldiers who might remember Blaine, who might even hold a personal grudge against him for getting away."

Kurt flounders for a counter, but he can't find one. "…that is… a good point, I suppose," Kurt says. He turns to look at Blaine, who—damn him!—is already sporting his kicked puppy eyes. "Given the circumstances… I think it might be best for you to sit this one out. I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't be sorry," Blaine says, puffing his chest out to make himself look less _crushed_. "I've spent most of my life cooped up behind walls for my own safety. What's another day going to hurt?"

Kurt's heart crumples up into a little ball of sad, and he just can't take it. "…you know what? I'll stay with you."

"Out of the question!" Thad says, pointing at Kurt. "There is absolutely no way I will stand for you having cuddle-time with your… partner while the rest of us bust our hindquarters scraping the city for your little friend. You can't just order us around to do the work that you aren't willing to do!"
A few snickers bubble up from the Hawks, but Thad silences them with a glare.

"Well, we can't leave him by himself!" Kurt says. "My face is on posters too, you know!"

"Oh, you're old news," Sebastian says. "Nobody cares about you anymore. I'll stay with him; those soldiers might recognize me too, and that's a conversation I'd rather not have."

"Good thinking, Sebastian!" Wes says.

Kurt's eyes bulge out, as if trying to escape from his head so they can strangle Sebastian with their optic nerves. *No fucking way.* "One guard isn't enough!" he says quickly. "Blaine was appointed two body guards by the Fire Lord, wasn't he? Someone else should stay. Maybe—"

"Wes," Blaine interjects. "I want Wes to stay with me. I've… been meaning to talk to him."

Kurt is a bit surprised by this. Apparently, so is Wes, though Wes recovers quickly. "Very well then," he says with a smile. "I am at your disposal, Prince Blaine." He turns to the room at large. "So, Mr. Smythe and I will stay behind with Blaine while the rest of you are out searching. Any questions or objections?"

The room is silent.

"Very well," Wes says. "Meeting adjourned!"

Kurt turns to his miserable boyfriend. "We'll be back before you know it, I promise" he says.

Blaine gives him a brave smile. "Don't worry about me," he says. "I was kind of looking forward to catching up with the Hawks, but it's not like they're going anywhere, right? I can wait."

All Kurt can give him is a peck on the cheek for comfort.

He decides to leave Wes with a few parting words. As the group shuffles towards the exit, Kurt waits until Sebastian is distracted, then slides over to the head Hawk with vital instructions. *Watch him!" Kurt says, pointing to the slimy snake.

"Watch who?" Wes says, following the trajectory of Kurt's finger to… where Blaine is currently standing. Wait, *what?* Where did Sebastian go? "Oh," Wes says, with a patient smile. "You needn't worry, Avatar. I've spent over half my life looking out for Blaine. I'd like to think I've gotten fairly good at it."

"That's… I wasn't… I meant…" Kurt sputters.

"AVATAR!" Thad shouts. "Come on! We're wasting daylight!"

Kurt continues to do horrible things to his teeth as he stomps towards the exit.

As the group walks away from the warehouse, Kurt feels a set of eyes on his back, and turns to find Sebastian watching him from an upper window.

Bastard *winks* at him.

Kurt wonders what the price of false teeth in the Fire Nation is. He might need a set before all is said and done.

Blaine's heart sinks as watches most of his friend set off on another adventure without him, and he
knows that he's being irrational. It makes no sense for him to be this sad about being left behind, but there's just no reasoning with his stupid, messed up emotions.

He feels this odd, aching sense of loss every time someone leaves him.

What can he say? He's a people person.

"Come now, Blaine," Wes says lightly, nudging him in the shoulder. "Surely I'm not such bad company that being left alone with me merits tears?"

Blaine laughs against his will and half-heartedly shoves him back. "Oh, of course not," he says. "You're just so interesting. What with your endless history lectures and bottomless store of useless information."

Wes looks offended. "What a horrible thing to say!" he says. "All information is useful in some way. Your tutors would be ashamed of you. Do you not remember your lessons?"

"I don't need to. That's why I've got you," Blaine says with a grin. It's a nice little moment, but it fades fast, like an ember in the wind. "Actually… that's sort of what I wanted to talk about."

"Oh?" Wes says.

"I need your… historical perspective, I guess," Blaine says. He looks up to see Sebastian staring out the window at something, and leans in to whisper. "Just out of curiosity… what kind of ruler was my father?"

He's caught so off-guard he doesn't even consider masking his shock. "Why on earth would you want to know that? Surely you knew him better than anyone."

"Not really," Blaine says. "Maybe I knew him better than you, but I didn't really know him. He was always just…" He sighs. "Look, I'm not asking about him on a personal level. I'm asking what the people thought of him. What was he like according to everyone else?"

Wes blinks at him, the shock giving way to seriousness. "Where did this come from?"

"Please, just tell me," Blaine says.

"Your father's legacy is somewhat…" Wes sighs as he looks for the right words. "It is difficult to put into the right words. Blaine, I can't just—"

"Hey," Sebastian says, dropping down beside them. "Wes, Blaine. Sorry about getting you stuck here. I didn't realize I was raining on your parade that much."

Blaine gives him a brave smile. "Oh, don't worry about it," he says, glancing over at Wes. "It's just… umm… Wes and I… we were just…"

"I was just about to go," Wes says suddenly. "I need to go… check the perimeter. We will continue our conversation later, Blaine. I promise."

He's gone before Blaine can protest, and his evasion of the question only heightens the tension roiling in his gut.

"Did I interrupt something?" Sebastian asks.

"It's fine," Blaine says. "We can talk about it later."
Sebastian smiles at him. "You are so damn polite," he laughs. "Is there anything you won't forgive?"

Blaine's face darkens like the sky ahead of a hurricane. "I don't think I'll ever forgive Sue Sylvester," he says, quiet but intense.

Sebastian sobered up, his smile dropping pretty quickly. "Hey, I was just joking. I didn't mean to make you think about that. Of course you can't forgive Sue," he says quietly. "After someone puts you through that kind of nightmare…" He looks away for a second. "…it's only human to hold a grudge."

"…are you speaking from experience?" Blaine asks.


"Well…" Blaine pauses to take a glance around the warehouse. Big stacks of old boxes, multiple levels of catwalks, big, sturdy rafters… he likes what he sees. "Something like… this."

And he's off. He scrambles up a pile of boxes, flips off and runs up a wall. Kicking off the wall, he lands on a catwalk and climbs the chains straight to the ceiling, hanging upside down from a rafter. "Ta-da!" Blaine says.

Sebastian claps for him. "I'm impressed!"

"Give it a shot!" Blaine says. "It's not as hard as it looks."

Sebastian takes a second to think, and shrugs out of his bow and quiver. "I probably won't look as cool as you," he says, "but I think I can handle the climbing part…"

He isn't lying. He takes a bit more of a direct approach than Blaine, climbing straight up a support to the upper level of the warehouse, and jumping from there to the ceiling. It isn't as showy or fast as Blaine's method, but it gets the job done. "You definitely handled the climbing part," Blaine says.

"Side effect of archery," Sebastian says. "It takes a lot of strength to draw a bow. Most people think it's in the arms, but it's not—it's actually your back and shoulder muscles that get the most work. Though I do have nice arms, if I do say so myself," he adds with a wink.

Blaine chuckles at him. "Alright, then. Let's see if you can do this!"

He flips up and kicks off the rafter, actually crawling along the ceiling for a few seconds before he catches another rafter.

Sebastian stares at him, uncharacteristically quiet.

"Wow," Blaine says. "Am I that impressive?"

"Oh, no," Sebastian says. "Well, I mean, maybe, but I was just…" He smiles. "You looked kind of like a bug for a couple of seconds."

Blaine quirks an eyebrow. "Okay?"
"I've... ummm..." He clears his throat. "I've got a... a pet bug back at home. I was just thinking about him. I hope they're taking care of him like they promised..." he trails off.

Blaine gives him a reassuring smile. "I'm sure your parents wouldn't let anything happen to him."

Sebastian's eyes narrow, almost like he's confused. He quickly snaps out of it, though. "Right. My parents, of course, yeah. Hey, show me that upside-down crawling thing one more time, will you?"

The Prince obliges him. A small part of him wants to ask more, but he's afraid he'll make Sebastian even more homesick than he already is.

And Sebastian feeling homesick just reminds Blaine that he no longer has a home to be sick for.

So Blaine scrambles along the ceiling, Sebastian laughs and challenges him to a pull-up competition, and the two of them just goof off together, not another word about home being mentioned.

Sometimes... it's nice to just forget, if only for a little while.

Out in the city, Kurt is also feeling a bit homesick, if only because the Northern Water Tribe wasn't nearly as crowded. He's got about a million or so problems, and they're all moving around at once, making it almost impossible for the inexperienced to navigate the city around them. Kurt bounds and rebounds between businessmen, laborers, cooks, cleaners, crooks, and beggars, to the point where he's starting to feel like the ball in a very twisted game of ping-pong.

"How are there this many people, like, in the entire world?" Finn asks, shouldering through the crowds as best he can without actually knocking anyone down.

"This is like trying to swim in a river," Rachel says, slinking and sliding in the narrow spaces between bodies, "only the river is made entirely of people and every direction is upstream."

The Dragon Hawks aren't faring much better.

"Cole!" shouts Trent. "Come back!"

The smaller Dragon Hawk is being carried away on an unexpectedly speedy people-current.

"Save yourselves!" Cole says, reaching a hand out in vain. "Go on without meeeppeeeeee..."

"I'll save you, little buddy!" Jeff shouts, shoving his way through the masses.

"No, Jeff! It's too dangerous!" Nick shouts. He tries to give chase, but an unexpected sleeping beggar trips him up, and he disappears beneath the sea of heads.

"Niiiiiiick!" Jeff cries to the heavens. "I'll always remember you!"

"I'm not dead!"

"I know, I'm just saying!"

David hops up on a streetlamp and whistles for Pavarotti. The feathered one's mighty screech acts like a homing beacon for the other Hawks, calling them to assemble. Nick pops up from his early grave, Jeff shoulders back into place, Trent bravely charges through the folds... even Cole makes a speedy reappearance, hopping across people's shoulders. David attempts a headcount.
"We're missing two!" David announces.

"Already?" Kurt asks. "Who?"

"Thad and Mercedes," David says. "Where on earth could they be?"

Kurt facepalms. "Honestly? You probably don't want to know. Let's just... go on without them for now. The heavens only know what they're up to..."

A short distance away, a smiling Thad happily pulls a grimacing Mercedes along behind him as he practically skips through the city. "Oh, I have such a day planned for you, my delectable debutante," he preens.

"I can... hardly wait?" Mercedes tries. "Wait, are we just gonna leave them? Didn't you just make a big speech about making others do all the work?"

"Oh, don't be silly," Thad says. "That speech was for the Avatar, not us."

"Ah," Mercedes deadpans.

"And... here we are on our first stop!" Thad says happily, leading her in front of an elegant storefront. "Wait right here!"

He disappears into the store, and emerges with a large, red box wrapped in paper that would probably cost most people a month's salary.

"For you, my dear," Thad says, bowing and thrusting the box into her arms. Not wanting to drag this out anymore than it has to be, she rips the wrapping straight off and opens the box to find...

A dead bird.

"Ewww!" Mercedes shouts as she throws the box to the ground. "What the Hills?"

"Be careful with that! It's very valuable," Thad shouts, reaching down into the box and pulling out a fairly nice-looking hat. Well, nice if you don't count the dead bird on top of it.

"Why is there a dead bird on that hat?" she asks.

"It's not dead," Thad says. "It's stuffed Sun Dove. Very rare, incredibly pricey, and very vogue at the moment, or so I'm told. I bought it because it reminds me of you," he adds, his voice slipping into breathy poetics. "For you alone make my heart take flight," he waxes, before handing her the hat. "Try it on!"

She glares at the hat, silently wishing it would take flight and leave her alone. "Thad, honey, this is very nice, but I don't think I can wear this."

"Why ever not?" Thad asks.

"Because there's a dead bird on top of it!" Mercedes says. "I don't want to go around feeling like I'm wearing some wild animal's dinner."

"It's not dead, it's stuffed," Thad insists. "And you're being ridiculous. Here, let me..."

He takes the hat from her and is about to deposit it on her head when, somehow, the hat hears her wishes and flies right out of his hands, courtesy of a hungry cat.
"Pffft!" Thad sputters at the feasting feline as it tears into his expensive gift. "You… you stop that at once! That hat is worth more than your entire species, you mangy beast!"

He makes a valiant attempt to retrieve the hat, but the cat picks it up and scampers off into the crowds. It has much more experience navigating between people's legs than Thad, judging by the barely-noticeable footprint on his face when he returns to her.

"I couldn't get the hat back," he mutters miserably, and Mercedes actually feels bad for him.

"Oh, there, there, sweetie," she says, patting him on the shoulder. "I'm sure it'll be alright. It's just one hat."

Thad perks up fairly quickly. "Of course, of course, you're right, my dear," he says proudly. "This is but the first stop on the Harwood Love Train. Our whirlwind tour of romance has only just begun! To the next stop!"

And she's being dragged off again. She sighs. Oh well. As long as I'm signed up for the whirlwind tour, I might as well see if I can't get Mr. Blowhard to blurt out some useful information…

"Thad, honey," Mercedes says. "You're just such a sweetheart. I'd love to know more about you."

"Is that so?" Thad asks. "Well, my dear, if you want to talk…"

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"I'm ready to talk," Wes says quietly. "If you are, that is."

Blaine sits up from his position on the floor, having collapsed to catch his breath after his and Sebastian's impromptu workout session. Sebastian sits up as well.

"Is this what I was interrupting?" Sebastian asks.

Blaine nods. "If you don't mind, could you—"

Sebastian holds up a hand. "Say no more. I felt like going outside anyway. I'm all sweaty and gross now. I need to air out."

He hops up and heads for the exit, casually pulling off his shirt as he goes. Blaine rolls his eyes at the blatant flirtation. Sebastian is clearly not used to being turned down. From an objective standpoint, he does have nice back and shoulder muscles, but Blaine just isn't interested. He's hoping the guy will get that through his head sooner rather than later.

He turns back to Wes, who looks uncharacteristically nervous, and starts to say something. Wes silences him. "One thing," he says. "I want to know why you're asking this."

Blaine scratches at the back of his head. "I just… heard some stuff from the Navy," he says. It's technically true, after all. "I can't help but wonder."

Wes sighs. "That makes sense, I suppose. The Navy probably did not hold your father in terribly high regard."

Blaine is gobsmacked. "What do you mean?"

Wes sighs. "Your father… you have to understand, Blaine, he was not always the man you knew. Or didn't know, or… oh, heavens, I'm never going to get this out." He takes a deep breath and starts again. "In terms of history, your father's legacy is somewhat difficult to pin down at this point. He's only been dead for… well, almost a month at this point."
"…is that it?" Blaine asks. "I… wow. It seems like longer."

Wes gives him a sad smile. "I know," he says quietly. "I've been trying to think of the right way to put this, and the best I can come up with is to divide your father's legacy into two parts. The Before, and the After."

"Before and after what?" Blaine asks.

"Your mother," Wes says quietly. "Or to be more precise, your mother's passing. It… changed him. That, you do know better than anyone."

"…yeah," Blaine says quietly.

"Before… before is a bit before I was really taught to pay attention to such things, but from what I can piece together, your father was very well-liked, possibly even beloved. He was charismatic and outgoing, a ruler of the people. He loved to make speeches. My mother once called him a 'crowdbender;' any time you put him in front of an audience, he could bend them to his will. Your gift for oratory is as much from him as it was from your mother," he says with a smile.

Blaine returns a slightly weaker smile, and nods for him to go on.

"He had a great deal of… well, ambition, I suppose you could call it. He excelled in rallying people behind him, and he seemed poised to lead the Fire Nation in a new direction. Now… not everyone agreed with this direction, of course. Some saw it as inevitable, but others—like my father—were very wary of the idea. It was largely your father's charisma that created such a strong movement towards… this direction, and… when your mother died, all that momentum just seemed to be wasted. Your father stopped. The Fire Nation, as a whole, stopped. And all the people who were invested in your father's plans were… well, they were very unhappy. He became very unpopular in certain crowds, though there was nothing they could really do about it. This, combined with the fact that he seldom appeared outside of the palace after your mother died, caused many people to dislike him. But not everyone. I am of the opinion that he was a very good ruler, a wise and noble man, who—"

"Wes," Blaine interjects. "There's something you're not telling me."

Wes swallows, and remains silent.

So Blaine presses him further. "What are you hiding? What 'direction' was my father leading us in?" he asks.

The silence seems thicker somehow just before his answer. "Expansion," Wes says quietly.

It does not sink in right away. "What, you mean like… expanding the Fire Nation?" Blaine asks.

Wes nods.

The Prince turns this over in his mind. "But… that doesn't make sense. You can't expand the Fire Nation without infringing on…"

And in one terrible moment, it clicks.

"…other Nations," he finishes. "He wanted to expand into other Nations. He wanted to… to…"

"To colonize," Wes says. "Perhaps even conquer."
Blaine's breath hitches. It doesn't fit. He can't accept it. "No," he says. "That can't be right."

Wes sighs. "I was afraid you'd react like this."

"That can't be right," Blaine insists. "My father… he always taught me that fire wasn't just a weapon. It was light, and heat, and life, and, and… we should use it responsibly, and always keep control over it, and—"

"Blaine!" Wes says, a hand on his shoulder. "Calm down, please. I think he believed all of those things when he taught them to you, I do. I think that in time, he came to see wisdom, and that's what caused him to abandon the path of war, not just your mother's death. But there was a time before you. Before her. Your father was different, he believed different things."

"I can't believe that, Wes!" Blaine says. "I can't believe that my father would think it was okay to just… walk over other Nations so the Fire Nation can have better stuff. And that the people just… went along with it…"

"The people of Flame have a natural drive, Blaine," Wes says. "We seek to strive, to struggle, to overcome and improve, to find the next new horizon. The will to power burns within all of our veins. Even yours."

"What?" Blaine balks. "That's insane. I would never…"

"You could never be contained by your father's walls," Wes says. "No matter how high or how thick he built them. The world you were given was beautiful and rich and comfortable. But it was not enough. You wanted more. No matter how high you climbed, you always wanted to go higher. Every day you challenged yourself, and when the Palace could no longer satisfy you, you sought challenge outside of it. This is who we are, Blaine. It isn't a bad thing—the ambition within us can be turned towards many ends, both good and ill. War is one such end. It wouldn't be the first time we have turned towards it."

Blaine just clenches his jaw, unable to speak.

"Whatever his reasons might have been," Wes continues, "your father abandoned the path of war, and those who stood to profit from that war were not pleased. A number of powerful people had become invested in your father's dreams of expansion. When he abandoned those dreams, they felt… betrayed."

"Keros," Blaine seethes.

Wes nods. "He was an admiral. If we had gone to war, he likely would have been at the forefront, coordinating the effort. Power, prestige, wealth… a place in history. All of those things might have been his. I suspect the fact that he was denied those was a large part of the reason for his betrayal."

Blaine rubs his eyes. "Wes… shit, Wes, I don't know what to think about all this. Have you always known this? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'd only just recently began to think on it, and even then, I didn't know whether or not you knew yourself. But most of all… I didn't think it mattered," Wes says sincerely. "Blaine, whatever his flaws, your father was a good man who loved you fiercely, even if he didn't always show it."

Blaine just laughs. "It's just… it's almost funny," he says quietly. "I just learned so much about him, and I still don't feel like I know him at all. If anything, I feel further from him than ever."

"I'm sorry," Wes says, his hand on Blaine's shoulder once again.
"I know," Blaine says. "It's not your fault... I just... I need time to—"

A loud CRASH suddenly echoes through the warehouse. Blaine and Wes are immediately on-edge, up and in firebending form at a moment's notice. "What was that?" Blaine asks.

"It sounds like it came from over here," Wes says.

The two of them dash off towards one of the side doors to the warehouse. Nothing seems amiss, until...

CRASH.

The door buckles against an enormous force. It doesn't give way, but it doesn't look far from it.

"Someone's trying to force it open!" Wes says.

"Where's Sebastian?" Blaine asks. "I thought he was guarding the perimeter!"

CRASH.

"Never mind him!" Wes says. "Run to the inn! Find somewhere safe to hide! I'll cover your exit!"

He steps into stance next to the door.

Blaine takes one look at him and smirks. "Screw that," he says, stepping into stance beside him.

"Blaine!" Wes says. "This is serious."

"I know," Blaine says. "That's why I'm here. I'm done letting other people fight my battles. We do this together, or not at all."

Wes opens his mouth to tell him off once more—

CRASH.

The door opens.

The door opens, and Kurt slams through it, throwing his arms into the air, completely out of fucks to give and not willing to look for more. "This is hopeless!" he cries.

"It's not hopeless," Finn says.

"That's the twenty-seventh false lead we've investigated!" Kurt says, "And we're not even halfway through the list."

"Surely you didn't think this would be easy," David says.

"I knew it would be difficult, but I figured we'd be dealing with a lack of leads, not a freaking City of Sams!" Kurt says.

"Perhaps it would help cut the size of future lists if we instructed the Dragon Hawks to always specify that Sam is light skinned," Rachel says helpfully.

"There's not going to be any more lists," Kurt says, massaging his face. "We've wasted hours on this and we haven't even left the first district."
"Yeah, can we stop now?" Trent asks. "I'm tired."

Several other Dragon Hawks chime in with their conditions.

"I'm hot!"

"I'm hungry!"

"I'm thirsty!"

"My feet hurt!"

"My head hurts!"

"My sunblock is wearing off!"

"I'm developing a rash!"

"Where's the nearest bathroom?"

"Okay, ENOUGH!" Kurt shouts. "Clearly, this isn't working, and we all need a break anyway. Let's just… head back to the warehouse and try to regroup. We'll come up with a new plan once we get there."

"What about Mercedes and Thad?" Finn asks.

"Screw 'em," Kurt announces sourly, before stomping off.

The Hawks-plus-Finchel somehow manage to whine *continuously* through the entire trip back to their little base-camp. Once they get there, however, the silence descends suddenly and severely.

The smashed-open door and completely silent warehouse might have something to do with that.

"It wasn't like that when we left, was it?" David asks.

"No," Kurt says. "Everyone, on your guard."

The Hawks put hands to weapons, and benders hold their elements at the ready. Kurt takes point, and leads them through the door.

Inside, the warehouse is largely undisturbed. There are only a few scorch marks near the door, meaning that whatever fight took place here, it was over fast. Kurt doesn't want to think of what might result in Blaine and Wes being overwhelmed so quickly.

Mostly because most of his ideas involve a knife in the back from the *other* person they left back here.

Kurt holds a finger to his lips to shush any potential outbursts from the Dragon Hawks, who look scared out of their minds, thought whether it's for themselves or for Blaine, he can't tell. All he knows is that he needs everyone to keep their heads for the next few minutes.

And then…

*He hears something.*

Voices.
They're heavily muffled, largely unrecognizable, but they don't sound like Blaine and Wes to Kurt. He re-iterates his shush to the others. If there are hostile people still hanging around here, it'd be best to take them by surprise.

Slowly but surely, Kurt leads them through the warehouse to the source of the voices, the back rooms. He carefully bends aside any potential noise-makers on the floor, positively certain that someone (most likely Finn) will step on them if he doesn't.

Once they reach the back rooms, Kurt tries to listen for the voices again, but it's no use. He still can't hear them clearly through the metal, or make out what they are saying. All he knows is that it still doesn't sound like Blaine and Wes. Whoever it is, they aren't welcome here.

He takes position near the door.

'Ready?' Kurt mouths.

The group nods at him.

Kurt kicks open the door, and it all happens at once.

The Avatar bursts in with a flourish of flame and a mighty yell, which causes Blaine to nearly leap out of his seat in shock, which triggers Wes going into immediate fight mode, which results in a mistaken fireball thrown very close to Finn's head, which leads Rachel to instinctively rush him and tackle him to the ground, which causes the confused Dragon Hawks to pull out their weapons and brandish them at no one in particular, which frightens Sam into diving underneath a table for cover.

The approximation of everyone's screams and shouts during the incident roughly equates to "SFKSDJGSJIVSRJGSEITN#IJREJI$$)%^)IY*#*FJGMBRJSII?RGIESPECKLEWORT."

Only when they all pause to catch their breath do they realize what just happened.

"Holy crap, Kurt!" Blaine breathes with a smile. "You nearly scared me to death."

"Me?" Kurt says, smiling as well. "I was terrified something had happened to you. Why are you hiding back here? Why did you leave the door open? And why—"

Wait just a pillow-fluffing second. Back the eff up. Something is unusual here.

Slowly and smoothly, as if confronting a frightened animal, Kurt bends down on one knee and looks under the table, only to find, staring back at him, an owlish pair of green eyes belonging to none other than…

"Sam?" Kurt barks.

Sam grins at him sheepishly. "…hi?"

"What the fuck?" David shouts. "We just spent like twenty hours looking for you!"

"It was far less than twenty," Flint says.

"That's why I said like!" David shouts.

"Dude!" Finn shouts, dashing over to drag him out from under the table and wrap him in a bear hug. "Holy crap, man! Have you been here this whole time?"

"Well, not the whole time," Sam says. "Just a little while."
"How did you find this place?" Kurt asks. "And how did you get in?"

Sam grins at him. "I had a little help…"

He gives a little whistle, and a familiar voice answers him back.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please hold your applause until the object of your adoration is in the prime position to receive them."

Through the door he rolls, propelling his chair into the exact center of the room with a single push. Once he stops, he turns himself around to get a good look at his gawkers' expressions.

With his very best shit-eating smile firmly in place, Artie Abrams greets his old friends.

"And… go."

Chapter End Notes

Up next – The earthbender of the hour informs us of how he got from there to here, and picked up his spare traveler along the way. It’s quite the tale.

In the meantime, Trollface!Artie wants you to leave a review. Don’t disappoint him! :D
A Boy Like That

Chapter Notes

I meant to mention this much earlier, but I kept forgetting, so just fyi: this story will not cover the entire adventure of everyone. To me, Solar Winds is, and always has been, the chronicles of Kurt and friends in the Fire Nation. It ends when they leave. Think of it as Episode IV in Star Wars—it's a complete story itself, but it's not the entire story. I like to leave things a little open-ended. Don't worry, though—there will be plenty of answered questions before the end. ;)

Now, onto this chapter. I know, I know, this is supposed to be DALD Part 2. Originally, the information in this chapter was supposed to be woven into that one, but it just felt too disjointed, so I cut it out and made it its own chapter. I feel both are stronger this way.

The good news is that I already have a good chunk of DALD Part 2 written, so it could be up as soon as Tuesday. Until then, enjoy this. It's primarily about Quinn, and one other character. I'm sure the title doesn't give it away at all. Aww, wait, come on! Don't go! It's not even that long! XP

WARNINGS: The warnings for this chapter involve spoilers. The complete list is available at the bottom of the chapter—scroll all the way down to see it. No triggering content should be viewable from the bottom of the scroll bar.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Elsewhere in the city, Quinn stands at the docks, waiting for someone to arrive.

After Quinn brought Sue the message, the Fire Lord saw fit to appoint her as the official liaison between the Fire Nation government and the terrorist known as the Four-Tailed Fox. Quinn is apparently now considered 'expendable,' so who better to confront a potentially dangerous psychopath?

Expendable. Not for much longer. Not if Quinn has anything to say about it.

She hates the Fox. Hates him. Hates his smug attitude, hates everything he stands for, everything he represents. Hates that she has to negotiate with a masked murderer, when every cell in her body screams for her to take him down, bring him to justice, make him pay for what he's done.

Perhaps today is the day.

This will be her third meeting with the fox.

The third time's the charm, they say.

Though she can't be sure of the ending, Quinn knows one thing; today will be different.

As Quinn scans the crowds for any signs of the masked man, she pulls her cloak closer around her head, unintentionally throwing herself back to their first meeting…
Two days ago, in the city of Mu Bai…

Quinn pulls the cloak around her as she walks through the city's streets. Mu Bai is renowned for its fortune tellers, but Quinn seeks no prophecies from any of the money-peddlers. Hopefully, they will catch the hint and leave her alone.

No such luck. A raggedy old woman sees her face beneath the hood and approaches her unbidden.

"Such warmth," the old hag says. "Such glow! The mantle of motherhood will sit well upon your brow, young miss."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Quinn balks. "I'm no one's mother."

"Not yet!" the old woman says with a cryptic grin. "But the aura of life is about you, my dear. I see young ones in your future. Perhaps you'd like to consult the seeing stones, and find out for sure?"

"No, thank you." And Quinn hurries off before she can say anything further.

Stupid old woman. Who does she think she is, walking around accusing random women of being pregnant? That is a fantastic way to get slapped. She should be thankful for Quinn's martial discipline.

The mantle of motherhood. Pfft. What garbage. She can't possibly be pregnant. She's never even had sex.

Well except that one time.

But that was one time. No one gets pregnant the first time they have sex. The very notion is ridiculous. The gods cannot possibly hate her that much.

The old bat probably just throws prophecies about at random. She'd stake her life on it.

In fact, she decides to go confirm it herself. Later on, she goes back to watch the old woman in secret.

Sure enough, she gives the same prophecy, word-for-word, to twelve other girls… along with coupons for discounted baby merchandise at a local shop.

But of course. Like all of this fortune-telling nonsense, it's nothing but a ploy, a business strategy, a way to make money off the feeble-minded and gullible. That woman gives out coupons to any pretty young thing that walks by. She's nothing but a shill. She knows nothing about Quinn.

Pregnant.

The very thought is absurd.

She muses on its absurdity long into the night. For some odd reason, it simply refuses to leave her, so she just keeps on laughing at it. It's stupid.

And yet…

As she slips on the white cloak with the red circle, stalking through the quiet night, waiting for a sign of the Fox, her mind wanders. Her body aches in odd ways. Her thoughts are strange. Her emotions are tumultuous, churning beneath her skin.

Perhaps there is something wrong with her. Perhaps she is sick. Perhaps she is stressed. Perhaps
she is suffering from exhaustion. Perhaps she ate some bad curry. Perhaps she has a tick trying to suck out her brain.

Perhaps, and perhaps, and perhaps…

The list of possibilities is long, occupying her mind for hours. There are a million reasons that she could be feeling the way she feels. Pregnancy is but one of them, a single grain of sand on the beach.

And yet, it is the thought of pregnancy that keeps stubbornly resurfacing, like a buoy pushed beneath the water.

By the time she snaps out of her reverie, it is almost morning. The sight of a strange, cloaked girl wandering around at night would normally raise a few alarms, but the night watch has received instructions from on high to ignore her presence. She is one of the very, very few people besides the guards out at this ungodly hour. The Fox should have found her by now. Unless he is as incompetent as the rest of that band, there is no reason—

An arrow embeds itself in the dirt near her feet, breaking her line of thought. A note is wrapped around the shaft. Directions. She follows them carefully, ever watchful for ambush. Her charge is murderer, terrorist, and traitor rolled all into one. He cannot—he must not be trusted.

She steps into a narrow alleyway, her eyes scanning for signs of a trap. When she is halfway through, someone calls to her.

"Well, look who decided to show up," says a voice, low and throaty. "I'm glad you came."

Quinn wheels around to find a figure blocking the entrance to the alley. He stands tall, but all other features of his form are hidden by black cloak, and a strange, white-and-red fox mask. She is ever-so-slightly thrown. She had honestly thought the crippled criminal was the bad egg. This definitely isn't him. It isn't Hudson, either—he would have fallen flat on his face or ran into a wall by now. She watches him carefully, searching for clues to his identity. "You're late," Quinn says. "It's nearly morning."

"Shit happens," the Fox says casually. "I'm here now, and I have what you want. That's all that matters."

Casual. Flippant. He's young, immature, or both. "And what is it that I want?" Quinn asks.

His eyes gleam green in the moonlight as he cocks his head back, confident. "The Prince."

Inside, she burns at the mention of him. Outside, she is as cold as ice. He definitely knows something. The only question is… how much? "The Prince is dead," Quinn says.

"Oh, really?" the Fox replies. "I hear differently. I hear a certain ambitious lady wanted a shiny new Fire Nation, but they didn't have any more of those in stock. So she decided to take one slightly used from somebody else. And the only thing keeping her from keeping it forever is the boy on the posters. The Crown Prince."

"You are mistaken," Quinn says evenly. "The boy is an assassin and a criminal. Nothing more. Turn him in and receive the reward. As a gesture of mercy, we will kindly ignore the murders you have committed."

The Fox stares at her flatly. "Alright, now it's just getting insulting. A liar knows a liar when he sees one, alright? Cut the crap. We both know what I have, so lay it on the line for me, Princess:
are we going to talk price, or should I take my business elsewhere?"

Quinn bristles at the nickname, at the condescension in his tone. She can practically hear him smirking, and wants to wipe the smile off of his smug face, whatever it looks like.

But no. Not yet, anyway. There are still too many unknowns.

"Very well," she says. "Speaking hypothetically—if you did have the Prince, what would you want for him?"

The Fox begins to step towards her. "A ship," he says.

"Planning a vacation?" Quinn asks.

"Don't try to figure me out, just pay attention," the Fox says. He counts the specifics on his fingers as he lists them. "I want a supply ship stocked with nonperishable food, clean water, and clothes."

"Why clothes?" Quinn balks.

"Not done talking yet!" the Fox says. "I want a competent captain and a skeleton crew—the bare minimum required to make the ship run. And I want absolute authority over all of them."

"Is that all?" Quinn asks. "Are you sure you don't want to throw in a private island? Perhaps a personal harem or a solid gold statue of yourself?"

"Those are my demands," the Fox says dismissively. "Take them or leave them."

His tone raises her hackles. Who does this idiot think he is, talking to her like this? "And what if I decide your demands are too much?" she asks. "You're a murderer. You killed two people in cold blood—"

"More than two," the Fox says.

"So you admit it," Quinn says. "What's to stop me from taking you in and squeezing the answers out of you myself?"

"Try it, and it'll be your corpse that carries my next message," the Fox says flatly.

"Oh, please," Quinn says. "You couldn't kill me if you tried."

"You have no idea what I'm capable of," the Fox says, his voice slipping briefly into a growl. Quinn's body tenses at the sound—it's the first time she's seen any emotion from him other than smug self-assurance.

She'd have no trouble taking him down, she's sure of it. He kills from a distance, like a coward. All she would have to do is close in on him, and his fate would be sealed…

But no. That is not what the Fire Lord ordered.

Quinn relaxes her stance.

"That's better," the Fox says, following her lead. "So, we got a deal, or not?"

"I will discuss your requests with the Fire Lord," Quinn says flatly. "I can make no promises."

"Yeah, well, tell her not to take too long," the Fox says. "This is a limited time deal. I'm not a fan of
waiting. Tomorrow night, I'll be in the city of Zedong, market district. I expect to find you there, and I expect an answer."

And just like that, he turns to leave without another word. Completely dismissive, like he doesn't even care that he's showing his back to her.

She was fairly sure of it before then, but that moment leaves no doubt in her mind: Quinn hates this man—no, this boy with every fiber of her being. She hates his stupid smug voice and condescending tone, hates the way he casually brushes off everything up to and including murder like it doesn't matter. She hates everything he represents, everything he stands for. Most of all, she hates that he has put her in this position—once the leader of the hunt, now a mere liaison between predator and prey.

Screw it. They're doing this her way. The last person who was foolish enough to show his back to her got off light compared to what she's about to pull.

She starts towards him—

And a steel stiletto embeds itself in the dirt next to her foot. The Fox's hand is outstretched and still—she didn't see him draw the blade, let alone throw it.

"Bad idea," the Fox says simply. "You stay here. Don't try to follow me. My arrow will find you long before you find me, I guarantee it."

He leaves without another word, long legs carrying him swiftly through the silent streets.

Quinn stares down at the stiletto, gleaming in the moonlight, taunting her. A single swift kick sends it clanging out into the street. The sound catches the attention of a guard, who comes over to investigate. She catches him before he can spit out a single word, pointing to the Fox as he vanishes around a corner.

"Follow him," she orders. "Stay hidden, and report back to me when you find his camp. Understood?"

Despite her lack of official authority, Quinn still carries the air of a commanding officer. The guard does as he is told.

Quinn returns to her room to write to the Fire Lord and wait for word from her scout.

Once the letter has been given to the Fire Lord's personal messenger hawk and sent off, Quinn nearly swoons with exhaustion, barely making it to the bed before collapsing.

She once stayed awake for three days straight as part of her Chi-Ryu training.

Now it seems she can barely manage one night.

*What is wrong with me?*

There are none to answer her question. Her Chi-Ryu soldiers have been denied to her. Santana and Puck are lost to her. Not that she particularly liked either of them, but they were company, at least. She thinks of them as she drifts off. Her girls, so loyal, so capable. The assassins, so idiotic, so incompetent, yet somehow still endearing.

As her mind wanders in the calm before sleep, her thoughts take an unexpected turn towards another.
A boy. Light skin, golden hair, full lips ever-ready for a smile, even after what she did to him. Green eyes so full of hope, determination, loyalty.

That is what made her spare him. His loyalty.

She looked into Sam's eyes, saw his fierce devotion to his friends, and faltered. How could she execute him for holding to the greatest thing she prided in herself?

Ironic that his loyalty caused her to briefly lose her own. Perhaps this is some kind of karmic punishment for that lapse in judgment.

Regardless, she has no regrets. Her loyalties lie where they always have, and where they always will.

People without loyalty are lower than dogs in her eyes. Even dogs are loyal to their masters. A boy like that—a boy who kills and lies, hidden behind a mask—cannot be trusted.

As she slowly drifts off, her mind ping-pongs between them. Two people who could not be more different… two sets of green eyes, one as warm and lively as a forest, the other cold and hard as chiseled jade…

It is the first time in a long time that she has fallen asleep thinking of someone other than the Prince.

When she next awakens, it is mid-day, and the town is abuzz with the news.

A guard was found dead outside of the city this morning. Killed by a single arrow through the eye socket.

Quinn's heart clenches for a moment, but she squelches the rush of emotion.

She will carry no guilt for his death.

It was not her arrow that pierced him…

___

*Back in the present…*

A *thud* breaks her line of thought as an arrow embeds itself in the wooden dock at her feet. A note is wrapped around the shaft. This one simply says *Which one is mine?*

Quinn burns the note to ashes and scatters them with a smile. She's only too happy to give him his just reward.

The docks are busy this time of day, but Quinn has no trouble navigating the crowds. She has an air about her—every inch of her musculature is a warning of what happens to those who stand in her way. The message is loud and clear, and most of the time, it is heeded.

She finds the boat easily, and waits at the boarding ramp for her charge to show up. She'll need something from him before she lets him board.

Before she lets him walk to his doom…

___

*Last night*…
The market is eerily silent in the darkness. Not a soul is in sight. The Fire Nation rises and falls with the sun. There are a few odd souls who prefer darkness to light, but they are the minority. Even the nonbenders seem attached wholly to the day. During the day, the Fire Nation sizzles and burns with heat and life. At night, all belongs to silence and shadow.

Again, Quinn wanders until the Fox finds her. Again, she is guided into an alleyway.

"Freeze," the voice says.

Again, he treats her like someone he can boss around. She stops.

"Turn around nice and slow."

Bubbling with resentment, she complies, again catching the cloaked and masked man at the entrance to the alleyway. Above him, on the rooftops on either side, are two more cloaked figures, both aiming arrows at her.

"Who are your friends?" Quinn asks.

"None of your business," the Fox says. "You can call them 'Life Insurance' and 'Health Insurance,' respectively. Now, do you have my answer?"

Quinn cocks her head back. "That depends," she says simply. "Do you have proof?"

"Of what?" the Fox asks.

"Your ability to deliver," Quinn says. "That you actually know the Prince, that you aren't some charlatan attempting to con us."

The Fox tilts his head at her. "I thought my insider knowledge was proof enough."

Quinn scoffs. "Hardly. The Fire Lord demands evidence that you can give us the Prince. And not just hearsay—tangible, physical proof that you are connected with him. The Fire Nation is not in the habit of negotiating with terrorists. We want to make sure you will hold up your end of the bargain before we start putting together ours."

The Fox stares at her in silence for a few moments. "Fine," he grunts. "But I want the same from you. I want to see my ship. I want to walk its halls, inspect its cargo, make sure it's up to snuff. Until I do, you won't see hide nor gel-slathered hair of the Fire Nation's Most Wanted. Got it?"

Again, he insists on gaining control of the situation. Whoever he is, it's clear he is used to being in a position of power. He does not take well to the demands of others.

That makes two of them.

"Again," Quinn says. "I will discuss it with the Fire Lord."

"Yeah, yeah," the Fox says. "Tomorrow. Be by the docks at noon."

"Not at night?" Quinn asks. "Feeling bold, are we?"

"Just be there," the Fox says. "You bring your proof, and I'll bring mine."

"You really think the Fire Lord can put together your demands in a day?" Quinn asks.

"She's the Fire Lord," the Fox says, his voice gaining a slight edge. "She can do whatever the fuck
she wants."

And again, he turns his back on her. She's sick of him treating her like something he can just brush aside. "Stop," Quinn orders.

"We're done here," the Fox says. "Don't follow me. And don't send anyone else, either. We wouldn't want a repeat of last time."

She takes a step forward before she remembers the archers on the roof and freezes. Damn him. She can't let him have the last word. She's sick of him just getting to walk away like this. So she calls out with the one other demand she can think of.

"I want him alive!"

The Fox stops.

She wasn't expecting him to listen to her, but she's glad he did. "We have… unfinished business to settle. The Prince must be delivered to me alive. Are we clear?"

The Fox considers this for a moment. "Whatever you say, Princess." And just like that, he's off again.

"Wait!" Quinn says. "Aren't you going to call off your covering fire?"

No response.

The archers keep their bows steady on her. Quinn glares up at them. They probably intend to keep her there until morning to avoid another incident like last time.

The rage inside of her reaches the boiling point. Her hands snap heavenward, throwing out an expanding dome of fire that fills the entire alleyway above her, blooming brightly into the night. As the flames subside, she sees the cloaks burning, the orange light finally enabling her to see who sits inside of them.

No one.

The cloaks are empty. Draped over chimneys and propped up with sticks to give them shape. The bastard tricked her.

She dashes out into the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Even the tiniest hint of direction would be enough.

She finds nothing. He is gone.

She scrambles up to the rooftops and incinerates what is left of the cloaks.

It isn't enough to quench her fury.

Another night, another note.

Her head is killing her. There's an odd, slightly nauseous feeling in her gut.

She's stabbed straight through the paper three times now. At this rate, she's going to take two days to write this damn letter. Why can't she focus? Why can't she quell this frustration? Why can't she just grab that stupid fox-masked traitor and nervebend him until he sings the Prince's whereabouts
in his finest falsetto?

What is wrong with her?

Perhaps…

No. That is ridiculous.

Except…

She can't even remember when her last period was. Her mind draws a complete blank on the information. It… no… that can't be right.

She can't be pregnant.

A pregnancy would be catastrophic. It would negatively impact her combat performance and possibly compromise her ability to lead the Chi-Ryus, at least in the eyes of Sue Sylvester. It would destroy her reputation for discipline and absolute, uncompromising focus on the task at hand.

And her parents…

What would her parents think?

Well, there's no question there.

They would not be happy.

They might even…

No. She doesn't want to think about that. Truthfully, she doesn't want to think of anything at the moment.

She focuses anew on the letter, writing down only what is absolutely necessary to communicate the Four-Tailed Fuckwit's inane demands, and sends it off by practically throwing the hawk out the window.

As she drifts off, she wills her brain to shut up, to stop walking along the path it is taking.

It does not listen.

Her parents would be furious. Well, not exactly. Her father would be furious. Her mother would echo her father in every way, acting as an empty vessel to be filled by his will, as she always has. They wouldn't want a harlot for a daughter. It wouldn't be the sex or even the baby that infuriated them the most, though.

No, it would be the father. That she defiled herself with someone from the Earth Kingdom would be unforgivable in their eyes.

And the hilarious thing is… she doesn't love him. She doesn't even like him. In fact, at the moment, for making her even think about this, she more or less hates Noah Puckerman.

And yet… there were times—not too many, but just enough to make her wonder—when there seemed to be more to him that just the stupid boorish sex-shark from the Land of Neverending Dirt.

It is useless to think about. She isn't pregnant. But if she were…
Puck is not for her. Of that, she is certain.

But maybe… just maybe… could he find it in himself to be for her child?

She can only wonder…

_____________________________________________________________

*Back in the present…*

"Careful, Princess," says an infuriatingly familiar voice. "Get too deep in a daydream, and someone might sneak up on you."

The Fox stands in front of her, smug as ever. He is dressed the same—red and white mask, black cloak—yet people seem to pay him no mind. Are the sights in this city so strange that not even a masked man in a cloak is enough to draw attention?

Whatever. Quinn has had it up to here with this bastard. "Did you bring what the Fire Lord asked for?"

"Wow. No foreplay whatsoever, just straight to business?" the Fox says lightly, and Quinn envisions herself ripping that stupid mask off of his face, bending his nerves into knots and staring into his eyes as he realizes how utterly screwed he is.

It will be wonderful.

All she has to do is wait. There is an old saying about playing with fire. The Four-Tailed Fox is about to discover its meaning firsthand.

"Do you have it, or not?" Quinn presses.

"How's this?" asks the Fox. He reaches inside of his cloak, and pulls out a sword, gripping it by the blade to offer it hilt-first. She takes it and holds it up to get a better look, and recognizes it almost immediately.

The Sun Warrior sword. The one she's seen hanging from the Prince's belt. The one he stole from Admiral Keros. There is absolutely no mistaking it—even if the Fox somehow managed to find another Sun Warrior blade, how would he have known to offer it as proof unless he has seen the Prince carrying one with his own eyes?

"Well?" the Fox says.

Quinn smiles at him. "Well, indeed," she replies. "This will suffice."

"I thought so," the Fox says. "You know the deal. I've shown you mine, now you show me yours."

"Follow me," Quinn says, walking up the boarding ramp.

They step onto the ship, and the Fox scans the deck, cool green eyes raking over every detail. "Not bad," he says. "But how do I know it's mine?"

Quinn pulls out a scroll and unfurls it for him. "This is an official order, sealed by the Fire Lord herself. It transfers all authority of the ship to you, giving you free reign over Captain and crew until you no longer need them. It also clears you to pass through the blockade."

The Fox snatches the note and reads it carefully. "Alright," he says, somewhat satisfied. "All that's left now is the cargo. I want to inspect it."
"Of course," Quinn says. "Follow me."

She leads him below decks, showing him the various rooms of the ship, most of them stocked with supplies, just as he ordered. The crew is minimal—they only encounter a few of them milling about, performing routine maintenance and inspections. The Fox barely even notices them.

So of course, the fact that all of them are girls doesn't register with him in the slightest. The triumphant smirk inside of her gets harder to contain with every room they pass, getting deeper and deeper into the ship, making escape less possible with every inch they descend.

"And here we are at the bottom of the boat," Quinn says at last, leading him to the lowest level with the least important cargo. "As you can see, the ship is stocked to your exact specifications. Sue Sylvester is happy to reward those who actually prove useful, as you have."

The Fox steps further into the room, carefully inspecting the boxes for signs of sabotage.

"Of course..." Quinn says as her girls move into position behind her. "She also believes 'rewards' should be appropriate to the ones who receive them."

The Fox catches her tone and stills, turning slowly. He finds Quinn standing in the room's only exit, flanked on either side by Chi-Ryus, most of whom already have small flames at the ready. The Fox glares at her. It's a considerable effort, but even through the mask, she can see the hint of fear in his eyes.

"And the only reward that fits a traitor... is betrayal," Quinn says, smile bright and merciless as the desert sun.

The Fox shakes his head. "Can't say I'm surprised," he says, semi-casual. "But I am disappointed. We were so close. Why did you have to ruin it by being stupid?"

"Stupid?" Quinn says, rolling her eyes. "You're the one who came alone into the deepest part of an enclosed space, populated entirely by people who work for the Fire Lord. You couldn't have made it easier to trap you if you tried."

Quinn snaps her fingers, and the Chi-Ryus move to surround him, keeping him squarely in their sights the entire time.

"I think it's time we re-negotiate our terms," Quinn says. "Here's the new deal—you tell us where the Prince is, and in exchange, we'll be gentle when we take you in. We'll even throw you in one of the nicer prisons so you can rot in peace."

"And if I don't?" the Fox asks.

"If you won't give us what we want..." Quinn steps into stance. "We'll just have to take it from you. Piece by piece."

The Fox is still and silent for several seconds. There is no sound but the crackle of the flames, the lapping of the waves against the boat's hull.

Something gleams in the darkness. Quinn looks down to see that the Fox now has a large knife in his hand. The Chi-Ryus take a step back when they see it—not one of them saw him draw it.

"Shitty deal," the Fox says. "I'll pass."

"Don't be stupid," Quinn scoffs. "Do you really think you can take on an entire squad of elite
firebenders with your little knife?"
The firelight catches the Fox's eyes as he stares at her. They crinkle at the corners, almost like…
He's smiling.
"Knife's not for you, Princess."
And then, everything changes.
Before she can process that statement, before she can move or even think, the Fox's knife is at someone's throat.

*His own.*
The Chi-Ryus' stances become confused. They aren't sure how to react to this. To be honest, neither is Quinn.

She gapes at him. "What are you doing?"
"Isn't it obvious?" the Fox says. "I'm about to ruin your day."
"How?" Quinn asks. "By holding yourself hostage? Do you really think I care about your life?"
"I *know* you do," the Fox says. "It's written all over your face. You're about two steps away from panic, aren't you?" He scratches at his chin like he's mock-shaving.
"Stop that, you idiot!" Quinn says.
"What? Am I making you uncomfortable?" the Fox asks. "Feeling a little nervous all of a sudden?"
Quinn decides to try a different tactic. "Don't be stupid. You don't have to die! We have no intention of killing you!"
"Ding, ding, ding!" the Fox says. "And there we have the answer! You need me alive. Can't get any answers from me if I'm dead, can you?" He presses the blade lightly into his neck. She can see the little shadows where the serrated edge pushes against his skin.

Quinn is speechless. What is going through this boy's head?

She tries another strategy. "You're bluffing," she says. "You can't do it."
"I told you before…" the Fox says, his voice low. "*You have no idea what I'm capable of.*"

His grip tightens around the blade, and he pulls. A trickle of red appears on the blade, and Quinn lurches forward without meaning to.

He stops. The cut is shallow, the skin only just broken. "Gee, Princess. With that kind of reaction, I'd almost think you *cared* about little old me."

Quinn's heart is pounding. She had prepared for a hundred different ways this confrontation could have gone, but she never expected this one. "What is *wrong* with you? Have you lost your mind?" she says.

He *laughs* at her. "I've lost a *lot* of things," the Fox says, his voice gaining a slight edge. "Way too many to list, so let's save time by going over the things I still *have*—I have a knife, the clothes on
my back, a Prince, and... what else? Oh, yeah. Nothing. To. Lose!"

He pulls the knife again. The cut deepens—more blood trickles over the blade, down his neck, seeping into the collar of his shirt.

"Stop that!" Quinn shouts.

"You started it," the Fox says idly. "I'm just finishing it. Since you reneged on our deal, I have nothing to look forward to except a lifetime in prison. No thanks." He chuckles. "I'd rather savor the stupid look on your face as I bleed out all over your shiny combat boots."

"You'd kill yourself just to spite me?" Quinn asks, incredulous.

"My only regret is that I won't be there to see you explain to your boss why you're bringing her a dead fox instead of a dead royal," the Fox says. "That will be a conversation for the ages..."

He pulls the blade deeper still. The flow of blood increases, and Quinn feels the cold sweat of panic beginning to build on her neck.

"Stop it!" Quinn barks.

"Wonder where my jugular is?" the Fox says, still casual-as-you-please.

"You don't have to do this!" Quinn says.

"Ah, well. I'm sure we'll know when I hit it," the Fox continues, growing slightly louder.

"You're insane!" Quinn shouts.

"Hope one of you guys brought a mop..." the Fox says, his voice reaching a fever pitch.

He takes a deep breath, his fingers clench around the blade, and—

"ENOUGH!" Quinn says. "Chi-Ryus, stand down and back away!"

"What?" the Chi-Ryus bark at her.

"Stand down and step away! That is an order!" Quinn barks.

A single tense moment that feels like a lifetime passes before the Chi-Ryus obey her command. The girls step out of stance and move away from the fox, coming to stand beside her.

The tension in the room slowly dissipates, through it never leaves entirely. The Fox hisses slightly as he removes the knife from his neck, causing a bit more blood to spill. He isn't in danger of bleeding out, but the amount of red is still startling.

"That's better," the Fox says, his voice a bit rough as he wipes the blood off of his knife. "Thank you for being reasonable."

"Reasonable?" Quinn says. "You nearly killed yourself just to piss me off, and you want to talk to me about reasonable? You... you can't..."

"You can't beat me, Princess," the Fox says simply. "You have something to lose. I don't. You'll limit what you'll do to win. I won't. Life means nothing to me—yours, your cronies', the Prince's... even mine. I'll sacrifice whoever I have to. I am here to accomplish one thing, and I will do whatever it takes." His voice again slips briefly into a growl before he catches and calms himself.
"Now, I have tried to set this up this little deal so we can both benefit from it. Despite your sudden detour down Bitch Lane, I'm still willing to deliver on my end of the bargain. Are you?"

Quinn glares at him, stunned, infuriated, mortified and confused all at once. His eyes are unreadable through the mask. She has no idea what to make of him. She is certain of only one thing…

She hates him more than ever now.

Because he's won, and he knows it.

"Fine," she says flatly. "I will take the Prince into custody myself. When and where can I expect him?"

"The alley where we last met," the Fox says simply. "I can bring him to you tonight."

"Very well," she says. "You may go."

"Pleasure doing business with you," the Fox says as he brushes past her, walking and talking like he isn't bleeding from his neck at all. He stops at the end of the hallway. "Oh, and… well, do I really need to remind you?"

"Don't follow him," Quinn orders the Chi-Ryus, her voice monotone.

"That's what I like to hear," the Fox says. "See you tonight."

And he is gone.

"You're really just going to… to let him go?" a Chi-Ryu asks her.

"Do I have a choice?" Quinn asks rhetorically, turning to walk away from them. She doesn't ask the follow-up question, the one she really wants the answer to.

Have I ever?

Quinn doesn't see the Fox as he leaves the ship.

She doesn't see his pace quicken as he reaches the deck. She doesn't see the sheen of sweat forming on his forehead, doesn't hear how fast his heart is pounding, how quick and shallow his breathing has become. She doesn't see him nearly trip over his own feet as he steps off the ramp, doesn't see his hands trembling as he rips off his mask and tosses it into the ocean.

She doesn't see him clutching at his neck as he tries to shove through the crowds and succeeds in only getting bounced around. She doesn't see him ignoring the few people who actually see enough to ask about him. Whoa, what happened to you? Hey, kid! Are you alright? No answer. She doesn't see him giving up on the crowds, slip underneath the docks and collapse against a concrete wall, trying to catch his breath.

She doesn't see any of this.

But Charlie does.

Now, you may be wondering; who is Charlie?
Well, Charlie is the King of the Underdocks. He sees all and knows all that transpires beneath them.

Well, he sees what happens near him, anyway. Technically, he only hears about the rest, but that's beside the point.

When he sees the kid, he fully expects some no-good whippersnapper looking for a place to sell drugs, or… or light up, or tweak out, or jungle fuck, or whatever it is kids do these days. Charlie squares himself up, puts on his Official Royal Crown of Officiality, made from only the finest tin cans, cardboard boxes, and seashells, and heads out to establish diplomatic relations—namely, the relation, of his foot to the kid's behind.

He changes his mind when he sees the kid, though.

"Agni's testes!" Charlie shouts. "What in the blazes happened to you?"

Kid's got a strip of cloth torn off of his sleeve and is trying to tie it around the big old bleeding cut in his neck. He looks about ready to pass out—his hands are shaking way too badly to tie the knot. "Nothing," the kid says. "I'm fine."

"'Fine' my third nipple!" Charlie says. "You're leaking, son. Let me help you with that."

Kid looks a little wary, but he hands the strip of cloth to Charlie after a couple of seconds. Charlie puts his Trail Blazer training to good use, tying it in a neat little knot around the kid's neck.

"Not too tight," the kid says, half-smiling. "Choking's not my kink."

"Ha-ha," Charlie says, finishing up the knot. "I used to have a friend named Phil, he was into that kind of thing. Loved to have something around his neck, squeezing all tight. You'll never guess how he died." He ties it off, just tight enough to stem the bleeding and keep the wound clean.

Kid turns and quirks an eyebrow at him. "Choked to death?"

"Nope!" Charlie announces. "Walruseal fell on him while he was asleep. Squashed him flat."

Kid's eyebrows shoot up. "You're right. I definitely wouldn't have guessed that."

Charlie extends the diplomatic hand of friendship. "Charlie, King of the Underdocks."

Kid eyes his crown, a little skeptical, but he accepts the handshake. "Sebastian."

"Welcome to the kingdom! So, you okay? What happened? You get the wrong end of a mugger or something?" Charlie asks.

"…something," the kid says. "It was kind of a close call. I almost…" He clenches his jaw. "It's nothing. I'm fine now."

"Speaking in my official capacity as ruler," Charlie says. "You don't look fine."

"Well… I am," the kid says, shoving past him. "Thanks anyway, though. You know. For the help."

"No problem!" Charlie says. "You can repay me by putting a good word in to the city council. I've been trying to get my domain recognized as an independent nation for years now. Got a flag and everything!"

He points to the flag, a circle with the image of a toupelican barfing up some partially digested fish.
Sebastian fish-eyes it for a couple of seconds. "That's… uhh… very visceral," he says. "I'll see what I can do. Thanks again."

Charlie waves him off. "Come back any time! You are welcome in my kingdom."

The kid starts to walk off, and Charlie prepares to return to his throne and finish his lunch, when suddenly…

"Hey, King Charlie," the kid says.

His Majesty turns around to see the kid pull a sword out of his belt.

"Something for the royal treasury," he says, tossing it towards him. "Enjoy."

He jumps up and climbs back into the world above before Charlie can say another word to him. Ah, well. He's always happy to have donations. One man's trash is another man's—

**HOLY TREASURE TROVES.**

Charlie picks up the sword and holds it up to the light. It's… it's… it's a thing! A very fine thing, with a great deal of… thingness! Okay, he's no expert, but he knows an ancient historical whatchamabobbit when he sees one. This thing is older than dirt. He feels twelve hundred percent more kingly just by holding it.

And the kid just gave it to him.

He's torn, y'see. Between being thankful for his kingly treasure of kinglyhood, and thinking about the cut on the kid's neck.

It was precise. He's seen enough to know—a cut like that was no accident. A knife made that wound. He was just a kid, and somebody tried to kill him.

As he heads back to his throne, Charlie can't help but shake his head and wonder…

What kind of sick bastard would do something like this to a boy like that?

It happens at the climax of Sam's Amazing Cross-Country Fire Nation Adventure. Kurt and Artie are in the back, having a private conversation and (Blaine hopes) repairing their fractured friendship. Everyone else is in the warehouse proper, listening to Sam's riveting tale. Blaine is really into it—Sam's a pretty good storyteller, and apparently, quite a bit happened to him after he escaped from Quinn and the gang. They've just reached the part where Sam is attempting to climb down a rope made of bedsheets, when suddenly, Suzy Pepper comes into the room and sees him.

She lets out a feral cry and charges towards him, and then—

**CLANG.** The warehouse door slams open again, and who should stumble through it but—

"Sebastian!" Blaine shouts.

Sebastian stumbles in, looking like he was just dragged headfirst through a meatgrinder. His clothes are ripped, he's covered in dirt and bruises, and his neck… holy shit.

Blaine just manages to catch him as he collapses. The other Dragon Hawks help move him to a box where he can sit down.

"What happened to you?" Blaine asks. "Where have you been?"
Sebastian takes a second to catch his breath before answering. "I was patrolling… saw… some guy… looking at the warehouse, all weird," he says. "Tried to chase him down. Chased him a long, long way, and… well…" He grins. "Don't laugh, but… I got lost. Just now found my way back."

"Lost?" David asks. "What happened to your face? Your clothes?"

"I got really, really lost," Sebastian says.

"That's it?" Wes asks. "What happened to your neck?"

Sebastian pulls the cloth up over the wound. "Tripped, fell, landed on some broken glass. It's nothing major. Just a scrape."

"Alright," Blaine says. "That's enough questions for now. Everybody step back. Finn, can you heal him up?"

Things are a little chaotic for a few minutes as the Hawks fret around in confusion, Rachel looks at him all sad, and Finn fixes him up. By the time he's finished, the cut is little more than an angry red scrape.

Once they realize Sebastian's story isn't going to be told to them any more than that, the Hawks go back to listening to Sam's tale, allowing Blaine to get Sebastian alone.

The Prince helps his friend to one of the back rooms. "It should be nice and quiet back here," Blaine says. "Kurt and Artie are a couple rooms over having some super secret talk, but they can't hear us. No one can."

Sebastian smiles at him. "Mr. Anderson! I'm shocked. Bringing me to a private location where no one else can hear us… I'd almost think you had intentions towards me."

"I do," Blaine says. "I intend to find out what really happened to you."

"You don't believe me?" Sebastian asks.

"Not even a little bit," Blaine says. "Tell me the truth, Sebastian."

Sebastian chuckles, shaking his head.

Blaine takes his hand. "Hey, come on. You can trust me."

That does it. Sebastian sighs, averting his eyes. "Okay, okay… I was… kind of… mugged," he admits. "The guy I was chasing led me into a trap. They got the jump on me and… one of them had a knife, and…"

Blaine's eyes bug out in horror. "They tried to kill you?"

"Hey, look on the bright side," Sebastian says. "They missed!"

"Sebastian…" Blaine says. "This isn't funny. You could've died!"

Sebastian shakes his head. "I'm fine now, really, I just…" Another sigh.

"What?" Blaine asks.

"There is… one thing," Sebastian says quietly. "The thugs stole something very important from me. A little fox mask. It's an old family heirloom… I carry it with me for luck. I hate to ask… but
could you help me get it back? I think I know where the thugs went, I just… I don't think I can face them alone."

"Of course we'll help you get it back," Blaine says.

"No!" Sebastian says. "Not… I don't want anyone else to know about this. Especially Kurt. I… umm… I don't think he likes me very much. You're the only one I really trust with this. We can do it tonight, after it gets dark, so no one will recognize us. Please?"

Blaine looks a little conflicted, but it passes quickly. "Well, you did save my life," he says with a smile. "I suppose helping you beat up some no-good thieving thugs is the least I can do to repay you."

Sebastian smiles at him. "Thanks, Blaine. I knew I could count on you. You're…" His smile fades, and he trails off. "…you're a great guy…" he says quietly.

Blaine squints at him. "Something wrong?"

"Just tired," Sebastian says quietly. "Might have lost a little more blood than I thought."

"Get some rest," Blaine says. He squeezes Sebastian's shoulder as he heads out of the room.

"Blaine?" Sebastian says.

The Prince turns around.

Sebastian looks weird. His jaw is clenching, and he isn't looking at Blaine. When he speaks, it's so soft that Blaine can barely hear it. "I'm sorry."

Blaine smiles at him. "Hey, you were just doing your job. It's not your fault those guys mugged you. You have nothing to be sorry for."

Sebastian shakes his head, huffing out a single laugh. "Thanks," he says quietly. "You're wrong, but thanks."

"Sleep well," Blaine says.

Sebastian says nothing as the door quietly closes between them.

Chapter End Notes

I know Sebastian isn’t the most popular character in the fandom—hell, he’s probably one of the least popular among Klainers. But I would just like to remind everyone that I am not the Glee writers; when I introduce characters, I do so for a reason. Sebastian has a part to play, and, again, unlike the Glee writers, I am writing him as a person instead of just a plot device. I hope this chapter has inspired a little speculation into his motives and purpose without making them too obvious. ;)

UP NEXT – Dream a Little Dream, Part 2. No, seriously, for real this time! XP

WARNINGS: Self-Harm, Suicidal Behavior, Blood (and not in the ways you might expect).


Dream a Little Dream, Part 2

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Mild reference to attempted sexual assault (past).

Author's Note: Artie is back, and he has quite the tale to tell, though it is not always a happy one. This is the last chapter for a while that should focus on anything but Klaine, and it's a doozy... but it's important. Everyone and everything is beginning to come together, which means it's only a matter of time before the fireworks start up again. ;) Enjoy!

Also, editing? What editing? Mercedes was never in the last chapter, silly. YOU SAW NOTHING.

It takes them a good five minutes to pry Artie from Finn's desperate grasp.

"Never leave us again!" Finn admonishes.

"Keep squeezing, and I won't have a choice," Artie grunts. "Pretty sure we're about to fuse into the mudbender. Permanently."

When Finn is finally convinced to put Artie back in his chair, a blizzard of questions kicks up in the room. Where have you been? What have you been doing? Why'd you leave? How'd you find us? Who made your wheelchair, and why does it look like junkyard vomit?

"Now, now," Artie says with a benevolent smile. "Calm yourselves, my brothers. And Rachel."

Rachel waves cheerfully, offering a hand to Sam. "Rachel Berry, newly minted fugitive, future stare of legend and song, pleased to meet you!"

"All questions will be answered in time," Artie says, with a significant look towards Sam. "But first, I would like a moment of privacy with my boy, Kurt. In the meantime, Sam here has a tale of his own to spin, don't you buddy?"

"Who wants to hear an awesome story?" Sam asks.

"Oooh," Blaine perks up. "I love stories!"

"Come one, come all," Sam says. "And I will tell you of my epic adventures in the Fire Nation. Your country is awesome, by the way. Scary, but awesome!"

He heads outside, and the group dutifully follows, hanging onto his every word. Only Blaine hangs back.

"Are you two alright?" Blaine asks.

"We straight, B-Money," Artie grins.
"If we aren't," Kurt adds. "We soon will be."

Blaine smiles. "Good. I'm glad." He waves as he leaves. "Just… call, if you need anything."

He closes the door behind him, and then it's just Artie and Kurt.

Kurt looks at Artie. Artie looks at Kurt. Neither is quite able to find the words.

So Kurt goes for the default. "I'm sorry," he says quietly.

Artie holds up a hand, blocking Kurt's apology like it's a fist to his heart. "Don't apologize just yet," he says, his smile growing less and less happy by the second.

Kurt blinks at him. "What do you mean? Artie, it was wrong to treat you—"

"Just…" Artie sighs. "Just… take a seat. Hear me out, before you say anything. Okay?"

"Okay," Kurt says. He kicks a chair into position next to Artie and sits down. Upon taking a closer look at him, Kurt very nearly squeaks aloud at what he sees. He's seen Artie at his best—smiling, boasting, puffing out his chest, ready to take on the world. He's seen him angry—at himself, mostly, but also at the world and occasionally even at them. He's seen him happy, sad, regretful, guilty, penitent, mischievous, confident… and once, even lovestruck.

He's never seen him like this.

The lighting in the room is warm, and in all the commotion and joy of the reunion, it was easy to miss, but up close, it's impossible to ignore. Artie is even paler than before, almost ghost-white. The skin on his face is drawn tight over his skull, and the rest of him isn't much better. He's thin. Thin even for Artie. His eyes are a maelstrom of red lines, the shadows around them pronounced enough to look like bruises.

He doesn't look tired. He looks ill. He looks like he's dying.

"Oh, La," Kurt breathes.

Artie laughs. "Wow. That bad, huh?"

"Artie, please," Kurt says. "Tell me what's happening to you. Tell me so that I can stop it."

Artie just shakes his head sadly. "I guess it's time to come clean…" He takes a deep breath. "Alright, here's the low-down; my life has holes in it. Big ones. We're talking years and years, blacked out. Locked up."

"You have amnesia?" Kurt asks.

"No," Artie says. "The memories aren't gone. Something's blocking them."

"I… didn't know that was possible," Kurt says. "Is that like a blocked chakra?"

"Pretty much," Artie says. "I don't know what's up here," he says, tapping his skull, "but I know it ain't pretty. So I leave the block in place. Don't think about it, don't talk about it, don't ask, don't tell. It's not the best arrangement, but it works. Or… it did." He swallows. "When we were on the train, I took a hit," he says, pointing to the base of his spine. "Right here. And something… happened. Something came loose. And now…"

"Now what?" Kurt asks.
Artie sighs. "Maybe I should just tell you the whole story…"

From there, Artie recounts everything from the night he and Kurt split up—how he hid in the basement and overheard Kurt's plan to look for Sam.

"Clever little twerp," Kurt says fondly.

How he got himself thrown in jail, got Pucktana on his side, and broke them out.

"I bet that was a barrel of laughs," Kurt deadpans.

How he stole for them.

"No golden lion for us?" Kurt pouts.

How they went into town. How he slinked around at night. Saw the fox-faced killer.

"Oh, La," Kurt says. "That's awful. I'm glad you didn't commit those murders, but still… knowing the killer is still out there…"

And eventually… how he started hearing voices. Seeing things. Speaking to people who weren't there.

At that, Kurt remains silent.

"It was manageable, the first night," Artie says. "But the morning after the three of us escaped from the city, things changed…"

After maybe two hours of sleep, Artie opens his eyes in the forest.

The sun is has only just begun to rise. Dew hangs fresh on the leaves, sparkling in the light of the new day. Kurt chases Finn through the woods, laughing and playfully tossing bits of fire. Blaine laughs with them, eyes crinkling. Artie can't help but grin at the Prince's goofy smile. The guy is, to put it flatly, cute as a puppy and a kitten climbing into the same shoe.

"He could be useful."

And just like that, the moment is broken. Things seem to slow down suddenly, as if the air is thickening, hardening like old sap.

"The Halo Effect. Those with greatest beauty are ascribed greatest virtue. They never expect the cute ones."

The voice comes from everywhere and nowhere, but Artie intrinsically knows who is speaking. The Hidden Man approaches him, moving unimpeded between Finn and Kurt, who are still running in slow motion.

"Even the broken have their purpose," the man says, nodding to Blaine. "Befriend him. It'll make him easier to use."

"I'm not gonna use him," Artie says. "Well, I mean… I'm not just going to use him—"

"You use everyone. You use, and are used. A tool using tools."

"I'm not a tool!" Artie says. "Neither is Blaine, I… you…” He shakes his head. "Wait a second.
This isn't right. This isn't happening... it's a memory."

"Is it?" the Hidden Man asks.

"Yes, and it didn't happen like this!" Artie says, pointing an accusing finger at him. "You weren't there!"

"I am always with you, Artie," the Hidden Man says simply, "even if you are not always aware."

"No, actually, you aren't," Artie says. "I'm pretty sure I'd remember a creepy asshole that slowed down time."

"Would you?" the Hidden Man asks. "Considering all you've been through, I'd think you would have learned by now how fickle perception is... how malleable memories are."

The Hidden Man snaps his fingers. A root from a nearby tree extends into Kurt's path. The scene speeds up again, and before anyone can do anything, Kurt trips and falls, twisting his ankle painfully. "Ah!" he hisses.

"Oh, holy crap!" Finn says.

"Kurt!" Blaine shouts, rushing over to help him, still moving a little stiffly from his injuries.

"Here, let me see," Finn says, pulling out his water supply and working his healing hands over Kurt's foot. "I don't think it's broken, so that's good. The healing should keep it from swelling, so I think we're okay. You're lucky."

Kurt hisses as Finn passes over a particularly sensitive area. "I don't feel lucky," he says.

Artie squints at the scene. "Wait... no, that didn't happen either. Kurt didn't—"

"How do you know?" the Hidden Man asks.

"This isn't how I remember things," Artie says. "I... I talked to Blaine. I asked him to help me in Fenghuang—"

"Who are you to say what you did or didn't do?" the man continues, ignoring Artie. "How much of your life have you forgotten?"

Artie shakes his head again. Fuzz, fog, and haze. His own thoughts are starting to slow, like the sap has seeped into his skull. It didn't happen like this; he knows it didn't, and yet... it's happening now. Kurt and Blaine and Finn are acting exactly like Kurt and Blaine and Finn would act. He can see and hear them. He can feel the morning sunlight, smell the wilderness around him, taste the cool moisture in the air. He is here, yet he isn't.

Is he?

"You," Artie growls, massaging his forehead. "You're doing this, aren't you?"

"No," the Hidden Man says simply. "I am a symptom. You are the disease. You do this to yourself."

Artie sticks his hands into the dirt, feeling the cool, moist earth between his fingers. But even as he feels it on his skin, he questions it. Is it really dirt? Are those really his hands? Is any of this happening? Why does he care?
"Shut up," Artie commands. "Who are you?"

"How fickle. First you demand silence, then answers. Which is it?"

Artie slips on his gloves and prepares to attack. "Answer me!" he commands.

"Ask the right question," the Hidden Man says simply.

"Who are you?" Artie repeats.

"That is not the right question."

Fresh out of patience, Artie fires his glove at the figure.

It slams into a tree just as Puck walks into the clearing. "WHOA!" he shouts, stumbling backwards. "Dude, it's me! It's Puck! Chill out!"

Artie blinks, and recalls his glove back to his hand. He looks around the clearing, but there is no one else in sight. The Hidden Man is gone. So are Finn, Kurt, and Blaine.

"You need to chill with that guard dog thing," Puck says, walking over to a nearby tree. "You nearly bit my head off."

"Sorry," Artie says, continuing to look around in confusion. This is the same clearing he was just in. Err, the same clearing from his dream. Except, apparently it wasn't a dream. Or was it? "I'm feeling a little paranoid at the moment," Artie says.

"You need to fuckin' relax," Puck says, turning towards the tree. "Know what helps me relax?"

"What?" Artie asks absently, still trying to make sense of what just happened. The surroundings haven't changed, but the people are gone. He was dreaming, but he wasn't dreaming. Was he awake? Is he awake now?

How did he get here?

He doesn't remember—

"Peeing outside!" Puck says, and Artie hears the telltale trickle of a tinkle being taken. "I don't know what it is, man, but I love it. It's like my animal side is marking his territory. I'm scribbling up some nose-graffiti. 'The Puckster was here.' You should try it!"

Artie rolls his eyes. "I'll pass, thanks."

"Suit yourself," Puck says. "How do you pee, anyway? I mean, since you can't stand up, or whatever, it seems like it'd be kind of awkward…"

Artie ignores him, lost in his own thoughts…

"So… what was that?" Kurt asks. "Were you dreaming? Hallucinating? Having a flashback?"

"No?" Artie says. "Yes? I don't know. All of the above? I can barely tell the difference anymore. It kept happening all throughout the day…"

Puck is chattering to him about something. Artie is disguised as a vase and strapped into the
carriage next to him. He peeks his head out to get a look at the surroundings. The city of Mu Bai, supposedly famous for being full of fortune tellers, aka con artists. He's looking for a good mark to rob when suddenly, Mu Bai becomes somewhere else.

Instead of the busy streets of the Fire Nation, Artie's eyes are greeted by the busy streets of the Earth Kingdom. Ba Sing Se's lower ring stretches out before him, crowded, cramped, bustling with life and teeming with tension, ready to snap at any moment. The world has changed. Green is red. Flames are rocks. Wood is stone.

On the rooftops, he sees them. Robed figures in conical hats, all dressed like the Hidden Man, but different somehow. Watching him. Just staring. He can't see their eyes, but they are all looking at him.

"Dude!" Puck says. "Hey, snap out of it!"

Artie flinches and turns to look at him. "What?"

"You spaced out on me there," Puck says. "You alright?"

Artie swallows. "Fine. You were saying…?"

Artie and Santana are working together to pickpocket an old lady who tells fortunes with the stars. Santana is pretending to be super-interested in the lady's endless babbling about the Sign of the Monkey and the Sign of the Dragon and how Gullet is in Picasso or whatever the fuck she's talking about. Artie is just about to stick his fingers in the proverbial cookie jar when suddenly, the scene changes.

He sees himself.

Younger. Younger by years. Tiny, dirty, fresh-faced and innocent looking. He sits on the corner with his little cup, smiling at the passersby. "Any change?" the younger Artie asks. "Spare change, anybody? Kind of hungry over here."

People pass by, completely ignoring him.

"Hey, buddy," Young Artie says. "You like to eat? Me too! Maybe we could bond over that sometime."

The passersby continue to ignore him.

Young Artie bites his lip. In a second, his countenance shifts, and his look is much less innocent. He reaches behind his back for a second, and his hand shoots out. The earth glove extends and rebounds like a tether, snatching a coin purse from an old woman's belt. She doesn't even notice.

Artie grins he watches Young Artie open the purse and finger the cash within.

"I saw that," a voice says from above him.

Artie looks up to see a familiar face eying little him. Young Artie gulps. "You're… you're not gonna turn me in, are you?"

The man moves forward, his stark white fur coat fluttering magnificently behind him. His golden cane sparkles in the sunlight, as do his golden teeth.

Master Alabaster grins down at him. "I'm no snitch," he says. "I am a businessman, little man. I've
seen what you do, and I like it. I think we can help each other out. Listen to my words, and I will spin a proposition for you…"

Young Artie listens in silent awe as Alabaster explains his operation, and big Artie knows that he has just found his idol for the next several years.

But something seems odd. The hustle and bustle of the city seems strangely quiet, the figures around them moving carefully and quietly, not at all like a crowd.

Artie turns around, and there they are again. The robed figures, faces shadowed by their hats. They have replaced every citizen, and all eyes are on Artie.

Not Young Artie.

They're watching him.

THUD.

An impact brings him back to reality. Santana just stomped her foot on the ground—the signal for hurry the fuck up. So Artie snatches the money, and a few star charts for good measure, and skedaddles.

Kurt works hard at keeping his jaw firmly hinged.

"I don't know what they are," Artie sighs. "Dreams, memories, and hallucinations all rolled into one. My thoughts run together like lines of wet paint, mixing together until I can't tell them apart anymore…"

He trails off, and Kurt isn't sure if he should speak or not. Artie seems to lose himself for a moment. His eyes are fixed on something that definitely isn't Kurt, and… Oh La. "It's happening now, isn't it?" Kurt asks.

Artie nods quietly.

"What do you see?" Kurt asks.

Artie swallows. "A room. It's darker than where we are… I think. Maybe underground somewhere. The walls are made of earth."

"Is there anyone else here?" Kurt asks.


"Who is he?" Kurt asks.

"I don't know," Artie sighs. "Someone I knew from before. Before I can remember."

"Is he saying anything?" Kurt asks.

Artie shakes his head. "Just watching us. All creepy and quiet. Like some creeper tryin' to get his perv on in the locker rooms…"

"Well, at least you can tell the difference between your visions and reality," Kurt says, trying to put a positive light on things.
"Yeah, but for how much longer?" Artie asks. "What if I space out and don't come back? What if I'm doing it now? What if I only think I'm talking to you?"

"Maybe... you should try to get some sleep?" Kurt suggests.

Artie clenches his jaw and shakes his head.

"Why not?" Kurt asks. "Is it nightmares? Because whatever it is, it can't be as bad as what's happening to you now. You're falling apart, Artie."

Artie shakes his head. "You don't know that. It's not just nightmares... it might be worse."

Kurt blinks at him in confusion.

"Get Finn in here," Artie says.

Finn is summoned summarily. "What's up?" he asks.

"I think Artie wanted to talk to you about something?" Kurt tries.

Artie nods at him. "Finn... you remember when we first met?"

"Of course, dude," Finn grins. "We met in that crappy prison in the Earth Kingdom."

"Remind me," Artie says. "How did we escape?"

Finn grins. "You knocked out the guard and took his keys, and unlocked my cell while I was asleep. Then we formed the Mudbender for the first time, even though there was, like, no mud around. You just kind of punched the crap out of anyone who got in our way while I did what I do best and got hit a lot without falling over. And then we got outside, and you found some earth, and —"

"Go back to that first part," Artie says. "I knocked the guard out and took his keys. How?"

Finn blinks at him. "I don't know, man. I was asleep, remember?"

"Of course," Artie says. "I remember now. Thanks for the help, Finn."

Finn blinks at him. "Are you alright? You look kind of sick. And now that I think of it, you were, like, crazy light when I picked you up. I thought maybe I'd gotten stronger, but—"

"I'm fine, Finn," Artie says. "We'll talk later."

"Okay..." Finn says, giving them both sad eyes as he leaves.

Kurt smiles and pats him on the shoulder as he goes, closing the door behind him. "Okay, so, the point of that was..."

"Finn doesn't remember how I got out of my cell, or how I got him out of his cell," Artie says.

"Well, that makes sense," Kurt says. "He was asleep."

"Yeah," Artie says. "So was I."

They're trundling towards the city of Mu Bai. Puck's got his guard helmet on, facemask down, just in case. Santana and Artie hide in back, preparing to disguise themselves as a hitchhiker and a
statue of a fat man peeing, respectively.

The Hidden Man's words echo in his mind. *How much of your life have you forgotten?*

"Hey, guys," Artie says. "Were either of you awake when I busted us out of prison?"

"Nope," Puck says. "Out like a fuckin' candle."

"Same here," Santana says. "Pretty smooth shit, though, I have to say. How'd you pull it off?"

*I have no fucking idea*, Artie doesn't say. Because that would go over about as well as a battleship made out of limestone. "A good magician never reveals his tricks," is what he says instead, with a wry grin.

"Oh, fuck you," Santana says, without venom. "Why'd you even ask, then?"

"Just curious," Artie sighs.

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"So you're sleepwalking?" Kurt asks. "Errr… sleep…sliding? Sleep-something-ing?"

Artie nods. "A couple nights after the train, I woke up a long ways from where I went to sleep. Don't remember moving. And yeah, I guess sleepwalking isn't all that uncommon, but sleep-busting-out-of-the-slammer? That's a new one. If I can do that while I'm asleep… what can't I do?"

Kurt shakes his head, trying desperately to find something comforting to say and coming up empty. "Well… at least you've never hurt anyone in your slee—"

"Knocked out multiple guards," Artie corrects.

Kurt winces. "Okay, you've never hurt any of *us*,"

Artie shrugs.

"Well, you didn't hurt Puck and Santana, did you? And you don't even like them!" Kurt jokes.

And suddenly, Artie looks sadder than ever, and Kurt's heart drops into his stomach.

"You didn't… did you?" Kurt asks.

"Oh, I did something," Artie says quietly. "I… just let me tell you the rest of the story. You can decide."

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*When we got into Zedong, Santana suggested what would eventually become the Sam Trap.*

"Fuck me," Puck groans, looking out over the massive cityscape. "It'll take us like eighty years to find anyone in this stupid city."

"We don't need to find him," Santana says. "He's going to find us. To catch a trouty-mouth, we need just need the right bait on our hooks."

"And what kind of bait would that be?" Artie asks.

Santana smirks at him. "Well, that's where you come in, four-eyes. You know Sam—what does he like?"
I told them what I knew, and we got to work on the plan. Santana found us a good place to set it up, and sent me and Puck out for supplies.

Now, I'd been trying for a while to get some more info on our favorite assassins, and Puck was the first one I got to crack. I think he'd wanted to tell somebody for a while now, cause he more or less just blurted it out...

"So," Puck says idly. He's pushing Artie around in a laundry cart, disguised as a pile of clothes. "Are you crazy, or what?"

A glove emerges from the pile, middle finger mysteriously raised.

"Just askin'," Puck says. "I mean, you kind of zone out sometimes. And I swear I've heard you talking when nobody's around."

A second glove emerges, this one with its finger and thumb forming a circle. The first glove's finger moves in and out of the hole.

"Look, I'm not a fan of this gushy-feely crap either, but you are pretty much my meal ticket. If I can stop you from, like, flipping out and gutting me in my sleep, I am all for that sh—"

Puck mysteriously trips over a strange bump in the sidewalk, banging his knee against the cart.

"FUCK," Puck hisses. "Watch it, you crazy asshole!"

Artie's eyes finally peek out at Puck from behind a pair of silk boxers. "You're calling me crazy?" he whispers. "You're the one talking to a pile of clothes."

"Dude, nobody's paying attention to us," Puck says. "It's the big city. Nutjobs are everywhere. No one gives a fuck."

"Just shut up and keep walking," Artie orders, vanishing back beneath the pile.

They continue in silence for a few moments.

"Look," Puck says after a couple of minutes. "I get it if you don't feel like broadcasting it, or whatever, okay? I know about secrets. Got a pretty juicy one myself, actually."

Artie remains silent, wondering if he should try and bait Puck, or just wait for him to talk on his own.

Apparently, it's the second one. Puck continues, all on his own. "I'm dying."

Artie's head pops to the surface with enough force to catapult lacy panties into Puck's face. "Say what?" he whispers.

Puck shrugs the underwear off his head like he's used to having it there. "My hand's got this... thing. It's all veiny and gross-looking. 's why I keep it hidden."

"And that's the source of your mighty hammerfist, I presume?" Artie asks.

"Yup," Puck says almost proudly. "I don't really get how it works, but the medicine lady said it's got something to do with my chi. It's all blocked up and getting sucked into my arm. It's why I can't earthbend anymore."

"You're an earthbender?" Artie asks.
"Was," Puck says. "Like I said, the hand thing screwed that up. Normal bending doesn't work for me anymore. It's like... all or nothing. All this energy builds up in my fist, and whenever I punch something, I let it all out at once."

"I guess that makes sense," Artie says. "But I've seen you punch the air. Even if you do have a... a hand-thing, it should only work when you direct it at the earth."

"It used to," Puck says. "But then I got myself this bitchin' glove. Now, I can punch anything, and it still works. It's like the energy just goes through the glove and hits whatever I'm aiming at."

"So you're earthbending through metal?" Artie says. "That shouldn't be possible."

"Talk to the hand, dude," Puck says. "I don't know how it works, I just know that it works."

"Whatever," Artie says. "What's that got to do with you dying?"

"Well," Puck says, a little hesitant. "It's... like... growing."

Artie tilts his head. "The little veiny-veins are climbing up my arm," Puck says. "Medicine lady said it's after my energy, so it's growing towards my... ummm... chocograms? chocktards? Chaka Khans?"

"Chakras," Artie corrects. "Yeah, those," Puck says. "It's after my chakras, my heart mainly. And when it gets there..." He jerks his fingers across his throat. "End of the road."

Artie's eyes bulge. "Dude! Is that why your mom wanted to cut it off? Because suddenly, she's looking a lot more sympathetic from my POV."

Puck clenches his jaw. "She just... he growls. "She doesn't get it."

"What's there to get?" Artie asks. "This thing will kill you, fool! Stop perambulatin' and start amputatin'!"

"Fuck you! It's my hand! It's the only thing I've got that's worth anything!" Puck almost-yells. A few odd stares get thrown his way, but his outburst goes unnoticed by the world at large. He continues, quietly. "My mom... she was always talking shit about me. Pop bailed on us a while back, and I kind of look like him, so I get why, I guess. Guy's a no-good bailout, and I'm his no-good son. He made it hard on her, y'know? I tried to make it easier, but nothing I did was ever enough. But then... this happened."

Puck holds his gloved hand up, staring at it for just a second. "The medicine lady said she'd never seen anything like it. Nobody has. Nobody can do the kind of things I can do. Yeah, fine, I'm a freak. But I'm the best kind of freak. I'm valuable. Back in the Earth Kingdom, people would pay out of their asses to hire me. I'm a one-man demolition squad."

"So you wanted to keep your hand because it made you money?" Artie asks.

Puck shrugs. "It's pretty much my only draw. Wasn't that great an earthbender, wasn't that great a fighter, wasn't that great a son, and mom made sure I knew it. Worthless. That was pretty much her favorite word for me. When I was working my ass off and not making shit, I was worthless. So I thought, fine, hey, great, I've got a way to make money now. But apparently, when people are throwing money at me because of my epic pimp hand, I'm a freak. So she tried to make me cut it
off, because she didn't want a freak for a son."

"Right," Artie says. "I'm sure that's it. The fact that it might kill you had nothing to do with it."

"Look, I don't want to be worthless, alright?" Puck says. "If I have to choose between being a freak and a loser, I'll choose freak. It wasn't just losing my arm—lady doc said it might have screwed up my bending forever. If I lose it, I lose everything. I'd just be even more worthless. It was stay there, and be made worthless, or leave, and be awesome. So… I left."

"Like father, like son?" Artie says.

"Fuck you," Puck hisses. "I didn't bail on them!"

Artie looks at him flatly.

"Okay, fine," Puck says. "I didn't just bail on them, I'm…" He grunts in frustration. "This is the only way I can help them. I make money this way. And most of it, I send to them. It works. I make more money in one job than my mom would in a decade."

"And all you have to do is sell your soul to the highest bidder," Artie says quietly.

"I'm not selling my soul, I'm just—" Puck falters. "Look, whatever, okay? I know what you think of me, and I don't give a fuck. I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it for my mom and my sis, mostly my sis. I could spend the rest of my life breaking my back in that stupid fucking nowhere town, or I could take advantage of this and use it to make myself famous and my family rich. Can you blame me for choosing this? I'd rather die a legend than live as a loser."

"You'd rather die far from home, surrounded by people who hate you, way earlier than you would otherwise?" Artie asks.

Puck shrugs. "Hey, since I know I'm gonna die, I can live it up with whatever I've got left. Sex it up, booze it up, live it up… only the good die young, y'know?"

"You're not that good," Artie says quietly.

"Fuck you," Puck repeats.

"No, I mean…" he sighs. "It's not worth it, Puck. You've got a mom that loves you… sort of. Even if she doesn't, your little sister probably misses you like crazy."

Puck shrugs. "Yeah, well… I'm doing this for her good. It's better this way."

"Alright," Artie says. "Riddle me this. If you asked your little sister whether she wanted all the money in the world, or for you to come home and play with her, what do you think she'd pick?"

That does it. Puck's jaw clenches, and he can't look Artie in the eye anymore.

Artie leans back. "Yeah, I thought so."

Puck looks down. "Look… maybe… I don't know… maybe you're right."

"What's that?" Artie asks, cleaning out his ears with a pair of socks. "I don't think I heard you correctly, say it one more time. Loud and proud!"

"Don't get all excited," Puck says. "I'm not saying this because of you and your magical smacktalk. I just… I miss 'em. That's all. Even mom was kind of okay, when she wasn't being a raging bitch
about everything. If I'm gonna kick the bucket anyway, might as well do it back home. The Puckster has already peed on the tree of life. My territory has been marked.

Artie rolls his eyes. "So… wait. If you're satisfied, why not just cut your hand off and, you know, live?"

Puck glares at him. "Maybe I just don't fucking feel like it, okay? It's my hand. I can do whatever I want with it."

Artie raises his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay."

"Anyway," Puck says. "I just… I want to make sure they're gonna be alright after I go become one with the earth, or whatever. I need a good chunk of dough to bring home with me. Once I've got that… I'm set, man."

Artie looks at him carefully. "Really?" He grins. "And what would you say if I offered to help you with that?"

"Seriously?" Puck asks.

"Yup," Artie nods.

"Why?" Puck asks. "You don't even like me."

Artie shrugs. "A wise man once said 'the surest way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend.' Besides, you're… less awful than I'd imagined. If it'll get you off our cases, I'll contribute a little extra to your retirement fund."

Puck blinks at him. "…huh. Well, uhhh… thanks. I guess." He clears his throat. "So… guess you're not crazy after all?"

"Okay, one, I would prefer you use the medical term Cray-Cray, and two…" Artie takes a second to contemplate that. "…to be honest, the jury's still out on that one."

"That's… kind of creepy and not really a good answer, but whatever," Puck says. "The main question is: are you gonna kill me in my sleep?"

Artie scoffs at him. "Nah," he says. "Puck, I promise, if I ever kill you, you will be awake for it."

"I appreciate that," Puck says. "Bros stab each other in the front, yo."

If only he knew…

Back in the present, a knock on the door breaks Artie's tale in twain and nearly scares Kurt into flipping out of his chair. He quickly hops up and opens the door. "Now is not a good time. What do you want?"

"Sorry to bother you," says a rather hesitant-looking Trent. "But do you have any idea where Thad and Mercedes went? They've been gone a long time."

"I don't know," Kurt says. "But I'm sure they're fine. They're probably just out on a date somewhere."

"They're on a what?" says another voice. And suddenly, Trent is sent flying by a ramming-speed Wes, who takes his place in the doorframe.
"Oh…" Kurt says, wincing just a bit. "I… probably wasn't supposed to say that."

"They're… they're dating?" Wes asks, looking positively pitiful. "But… but how? When? Why?"

"They're not dating!" Kurt tries to clarify. "Thad just… has a little crush! Mercedes is just being polite, I'm sure that's all there is to it."

Wes still looks slightly queasy. "But… but…"

"It's okay," Kurt says gently. "I know how you feel. You are experiencing the symptoms of lovesickness. Calm down, and take deep breaths, in the nose, and out the mouth. Continue until all the bad feelings are expunged. Call me in the morning if symptoms persist, and thank you for visiting Doctor Kurt!"

He slams the door on a slightly wibbly Wes, and turns back to Artie.

"Sorry about that," Kurt says.

"s cool," Artie says. "Always nice to see a little love in the air. Believe it or not, love turned out to be the key to getting Santana's trust, and I'm not talking about her love for me…"

After Puck and I got the supplies together, Santana and I wound up designing the posters together. Our working relationship was… shall we say… somewhat strained.

Artie holds up the star chart he stole, comparing it with the ones Santana is painting. "That is not even close to accurate."

"Fuck you, Wobbles," Santana growls. "My stars are flawless."

"Far from it," Artie scoffs. "Look, Sam is a huge space nerd, and he has trouble reading. The words are important, but the stars are what are really going to catch his eye. He's enough of a space nerd to know when they're wrong. If we don't get them right, he might not even look at the rest of the poster."

"Yeah, well how about you leave the drawing to the big people who can actually reach the paint and canvas?" Santana snits as she crumples up her latest attempt and starts on a fresh piece of paper.

"Do you have to be such a bitch all the time?" Artie asks, putting the star chart where she can see it. " Seriously. You're very one-note. It wouldn't kill you to be nice every now and then."

"Well, excuse me for not being nice to the asshole who stole my girlfriend," Santana says.

"Wait, what?" Artie balks.

"Nothing," Santana says. "Of course you wouldn't understand."

"Whoa, whoa," Artie says. "Back the fuck up. I did not steal your girlfriend."

"Yeah, right," Santana says.

"Hey!" Artie says. "I'm a professional thief, ya heard? If I stole something from you, I would preach it to the mountaintops with arms wide. I didn't 'steal' your girlfriend. I don't even know who you're talking abo…" He trails off, thinking back. "Wait, is this about Brittany?"
Santana cocks her chin upwards, refusing to meet Artie's eyes.

"Oh, holy hilltops," Artie sighs. "Why on earth would you think I stole Brittany?"

"I saw you two together!" Santana says. "You were bestest cuddle-buddies on the back of that bison."

"Yeah, for all of fifteen minutes," Artie says, rolling his eyes. "I don't know how you managed it, but you saw what probably amounts to half of our entire relationship. She was 'cuddling' me because I'm terrified of heights. That's it. That's the extent of me and her."

Santana's sneer softens, but only just. "You still made her leave," she sourly. "You turned her against me."

"No, I didn't," Artie says. "You did that to yourself. All I did was point out what Brittany already knew."

Santana quietly stares ahead, seething with outrage. "...still..."

"'Still' nothing," Artie says. "You're blaming me for something you did. It seems to be a common theme with you."

"Yeah, well, the world has a tendency to screw me over," Santana says. "I err on the side of caution, generally assuming that I am flawless and everyone else can fuck off. It's done me well so far."

"Yeah," Artie deadpans. "Just look at where it's gotten you!"

"Hey, noodle-legs, you might not realize this, but we're in the same place right now," Santana says. "You don't have much room to talk."

"Hmmm," Artie says idly. "So... girlfriend, huh? You and Brittany—"

"Don't even start, perv," Santana says.

"Who says I was going there? I was just going to say how hard it must have been for you back in the Earth Kingdom. I traveled through there with Kurt. They are not exactly the most accepting people, you know?" Artie says.

"Don't even try to act like you 'understand' me," Santana says. "You have no idea what my life has been like. For your information, my getting exiled had nothing to do with that. Well, not directly, anyway."

"Really?" Artie asks, leaning forward. "What did it have to do with?"

Santana rolls her eyes. "My dad was a big shot in the city. Little town called Omashu. Kind of a big deal, you might have heard of it."

"Pffft," Artie scoffs. "You call that dinky little place big? Y'all got nothing on the B-S-S."

Santana flicks some paint at him. "Anyway, it goes like this; daddy dearest wanted to make a new friend, so instead of going up to the other guy and asking real nicely, he decided to give the guy's son a shiny new bride as a token of friendship. And guess who they slapped the bow and dress on?"

"Damn," Artie says.
"Damn straight," Santana sighs. "I didn't like it, and I sure as hills did not like him, let alone love him. He was fucking repulsive. Tried to bow out, ask off, renegotiate—none of it worked. So I wound up married against my will to a grabby douchebag who doesn't know the meaning of the word 'no.' He demonstrated that pretty clearly on our wedding night."

Artie balks. "Wait, what? You don't mean… he didn't… did he…?"

Santana stares at him oddly. "What?" And then it hits her. "Oh, fuck no. Holy hilltops, no. I mean, he definitely gave it his level best, but there was only one cherry popped in the room that night, and it wasn't mine, if you catch my drift."

"Ouch," Artie winces. He finds himself fighting off the urge to form a protective cup out of the dirt and slip it into his pants while Santana isn't looking.

"No sympathy from me. Put your twig and berries where they don't belong? Don't be surprised when things get snapped," Santana says simply. "Pretty cut-and-dry as far as I was concerned. But Omashu saw it differently. I damaged the family jewels. Prevented the bloodline from being passed on. His family wanted to stone me in public, but daddy dearest pulled some strings and got me exiled instead. I left the city with two middle fingers raised and never looked back."

"Is that why you… you know… like girls?" Artie asks.

"No," Santana says. "I like girls because I like girls, dickweed."

"Alright, alright," Artie says, holding up his hands. "Still, that's pretty harsh for just defending yourself."

Santana shrugs. "Hey, I was sick of that place anyway. Felt nice to get out for a little while."

"Bullshit," Artie says. "Getting kicked out into the wilderness with no money and no support? That shit sucks. Believe me, I know."

"Fine," Santana says. "It wasn't always easy. But I got by. And now look at where I am."

"Yeah," Artie says. "Just look at you. Stuck in a foreign country, hateful, angry, miserable, and dirt-ass poor."

"Again, we're in the same place," Santana says.

"And yet I am so much happier," Artie shrugs. "I'm exactly where I want to be."

Santana rolls her eyes and 'accidentally' kicks a can of paint over near him. Artie bends a gutter into the ground to divert the flow.

"Out of curiosity… where would you want to be, if you could pick?" Artie asks.

"Away from you," Santana says.

"More specific," Artie presses.

Santana remains silent.

"Since we're speaking in terms of people," Artie presses. "You want to be away from me, and… with someone else? Maybe a certain blonde airbender?"

Santana glares at him, but his question finally finds the one weak spot in her armor. She softens
just a touch. "Fucking Brittany…" she grouses quietly. "I don't get it. I mean, I barely even had a week with her, and now I can't stop thinking about her, and it pisses me off. Who does she think she is, all easy breezy beautiful, blowing into my life and making me have all of these stupid feelings? I'm used to being pissed off. Pissed off, I can handle. Pissed off, I'm good at. I don't know what to do with all this… this soft stuff that she gives me."

Artie gapes at her. "That… is the sweetest most adorable thing I've ever heard," he coos. "Who knew you were such a softie?"

"Fuck off," Santana snits. "I will strangle you in your sleep."

"I don't sleep," Artie says smugly. Santana gives him a side-eye, but he quickly re-rails the discussion. "So if you want Brittany so much, why don't you just go after her?"

Santana glares at him. "I don't even know where she went. How am I supposed to find her?"

"There are four Air Nomad temples in the entire world, Santana. Plus, anyone who's seen and/or spoken to Brittany is not likely to forget her. You're a tracker, aren't you? Track her down!" Artie says.

"With what?" Santana asks. "I don't have any money."

"You do now," Artie says. "That golden dragon statue is worth a king’s ransom in gold. And there's more where that came from. I'm happy to skim the top of these rich folks' coffers to donate to a good cause."

"Oh, I'm a charity case now?" Santana asks.

"No, I am. This money is donated to the cause of getting you to leave me and my friends alone. Call it 'enlightened self-interest.'"

Santana rolls her eyes.

"Come on," Artie grins. "What do you say? I help you build a Brittany fund, and in return, you give Quinn and company the middle finger the next time the Fire Nation comes callin'. What do you say?"

Some of the hate finally vanishes from Santana's eyes. It doesn't sound like much, but when she says "We'll see," Artie actually believes her.

She finishes the poster with a flourish, stepping back to admire her handiwork.

**Announcing… NAGA Con! The National Association of Gadgeteers and Astronomers Convention! Today at the Zolt Street Gymnasium. Special guest speakers on Sun Warrior historical artifacts and ancient languages!**

She looks at Artie. "Think that'll draw him in?"

Artie peruses the poster carefully. "It needs just one more thing…"

He slides along the floor to the poster, grabbing the paintbrush and adding one little extra tidbit at the bottom of the page…

*Free Chapstick for every visitor (while supplies last)*
We hired some kids to put the posters up throughout the city, and it was literally thirty minutes before people started showing up. Apparently, there are quite a few space nerds in Zedong. Pretty soon, we had a line forming, which was a little awkward, seeing as the convention was fake and we had nothing to show them.

Santana came up with some BS about a chemical spill needing to be cleaned up that pacified the masses for a while, enabling me to sort through the nerd herd to find our man...

Artie peeks out of a trashcan, scanning the crowd for signs of Sam.

"You were foolish to make promises to the assassins," a nearby wanted poster says. Artie looks up to see the surprisingly well-rendered mug of one Blaine Anderson staring down at him disapprovingly.

"I'm just getting them off my back," Artie whispers. "Wish I could do the same for you."

He goes underground again, navigating around the sewers and popping up beneath a crack in the sidewalk.

"You held all the power," says the broken head of a ceramic tanuki statue. "They gave everything, and expected nothing. Now, they want something from you. You have compromised yourself."

"I'm just trying to help them," Artie says. "The surest way to destroy an enemy—"

"Is to destroy them. Quickly, cleanly, and without mercy. They will never be your friends. Their very natures conflict with yours. They are weapons, nothing more. When you are finished, dispose of them."

Artie clenches his jaw and burrows again, popping up under a broken box a little further down the line. He lifts up the lid and looks out.

"They will betray you," says a lizard crow, in between taking bites of discarded, moldy bread bits. "Mark my words."

"They have no reason to betray me," Artie counters.

"They have every reason," the lizard crow says. "Or have you forgotten how much you are worth to certain parties in the Earth Kingdom?"

Artie flicks a pebble at the bird, causing it to fly off towards the crowd. A few of the people in line watch it fly overhead—one of which happens to be wearing a hood. As he tilts his head back, the hood falls off, revealing bright blonde hair and a familiar face. Artie grins like a fiend, and heads back inside.

A couple of minutes later, the doors open, and everyone files into the dark gym.

"Welcome, dorks and dorkettes, to the most spectacular celebration of shit that no one else cares about that you will ever see in your life!" Santana announces proudly. "If you look closely, you will see our show's first exhibits—star maps, projected on the ceiling! Look hard—it may take your eyes a few moments to adjust to the darkness."

Naturally, there are no projections. Everyone looks up into the black void of space, while Artie uses his tremorsense to pick out his mark.

In a couple of minutes, Sam's got a bag over his head and a gag in his mouth, and the four of them
are leaving an entire gymnasium full of would-be astronomers contemplating the darkness of the universe.

When the bag comes off his head and the gag comes out of his mouth, Sam sees two enemies and a friend sitting next to each other.

"Ummm…" Sam says. "Okay, pardon my language and all, but… what the actual fuck?"

I explained the situation, and Sam was surprisingly receptive. I'm guessing he experiences enough weird shit to believe just about anything at this point. He led us back to his workshop, a little place not too far from here, actually. We parked Kilgore next to Sam's mongoose lizard, Skippy.

"I don't know where she came from," Sam says, patting the creature on the nose as it flicks its tongue out to taste/smell him affectionately. "She just kind of finds me wherever I am. I think she likes my cologne, or something. She's always smelling me."

"What happened to her tail?" Puck asks, noting the point where it detached.

"No idea," Sam shrugs. "She was like that when she found me. I was a little ways outside of some big Fire Nation town… uhh… Loveseat? Sofa? Something like that."

Back in the real world, Kurt instigates a reunion between old friends Mr. Face, and Mr. Palm. "That fucking lizard…" he mumbles.

Artie continues his story, oblivious.

Sam's workshop is in the uppermost loft of a mostly-abandoned building that was probably condemned ages ago.

"Nobody comes around here except the druggies," Sam explains. "At first they were kind of annoying, but then I figured out that I could keep them away by drawing really scary eyes on my door."

As they reach the top of the stairs, a giant pair of bloodshot, red eyes stares down at them.

"Damn, dude," Puck says. "I'm not even high and that shit scares me."

"Baby," Santana says dismissively. From his position on Sam's back, Artie notices that she keeps her eyes on the fake eyes the entire time they're going up the steps, just in case the door tries something.

They open the door to find a clusterfuck of whatchamacallits and doodads. Half-finished knick-knacks and spare parts for spare parts litter the floor, the walls, a few tabletops, and even the rafters. A few sheets are hung from the roof, to give the illusion of rooms. It looks like chaos to them, but Sam navigates the mess with ease.

"I lost all my junk when you guys captured me," Sam sighs sadly. "Like, gillions of gold in equipment and important astrological information were in my backpack. I don't guess you guys brought it with you, did you?"

Puck and Santana look at each other. "Ahhh, nope," Puck says. "Pretty sure it's at the bottom of a cliff in about a gillion pieces."
"Along with a couple of rhinos and a shit-ton of supplies," Santana says. "We had a little run in with an aggressive amphibian."

Sam sighs. "Oh well… this place is my workshop. I've been trying to rebuild the equipment I lost. Picking up spare parts, trying to piece things together… You'd be amazed at what these factories just toss out like it's garbage. I mean, look at this!" He holds up a… twirly, metal spiky spring, half-rusted and warped. "Who in their right mind would trash this?"

The other three don't really have an answer for that.

"Anyway," Sam says. "You guys can stay here if you want. I've got spare… uhh… rooms? And some sheets and stuff. I mean, I don't have any spare beds, but I don't really have any beds at all, so…"

Puck and Santana share a look. "We'll get back to you on that," Santana says.

"Here," Artie says, tossing the two of them a coin purse. "Go buy yourselves something nice. Me and Sam got some catching up to do."

"Thanks, dude," Puck says. "I am so fucking hungry. I could just… eat stuff."

"Puck, you are a poet in the making," Santana says casually as the two of them head out.

"So," Artie says. "How've you been?"

Sam gives him a half-grin, half-wince. "I've been getting by, man. That's about all you can do, you know?"

Artie nods. "Believe me, I know."

Sam grins. "Hey, I bet I have enough parts here for a wheelchair! Just give me a couple minutes…"

Now about this next part…

I've always wondered about Sam. I could never tell if the guy was a total dunce or a genius in disguise. I feel the matter is firmly settled after what he did here.

I'm gonna tell you what happened, but quick disclaimer; you will not believe this shit.

"There," Sam says, putting the finishing touches on the most ghetto set of wheels Artie has ever and probably will ever sit in. "It's pretty cool, huh?"

Artie tilts his head. "It's something, alright. Help me in?"

Sam grabs him and deposits him in the seat. Artie half expects the thing to fall apart the second he plops onto it, but not only does it hold together… it's actually pretty comfortable. "Not bad," Artie says.

Sam grins at him. "Try it out! I'm gonna go check the back—I think I've got a few more parts we can trick it out with."

Artie rolls around for a bit. The axels need a little oil, and the wheels need to be aligned, but other than that, it's actually pretty nice. "Damn, Sam!" Artie calls out. "You're a natural at this construction stuff. If you can just slap something together like this…"

"Well," Sam says from the back. "I didn't just slap it together. I've actually been working on the
design for a while. I've got tons of gadget designs that I've never had time to build. This is just the first time I've really had a reason to put together a wheelchair. I've had all sorts of cool ideas for it. Like, I was thinking the other day—Fire Nation wheelchairs must kind of suck for you, right? In the Earth Kingdom, all the wheels were made of stone, so you could move them without even touching them. Here, everything's metal."

"True, true," Artie says, testing the turning by spinning the wheelchair in place.

"So, I got to thinking," Sam says. "You know how Kurt can, like, plantbend or whatever?"

"He doesn't plantbend," Artie says. "He bends the water *inside* of the plants."

"Exactly!" Sam says. "He bends the elements inside of things he can't bend. I was thinking; hey, why can't you do the same thing? So—" A loud clang briefly interrupts Sam as he tosses something around. "—I put bits of earth in the metal of your chair… theoretically, you should be able to bend them, right?"

Artie cups his chin in thought. "I like the way your brain works," he says. "Let's try it out…" He gives the wheels a few experimental taps, trying to feel out the locations of the earthy bits. It takes him a few taps in a few different locations to get a really good feel for them, but after a few minutes, he's pretty sure he's got them down. He clangs his knuckles against the metal, and gives an experimental 'push' without touching the wheels.

The chair moves.

"Hot damn!" Artie grins. "Sam, you *are* a genius!"

"What do you mean?" Sam asks, emerging from the back with a few bits of scrap metal in his arms. All of which he promptly drops when he sees what Artie is doing. "Whoa! Holy crap, dude! How are you doing that?"

"Oh, like you don't know," Artie scoffs. He continues to push the chair around without touching the wheels, purely using his bending. It works like a dream—if anything, it's even more precise than just moving it with his hands, because it doesn't rely on his muscles or his skin to function. It's purely his energy. "Putting bits of earth in the metal… motherfucking genius."

"Ummm…" Sam says somewhat nervously. "I… uhh… I didn't actually… do that."

Artie blinks at him. "But… you said you did."

"No, dude," Sam says. "I said 'for example.' You must not have heard me."

Artie tilts his head. Blinks. "Wait. So… if you didn't put bits of metal in here… who did?"

Sam shrugs. "Beats me."

Artie contemplates this for several more seconds. "…bring me more metal."

A few minutes later, Artie is surrounded by pieces of scrap metal, tapping and feeling all of them. "Every damn one of them," Artie says. "They've *all* got bits of earth in them."

"Huh," Sam says. "Who knew?"

Artie slams his hands into the metal over and over again, trying to figure out where the bits of earth are, how big they are, where the biggest pieces rest. When he's ready, he slams several rapid
punches into the metal at specific points, finishing with a single blow directly the middle.

The metal curves around his hand, crumpling like paper into a massive, gnarled mitt.

"Whoa!" Sam says. "Cool!"

Artie's reaction is a bit more subdued. He stares up at Sam, expression flat, and says, perfectly monotone, "You do realize what you've just done, right?"

"...no?" Sam says.

"You just solved a thousand-year-old problem for earthbenders. You just discovered a way to do something that everyone else in the world thought was impossible. And you did it by accident."

Sam blinks at him. "...sweet!" he grins.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Kurt says. "Wait, so you're telling me that you can actually bend metal?"

Artie nods. "It's entirely possible. You aren't actually bending the metal—you're bending the impurities inside of it. Turns out, pure metal is shockingly soft, so most metals have impurities worked in on purpose, to give them greater strength. It isn't as easy as bending regular old rocks—you really need to know what you're doing, and it takes some practice. I'm still not perfect at it, but I'm getting better. Did you see the door when you came in?"

"Yeah," Kurt says. "It looks like it got hit with a battering ram."

"Artie Ab-rams, at your service," Artie says, leaning back in his chair, proud as a peacock.

Kurt blinks, still a bit shocked. "I can't believe Sam figured that out by accident. I can't believe no one's figured it out before."

Artie grins. "I suspected as much. To be honest, she's probably good enough to pull it off too, with a little practice. She won't be as good as me, though," he says smugly. "'Cedes has raw power to spare, but this technique requires… precision. And you are looking at Mr. Precision right here."

"What about me?" Kurt asks.

"Maybe someday," Artie shrugs.

Kurt glares at him. "Well, thanks for the vote of confidence. Now, as you were saying…?"

Artie's warm glow of pride fades slowly, as he realizes what comes next in the story.

---

I was on cloud nine. Even sleep deprived as I was, the discovery gave me a huge rush of energy. I actually felt like staying up all night, for once. So I did. Sam fetched me as much metal as he could, and I just sat there, pounding away at it, bending as best I could. After a while, Sam got tired and headed to bed, so I had to quiet my bending a little. I was lightly tapping at a piece of tin when I
heard them. It was a complete accident. Their voices traveled through the metal gutters as they spoke outside…

"So he did the same thing to you?" Puck asks.

"Offered to pay me off, out of the fucking blue," Santana says. "I was kind of blown away, actually."

"Me too," Puck says. "How fucked up is this? I mean, are we just gonna wait for him to steal us our weight in gold?"

"Oh, what, you don't like waiting? If it bothers you that much, we can just skip the middle man, and turn numbass in for the reward," Santana says.

"He does have that giant bounty," Puck says thoughtfully. "How long do you think it'd take to steal that much?"

"Longer than you've got," Santana laughs.

"Heh," Puck says. "You might be onto something here."

"We'll just stuff him in a box, poke a few holes in the top, and take a luxury cruise back to the EK," Santana says idly. "Easy peasy…"

Their voices fade as they move out of the doorway and into the building proper, and Artie sits back in shock.

"Well, now look what you've done."

He can see the Hidden Man out of the corner of his eye, but he refuses to look at him. "Shut up. I don't feel like talking to you now—"

"Self-sabotage at its finest," the Hidden Man says. "The assassins cared only about money. You put the thought of retirement into their heads, and promised them a fortune. What did you expect? Now, they've begun thinking of all the lovely things they could do with a life of luxury. And they have realized that turning you in is the easiest way to attain exactly that. People are like water. They will always take the path of least resistance."

"Shut up," Artie hisses. He clamps his mouth shut as the door flies open.

"Man, those eyes are creepy as fuck," Puck says. "I'm gonna have nightmares about those things."

"Stop being such a whiner," Santana says. She notices Artie sitting in the corner, and jumps. "Holy shit!"

"See!" Puck says. "They are scary!"

"No, dumbass, look," she says, pointing at Artie. "You weren't kidding when you said you never sleep, were you?"

Artie smiles at her. "Gotta always be on the lookout," he says quietly. "You never know when a knife is coming at your back…"

"True dat," Puck says. "Well, some of us non-freaky people do need sleep. So, night."

"Later, Abrams," Santana says with a yawn. They head off to one of Sam's side 'rooms,' and the
Hidden Man's voice fills his ears again.

"Wait an hour or so," he says. "You can slip in and finish them without resistance."

"I'm not a murderer," Artie says.

"You are whatever the situation requires," the Hidden Man counters. "It is how you were designed."

"Shut up," Artie says. "I can't… I can't think when you're around. Just leave me alone, okay?"

"Artie?" Sam says sleepily.

Artie spins around in his chair to see Sam, hair askew, barely coherent, wobbling back and forth in the moonlight.

"Who ya talkin' to?" Sam asks blearily.

"Nobody," Artie says. "You're… umm… you're dreaming."

Sam blinks. "I am?"

"Yep," Artie says. "And you should go back to bed. Errr, your dream bed, that is."

"Mmmmkay," Sam says, sleepily turning around and plodding back to his room.

"Wait," Artie says. "First… could you do me a favor and put me outside?"

Sam blinks at him. "It's a dream. Why don't you just, like, warp yourself outside?"

"Because… it's your dream," Artie says. "Not mine."

"Ohhhh," Sam says, turning this over for a few moments. "That makes sense," he nods.

A couple minutes later, he has carried Artie down the steps and deposited him on the street. "Why do you want to be outside anyway?" Sam asks.

"I've got… ummm… important stuff to do," Artie says. "You know. Dream stuff." He sprinkles imaginary fairy dust through the air, to illustrate his point.

"Cool," Sam says. "Well, don't take too long. I might wake up soon, which is, like, the apocalypse for you, or something. Pretty sure dreams explode when they die."

"Duly noted," Artie says. "Night, Sam."

"Night, Dream Artie!" Sam says.

Artie turns around and stares up at the night sky.

"You know what you must do," the Hidden Man says.

And for once, Artie agrees with him. "I guess so."

I spent the entire night making preparations. I found the perfect location, transported everything there myself. It wasn't easy, but I was… driven, you might say. It's like when I decided to go along with the Hidden Man, suddenly, everything was easier.
The next day, I told Puck and Santana that I had robbed a bank for them during the night, and invited them to a cave outside of town where I'd stored the loot.

There was loot in the cave, alright. But it wasn't from a bank...

"Just wait 'til you see it," Artie says as he slides to the back of the cave. "It's gonna rock your world..."

He collapses the false wall he erected, and Puck and Santana eagerly head deeper into the cave. The torchlight dances along the walls, shadows cast by the cracks seeming to wave at them in warning. Go back.

But they won't. None of them will. There is no going back at this point.

"Damn, dude," Puck says. "How deep did you store this shit?"

"Not too much further," Artie says.

Santana is the first to see it. She squints at it, holding her torch closer to the sparkling metal. It takes her a second or two to recognize it. "Hey… isn't that the statue we stole?"

"How'd it get here?" Puck asks.

Artie answers by thrusting his hands up, slamming Puck into the ceiling with a pillar of earth and knocking him senseless. Santana jumps up and tries to counter, but Artie slams her into the wall with a square stone slab.

Before either of them can move, Artie has affixed their extremities to the ground, encased in solid rock. The discarded torch rolls along the ground behind Artie, encompassing Santana and Puck in his enormous shadow.

"Dude," Puck coughs. "What the fuck?"

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Artie asks. "Did you think I wouldn't find out about your plan?"

"What plan?" Santana asks, honest confusion mixed in with the outrage.

Her question is so sincere that it throws Artie off for a second. A loud voice from outside brings him back to reality.

"This is the Zedong City Guard!" a voice calls from outside. "We know you are in there, criminal scum! Come out with your hands raised."

Puck looks at Artie, eyes wide. "You… you set us up," he whispers, like he can't believe it.

Santana's voice is low, and surprisingly calm for a change. "I knew it. I knew you couldn't be trusted."

"Takes one to know one," Artie counters. "I heard you talking."

"About what?" Puck shouts. "Tell me what the fuck is going on here, man!"

"In the name of the Fire Lord, we ORDER you to surrender, or we will come in after you!"

"Your little conversation last night," Artie says. "'Skip the middle man? Just stuff him in a box?' That ring any bells? You were going to stab me in the back. You're just mad that I stabbed first."
"Oh, I wish," Santana says. "I wish we'd done that. I wish we had given your fucking slimy traitorous ass exactly what you deserve."

"Dude, that was just fucking around!" Puck says desperately. "We weren't actually going to do it! It was a joke!"

"You have sixty seconds to surrender peacefully! We are authorized to employ deadly force!"

Artie clenches his jaw. "You're just... you're just talking out of your ass..." he says quietly. "I know people like you. I know how you think."

"You don't know a fucking thing about me," Santana growls. "You never have, and you never will."

"Dude, I am begging you," Puck says. "Don't do this. Just let us out, man. We're bros, right? It's just a misunderstanding."

Puck sounds so pitiful that for a second, he almost does it. He almost lets them go.

And then, on the back wall of the cave, Artie's enormous shadow looks at him with firelight eyes, and begins to speak.

"Even if he speaks the truth," it says, "your trust has been compromised. They have seen that they cannot trust you, and therefore you cannot trust them. Free them now, and they will betray you as surely as ever. Finish this."

"Sorry," Artie says. "You had your chance, and you blew it. You can rot, for all I care."

He slides towards the wall, away from the torch, exposing Puck and Santana to its light.

He can see Puck as he whispers, broken. "You piece of shit..." And he can see him as he begins to roar, body thrashing, back arching, every tendon straining to its limits against the bonds that hold him. "You fucking bastard! Fucking SCUM! FUCKING BACKSTABBER! STAB ME IN THE FRONT, YOU HEAR ME? GET BACK HERE AND KILL ME YOURSELF, YOU COWARD!"

He can see Santana's deadly calm expression, her flat, focused eyes, emotion betrayed only by tear tracks shimmering the firelight. "I am coming for you. Mark my fucking words. You can run to the ends of the earth. You can hide in the deepest pit, or on the highest mountain peak, it makes no difference. I will escape. I will find you. And I will make you pay for this."

Artie has nothing more to say to them. He melds with the cave wall, vanishing into the rock.

He watches a short distance away, well-camouflaged, as the guards drag them out of the cave with the stolen goods.

Santana is calm and still.

Puck does not struggle, but he still screams, his voice hoarse. "You're dead, you hear me? FUCKING DEAD. You're nothing but a smear on the sidewalk, you little dick!"

"You should have killed them," the Hidden Man says as he steps up next to Artie. "Now, you have two enemies who are more devoted than ever to your demise. You failed to eliminate them, and you failed to convert them. You have failed on all counts."

Artie knows that he has failed, and not in the ways jerk-face thinks. He stares up at the shadow of
his mind. "Who are you?" he whispers. "What do you want from me?"

The Hidden Man turns and walks away, growing fainter with every step, until he is little more than a vague shimmer, an outline in the air.

"That is not the right question."

"I went back to Sam and told him everything," Artie says quietly. "Bless his goofy-ass, trusting little bones, he said he'd stick by me. Assuming Puck and Santana would squeal on him if given half a chance, we gathered as much of his junk as we could and high-tailed it out of there. I was looking for a new place for Sam to set up shop when I discovered your little hideout, and… here we are."

Kurt swallows thickly, unsure of what to say. "Oh, Artie…" is all he can offer.

"Don't you get it, Kurt?" Artie says, sounding so resigned and exhausted it's like he's speaking from beyond the grave. "You have nothing to apologize for. You were right. I can't be trusted. Puck and Santana trusted me, and I rewarded them with a knife to the spine. I'm seeing things, I'm hearing voices… I don't even trust myself anymore." He slumps in his chair. "I'm so tired…"

He gathers his thoughts as best he can. Kurt knows that his words now are more important than ever. This could make or break not only his relationship with Artie, but the boy himself.

There are many things he could say, but only one of them feels right. This isn't the time for platitude or placating him. Kurt needs to say something true, something real. And when he reaches for such a thing, his mind returns one truth. Even after all the secrecy and deception, even after everything he's heard…

"I still trust you," Kurt says.

Artie looks up at him, shocked and lost. "What? How? Kurt, I just told you—"

"I don't care," Kurt says, kneeling in front of him and grabbing his shoulder. "You are my friend and I trust you. It was wrong to treat you the way I did, and I'm sorry. No matter what's going on in your head, for better or worse, you are part of this family. Your place is with us. And I promise you, it always will be."

And that tears it. It's like a beacon in the heavens, a constellation spelling out 'it's okay, Artie, you can fall apart now. We're not going to leave you on the curb.'

Artie sniffles a few times, and then just goes for broke, burying his face in Kurt's shirt before he starts ugly-crying. "I'm out of ideas. I don't know what to do anymore," he sobs. "I'm losing it, Kurt. I'm losing my mind."

Kurt pats him on the back and lets him cry. "Shhh," he says. "We'll figure something out, I promise."

He is absolutely certain of one thing that needs to happen, but he can't tell Artie yet. Not when he's this fragile. He doesn't want to risk pushing him away again.

But he does know this. Sooner or later, Artie is going to have to start sleeping again.

Because if he doesn't, he's going to lose a lot more than his mind. He's going to lose his life.
After nice, long emotional venting session, Artie finally calms down and sits back. "Well," he sniffs. "That was therapeutic." He points at the wet spot on Kurt's shirt with a wobbly grin. "Sorry about that. I don't always cry, but when I do, I don't half-ass it."

Kurt waterbend-flicks the tears and snot out of the fabric with ease. "No harm, no foul," he grins. "So, are we good?"

"We are the very best," Artie smiles.

"I'm glad to hear it," Kurt says. "Now, let's get back to the others. It's dangerous to leave them unsupervised for this long."

"What would they do without us?" Artie says with a grin.

As they leave the room, Kurt is putting together a plan. If he triple-teams Artie with Mercedes and Finn to back him up, he might be able to convince him to sleep. He could employ Rachel, but Kurt doubts Artie will take her opinion into account. Actually, having her on their side might actually make him more likely to rebel…

He's so deep in thought that he doesn't see Sebastian until he basically collides with him. "Ooomph!" Kurt grunts.

"Ow!" Sebastian hisses. "Jeez, if you want me to move, ask. I'm not an element—you can't just bend me out of the way."

A scathing retort is all cooked up and ready to be served, but Kurt abruptly swallows it when he gets a good look at Sebastian's disheveled condition. "What happened to you?" he asks.

Sebastian purses his lips in thought. "Gopherminks."

Kurt blinks. "Gopherminks?"

Sebastian nods. "Thousands of 'em."

And he's off towards the warehouse proper. Artie watches him go with a squint of disapproval. "Who's the douchebag?"

"THANK YOU," Kurt sighs, throwing his arms up in celebration at finally having an ally. "Artie, I am so glad to have you back."

"That makes two of us," Artie agrees.

Avatar and earthbender approach Sam just as his story wraps up. "…and that's why Suzy Pepper finally agreed to get therapy and let me out of her basement."

The Hawks erupt into applause. Blaine stands up and whistles.

"Positively thrilling!" Wes says.

"Ten out of ten, would listen again!" David agrees.

"Well, as much as I would love to get a recap," Kurt says. "We kind of had a reason for searching you out, Sam. I suppose Artie explained that to you already?"

"Oh yeah!" Sam says. "The Sun Warrior thing. Do you have it here?"
"Oh, I do!" Rachel says. "Give me just a second…" She dashes off to the back, a faint cloud of dust in her wake.

"Hey, while she's doing that, maybe you can translate the writing on my sword," Blaine says eagerly. He steps up and unsheathes the weapon… only to find that it isn't his weapon at all. It's a perfectly ordinary sword. "…wait, that's not right. Where'd my Sun Warrior sword go?"

"You lost that thing?" David barks, incredulous.

"That was a priceless historical artifact!" Trent says.

"I just… I don't know where I put it… I could've sworn…" Blaine stammers.

"Hey," Sebastian says, stepping in front of him. "Lay off, alright? Shit happens. We've got more important stuff to worry about than some silly sword, am I right?"

"Yes, like the whereabouts of Thaddeus and Mercedes," Wes says. "They still aren't back!"

"If you're really that worried," Kurt says, "we'll go look for them after this. But we need to get this done first."

"Definitely," Artie agrees, rolling up behind them. "I've been aching for some answers here."

"Your wait is at an end!" Rachel announces proudly. She walks through the crowds, slowly and with perfect poise, presenting the Sun Warrior tablet to Sam with a flourish and a bow.

"Sweet," Sam grins. Everyone crowds together, clumping as closely as they can without crowding Sam too much. Kurt squeezes in next to Blaine, who has Wes and David on his other side. Finn is on Kurt's other side, with Rachel tucked under one arm. Artie climbs up on Finn's shoulders, and the two share a brief grin at the familiar situation. The rest of the Hawks shove their heads into whatever space is available, as they wait with bated breath for Sam's reading.

"We'll start with this side first," Sam says. He clears his throat. "The subject is right here. It says 'The Sun Farts—'"

"Ahem," Kurt clears his throat loudly.

Sam looks up and tilts his head at Kurt. It takes him a second to remember. "Oh! Right, yeah, sorry. What I meant to say was…"

And then he starts reading again.

"The Solar Winds…"

Chapter End Notes

This chapter marks a significant turning point in the story. Up until now, each chapter has brought more questions than answers. This is the last chapter where that is true—starting with 70, we're reversing that trajectory. We're going to start getting answers. Big ones.

In other words, we'll soon be on the steady slide towards the Grand Finale and our
tale's eventual conclusion. ;)

Coming up next…

CHAPTER 70 – The Solar Winds
The Solar Winds

**Warnings**: Discussion of being suicidal.

**Author's Note**: This chapter is **insanely** dense. Question after question after question is answered. Staggering secrets are revealed, and characters are pushed to places they never thought they would go. We have reached a turning point. No more screwing around—this is the proverbial deep breath before the plunge. We're not quite at the finale yet, but we are getting close. And as you well know… it always gets darker before the dawn.

Sam peers at the tablet with a mighty squint of deep thought. The rest of the room waits with bated breath for the coming revelation.

And waits.

And waits…

"Are you going to start any time soon?" David asks.

"Working on it," Sam says.

"What's the hold-up?" Artie asks.

"Translation's not as easy as it looks, okay?" Sam says. "I've gotta worry about grammar, and syntax, and sentence structure, different ideas attached to different words, author intent, jokes and puns that can't be translated, lines of thought that haven't been in popular consciousness for like a thousand years…"

"Okay, okay," Kurt says. "We get it. Continue. We'll be here whenever you're ready."

"While he's doing that," Trent says, "can we get some kind of recap on what it is we're trying to figure out?"

"Oh!" Rachel shouts, raising her hand and jumping up and down. "I can help with that!" She vanishes in a cloud of dust, which persists for about two seconds before she dispels it with the speed of her return. "This is the prologue from my work-in-progress dramedy, *Legendary Heroine: Rachel Berry*."

"*Legendary Heroine?" Artie asks. "That's putting the cart before the ostrich horse, don't you think?"

"I'm simply thinking head," Rachel says. "When I inevitably become a famous historical figure, there will be a mad rush to write songs, poems, and dramas about my exploits. I am merely staking advance claim on that very profitable territory."

"Oh, that's smart. You're really smart!" Finn says. Artie just sighs and pats him on the head.

Rachel clears her throat. "*Since time immemorial, the world has flourished the watchful eye of the Spirits. Sea and sky and earth and sun hang in a delicate balance, guarding, protecting, and enabling the existence of life. Only when all four of these mighty forces are in balance can life exist. And thus, to maintain that balance, the spirit of the Avatar—*"
"Too long, already bored," Sebastian yawns.

Rachel gasps in outrage. "What? I—you—"

"Dude!" Finn says. "No talking during the performance."

Sebastian ignores them both. "Can we get someone a little more concise? Someone who doesn't feel the need to start at the beginning of time?"

"I'll handle this," Kurt says. "Sorry, Rachel. But keep working on that, I like the tone." He clears his throat. "Okay, my friends and I were smuggled into the Fire Nation a couple of months ago. You guys know how it is, right? The Avatar must master the four elements and bring balance to the world. Well, in this case, bringing balance means fighting the unnatural plague that is ravishing the world's population."

"You're fighting the plague?" Trent asks.

"Yes and no," Kurt says. "It's complicated. Anyway, I had two elements under my belt and needed a firebending teacher. Unfortunately, the plague had made the Fire Nation paranoid about anything and everything foreign, up to and including me. There were rumors that I was somehow responsible for spreading the disease—horse-hockey, by the way—so pretty much any search for a firebending teacher ended in an attempted lynching. Seriously, the xenophobia around here is insane. No offense."

"None taken," Blaine nods. "Continue."

"Anyway, my friends and I wandered aimlessly for a while, until we got to the Capital, and I happened to find someone who still believed in the Avatar, despite everything."

"Me!" Blaine says smugly. "He's talking about me."

"Yes," Kurt says with a smile. "Our dear adorable Prince Blaine agreed to help me out. Unfortunately, disaster found both of us shortly thereafter. There was a crazy light show, a massive riot, a couple of assassins, and a governmental overturn. By the time the whole thing was over, Blaine was holding on to life by a thread, and I was artistically interpreted as a giant lizard monster and declared Public Enemy Number One."

"Yikes," Jeff says. "That had to suck."

"Those lights were crazy," Nick says. "They had everybody acting weird. Dalton had more disciplinary incidents in that one night than they had in the entire rest of the year."

"Yes, they did seem to have an odd effect on the population," Rachel says. "Sho Fa seemed to break out into an unusually large number of loud parties in the streets. It was a great impediment to my necessary eight hours of beauty rest. I can't use ear plugs to block out the noise because the pressure on my inner ear interferes with my tonal perception—"

"Yes, Rachel, thank you," Kurt says. "You have actually helped make my next point. Shortly after fleeing for our lives, we ran into Sam, an old friend of ours. It turns out that his family translated this very artifact for Sue Sylvester, our illustrious new Fire Lord, not too long before the lights came on. The lights, or solar winds, as we came to call them, have some kind of effect on firebenders. We think Sue used them somehow to orchestrate her rise to power. The only problem is… we're really not sure what the solar winds actually do."

"We are now!" Sam announces.
All attention shifts away from Kurt and over to a brightly grinning Sam. "Okay," he says. "So, a little background; back in the day, the Sun Warriors were, like, the Kings of Space. They knew more about the sun and the stars than pretty much anyone, but as you can probably guess, the sun was their best subject. They figured out that it goes in cycles, just like everything on earth does. Only solar cycles are a lot longer than earth ones. At certain points in the cycles, the sun basically gets indigestion and sends a lot of extra stuff towards the earth. That's where the solar winds come from."

"Indigestion?" Blaine says. "My dad said something about the sun being restless this year. I don't think that's what he meant, but…"

"He had the right idea," Sam says. "I sorted through all this stuff—historical information, dates, charts, equations, and a recipe for spicy cheese puffs—"


"—and found this on the solar winds" Sam continues. He pauses for a second. "When the midnight light sets fire to the sky, the solar winds fan the flames of the heart."

There is a small chorus of oohs and ahs from the crowd.

"Fans the who of the what?" David asks.

"The flames of the heart," Sam repeats.

"Like… feelings?" Finn says.

"Oooh!" Rachel says. "I have a lot of those."

"We know," Artie deadpans.

"So it affects our emotions?" Wes asks. "How?"

"You guys are the fire experts," Sam says. "What happens when you fan flames?"

"They grow…" Blaine says.

"Well, there you go," Sam says. "It makes everything feel, like, bigger. More important, more powerful, you know? I mean, think about it. How did you guys feel when the lights were going on?"

"I was pretty hyped up," Nick says. "I wanted to climb on top of the school for a better look. I tried to get Jeff to come with me, but he was too busy laughing at everything like he was high."

"And I wasn't," Jeff says. "I mean, you know, not this time."

"I was really fidgety," Cole says. "Pretty sure I rearranged my room. Might have rearranged a few more. My hallmates were… not pleased."

"I hardly noticed the lights," Flint says. "I lost myself in one of my philosophy texts."

"I did homework," Trent says. "Lots of homework."

"Interesting…" Kurt says. He looks at Wes and David. "What about you two?"

"I was… worried," Wes says. "About Blaine, mostly."
"I was a bit more worried about myself," David says.

Wes gives him a skeptical side-eye.

"Well, I can't do much for Blaine if I'm dead, can I?" David asks. "I was worried about him, too."

Kurt turns to the boy himself, using his eyes to silently ask if he feels like sharing.

Blaine nods. "I was just… scared," he quietly admits. "I didn't know what was going on, or why. People were trying to kill me, the city was going crazy, everything was wrong… I just wanted to find my dad. I thought he could fix things."

There is a moment of respectful silence before Sam picks up again.

"So, do you guys get the idea?" Sam says. "The solar winds don't change how you feel, or why. They just make you feel more of it. Emotions become huge. Wants become needs. Curious becomes adventurous. Happy becomes ecstatic. Nerdy becomes nerdier."

"Hey!" Trent says.

"Dude, chill," Sam says. "As a fellow nerd, I understand your plight."

Trent crosses his arms sourly.

"So, yeah," Sam says. "The solar winds just take all firebenders' emotions and make them super huge and dramatic. Kind of like puberty, but powered by magical sun juice instead of hormones. The Capital has a lot of firebenders, so whatever they were feeling, they felt a lot more of it when the winds showed up."

"In the days before the lights," Kurt says, "the two biggest emotions on my vibe-o-meter were suspicion and resentment. So suspicion becomes paranoia, and resentment becomes anger."

"And an environment full of paranoia and anger is a powder keg," Blaine says. "A single spark would set off the whole thing."

Finn's face goes from pensive squint to wide-eyed shock. "Holy crap! I just remembered—like, in the days before the riots, there were these chicks going around the city, talking about the plague and stuff. I saw one myself."

"Me too!" Kurt says. "They were saying the most insane things about it. And me."

"And Blaine, too," Finn says.

"What?" Blaine says.

"Yeah, those girls were talking about you, like you were the reason the Fire Lord didn't do anything about the plague," Finn says.

"Well, I'll be," Artie says. "Who wants to wager those girls were in Sue Sylvester's employ? She's got a small army of firebending warrior chicks to throw around—I'll bet you anything they were spreading rumors on her behalf."

"They planted the seeds," Kurt says quietly. "Sue started all those little fires knowing that the solar winds would come along and fan them into a raging inferno."

"But, wait," Finn says. "If the shiny sun thingies only affect firebenders, why'd the whole city go nuts?"

"Emotions are contagious," Rachel explains. "If you surround yourself with happy people, you soon find yourself feeling much brighter. The same is true of all emotions, especially strong ones. If the firebenders of the world had very strong feelings, everyone around them would likely catch a bit of their fervor."

"That's not all," Sam says.

"What do you mean?" Trent asks.

"'Flames of the heart' has a double meaning," Sam says. "The modern Fire Nation learns to bend on pure drive and focus. No emotions required. But the Sun Warriors were different. They were all about the feelbending."

"My father always said that using emotions to firebend is dangerous," Blaine says quietly. "Relying on hate and anger to fuel your flames will blacken and char your heart."

"Yeah," Sam says, "but those aren't the only emotions in the world, you know? The Sun Warriors weren't a bunch of rage-a-holics, or anything. They could firebend from joy and happiness, as well as sadness and pain. They weren't completely emotional benders, 'cause you never know what your heart's gonna do. But when they really felt something, they weren't afraid to draw on it for a little extra juice."

"Interesting," Wes says quietly. "So it strengthens firebending based on emotion?"

"Bingo!" Sam says. "There's a list here of years when the solar winds came, and what the Sun Warriors used them for. Building monuments in record time, throwing all night dance parties, having wild sex orgies—"

Kurt quirks an eyebrow and makes a note to talk to Blaine about that later. He seems to be deep in thought at the moment.

"They even used them to clean house in battles that would have been impossible under normal circumstances," Sam says.

Blaine snaps his fingers. "That's it!" he says.

"What?" Kurt asks.

"That's why Sue waited until that night to challenge my father," he says. "She could have challenged him to an Agni Kai at any time. The Fire Lord is supposed to be the most powerful firebender in the world, so if someone challenges the Fire Lord to an Agni Kai and defeats them, they get the position. But to issue an Agni Kai is an incredibly grave thing; it is a challenge directly to someone's honor. To challenge someone and lose is to be disgraced, and that's if you even survive. Firebenders take their honor very seriously. An Agni Kai with the Fire Lord is always to the death. If Sue hated him so much and really thought she could take him down, she would have challenged him long before this…but she didn't. She waited until her bending would be strongest."

"She's an emobender?" Kurt asks.

"Sue Sylvester is barely-contained pot of hatred and rage," Blaine says. "Even when she's happy, she always seems on the verge of exploding. The solar winds whipped her anger to new heights.
With all that to draw on, she thought she had the boost she needed to win..." He smiles. "And she was still wrong. My dad would've had her with the lightning if... if it wasn't for..."

He trails off, his smile fading. Kurt puts a gentle hand on his shoulder in an effort to comfort him, but oddly enough, Sam does a better job at that.

"Dude, your dad was a beast," Sam says.

"What do you mean?" Blaine asks.

"Think about it," Sam says. "Lightning requires a clear mind and a clear heart. When the lights were making all other firebenders go wild and crazy, your dad was stone-cold focused. He was able to free himself from all thought and emotion at a time when emotions are at their strongest."

Blaine's smile returns just a bit. "He saved my life," he says. "My dad was the best firebender in the world, and Sue Sylvester cheated him out of his life and his throne."

"So let me get this straight," Sebastian says. "Sue Sylvester used a magic sparkling cloud of sun steroids to send everybody into a roid rage, then she roided up herself to toast your dad and become the uncontested HBIC of the Fire Nation. That about right?"

"That is a very good summary," Rachel says.

"But that doesn't tell us anything about the dance," Kurt says, "or what her next step is."

"Turn it over," Artie says. "Do the other side now."

"Sure thing," Sam says, flipping the tablet over. His jaw drops. "Holy crap! That's a lot of words."

"You can still translate it though, right?" Finn says.

"This isn't just a list. This is like a story, or a poem. It'll take way longer for me to make it make sense to you guys," Sam says.

Suddenly, Cole perks up. "Would it help if somebody already did most of the work?" He pulls out a sheet of paper, which Kurt recognizes as the ink-smeared, incomplete version of the poem they stole from Sue's trunk.

Sam looks at it. "Oh, sweet!" he says. "Now it's just like a fill-in-the-blank puzzle. I love those!"

As he gets to work, Kurt spins around to address the crowd.

"Alright, it's time for Round 2 of 'What do we know?" Kurt says.

Blaine steps in. "We know that Sue is teaching some kind of bending dance to the Navy, but we don't know what it does or how she's going to use it. I read some letters between Admiral Keros and Sue—I think it has something to do with the plague survivors on Etna Island."

"Wait, what?" Sebastian says.

"Nobody lives on Etna Island," Cole says.

"I know," Blaine says. "But according to this letter, Keros rounded them all up and put them there."

"But... why?" Trent asks. "There's nothing there."

"Etna is the smallest volcanic island in the Fire Nation archipelago," David says easily, as if
quoting his geography textbook. "It is currently uninhabited, owing to its small size and a belief that the island itself is cursed."

"Why do they think it's cursed?" Sebastian asks.

"It's a very old legend," Wes says. "Historians haven't even been able to trace its origin. Essentially, it has to do with the mountain—"

"Done!" Sam announces, triumphantly holding the finished poem up for all to see.

"Great!" Kurt says. "Read away."

Sam holds up the paper and opens his mouth, only for the poem to be snatched from him.

"Actually," Rachel says, waving the poem around. "I would like to read it. I need to practice my narration. And since someone so rudely interrupted my last reading—"

"Just get on with it," Sebastian sighs, exasperated.

Rachel unfolds the sheet of paper before her. "Very well," she says primly.

Adopting the whispery tone of an epic narrator, she begins reading aloud…

"Zodai the Fourth, great king,
We sing of your madness, of your glory.
You who brought the dance to us,
The great power, the terrible power.
To call forth and tame
The fire-blood of the earth,
You prayed to the Fire Gods,
With fever in your blood.

"Behold!" said you. "The armies of sand and stone.
In the shadow of our mountains, they sleep,
And so earn the ire of the Gods.
Come, my people! Dance with me,
And we shall rouse from dreaming,
The Sleeping Gods themselves,
To bury our foes in ash and flame!

Through our bodies, through our fire.
We danced, tireless in frenzy,
Strong in zeal, infinite in passion.
Hundreds upon hundreds,
Hours upon hours.
Our movements were the words of the world,
And she answered our call.

Behold!
The ocean breathes.
The earth trembles.
The sky burns…"

Rachel pauses for a second, looking out over the crowd before reading the final line.
"The mountain roars."

An uneasy silence hangs over the room as she finishes. Tension is heavy in the air; there are many thoughts, but few brave enough to speak them.

"The mountain roars," Kurt repeats. "That sounds almost like…"

"There's no way," Blaine says quietly. "Sam, this can't be right. Can it?"

Sam crosses his arms, growing pensive. "Zodai the Mad was a famous Sun Warrior King. Not much is known about him, other than he talked to ghosts and had a weird fixation with egg shells, but he was definitely a real dude. The Sun Warriors worshipped volcanoes as Gods, so…"

"So when Zodai prayed to the Fire Gods, he was praying to the volcanoes," Kurt says. "And when they danced to awaken the Sleeping Gods…"

"They were dancing to awaken the volcanoes," Blaine says, his throat dry. "To bury our foes in ash and flame…' That's what it does. It erupts volcanoes."

The reaction is immediate. Several exclamations of 'what the (blank),' a couple of 'holy (thing)' and a smattering of 'no (something) way!'

"That's not possible!" Trent says.

"Sue Sylvester certainly thinks it is," Kurt says quietly. "She's apparently got some pretty big plans for it."

"Kurt," Blaine says, his eyes widening. "The map of the Earth Kingdom. Those mountains she had marked… they aren't mountains at all. They're volcanoes."

The room erupts into commotion again.

"I don't get it," Artie says. "Why is an erupting volcano such a big deal? It's just a little lava. So what?"

"You obviously know very little about volcanoes," Trent says. "There are all sorts of eruptions. Some are just trickles of lava, burbling out like a premature ejaculation after an awkward handjob. But some are far more powerful—a sudden release of thousands of years of pent-up sexual tension, exploding with a clap louder than any thunderbolt, blasting skyward with enough force to disintegrate flesh and bone. Smoke, ash, lava, and flame are sent miles into the heavens as Mother Nature herself heaves and groans in the throes of orgasm, her plates grinding, her flesh splitting and steaming as the ecstasy goes on, and on, and on—"

"Okay, dude!" Jeff says, his eyes wide and a little freaked. "We get it. Enough with the volcano porn!"

"What…" Sebastian says, looking oddly pale. "What does any of that have to do with the survivors?"

"Oh…" Wes says quietly, his voice thick with dread. "I believe I understand now." He swallows thickly. "The curse of Etna Island is Mount Etna herself. 'Etna' is a Sun Warrior word, meaning…"

"Hermit," Sam says. "One who lives alone."

Wes nods. "They say the mountain hates people; that she refuses to tolerate them on her land."
Every time Etna has erupted, the island has been inhabited. And in the wake of every eruption…"
He swallows. "…the island is ruined. A desolate waste, cleansed of all life."

Silence. The room itself seems to inhale the truth like a deep, painful breath. The Hawks seem to pale in unison. Rachel clutches a hand to her heart. Finn pulls her close, as if to protect her. Artie nearly slides off of Finn's back in shock. Wes and David gape silently. Kurt covers his mouth with his hand. Even Sebastian is affected—he blankly sits on a box, looking almost ill.

Blaine has to lean on a large wooden crate to keep from falling over. "Keros said that Sue had a plan to fight the plague," he says quietly. "This is her plan. She's gathered everyone who was exposed it in one place. And now she's going to turn that place into a smoking wasteland. She's going to kill them all."

Hearing it said aloud is almost like a physical blow. Several people actually flinch.

"That is messed up," Sam says. "She's… like… she's testing her new superweapon on her own citizens. That's sick."

"There are hundreds of people on that island," Sebastian says blankly.

"Why?" Rachel asks. "Why would she do something like that?"

"Fear," Kurt says quietly. "It all comes down to fear. Fear of the plague is almost as bad as the plague itself. Fear is what makes the Fire Nation hate us. Fear led to Sue's rise. And it may lead to worse things yet."

Silence. The air is thick. It is suddenly difficult to move or breath or even think. The weight of the revelation presses down on all of them, and the pressure is almost too much to bear.

"We have to do something," Wes says.

"Yes," David agrees. "We need to act. Immediately, if not sooner."

"No, we need a plan first," Wes says.

"You just said we have to do something!" David says.

"Yes!" Wes says. "By which I meant 'we need to come up with a plan of action!'" He turns to the Prince. "Blaine, what do you think we should do?"

Blaine's head snaps up, his eyes wide and fearful. He looks like a dragon moose, caught in the lights of an oncoming train. "I… think… I think we…"

The Dragon Hawks begin to chatter and murmur amongst themselves. The discussion is dizzying in its speed and intensity. Blaine can't even keep up with who is speaking.

"Maybe we should warn people…"

"Warn who? Nobody would believe us."

"We can't just do nothing!"

"Nobody's saying that—"

"We can't fight off the whole navy!"
"We can't fight a volcano, either!"

"Blaine, what should we do?"

Blaine shakes his head. "I... I'm not..."

"What the fuck are we supposed to do about this? We're just kids!"

"I don't think I want to be here anymore. Oh man, oh man..."

"Will you guys just calm down for a second!"

"We need a plan!"

"We need to act!"

"What do you think, Blaine?"

"Go ahead, Blaine."

"Come on, Blaine."

"Tell us what to do, Blaine."

"Blaine."

"Blaine?"

"Blaine!"

"Blaine."

"Blaine."

"BLAINE. BLAINE BLAINE BLAINE BLAINE BLAINE BLAINE—"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Sebastian barks, so loud and sudden that everyone near him takes a step back. The room stares at him in silent shock.

Sebastian rises from his seat, breathing heavily. "This is stupid," he says, turning towards Blaine. "You know what to do."

"Sebastian— I just..." Blaine says.

"No, you 'just' nothing," Sebastian says, taking a step towards him. "There is one answer to this question, and you know what it is. Say it."

Blaine takes a step back. "We need to... we need to consider... things. I need—I need input, advice, time—"

"There is no time!" Sebastian says, taking another step. "I know you're thinking it. I can see it in your eyes. Say it."

"Sebastian—" Blaine stammers.

"Say it!" Sebastian shouts, stomping the floor so hard that Blaine flinches at the sound.
Kurt sends him a powerful warning glare. "You had better step back."

"No," Sebastian says, still looking at Blaine. "Not until Blaine faces the truth. Not until he puts on his big boy underwear and says what everyone else is thinking."

"Sebastian, I can't," Blaine says. "I can't... I—"

"Fine," Sebastian shrugs. "I'll do it." He turns to the crowd at large. "Here's the plan—kill Sue Sylvester."

The room reels from the suggestion. The Hawks break out into a chorus of fearful chatter, and Blaine looks positively sick.

"It looks like that might be our only option left," Wes says quietly.

"Can we even do that?" David asks.

"Guys, I'm not... I'm not strong enough," Blaine says.

"So?" Sebastian says. "I didn't say challenge her to one of your stupid little Agony Kites; I said to kill her. You don't need strength. Stab her from behind, break her neck, cut her throat, put a hole in her heart, filet her lungs, rip out her liver, shoot an arrow through her skull—"

"You seem to know an awful lot about killing people," Artie says, squinting at him thoughtfully.

"—it doesn't matter how you do it, just that it gets done," Sebastian finishes.

"You want me to just... assassinate her?" Blaine says, starting to sweat. "I can't do that. That would make me as bad as she is—"

"Who gives a fuck?" Sebastian shouts, slamming his fist on Sam's translating table, causing Sam to jump out of his seat. Blaine stumbles backwards. Sebastian moves towards him—and Kurt steps right in his path, water already out and ready.

"Step back," Kurt says.

"Do you not get it?" Sebastian continues, ignoring Kurt and staring straight at Blaine. "Are you seriously this pathetic?"

"I said step back!" Kurt repeats.

"People's lives are at stake!" Sebastian says. "Nobody has time for your stupid little moral hang-ups. You're not a fucking little kid, and this is not a fucking fairy tale!"

"Sebastian, please," Blaine pleads quietly. "I can't..."

Sebastian overturns the table with enough force to knock over a stack of boxes, several of which almost crash into the Dragon Hawks. "STOP SAYING THAT!" he roars, stepping right towards Blaine.

Kurt freezes his water into an icy dagger and aims it at Sebastian. Wes and David are now on both sides of him, in-stance and ready to bend at a moment's notice.

"I won't say it again," Kurt says, his voice barely a growl. "Step. Back."

It finally seems to get through to him. Sebastian stops, and for the first time, Kurt takes stock of his
condition. His eyes are wild, almost feral with energy and something Kurt can't quite place. His entire body is primed and ready for action, his nostrils flaring, a thin sheen of sweat appearing on his face. There is something familiar, so familiar, about the way Sebastian is acting, but Kurt is too caught-up in the moment to search his memory for what it is, where he's seen it before.

Even now, Sebastian never looks at them. His eyes stay firmly rooted on Blaine.

Blaine looks ready to pass out. The rush of revelations and the emotions attached are close to overwhelming him completely.

"Mr. Smythe," Wes says firmly. "I suggest you step away from Blaine immediately."

"Do not approach him again until you are calm," David says. "Is that clear?"

And just like that, it's gone. Kurt can practically see Sebastian gathering the pieces of his smug façade, assembling his mask and placing it over the wild, raw emotion at his core. "Oh, it's clear alright. It's all clear to me now," he says, smiling and shaking his head.

"Sebastian…" Blaine says.

"Don't," Sebastian says, holding up a hand. He looks Blaine right in the eye, making sure he has his full attention before he speaks again. "Hundreds of lives at stake, and all you have to do to save them is kill one person. The woman who killed your father." He laughs. "And you can't do it!" He shakes his head with a smile, which rapidly turns into the coldest glare Kurt has ever seen. "Blaine Anderson," Sebastian says. "You are the weakest person that I have ever met."

And with that statement, Sebastian turns on his heel and starts walking out.

"Where do you think you're going?" Wes asks.

"I'm out," Sebastian says. "Fuck this."

"No, Sebastian, wait," Blaine says, pushing past his guardians.

"I'm done waiting," Sebastian says without even turning his head.

"No, you can't… don't… don't go," Blaine pleads. "Please. We were—what about your… your mask? We were going to look for it together…"

Sebastian pauses for just a second. "Fuck the stupid fox mask," he says. "It was a mistake. This was all… just a stupid mistake…"

And out the door he goes. The room echoes with the sound of it slamming behind him.

"Alright," Wes says. "I think we could all use a few moments to calm down and try to collect ourselves.

"Everyone, take a break," David says. "We'll reconvene in five minutes to discuss our next move."

The Hawks murmur amongst themselves as they disperse. Kurt immediately heads over to Blaine, who looks like he can barely stand up. He ushers him behind a stack of boxes so they can talk a bit more privately.

"Are you alright?" Kurt asks.

Blaine shakes his head. "Kurt, I don't know. I don't know what to do."
"Shhhh," Kurt says. "It's alright."

"No, it isn't!" Blaine says. "We have to do something. And I can't even get past my own feelings enough to figure out what. Sebastian is right. I'm weak."

"No you are not," Kurt says. "Sebastian is as wrong as wrong can be, and he deserves no further consideration from us. You are not weak!"

Blaine shakes his head. "This is just like that night," he says. "I'm freezing up. I can't… I can't…"

"Shh, shh, shh," Kurt says, pulling him into a hug. "It's alright. You're alright…"

"I just…" he sniffs. "I wish I knew what dad would've done…"

Something in the corner of Kurt's vision catches his eye. It's Artie, back in his scrap metal wheelchair, trying to get his attention. He holds up a stone slab with a message carved in it.

**AVATAR TEAM MEETING**
**PLACE: RIGHT HERE**
**TIME: RIGHT NOW**

"Busy!" Kurt mouths.

Artie wipes the slab clean and carves another message in the cracks.

**RE: THE DOUCHEBAG.**

Kurt rolls his eyes. Artie probably won't give this up until he gets it out. The sooner Kurt listens to him, the sooner he can get back. "Blaine, I need to go talk with Artie for a second. Are you going to be okay?"

"I think…" Blaine says quietly. "I'm… I'm a little calmer now. Go ahead." He tries for a brave smile and misses by an Earth Kingdom mile.

Kurt puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes as he heads to the 'Team Meeting.'

Artie leads him over to a private corner, where Finn and Rachel are already waiting for them.

"What's this about?" Kurt asks.

"Okay," Artie says. "I don't want to alarm anyone, but I'm pretty sure your boy Sebastian is a psycho-killer."

Rachel gasps.

"Okay," Artie says. "I don't want to alarm anyone, but I'm pretty sure your boy Sebastian is a psycho-killer."

Finn squints. "Holy—wait," he says. "Like, he kills psychos?"

"No," Artie says with a flat stare. "He is a psycho. And he kills people."

"What makes you think that?" Kurt asks.

"Where were you guys about three nights back?" Artie asks in return.

"Umm… camped outside of a town," Kurt says. "I can't remember the name."

"Was Sebastian with you?" Artie asks.
"Yes," Rachel says. "He joined the group the previous day."

"Did he stay at camp the whole night, or did he leave?" Artie asks.

"...he left," Kurt says. "I don't know where he went, but he got back early that morning. He said he was scouting the area."

"Mmm-hmm," Artie says. "That is an interesting coincidence. Because if we took the same paths to Zedong, then Puck, Santana, and myself were in that town that night. I just happened to be scouting doing a little scouting of my own when I witnessed a masked man straight-up ice two guards without even so much as a warning."

"Whoa," Finn says. "That's messed up. But… what makes you think it was Sebastian?"

"He was wearing a fox mask," Artie says. "And I do believe Mr. Smythe just mentioned owning one of those himself."

"That's right," Kurt says. "It's a little weird to be a coincidence, but it's hardly ironclad proof." He thinks for a couple of second. "What was the murder weapon?"

"Two kills. One with an arrow to the throat, the other with his buddy's weapon to the chest," Artie says. "And then he damn near put an arrow through me."

Kurt's eyes widen. "How did he miss you?"

"He didn't," Artie says. "I blocked the shot by the skin of my damn teeth."

_I always hit what I aim for…_

"Sebastian's signature skill is archery," Kurt says. "I've never seen him miss. _That_ is too much to be coincidence."

"Holy crap," Finn says. "We've been traveling with a murderer. For, like, _days._"

"I went off alone with him," Rachel says, putting a hand over her mouth. "He could have killed me!"

"But he didn't," Kurt says quietly, thoughtfully. "He had ample chance to kill all of us, in fact. But he didn't do it. Why?" He looks at Artie. "Why did he kill those guards?"

"Beats me," Artie says. "He left a note, but I didn't get enough time to read it. A guard spotted me near the bodies."

"So that's why they thought you were a murderer," Finn says.

"Yup," Artie says. "All I know is that the letter was to the Fire Lord. He was sending a message."

"Hmm," Kurt says. "That is interesting. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—Sebastian is gone now. We don't really need to worry about him anymore."

"What if he comes back?" Artie asks.

"If he comes back, we nail his ass to the wall," Kurt says. "Figuratively and literally. After this, and what he said to Blaine, I am so finished pretending to tolerate him. If he ever shows his face around me again, I'm sinking him into the ground and _squeezing_ a confession out of him."
"What about us?" Finn asks. "What if we see him?"

"Keep him far, far away from Blaine," Kurt says.

The group nods.

"Alright, everybody!" David calls out. "Dragon Hawks, assemble!"

The Hawks start shuffling back into place, still looking nervous and uncertain about... well, everything, really. Blaine is staring forlornly at Pavarotti, who is perched on his shoulder and gently nuzzling him. Who knew that bird had a sweet side?

Kurt returns to the front of the room, passing Wes and David as he goes.

"Just a heads-up," he whispers. "Sebastian is now officially a suspected murderer. Details are forthcoming, but if he shows up again, do not let him near Blaine."

Wes and David both look taken aback.

"And don't make a fuss about it," Kurt says. "The last thing we want is to stress Blaine out even more than he already is. Let's deal with one thing at a time for now, okay?"

They nod.

Kurt approaches Blaine cautiously, like an animal he doesn't want to spook. "Feeling any better?" he asks.

Blaine sighs. "I keep thinking about my dad now," he says. "He's stuck in my head."

"I'm sorry," Kurt says. "I didn't realize we would be digging up all these bad memories for you."

Blaine offers a weak smile. "It's okay... maybe... maybe we should—"

"Is everyone present and accounted for?" David asks.

"No," Wes says. "Thad and Mercedes are still not here."

"We should go look for them!" Blaine says suddenly, rocketing forward so fast that Pavarotti nearly falls off his shoulder. Kurt is surprised to see him shift so quickly into Action Mode. "We need to get everyone together. Everyone in one place. Then we can all... come up... with something. Yes. That's good. That's the plan! We go find Thad and Mercedes, and then we come back, and come up with another plan."

"An excellent idea, Blaine," Wes says. "All in favor?"

Obligatory chorus of 'aye!'

"Hawks, prepare to to form a search party—" David starts.

"Ah, no," Kurt says, stepping up and taking charge. "Here's how it's going to happen. Blaine, Wes, David, you're with me. We're going to find Thad and Mercedes. Pavarotti can track Thad by now, right?"

Pavarotti squawks in the affirmative.

Kurt smiles. "Then he can come too. Sam!"
Sam snaps to attention.

"You've been in Zedong longer than anyone," Kurt says. "Hypothetically, if you were a filthy rich young couple in love, where would you go?"

"Ummm..." Sam says. "All the really swanky places are just off the docks near the business district."

"Fantastic! We have a direction," Kurt says. "Let's get our disguises on people. We're going date-crashing!"

He marches off, leaving a slightly flabbergasted Wes in his wake. "A young couple in love?" he asks. "Why would we go to a place where those go? We're not... we're not looking for one of those. Are we?"

It's late afternoon as the four of them head through town, Pavarotti perched on Kurt's shoulder. The bird is supposed to start fluttering when they get close to Thad—actually following a dragon hawk in flight would draw a little more attention than they need at the moment.

As they head through the streets, Kurt notices the air practically buzzing with tension and excitement. It hangs around them like an electric charge. People flit to and fro—kids playing in the street, couples exchanging eager whispers, families holding hushed discussions on their front doorsteps, ladies gossiping in the stores. Bits and pieces of conversation find their way into Kurt's ears, and he quickly notices a recurring theme.

"The Fire Lord's in town!"

"Did you see the Fire Lord?"

"I can't believe the Fire Lord is here!"

Kurt looks at Blaine with no small amount of concern. Every mention of the so-called Fire Lord sends his skin a shade closer to white.

"The Fire Lord is here! She was awesome!"

"...came in with firebending acrobats and explosive confetti and everything..."

"...terrifying, but also amazing. Should I love her or fear her? Oh, screw it; I'll do both!"

A woman in dark glasses sits on the ground, playing a mandolin and singing to all who pass.

"The Fire Lord comes,
Bright shining as the sun,
A dragon at her feet.

We stand in awe,
Of her beauty and strength,
And think she's really... neat!"

Kurt shakes his head. "Honestly, you'd think she was a celebrity or something."

"She is their ruler, technically speaking," David says.

"Nobody ever seemed excited about my dad," Blaine says quietly. "But then, I guess he didn't go
out much…"

Wes sighs. "Blaine, you really shouldn't—"

Just then, Kurt nearly trips over a bunch of little kids on the sidewalk. A boy is crawling with a broken box on his back like a turtle shell, surrounded by other kids waving flags. A little girl sits on top of the turtle-boy. "Hyah!" she says, shooting a tiny flame at him. "I am da Fire Lord! Outta my way, or my dinosaur will eat you up!"

"RAAWRRR!" the turtle-boy says.

Kurt and the others step aside to let the Tiny Lord pass. As he does so, his eye catches something in the street. A footprint. A very large footprint—easily large enough for Kurt himself to fit in. The others see it as well.

"Oh," Wes says quietly. "I'd almost forgotten about the dinosaurs."

"So close," David sighs. "So very, very close."

"Come on," Kurt says. "Let's move a little faster."

The singing woman's voice echoes after them as they retreat.

"The Fire Lord comes,
Her fury conquers all,
Her enemies retreat!"

By the time they find the place they're looking for, the sun is well on its way to setting. Pavarotti begins fluttering and cawing outside of a very well-to-do little restaurant by the name of Chez Shinobi.

"Thanks, buddy," Blaine says, scratching Pavarotti behind the ears. "Go back to your fellow Hawks. We'll see you soon."

Pavarotti flies off, and the four of them look at the building.

"Why are they here?" Wes asks, though he looks like he already knows the answer. Kurt honestly cannot stand his pathetic, miserable expression.

"It isn't what you think," Kurt says. "Mercedes is milking him for information. She thinks he's hiding something about the Dragon Hawks."

"What?" Blaine says, worry crossing his features. "What about the Dragon Hawks?"

"Yes, what about them?" David says.

"Well, doesn't it seem a little weird to you guys that they all just happened to turn up, ready to do whatever you asked with, at most, a day's notice?" Kurt asks.

Wes squints. "I assumed they were friends of Thad's."

"Yes," David says. "Except that they don't actually seem to like him."

Blaine looks thoughtful. "They seem a little uncomfortable around him, actually. I wonder why?"
"That's what Mercedes is trying to figure out," Kurt says. "Come, gentlemen. Entrevous!"

Unfortunately, it's not quite that simple.

"Do you have a reservation?" the maitre'd asks.

Kurt smiles at him. "I am sure you can come up with one for the illustrious—"

"No table without a reservation," the maitre'd says. "Though I doubt even a reservation would get you seated in an outfit like that."

Kurt gasps and resists the urge to slap the man.

"Thank you, and goodbye!" he says, shooing them out.

"Well, now what?" David asks.

Kurt glares at the building as if it personally offended him. Which it basically did, through its obnoxious employee. "I'm not giving up yet," he says. "Follow me!"

They sneak around an alleyway to the back deck, a lovely little raised dining space with beautifully ornate paper lanterns strung about. The gentle, flowing tones of a virtuoso string quartet dance through the air. A short distance away, a blissfully oblivious Thad chatters away to Mercedes, who looks like she's about ready to bury herself out of boredom.

"There they are!" Kurt says.

"Well, let's get their attention!" Wes says cheerfully, bending up a small flame and preparing to signal them.

Kurt extinguishes it with a quick flick of water. "Not yet!" he says. "Let me talk with her first."

"How are you going to talk with her without getting their attention?" David asks.

Kurt smiles at him. "They were nice enough to make the floor of this deck out of stone. Observe…"

He stomps the ground a few times at different angles.

A ways away, Mercedes suddenly sits up straighter. They can just barely see her make a few subtle stomps of her own under the table as she continues to pretend to listen to Thad.

Kurt feels for her message. "She's almost got him."

"Got him where?" Wes asks. "What does she mean?"

"I wish they were a little closer," Blaine says. "At least then we could hear them."

"Great idea!" Kurt says. He stomps a couple more times.

Mercedes subtly nods, and says something to Thad. Thad lightly brushes her off and continues his story.

A few more vibrations come their way. "He won't move," Kurt says. "Alright, I guess I'll just have to help them out…"
Kurt rolls up his sleeves and waits for an opportunity. A waiter passes by Thad's table carrying a tray full of full wine glasses. A stomp, and a flick of his wrist, and the poor fellow trips over a sudden bump in the ground, flailing dramatically and spilling every single drink right on Thad's table. Both Thad and Mercedes leap out of their seats in alarm.

Kurt grins, expecting them to move. Unfortunately, Thad is too caught-up in lambasting the poor waiter to worry about actually going anywhere, and Mercedes can't break character in order to drag him away. Figuring he might as well get a little practice with his airbending as well, he gathers a gust in his arms and sends it sailing towards their table, knocking over the candle. The flammable alcohol ignites immediately, distracting Thad long enough for the poor waiter to escape.

As the rest of the wait staff emerges from the building to douse the inferno, Mercedes gently calms Thad down as she guides him to a new table, one much closer to where the four of them are hiding just around the corner. Kurt signals them all to be silent as they listen to the conversation.

"...so terribly sorry, my dear," Thad says. "Now, where was I?"

"You were telling me about your Aunt Margaret," Mercedes says.

"Ah, yes!" Thad says. "Well, the stubborn old man refused to sell her the house, even though she was offering market value—a very generous gesture on her part! So do you know what she did?" He grins. "She bought the land right out from under his house, and ordered him to move it. When he couldn't, she had it demolished!" Thad slaps his knee in delight. "Oh, she is such a card.

"Indeed," Mercedes sighs, subtly. "I do love it when the little people are put in their place."

"Yes," Thad says. "We really can't have give them an inch, can we? Give them one little thing, and the next thing you know, they think they're your equals. Preposterous!"

"You sound like you speak from experience," Mercedes says.

"Sadly, yes," Thad sighs. "Dalton used to be such a prestigious school. The gem in the crown of Fire Nation education, strictly for children of noble birth. Then, someone got the idea that it should be open to anyone who shows prodigious firebending talent. Now, we've got scholarship students running around, thinking they are on equal footing with us. A truly sad state of affairs."

Wes and David, both scholarship students, share a look. Wes looks confused and saddened. David just looks pissed.

"Fortunately," Thad continues. "There are ways to teach them their place," he grins. "Dalton is a place of learning, after all. Where better to learn of your position in life?"

"Ooooh," Mercedes titters. "Tell me more."

Thad smiles at her. "Well, I suppose I can tell you. But only because it's you." He leans in. "You see, those boys I travel with? The Dragon Hawks? Get this." He grins. "They're essentially my serving staff!"

Mercedes actually gasps in actual shock. "You've got your servants out here risking their necks for you?" she asks.

"Well, they're not actually my servants," Thad says. "I don't pay them, for one thing."

"So they're more like slaves?" Mercedes says.
"'Slave' is such an ugly word," Thad says. "I prefer the term 'unpaid servant.'"

"But I don't understand," Mercedes says. "Why do they serve you if you don't even pay them?"

"Because I make sure they know their place," Thad says, puffing himself up. "Their precious scholarships are granted by a committee, of which my grandfather is a member. A little insinuation that I have the power to send them back to whatever wretched hovel they crawled out of, and they bow to my every whim! A degree from Dalton brings tremendous honor with it, especially for lower class citizens. They'll do anything to stay in that school."

"Even fight for you?" Mercedes asks.

"Apparently so," Thad says. "It's good for them, really. The sooner they learn to obey their betters, the happier they are." He sits back, pleased with himself. "I've got them trained fairly well, if I do say so myself. Who knows? Maybe I'll hire them on after graduation. It'd be a shame to let all the work I put into them go to waste, would it not?"

"Hmmm," Mercedes says through clenched teeth. "And what if they don't want to work for you?"

"Well, my dear," Thad says lasciviously. "I think you understand by now that my family and I have ways of convincing people to comply with us." He grins. "In the end, a Harwood always gets what he wants."

"Well," Mercedes says with a pained grin, before dropping her character like an armful of poisonous snakes. "Have y'all heard enough yet? 'cause I know I have."

Thad squints at her. "Who are you talking to?" He turns around and looks through the patio railing to see four familiar faces. "Ah!" he squeaks, hopping up out of his chair. "W-Wesley! David! What are you doing…" His eyes widen. "You set me up!" he says, pointing to Mercedes. "You… you made me—"

"I didn't make you do anything," Mercedes says. "You talked a rope around your own neck. Now let's see if you can talk your way out of it. It looks like your buddy here has something to say to you." She nods to Wes, who says nothing as he walks forward, vaulting up and over the railing. Thad backs away from him nervously.

"You miserable, sniveling little snot," Wes hisses. "How dare you?"

"How dare I what?" Thad stammers. "I'm certain I have no idea what you're talking—"

He trips over a mysteriously appearing bump in the ground (and Kurt hides his grin in his collar). Wes catches him before he can even hit the ground and without even giving him the chance to squeak, he picks him up and slams him into a dining table hard enough to break it in half.

The patrons gasp in shock and outrage as the string quartet stutters to an awkward halt.

"We heard everything, Thad. Everything," Wes hisses at Thad as he picks himself up. "And to think, I thought I was your friend!"

"You are!" Thad says, standing up slowly. "Let's not jump to conclusions!"

"I can't believe you," Wes says. "I can't believe you would blackmail your fellow students into acting as your slaves."

"I prefer the term 'unpaid serv—'" He is cut off by a fireball thrown towards his head.
"Your *slaves*, Thaddeus!" Wes shouts. "You lent me your *slaves*! I took your *slaves* to the Capital and risked their lives!"

"To be fair, I had no idea what you were actually going to do with them," Thad says.

"Do you think that *matters*?" Wes shouts. "You didn't *care* what I did with them! They could have *died*, and their blood would have been on my hands as well as yours."

"They're fine!" Thad says. "None of them were even hurt! I take excellent care of my—" He ducks another fireball.

"Your *what*?" Wes says. "Your slaves? Your 'unpaid servants'? Because it doesn't matter what you call them, Thad. The very fact that you think of them as 'yours' is more than telling enough."

"Wesley, please, this is just a misunderstanding!" Thad pleads.

"Oh, no, I understand everything now," Wes says. "How could I have been so blind? You are an arrogant, pompous, entitled little zit that desperately needs to be popped. You have abused your power to force others into servitude and in sending those forced servants with me, you have made me *complicit* in your abuse." He takes a deep breath. "You have stained my honor."

David's eyes widen. "Holy shit," he whispers to Kurt. "I think he's about to—"

"What?" Thad says. "No, no! Wesley, you are my friend—"

"I am no friend of yours," Wes growls. "You have stained my honor, and I demand satisfaction in the Fire Nation tradition." He straightens his back, rising up to his full height as he stares down his former friend. "Thaddeus James Harwood, *I challenge you to an Agni Kai*."

The entire patio seems to ripple with shock.

"What is the meaning of this?" the maitre'd cries as he storms onto the patio, backed by his wait staff.

"Oh, not now!" Kurt says. "It was just getting good!"

The maitre'd spots Wes and Thad almost immediately, and begins stalking towards them. "You two! Come here! You have ruined the atmosphere of my restaurant, you have damaged my property, and you—"

The maitre'd then face-plants into the patio, having tripped over the third mysteriously-appearing bump in the ground of the evening. Kurt whistles innocently, studying the back of his hand.

"Get them!" the maitre'd orders. The wait staff launches into action, running towards the group.

The six of them promptly scramble off of the premises. They take cover in a half-constructed building a short distance away. Or two of them do, anyway. Thad abruptly splits off from the group and sprints up the road. Wes chases after him.

"Get back here, you coward!" he shouts.

"Wes, wait!" Mercedes says, running after him.

"Save some for me!" David says, running after them.

And thus Kurt and Blaine are left alone. Upon taking stock of his boyfriend, Kurt realizes that
Blaine was almost completely silent during the revelation about the Dragon Hawks. He was so quiet that Kurt had almost forgotten he was there.

But he was definitely there. Kurt can see the aftermath on his face. Blaine looks absolutely awful. He seems to have been pushed past the point where he even knows how to register his emotions. His face is terrifyingly blank.

"Blaine?" Kurt asks. "Are you alright?"

"It was all fake," Blaine says quietly.

"What was?" Kurt asks.

"The Hawks. Me. Everything," he says. "They never wanted to be here. They don't believe in me. They were just going along with it because Thad forced them to."

"I'm sure that's not true," Kurt says.

"How can you be sure?" Blaine asks. "You just heard it from Thad's own mouth." He shakes his head. "They're slaves. Conscripts. They don't want to be here, and they never did." He covers his mouth. "By Agni… they all looked so scared today… they're just a bunch of kids."

"So are we," Kurt says quietly.

Blaine just leans his head against the wall. "I have to do something. But there's nothing I can do. I'm useless."

"Blaine, you don't have to do anything right now," Kurt says.

"Of course you'd say that," Blaine mumbles under his breath.

"Excuse me?" Kurt says.

"Nothing," Blaine mutters.

"Blaine, I'm trying to help you," Kurt says.

"By doing what?" Blaine says, turning around, suddenly a little less blank. "By… by… by leaving me here in the Fire Nation to solve all of my problems myself?"

Kurt blinks at him. "I wanted you to come with me."

"Oh, right!" Blaine says. "Because running away from my problems is so much better."

"Where is this coming from?" Kurt asks.

"This is coming from me," Blaine says. "After everything we've learned today, do you honestly still think that Sue Sylvester is a problem beneath your attention?"

"I never said she was beneath my attention, Blaine," Kurt says. "I just said that I have to prioritize the plague over her."

"Right," Blaine says. "The plague you don't even know how to fight."

"The plague that caused all of this!" Kurt says. "Or did you forget about that? The fear of the plague lead to every single thing we're dealing with. It's why Keros betrayed your father. It's Sue's
big excuse to put herself in power. It's why she's scared enough to try and annihilate hundreds of people on the off chance that one of them might make her sick."

"So you just think we should focus everything on the plague while Sue runs around and does whatever she wants?" Blaine asks.

"I never said that!" Kurt says.

"You don't have to!" Blaine says. "Your actions say it loud enough. You don't act. You don't react. You just take everything that life throws at you and you move on. You know why firebending is so hard for you? Because you don't want anything! You don't want to help me, you don't want to help the Fire Nation, you don't want to take down Sue. What do you want?"

"Right now, I want you to calm the fuck down and talk to me like a rational human being," Kurt says.

"Oh, forgive me, mighty Avatar," Blaine snits. "I'm sorry my feeble human emotions are bothering you. I'm sorry that the impending death of hundreds of people is upsetting to me. I'm sorry that I care!"

"Don't you dare throw that at me," Kurt says. "You know I care."

"About what?" Blaine asks. "About saving the world? The world is made of people, Kurt! If you want to save the world, you'll need to save a few people!"

Kurt throws his arms out. "What do you want me to do, Blaine?"

"I want you to help me!" Blaine says. "I want you to help me stop a massacre."

"Great," Kurt says. "Do you have a plan? Let's hear it!"

Blaine falls silent.

"I thought so," Kurt says. "You said it yourself—there's nothing you can do against her right now!"

Blaine glares at him. "I can try."

"Yeah, and you can die," Kurt says.

Blaine takes a deep breath. "Better to die for something," he says, "than to live for nothing."

Kurt bristles at the unspoken accusation. A tense, painful silence settles between them as they stare each other down.

"We lost him," David sighs as he enters the room.

"I swear, if I ever see his face again—" Wes growls.

"Don't stress, baby. He's not worth it. Let the weasel crawl ba—whoa!" Mercedes says. "What happened to you two?"

Blaine shakes his head. "Forget it," he says. "Just forget it."

He walks out the door, barging past Kurt. The Avatar wheels around to shout after him. "Blaine Anderson, don't you dare run away from this!"
"Why not?" Blaine asks. "It's what I do with everything else…"

Kurt starts to go after him, but Wes stops him with a hand on his chest.

"We'll talk to him," David says. "He's in a mood; there's no reasoning with him right now."

"We'll handle Blaine," Wes sighs. "You and Mercedes should go back to the Dragon Hawks and…
tell them they're free."

"We'll be back soon," David says.

They march off after Blaine, and Mercedes and Kurt are left alone.

"Wow," Mercedes says. "What went down while I was out?"

"A lot," Kurt says quietly. "I'll explain along the way. Come on," he says. "We've got a bird cage to
open…"

By the time they get back, the sun is little more than orange haze in the western sky. The Hawks
are all milling around the warehouse, laughing and joking with each other. Finn and Rachel and
Artie and Sam have even gotten in on the fun. Rachel is leading a sing-along (of course). Finn is
practicing waterbending by splashing at the Dragon Hawks and letting them vaporize it before they
get wet. Sam is giving Sun Warrior language lessons to a couple of the geekier Hawks. Artie is
folding pieces of errant metal into discs, throwing them through the air so the Hawks can practice
their sharpshooting.

The worry and fear from earlier seems to have faded. The Hawks—and all of Kurt's friends—
suddenly look like the kids that they are. The thought of Thad forcing them to be soldiers in his
stupid little war games makes his skin curl.

"Alright, everyone," Kurt says. "Gather around, I have an announcement to make."

"Sweet!" Sam says. "They're back! Hey, Mercedes!"

"What up, Sam-I-am?" Mercedes grins. "Artie, my boy!"

"'cedes, my lady!" Artie says, throwing some kind of weird Earth Kingdom hand sign. "Holding it
down for the E.K.!!"

The Hawks all clutter around the Avatar, eager for news.

"Where's Blaine?" Nick asks.

"And Wes? And David? And T-Bag?" Jeff asks.

"That's actually what we came here to tell you," Mercedes says. "Long story short—y'all are free
birds now. Thad has flown the coup."

The Hawks all look slightly confused, so Kurt elaborates.

"Mercedes got Thad to admit that he was basically holding all of you hostage," Kurt says. "Wes
and David were not happy about this. Wes in particular seemed ready to turn Thad into a scorch
mark on the sidewalk. Thad wisely chose to flee rather than face him in a duel, so he won't be
bothering you anymore. You are free to go."
The Hawks share an uncertain look.

"What if we don't want to go?" Nick asks.

Kurt blinks. "Well, ummm…"

"Wait, you guys were forced to be here?" Finn asks.

"Well, yes and no," Trent says.

"Wait, what?" Mercedes asks. "Thad pretty much admitted that he blackmauls you all into slave labor."

"Yeah, for school stuff," Jeff says. "He makes us write his essays and join his stupid teams to make him look better—"

"And bring him drinks," Flint adds.

"And give him foot massages," Cole contributes.

"Yeah, stuff like that," Nick says. "But he's not forcing us to be here."

"So, he didn't make you go with Wes and David?" Kurt asks.

"He made us to show up and talk to them," Nick says. "After that, he left. We pretty much stop caring about what Thad wants when he isn't around. Yeah, he told us to go with them, and we helped them out, but not because we were afraid of Thad."

"We seriously wanted to help," Trent says. "By the time Thad showed up again, we were all invested."

"If T-Bag told me to risk my life for him, I'd tell him to sit on it," Jeff says, nodding to the point end of the spear. "I don't risk my life for things I don't care about."

"But you all still do everything he says," Mercedes says. "Why?"

The Hawks exchange confused glances. They don't seem too sure themselves.

"Habit, I guess," Nick says. "We're so used to going along with him that we just kind of do it automatically."

"That's pretty twisted," Artie says. "He's basically trained you guys to be his little lapdogs."

"We're not saying it's a good situation," Trent says. "But it's not as bad as it seems to you guys. It's… kind of how things work at Dalton."

"All the noble kids boss the scholarship kids around," Nick says. "We're used to it. The fact that we are considered Thad's personal staff means that the other blue bloods basically ignore us. It's not much of a perk, but I'll take what I can get."

"Are you seriously defending Thad?" Kurt asks. "Did he brainwash you or something?"

"No," Flint says. "We are well aware that Thad is a Class 5 asshole. All we're saying is A; he's hardly the only one, and B…"

"We're not here because of him," Jeff says. "We're here because we want to be. Blaine is
"Very well-read," Flint says.


"And a good leader," James says.

"With a cool bird," Ethan says.

"He's pretty smart," Trent says.

"And super friendly," Nick adds. "He's just an all-around great guy."

Cole quietly steps forward. "He gave me a name," he says. "That… doesn't seem like a lot, I know, but it means a lot to me. I finally feel like… like I'm me. Like… I have friends now."

"Awww," Nick says, clapping him on the shoulder. "Dude, you know we're your bros."

Cole nods. "So… yeah. Blaine is awesome, and Thad can suck it." He laughs. "Can you believe that guy? Like he could actually take our scholarships away… what a joke!"

The happy smiles of the Hawks fade slowly.

"What do you mean by that?" Jeff asks.

"…you don't know?" Cole asks. "Umm… wow. Yeah, umm, there's no way Thad could actually send us home. His story was complete bullshit."

"What?" the Hawks all bark in unison.

"Yeah," Cole says. "His grandfather used to be on the scholarship committee, but he hasn't attended a meeting in fifteen years. His position is more or less honorary at this point."

"So… all this time… we've been acting like Thad's towel boys… for no reason?" Trent asks.

"Guess so," Cole shrugs.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US?" Jeff shouts.

"I thought you knew!" Cole flinches. "All those records are public. You can go to the front office and ask for them! Am I the only one who did that?"

"Do you really think we would do jack shit for Thad we knew his story was bullshit?" Nick asks. "Actually… wait a second! If you knew his story was bullshit, why are you here? Why do you do what he says?"

Cole bashfully looks down. "Well… I didn't have anything better to do," he says quietly. "And I didn't have any friends, and you guys seemed cool, so I just… went along with it." He pauses for a second. "Plus, I think I kind of like being told what to do."

Jeff shakes his head and sighs. "Cole, buddy, one day you are going to make a dominatrix a very happy woman."

"Cool!" Cole says. "I think. That's… is that good?"
Nick sighs and pats him on the back, at a loss for words.

"So, basically," Kurt says. "Thad is still a dick. He's just a pompous, lying windbag dick instead of a manipulative evil sociopath dick."

"Pretty much," Nick says. "He's a jerk, but he's not a monster."

"Well, whatever," Kurt says. "I'm just glad to hear that you all really do like Blaine. He was seriously worried that you guys were faking it because Thad wanted you to."

"No way," Jeff says. "Blaine is an awesome Prince, and a total badass. I'd be proud to call him Fire Lord."

"Tell it to the man himself, when he gets back," Kurt says. "Wes and David are trying to rescue him from the pits of despair at the moment. You guys telling him all this should really help his morale. And after that…" Kurt sighs. "He and I can finish our conversation, hopefully on a less angry note."

The Hawks agree, and disperse back into the various corners of the warehouse.

"You guys fought?" Finn asks.

Kurt nods. "It… wasn't pretty."

"I'm sorry," Rachel says. "I hope it wasn't too bad."

Kurt swallows. "Me too."

---

Fire dances everywhere around him.

In a corner of a metal scrap yard, Blaine furiously runs through his firebending forms. Punch, punch, kick. Fireball, fireball, fire wave. Two-handed blast into a fire ring, a quick flamethrower into a Rising Dragon punch. He gives everything he has to the movements, willing mind and heart to surrender to body.

It doesn't work. Mind and heart refuse to shut up.

He's trying not to hit anything, throwing his attacks so that they burn out just before impact. Unfortunately, he's a little stronger than he realizes, and winds up smashing a stray fireball into a junk pile.

Metal clangs and clashes at the force of the blast. Something about the sound resonates with Blaine, and suddenly, he doesn't care about being careful any more. He aims all of his attacks at that pile, punching, kicking, furiously blasting it with everything he has. Bits of flaming junk begin to fly helter-skelter in every direction, a cacophony of explosions and metal-on-metal violence. Blaine doesn't care. He relishes in the destruction. In the sense of power. The sense that he has control over something.

Right in the middle of a series of furious punches, someone grabs him from behind. He reacts on instinct, wheeling around and striking open-handed at their face. Wes leans to the side as the fire sails past his head into the night sky. Blaine is momentarily stunned—just long enough for Wes to throw him down on the ground.

"Are you trying to attract every guard in the city?" Wes asks.
Blaine blushes. He should be ashamed. He should feel like an idiot. But he doesn't. Instead, he just feels more furious and frustrated than ever.

He whips his legs to throw out a ring of fire as he kicks to his feet, forcing Wes to back off. "So what if I am? It's not like it matters," he shrugs.

"What is that supposed to mean?" says a voice from behind him. Blaine turns to find David walking towards him.

"I can't do anything," Blaine says. He punches a couple of fireballs, which David easily sidesteps. "I can't beat Sue. I can't stop her. I can't even challenge her."

"So you've already given up?" David asks.

"Given what up?" Blaine says. "I don't have anything to give! I have nothing. Sue has everything." He throws a furious roundhouse kick. David ducks underneath it and grabs Blaine's leg, throwing him to the ground again.

"You have your life," David says. "You have your friends."

"You have us," Wes says. "I would think that counts for something."

Blaine grits his teeth and kicks back to his feet again. It's too much. He has too much anger, too much frustration, too much fury to think straight. Bending up a fireball between his hands, he flares it up with every drop of rage he can pour into it, and slams it into the ground right in front of him.

Immediately thereafter, he realizes how stupid that was.

The explosion is much stronger than he expects, blasting a crater into the ground and sending him sailing through the air. He flops on his back several yards away, slightly smoky. Somehow, the stupidity of actually blowing himself up manages to drain most of the fight from him, but once it's gone, he doesn't feel any better… he just feels empty.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asks weakly.

Wes and David walk over and sit down beside him in the dirt. "I wish I could tell you," Wes says. "We're just as lost as you are, to be frank," David says.

"We're all lost, Blaine," Wes says. "This is nothing we were ever prepared for. It's okay not to know what to do."

"Tell that to the people who are about to die because of me," Blaine says. "Somehow, I don't think they'll find it quite as okay."

"If those people die, it will be because of Sue Sylvester," David says. "Not you."

"If I have the power to stop Sue from killing them, and I don't, how is it any different from killing them myself?" Blaine asks.

"It is," Wes says.

"How?"

"I don't know!" Wes says. "It just… is."
Blaine shakes his head. "I'm supposed to know what to do. I'm supposed to be a ruler. A leader. But I'm completely clueless. I can't lead a country. I can't even lead my own life."

"You are not clueless, and you are far from powerless," Wes says.

"You've got more than you realize," David says.

"I just… I wish I knew what my dad would do," he sniffs. "I wish I could ask him. But then… I guess if I could ask him, we wouldn't really be here, would we?"

Silence. Blaine stares at the stars, with Wes and David on either side of him, imagining every point of light as a life, with Sue Sylvester as a great black blot, extinguishing the heavens.

"What do you think he would do?" Wes asks.

"What?" Blaine says.

"You knew him better than anyone," David says. "You tell us."

Blaine takes a deep, unsteady breath, and tries to think. His mind runs through his firebending training, lesson after lesson. He thinks of all the council meetings he spied on, of all the times he asked his father to spend time with him, only for his father to tell him to go outside and play. So many different pieces of one man… Blaine can no longer reconcile them. His father seems like a half-dozen different people. Blaine's image of him has been shattered, and he can't reassemble it because he no longer knows how the pieces fit, if they ever fit at all.

Just as his frustration reaches its peak, all those disparate shards of memory are brushed aside by a single moment: that one, powerful instance when Blaine and his father looked at each other for the final time. The moment when Blaine needed him the most. The moment when he willingly gave everything he had to save him.

And suddenly, everything becomes clear.

Blaine sits up. "I know what I have to do," he whispers.

Without another word, he stands up and begins walking away.

"Wait," Wes says, chasing after him. "Where are you going?"

Blaine stops and wheels around to look at his companions. It seems like a silly question, but he asks it nonetheless. "Can I count on you guys?"

They look shocked. "Of course," David says.

"Always," Wes agrees.

"Good," Blaine says. "Because… I can't count on anyone else."

Wes and David can only stare at him in confusion, unable to divine what's going on in his head.

"I know what I have to do now," Blaine says. "Sebastian is right. If I can't step up and defend my people, then I'm not worthy of them. And Kurt is right, as well. He's… he's too important, too vital to risk on something like this. And so are his friends. The Hawks… I can't even think about them right now. It has to be us. I can't count on anyone else and… I don't want to ask you to do this, but at the same time, I don't think I can do it without you, and I'm sorry…"
"Blaine," David says, worry growing thicker by the second. "You aren't making sense. What are you talking about? What are you asking us to do?"

Blaine takes a deep breath. "My father wasn't perfect, but there is one thing about his legacy that stands out above all others. One lesson, one principle that is absolutely crystal clear to me..." He takes a second to look each of his friends in the eye. "Sacrifice," he says quietly. "He was willing to do what needed to be done, no matter what it cost. I have to be willing to do the same."

Wes looks taken aback. David just looks shocked.

"Blaine, what are you planning?" Wes asks. "I don't think I like where this is going..."

"You think I do?" Blaine asks. "I hate this! I don't want to do any of it, but it doesn't matter what I want anymore. I..." He shakes his head. "No, I can't ask this of you. It's too much. Please, just go home. Forget about all of this." He turns and starts walking away.

"What—Blaine, stop!" David says, reaching out to grab him. "Why won't you just tell us what—"

"Because I'm about to give up my life!" Blaine says. "And I can't ask you to do that with me. I can't ask you to make that sacrifice."

"Blaine," Wes breathes, horrified. "What's gotten into you?"

"Blaine," Wes breathes, horrified. "What's gotten into you?"

"Why would you just throw your life away?" David asks.

"I don't see myself taking down Sue and living to tell about it," Blaine shrugs. "The only hope I have of killing her is with a sneak attack. She's surrounded by an entire military. Even if I pull it off without a hitch, they're not going to let me walk away."

"I can't ask you to make that sacrifice."

"There might be another way," Blaine says. "But we don't have time to find it. Sue is right here, right now. We know for a fact that she will be giving a speech tomorrow. She'll be distracted. She'll be vulnerable. That's when I have to strike. If I miss that, I may not get another chance before she launches her plan. I wish there was another way, but there isn't."

"Blaine," Wes says. "I won't let you do this."

"You can't stop me," Blaine says, eerily calm. "I won't be talked down. And don't even think about trying to fight me," he says, catching a movement from David out of the corner of his eye. "I was angry and sloppy before, but you know damn well I can take both of you at once when I'm focused. Please don't make me hurt you."
"Blaine, you can't just expect us to let you..." David says.

"You don't have a choice," Blaine says. "Neither do I. But it's okay. If this saves those people, then it's okay." He takes a shuddering breath. "I love you both. Tell... tell Kurt..."

"No," Wes says resolutely. "I refuse to let you walk away from this."

"Don't," Blaine says. "Please don't make me fight you."

Wes stares at him for a long moment, engaging in a silent battle of wills. He is shocked to find how strong Blaine's conviction is.

Wes blinks, his face a mixture of confusion and sadness. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but..." He sighs. "Alright then..."

Blaine smiles. "Thank you—"

"In that case, I'm coming with you," he finishes.

Blaine's eyes widen in shock. "What? Wes, I can't ask—"

"You don't have to ask," Wes says. "I'm volunteering. If you insist upon marching into the mouth of an erupting volcano, then you're right. I can't very well stop you. But I can, and I will be with you the whole way. I refuse to let you walk alone."

Blaine is almost literally blown away. He momentarily loses all ability to speak, only able to gape at Wes.

"What is wrong with you two?" David asks. "Have you completely lose your minds?"

"David, this is real," Wes says quietly. "There is an actual madwoman in charge of this Nation. She intends to slaughter hundreds if she isn't stopped, and she probably won't stop there. We have a chance, here and now, to put a stop to her. We need to take this chance."

David clenches his jaw. "You're both insane..." he says quietly, his voice thick with emotion.

Blaine tries to reason with him. "You don't have to come—"

"...but I will be burned alive before I let you embark on this foolishness without me," David says. "It may well be a suicide mission, but that doesn't mean we have to give up before we even start. We can fight. We can watch out for each other. We can try."

"True," Wes says. "We stand a far better chance of surviving together than alone. Though I should point out, we would stand an even better chance of surviving if—"

"No," Blaine says, realizing where he's going. "Kurt cannot be brought into this. He'll either try to stop me, or he'll join me, and I honestly don't know which is worse." He casts his eyes downward. "The world needs its Avatar. But the Fire Nation needs someone too, and right now, we're all it has. It has to be us. Just us."

Wes looks at David. David looks at Wes.

"Just us, then," Wes nods. He holds out his hand, a small orb of flame floating in front of his palm. "We started this together. We shall end it the same."

David holds out his hand as well, adding his own fire to the mix. "Friends, until the very end."
"No," Blaine says, before he adds his own flame. "Brothers, until the very end."

With three firebenders feeding it, the flame between them burns bright and hot. Brighter and hotter than it would for any of them individually. They are strong together... but are they enough?

They detonate the flame with a final surge of energy, causing it to flare up to ten times its normal brilliance, before vanishing entirely.

It is a fitting metaphor for what is to come.

Across the city, the Avatar engages in a secret huddle of his own.

"It has to be you two," Kurt explains.

Finn and Mercedes share skeptical glances. "Why us?" they ask in unison.

"Because Artie loves you both to death," Kurt says. "He won't listen to anybody else."

The earth and waterbenders share another look, slightly softer.

"Look," Finn says to Mercedes. "I know we don't always get along, or whatever, but I know you care about Artie, and he seriously needs our help. Can we... like... call a truce? For his sake?"

Mercedes gives him a little smile. "Truce it is, big man. Let's bury that hatchet before it gets stuck in somebody's head."

She offers him a fist, which he pounds resolutely.

"I knew I could count on you," Kurt says. "It's getting late—if you want him to get a full night's rest, you should probably start working on him now."

"Will do," Mercedes says, marching off. "Come on, waterboy. Let's go put the matter to bed."

Finn grins and follows her, clapping Kurt on the shoulder as he passes. Kurt watches as they head over to Artie's wheelchair and quietly usher the pale, exhausted boy to a side room.

A slight breeze seems to ruffle his clothes and hair. Kurt turns to see Rachel finishing a rather titanic yawn, and is slightly impressed. The girl seems to bend more air when she isn't trying than when she is.

"Is Blaine still not back yet?" Rachel asks. "I'd have thought he would be here by now."

"I'll send Pavarotti to check up on them," Kurt says, hopping up to retrieve a pen and some paper. "You can hit the sack. You need your eight hours of beauty rest, after all."

"Avatars need their rest, too," Rachel says as Kurt scribbles out a note. "When are you going to bed?"

"I'll wait up for Blaine," Kurt says, shoving the note in a canister. As he goes to retrieve Pavarotti, he notices several of the Dragon Hawks yawning and stretching. "Alright, people. It's bedtime. Your compliments will be much more effective if you aren't slurring and passing out while you give them."

"What about Blaine?" Nick asks.
"I'll wait up for him," Kurt says. "You all can dogpile him with your adoration in the morning."

The Hawks shuffle off to various corners of the warehouse, extinguishing their lamps as they go. Sam is already curled up on a box in the corner. Soon, pretty much everyone will be out except for Kurt.

He puts the canister in Pavarotti’s cage before he takes it to the door. On his way, he hears quiet voices from behind a door, and stops to listen.

"...be here the whole time," Mercedes says.

"We'll sleep in shifts," Finn says. "There'll always be somebody awake to keep an eye on you, okay?"

"But..." Artie says, exhausted and defeated. "You guys... I don't... I don't wanna." He sniffs, his voice almost childlike. "I'm scared. I'm scared of me."

"We're scared too," Mercedes says gently. "We're scared for you."

"You'll die if you don't sleep, dude," Finn says. "Like, literally. I know you're scared, but if I have to choose between dead Artie and maybe-kind-of-crazy Artie, I pick the second one. Any Artie is better than a dead Artie."

"But..." Artie starts.

"No buts! I don't know what's lurking in that head of yours," Mercedes says, "but I can tell you this. Whenever it rears its ugly-ass head, we will be here to help you with it."

"Whoever you are, whatever you've done, it doesn't matter," Finn says. "We know who you are now, and that's enough. If you wake up a different person, we'll deal with it. And we'll still love you."

Artie sniffs again. "I'm... I'm so tired..."

Footsteps pad across the floor, followed by rustling and a metallic creak. Someone just lifted Artie from his chair. More rustling as they set him on a makeshift bed.

"Then go to sleep," Finn says.

"We'll be here when you wake up," Mercedes says quietly.

A few seconds later, there is nothing but the sound of calm, even breathing.

"We did it," Finn whispers.

"We make a pretty good team," Mercedes replies.

Kurt can't suppress his grin as he lets Pavarotti out of his cage and into the night, a short, simple message to Blaine in its talons.

I love you. I'm sorry. Please come back. It's not as bad as it seems.

He's still smiling as he heads back to the warehouse proper, a little flame floating above his palm to light his way. Feeling ever-so-slightly hopeful, Kurt takes up a position next to the only lamp still burning and waits for his Prince to return.
A ways away, Quinn waits in a familiar alleyway for that same Prince to be delivered to her. Her lips move soundlessly as tries to decide what to say to him, rehearsing a thousand different speeches in her head. None of them sound right. None of them fit. Eventually she sits against a trashcan, wondering if she should give the Prince the chance to fight for his life when he arrives.

Just to be fair.

Just so she can say that she accomplished something when she actually beats him.

Leaning her heard against the can, she waits. And waits, and waits…

Kurt waits, and waits, his posture relaxing, his head leaning against a box without him realizing it. Thoughts and memories of Blaine drift in and out of his head, worry and pleasure and love intermingling, a sweet, simple song with a dark undertone. It soothes and lulls him. But just as he is about to fall asleep…

…she snaps awake, looking around frantically, half-afraid that she missed him.

There is no one. The alley is empty. Surely she would have known if anyone came in. Surely…

…surely he would have woken Kurt up when he came in. Kurt's eyes scan the dark corners of the warehouse for signs of Blaine or his two friends. When he doesn't find them, he adjusts his position to something more awkward and achey…

…making herself as uncomfortable as she can, trying to make sure she won't fall asleep again. When she's satisfied with her position, she sits and waits.

He sits and waits.

They wait.

And wait.

And wait.

The lantern oil burns low. Eventually, the fire goes out.

The Prince does not come.

The Next Day…

Kurt awakens to a frantic mass of fluttering feathers and squawks. Pavarotti flaps around him like a bird on fire, cawing and clawing him into awareness. Kurt flicks his hands at him, trying to shoo him away, but Pavarotti is very insistent for some reason.

"What?" he asks the bird. "What is it? Did Blaine come back?"

It is at this point that he notices the canister in his talons. Kurt retrieves it and opens it, unfurling the note.
His sleep-addled eyes take a second to adjust enough for him to read.

When they do, however, any vestiges of sleep still remaining are quickly sent packing.

His eyes grow wide as he scans the page. Every word drips horror into his heart. By the end, it is very nearly frozen.

Kurt,

First and foremost; I'm sorry. You are going to hate me for this, and I don't blame you at all.

Kurt rockets out of his seat. "Wake up!" he shouts. He dashes around the room. "Wake up! Wake up!"

He throws fire. He stomps the ground, causing the earth to bulge beneath them. He splashes them in the face with cold water. The Hawks sputter and cough and curse in confusion.

Kurt doesn't care.

I wish I didn't have to do this. I wish for a lot of things, actually. More time with you is chief among them. But my wishes don't really matter now.

"Dude," Sam groans at the racket Kurt is making. "What is with you?"

"We have a crisis situation!" Kurt says frantically. "Get up! Everyone who is awake—get dressed and get ready. We're leaving immediately!"

"Why?" Nick asks.

"Just do it!" Kurt orders.

All that matters is that people need me. And the world needs you. We have different destinies. We always have. And I will always treasure our time together—you mean everything to me—but my destiny is calling me now. I have to answer it.

"Rise and freaking shine!" Kurt says, blasting clumps of earth at the doors of all the back rooms. There is a commotion of clattering and clacking as everyone therein is roused. Rachel sleepily bursts through the door, still in the habit of wielding her pillow like a weapon. Mercedes groggily opens another one.

"What in the Hills is going on out here?" Mercedes asks.

"Get everyone up, and ready to leave," Kurt says. "We have to go now."

"Why?" Rachel asks. "What's so urgent?"

The world needs its Avatar. But the Fire Nation needs its Prince. My father was willing to give up everything to save me, and I would bring shame to his legacy if I was not willing to do the same for my people.

"Wake up!" Kurt shouts. "WAKE UP!"

"Dude!" Finn says, grabbing him and forcing him to be still. "Calm down and tell us what's happening!"

Kurt struggles against him, but Finn's grip is secure. And finally, Kurt is forced to put it into words,
to understand the terrible thing he just read.

"Blaine is about to do something very, very stupid," Kurt says. "We have to stop him."

"What? What are you talking about? Why—"

Kurt hands him the letter, catching sight of the last few lines. They're difficult to read—all but the final line is crossed out. But to Kurt, they are clear as day.

_Better to die for somethi—_
_I'm so sorry, plea—_
_Don't be sad—_
_I love you so mu—_

Goodbye,
Blaine

"Oh, shit," Finn whispers. "Holy shit."

Artie emerges from the side room, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. Kurt doesn't even have time to check on him.

"Come on people," he says, kicking the door open. "Let's GO!"

Zedong awakens.

_The rhythm of the city is strong. A beat positively trembling with tension and electricity. The people are the blood, flooding the streets like veins, driven into circulation by the steady pounding. Soldiers march to a single beat spread across a thousand drums. Thump thump. Thump thump. Thump thump._

_The city is alive. And its heart has begun to beat._

_The beat reaches Quinn Fabray, thrumming her out of a painful sleep. She squints against the light, flinches at the rhythm, confused and uncertain. When the fullness of her situation finally hits her, all confusion is replaced by anger. She lashes out, explosive flame decimating the metal can she slept against the night before._

_She was stood up. Even when success seemed certain, she has failed._

_The beat falls in time with the shots of a sharp-eyed boy. Far from the girl he was supposed to meet, he sends arrow after arrow into a wooden wall, nailing bullseyes that only he can see. His plan has changed. His purpose remains the same. The beat drives him, fills him with fire, brings his blood to a low boil. He rejects the heat, the fury it brings._

_He must be cold. He must be calm. There is too much at stake for him to be otherwise._

_The beat reaches the ears of the Avatar, seeming less like the pounding of a heart and more like the ticking of a clock. Every hit counts against them. Every hit is a second lost, a second less that they have to prevent a disaster. The tempo throws him, failing to coincide with his rapid footsteps, or the footsteps of his friends and companions behind him. They cannot fall in line, they cannot move in time. They cannot waste time._

_But they cannot fight it either. The beat goes on. The clock ticks down._
The heartbeat of Zedong is strong, steady, and sound. Thump thump, thump thump, thump thump, it drives all blood, all energy to one place; a military base, a courtyard massive enough to hold tens of thousands of citizens and soldiers alike. Inside the base, just shy of a large balcony, the beat reaches the ears of a powerful woman as she waits and prepares for the day ahead. Soon, she will give the speech that will define her rule. All the world comes to greet her, marching to the steady sound of drums.

A rush of blood to the Head of State.

The city is alive. The world is alive, the steady pulse of the planet, of time, of movement, of life. Destiny is not a machine—it is creature, living, moving, changing, and calling to those who can hear it. Her cry is loud in the air today, and all life seems to move towards it.

A short distance away from the thrum of life, three boys in stolen uniforms stand on the docks. Heads bowed, and eyes shut, they contemplate death.

Blaine takes a deep breath. "Agni, Spirit of Everlasting Fire, source of life and light, grant us courage and strength. Watch over us and light the dark road we are about to tread. May our strikes be true and our hearts pure. And if we should be extinguished... watch over those we love. Keep them safe and warm. By the light of the Sun."

"By the light of the Sun," Wes and David echo.

Blaine takes a deep breath. "Wow. We're really doing this," he says quietly.

"In all my life, I never imagined I'd be doing something like this," David says.

"The world can be a strange, terrible, frightening place," Wes says. "Hopefully, we are about to make it less so."

The Prince clasps his companions' shoulders. They reciprocate, forming a circle, a bond between all of them. "Whatever happens," Blaine says. "We watch out for each other. If we go down, we go down together. Brothers, until the end."

"Until the end," Wes repeats.

"Until the end," David echoes.

With a grim nod, three boys put on their helmets and take a final look at the sun rising over the sea, casting hues of pink and orange all across the morning sky. The light fills them with power and purpose, puts a fire in their hearts.

They bask in her light for as long as they can.

Then, they turn and march away, never knowing that for one of them...

It is the last sunrise he will ever see.

A/N: The coming chapters are quite possibly the darkest in the entire story. As Blaine and Sue meet face-to-face for the first time, Kurt must race against the clock to prevent the worst decision Blaine has ever made from becoming the last.

Everything is about to change.
Up next…

CHAPTER 71 – The Suicide Mission
The Suicide Mission, Part 1

Author's Note: This is huge. It's the 'Day of Black Sun' to my 'Sozin's Comet.' Not in anything specific, but in the general sense of 'tremendous pre-finale fuck-up that leaves the protagonists up shit creek.' Yeah, I know that might be considered a spoiler, but I would figure the name of the chapter itself would be enough warning that this cannot possibly go well. The only questions are just how bad it will be, and who will bear the brunt of the punishment.

Shit's getting real. ;)

Blaine tries to keep his breathing under control as he stares down the long courtyard in front of him.

People are everywhere, and the gates haven't even opened yet. The courtyard to the Zhao Naval Base has a fairly simple layout. The gates to Zedong are at the south end. At the north end is the main office building, behind which lies the rest of the base. To the east, the courtyard affords a full view of the military harbor, where hundreds of full-size battleships are sitting docked, looking ready for launch at any moment. When he looks at them, Blaine can't help but wonder just how far his father went towards war before pulling back.

Right now, the courtyard is filled with people setting up for what's ahead, an all-day celebration of the Fire Nation (and the Fire Lord, of course). Acrobats and costumed performers practice their routines, exchanging casual gossip while standing on each others' hands. Street vendors pull carts full of merchandise and threaten to duel each other over prime space to set up their stalls. Soldiers march hither and yon, directed by the seemingly omnipresent voice from a set of loudspeakers.

"Corporal Mills, please report to the mail office, we have a package from your mother, and it smells delicious. You have T-minus 2 minutes before I start chowing down! Alpha Squad, report to the courtyard immediately, go time in 5 minutes and counting. Let's move it, people!"

"We're here," David whispers as they march towards the office building. "Now what?"

"Now, we get into position," Blaine says. "We'll need Imperial Firebender uniforms in order to get close enough to strike."

"I thought your father disbanded them," Wes says.

"He did," Blaine replies. "But Sue's called them back into service, there's not a doubt in my mind. Her ego demands a personal guard."

"And then?" David asks.

"Once we have the uniforms, I'll let you know," Blaine says.

They step around a pair of showy firebenders practicing their dragon shapes, duck underneath an acrobat on stilts, and sidestep a procession of food carts, only to nearly get run over by the overloaded cart of a fireworks vendor.

"Hey!" the guy says. "Watch where you're going!"

"Watch where we're going?" Wes asks. "You nearly hit us!"
"If anyone needs to watch themselves, it's you," David grouses.

"You want a piece of me, tough guy?" the fireworks vendor says, dropping the handles of his massive cart of explosives. "Take off that armor, and we'll see who needs watchin'!"

Blaine holds up the empty hands of peace. "We're sorry," he says. "We're just a little wired. Big day, you know?"

The vendor gives them a couple of seconds of stink-eye. "Ah, whatever. I got no time for punks like you anyway." He pushes his cart off to the side, grumbling the entire time.

"The nerve of that guy," David says, shaking his head.

"What happened to manners?" Wes asks sadly. "I ask you that, Blaine. What happened to manners in the Fire Nation?"

Blaine fights off a grin. It's been so long since they did anything together, just the three of them… it'd be easy to forget what they're there to do. "Focus, guys," Blaine says. "Eyes on the horizon."

"Right," they nod.

The three of them stare up at the imposing military offices, proudly bearing several Fire Nation flags and banners. Somewhere in that building, the person who ruined and very nearly claimed their lives is preparing to give a speech to the people of a country she has no right to rule. The building looms over them, shining bright in the face of the sunrise.

"Alpha Squad, where the duck are ya? We need a buffer zone! Archers, get your asses to those watch towers. And will the owner of a spotted rhino lizard with a broken left horn please report to the stables? Damn thing just bit somebody, and we need to file a report. Gates open in three!"

With that reminder, the trio takes a deep breath, and marches inside.

Time's running out.

In stark contrast to Blaine's steady progress, Kurt and company are stuck in traffic. Pavarotti perches on the edge of a high building, cawing for Kurt to follow him. Sadly, Kurt is stuck behind a throng of people packed tighter than a water tribe knapsack. "Urgh," he growls, wishing he'd already mastered airbending so he could just fly. He wishes he could just fuck all caution and start bending people out of the way. He wishes Blaine wasn't so confragging stupid. He wishes for a lot of things, really.

The crowd shifts, and Rachel's chin is suddenly pressed painfully into his shoulder blade. "We're making very little progress," she says into his shirt.

"No kidding!" Kurt says. "Why is this taking so long?"

Finn stands on his tip-toes, using his height to try and get a better look at things. "I think there was a moose cart accident up ahead. The drivers look like they're about to Angry Cry."


"Right," Finn says.

"Urgh," Kurt groans. He turns to Mercedes, who is plastered into his right side. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to start a series of mysterious earthquakes, would you?"
"Probably not the best idea," Mercedes says. "Unless you want everybody to come down on our heads before we even find Blaine-brain."

"Urgh!" Kurt says. "Why? Why is he doing this? Wes and David were supposed to bring him back! What happened to them?"

"If we're lucky, they're with him," Mercedes says. "If not... he knocked 'em out and stuffed them in a closet and he's trying this fool mess on his own."

"I am going to wring every neck I can find," Kurt says. "**COME ON, PEOPLE! MOVE IT!**"

Finn smiles awkwardly as several people turn to stare at the screaming banshee boy. "Sorry!" he says. "Sorry. My brother gets a little cranky in the mornings."

"I'll show you cranky!" Kurt says.

Finn grabs him and ushers him off to the side. "Dude, chill, okay? You seriously look like you're about to glow it up and start tearing this place apart."

"If we don't start moving soon," Kurt says. "I might just!"

"Dude, you don't mean that," Finn says.

The sincerity in Finn's voice deflates him, and Kurt takes a deep, calming breath. "No, I don't. That is, in fact, the absolute last thing that I want," he sighs. "I just... I need to find him. I need to find him now."

"I might be able to help with that," Artie says from a nearby trashcan.

"What do you mean?" Kurt asks.

"Head to the docks," Artie says. "Sam knows a shortcut."

He's gone before Kurt can inquire any further. "Well, anything is better than this!" Kurt says, turning back to Finn. "Push through the crowd and lead everybody to the docks. I'll meet you there!"

He turns and gives a whistle, waving to Pavarotti. The bird answers his call, swooping down to see him.

"Come on," Kurt says. "This way!"

He starts to move towards the docks, but Pavarotti screeches and flutters at him, telling him to go the other way. Exasperated, Kurt reaches up and snatches the bird out of the air, cramming the shrieking mass of claw, beak, and wings under his arm and shoving through the crowd.

"Sorry, bird," Kurt says. "I know you want to go to Blaine, but unless you can carry me in your talons, we're gonna have to do this my way."

Pavarotti shrieks at him in indignation and attempts to bite his nipple off. Kurt adjusts his grip accordingly.

"Don't make me muzzle you!" he warns.

But the Dragon Hawk refuses to be tamed, continuing to struggle. Kurt sighs. It's going to be a long walk to the docks at this rate. He hopes whatever shortcut Sam has is worth it. They have no idea
what he's actually planning, so they have no idea when he's going to strike.

All Kurt knows is that every second brings them closer to disaster.

Time's running out.

Inside the military offices, things are just as chaotic as the outside. Soldiers and attendants of all kinds dart around the place in an absolutely dizzying tizzy. Wait staff carry food and drinks to various tables, while soldiers hang up some very imposing, very tall banners of Sue Sylvester staring down at everyone in various poses. In the eye of this storm, a diminutive girl in dark, official-looking robes stands on a stool and directs the chaos.

"The drinks go over there!" she says, pointing to the table. "Is that the rhino steak? Bring it here!" A waitress brings a steaming hot cut of rather delectable-looking meat over to her. She gives it barely a sniff. "Undercooked and underspiced! Make it again!"

The poor attendant bows to her. "Yes, Miss Becky."

"That's Lady Becky to you!" she shouts, throwing a small burst of flame at her. She yelps and scampers off.

"Becky!" a familiar voice calls from the intercoms. "Where are my cheese puffs? I ain't giving this speech on an empty stomach!"

Becky scurries over to a metal cone connected to the wall by a wire. "I'll check on that right away, Fire Lord!" she says. Then she turns around. "WHERE ARE THE FIRE LORD'S SPICY CHEESE PUFS?" she roars, little bursts of flame coming out of her mouth with every word. The trio is nowhere near the girl and they still flinch at her volume.

"R-r-r-r-right here!" sputters a nervous looking attendant, carrying a tray of delicious little snack-sized cheese balls.

"Why are they here?" Becky asks. "They should be upstairs, you nincompoop! Go!"

"Y-y-yes, Lady Becky!" the poor attendant stammers, the tray shaking slightly as he scampers off to the back. Blaine shares a significant look with his companions, and they promptly march off after him, Becky's voice echoing down the hallways after them.

"Why is that banner on fire?"

"You set it on fire during your tantrum, my lady."

"Well, the stupid things should be fireproof! Get me another one!"

The military commander's voice chimes over the intercom. "Gates are open, people, I repeat, the gates are open! Civilians are moving into the compound as we speak! Fire Lord, I will let you know when we're at capacity."

The attendant seems to get even more nervous when he hears this. Blaine is almost relieved that the constant reminders of time are having the same effect on someone else. The poor fellow's hands shake so badly as he opens the door to the stairwell that a few of his precious cheese puffs wind up falling on the floor.

"Oh no!" he breathes. "Oh, Agni! Oh, I'm dead. I'm dead. She'll boil me in oil. She'll deep-fry me!"
Blaine makes his move, reaching out and steadying the tray. "Shhhh, hey!" he says gently. "Calm down. It's alright."

"No, it's not!" the attendant says. "My life is over. I'll never get married. I'll never have sex!" He grabs Blaine and shakes him frantically. "I don't want to die a virgin!"

"You won't!" Blaine says reassuringly. "Hey, if you're really that scared, why don't you let us take the tray up to the Fire Lord?"

"I-I-I," the attendant stammers. "I don't know… I mean… I made these myself, and…"

Blaine looks at Wes and David, waggling his eyebrows.

"Look," David says. "You're clearly terrified. You look like you're about to have a heart attack."

"At this rate, you'll have spilled every single cheese ball before you even make it upstairs," Wes says.

"We don't mind," Blaine says. "If the Fire Lord is mad, we'll take the heat. If she likes them, we'll give you all the credit. Swear on the sunrise."

The attendant very nearly melts with relief. "Oh, thank you. Thank you so much!"

He hands the tray to Blaine and scampers off, leaving the three of them alone in the stairwell.

"Well, this gets us close to the Fire Lord," Blaine says.

"Somehow, I doubt this is really the best opportunity for a surprise attack," Wes says.

"We should wait and see what our options are," David nods.

Wes looks at him. "What? Doth my ears deceive me? David Thompson actually wants to wait? Mark this day in the history books, my friend."

"Oh, go sit on a volcano," David grouses. "I just don't want to screw this up."

Blaine shakes his head at his idiot friends. "Then we'd better keep moving," he says. "Masks down, guys."

The three pull down their face masks and walk up the stairs.

As they emerge on the second floor, the first thing that greets them is an Imperial Firebender in full armor. For most of the Fire Nation military, armor is predominantly black, with spiked helmets that look vaguely like skulls when the facemasks are down. The Imperials are different. Their armor is mostly red, their helmets slightly more streamlined. Their helmet hides their face by default—there is no mask to pull up or down. The entire helmet is a mask, making them look much more imposing and inhuman, especially when they all stand together. They are some of the best firebenders in the Nation, chosen specifically to guard the Royal Family. Blaine's father had them stationed elsewhere after his mother died, feeling their talents were wasted at the Palace. He used the city guard instead, for all the good it did him.

The Imperial stares at them, unreadable behind his mask. "What authorization do you have to be up here?" he asks.
Blaine blanks for a second, so David picks up the slack. "We're here with the Fire Lord's cheese puffs," he says simply.

The Imperial does not seem to react to this, still just staring at them through his mask. "All food presented to the Fire Lord must be tested for harmful substances," he says. He grabs a cheese puff, holding it up to light as if trying to divine its secrets. Then, he pulls his helmet up just enough to pop it in his mouth. "Oh, Agni's sweat-soaked underpants! These are delicious!" he says, seeming to shudder with delight. He quickly regains his composure. "You may pass. Down the hall, turn right, second door on your right."

Blaine nods, and the three of them start to head on.

"Hey!" the Imperial says, pushing Wes and David back. "It doesn't take three soldiers to deliver one tray. You two, back to your posts!"

Wes and David shrug at him as they march dutifully back into the stairs. Just before the door closes, Wes motions that they'll wait for him there.

With a deep breath, Blaine marches on down the hall. Another Imperial firebender stops him as he turns the corner.

"Halt!" the Imperial says. "What is your business up here?"

"Delivery for the Fire Lord," Blaine says.

"Hmmm," the Imperial says. "Better test them to make sure they aren't poisoned."

"You really don't need to—" Blaine starts, but the Imperial has already popped a puff before he can finish.

"Wow!" the Imperial says. "I think my tongue was just cockslapped by the sun! Man, that is good stuff! Go on through."

Blaine smiles at him even though his facemask is down, and marches onwards. There is one final Imperial stationed outside Sue's door.

"Delivery for the—"

"I'll be the judge of that!" the Imperial says, popping his helmet up to sample a puff. Blaine is pretty sure that's an orgasm noise he makes. "...I think I just swallowed a piece of heaven."

Blaine starts to move past him, but the Imperial puts a hand on his chest. "Hold it right there!" he says, causing Blaine's heart to beat a little faster. "No one but the Royal Procession is allowed in the room with the Fire Lord. Wait here."

A sigh of relief escapes Blaine's lips as the Imperial opens the door and takes the tray from him, marching into the room, which is full of other Imperials and personal attendants…

And her.

Blaine can't see her face. She's reclining in a luxurious-looking chair with her back facing towards him, but he knows it's her. Her attendants are milling around, filing her nails, scrubbing her feet, brushing her hair… one of them places cucumbers over what Blaine can only assume are her eyes, completing some kind of beauty mask. The Imperial sets the tray on a small table beside her.
"Ah," she says. "Those must be my puffs. Can't start the day without my puffs!"


He sees red.

Love lost, fresh hate, burning rage and frigid fear mingle and mix and fight for control of his heart. To see her just sitting there, being primped and pampered without a care in the world after everything she's done… he very nearly explodes. It's too much. For a second, he considers going for it. Just charging in and attacking, right then and there.

Then, the Imperial who brought the tray takes a second look at it. Very slowly, he creeps a hand towards the puffs in an attempt to secure one more.

Sue flicks her hand and blasts him into the wall with a fireball. "Touch my snacks again, and you'll spend the rest of your life as a sex toy locked up in some noblewoman's basement," she says, matter-of-fact. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Fire Lord," the Imperial says, bowing deeply.

Blaine is stunned. She didn't even look at him. Her eyes were covered. How…?

The Imperial returns to the door, still smoking from the assault. "The Fire Lord thanks you for your service," he grumbles. "You are dismissed."

With no other excuse to be there, Blaine returns to the stairwell, where Wes and David are waiting for him.

"Were you able to gather any useful intel?" Wes asks.

"See any weaknesses in her security scheme?" David asks.

Blaine shakes his head. "The Imperials are very vigilant. Sue's under constant guard, and even worse—she has an insane awareness of her surroundings. Just trying to sneak up on her won't work—we'll need to attack while she's distracted."

Wes considers this for a moment. "What about during her speech?"

"Hmmm," David says. "That seems viable. This whole propaganda party was probably concocted to get the people on her side."

"So when she's speaking to the people, all her focus will be on them," Blaine says. "It'll be the perfect time to strike. Good thinking, Wes!"

"Is the… method of attack still the same?" Wes asks quietly.

Blaine nods. "I'll do it. You guys are the back-up in case I fail, but… I want to do this. For my father. And for me."

Wes and David nod.

"There's just one problem," David says. "We still need to get Imperial uniforms."

"The Imperials are very dedicated," Wes says. "Without the Fire Lord's permission, I suspect nothing less than a direct order from heaven would make them leave their posts."
Blaine's eyes widen as an idea sparks to life. He looks to the bottom of the staircase, where the cheese puffs the poor attendant spilled sit intact upon the floor. "We might not have heaven," he says with a grin. "But we've got the next best thing…"

Mere seconds later, Blaine is on the second floor hallway again.

"You again?" the first Imperial asks. "What do you want now?"

Blaine holds up a cheese puff, and he can practically see the guard begin to salivate through his mask.

"We've got some extra, if you want any," Blaine says.

"…well… I guess it couldn't hurt…" He looks around, confirming that no other Imperials are watching.

Blaine leads him into a small side room.

"Man, just the smell of those things is enough to drive a man wild, I can't wait to—hey, wha—!

WHACK.

Thud.

"One down, two to go…"

By the time Kurt reaches the docks, he's resorted to taking off his outer robe just so he has something to stuff Pavarotti in to keep it from clawing Kurt's heart out. The tenacious bird has almost managed to shred its way free, and is still going strong. He spots Sam waiting beside Artie, and immediately shoves the bird into the arms of the latter so he can speak to the former.

"So, where's this shortcut?" he asks.

Sam grins at him and gives a shrill whistle. The shortcut climbs up from underneath the docks, scurrying over and posing proudly in all its scaly glory.

"The mongoose lizard!" Kurt says, delighted.

"Her name is Skippy," Sam says. "She can take us over the water without it looking suspicious. You guys doing your bending would look weird, but nobody'll think twice if we ride on Skippy."

Skippy flicks its tongue out at Sam, tasting/smelling him affectionately.

"Unfortunately," Kurt says. "I don't think Skippy can carry… jeez, how many of us are there?" He counts. "Fifteen people?"

"Uhhh, no," Sam says. "Her capacity tops out at five."

"Great," Kurt sighs as the rest of the group arrives. Artie has successfully corralled Pavarotti by metalbending a piece of his chair into a rather snug bird cage. The dragon hawk glares death at him from behind the bars, but at least isn't screeching anymore.

"Sweet!" Nick says. "A mongoose lizard! I've always wanted to ride one of these."

"Sadly, today is not your lucky day," Kurt says. "Skippy can only carry five people. Sam, Finn,
Mercedes, Artie, and of course, myself."

"What about me?" Rachel asks.

"And us?" Nick adds, gesturing to the Hawks.

"Do the best you can to push through the crowds and get to the base," Kurt says. "We'll meet you there."

"Stick together!" Mercedes commands. "The last thing we need is people getting lost in this mess. I have a feeling this is gonna be an all-hands-on-deck situation, so stay ready, you hear?"

The Hawks nod resolutely.

"If you get to the base but you don't see us, do not go inside," Artie says. "Wait for us to contact you somehow."

"Right," Rachel says with a bow.

"Be careful," is the only advice Finn has, most of it directed towards one person.

"You, too," Rachel says quietly.

With that, the five of them climb onto Skippy's back. The lizard seems a bit annoyed at all this extra weight, but it manages to adjust fairly quickly. Once everything is balanced and everyone is ready (and Artie is secured), Sam lashes the lizard into motion. The speedy creature zips off the docks so fast that Artie nearly drops Pavarotti, causing it to shriek in indignation. Skippy quickly and easily skims across the surface of the water, weaving in and out of the various civilian boats and docks. It's fast, but they've already lost so much time…

Is it fast enough?

It isn't long before the trio each has an Imperial uniform to call their own. In a rather miraculous occurrence, one of them is almost exactly the same size as Blaine, meaning he gets armor that actually fits him.

"Just do whatever the soldiers around you do," Blaine says. "The Imperials are trained to move together. If I remember correctly, they always stand in a line behind the Fire Lord whenever they are giving a speech. I'll try to get the position closest to Sue. You guys stay close to me."

"Right," Wes says.

"Got it," David nods.

Blaine takes a deep breath. "We… we may not get another chance to talk like this," he says quietly. "If this thing goes up in smoke, I just… I want you to know…"

"The courtyard is filled to capacity, repeat, the courtyard is full! We are ready when you are, Fire Lord!"

Wes looks at him with a small smile. "No more words," he says quietly.

"We've said what we need to say," David says. "It's time for action."

They embrace, short but fierce, and full of feeling.
And then they don their helmets and march down the corridors to take their place at the Fire Lord's side.

Sue's back is still turned to them when they enter the room. Her attendants are just finishing her preparations. They outfit her in robes of starkest black, sparkling with embroidered gold dragons, pulling at the fabric, carefully removing all traces of wrinkles. When Sue is satisfied, she snaps her fingers, signalling the final attendant to place the Fire Lord's headpiece in her hair.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Sue says, cracking her neck from side to side. "It's showtime."

The Imperials begin to take their formation behind her. There are six others, nine altogether. Blaine winds up right in the middle of the line—right behind Sue, with Wes and David on either side of him. It's the perfect position; he could not have asked for a better place to strike from.

An attendant signals someone on the balcony, who proceeds to announce…

"Ladies and gentlemen, citizens and soldiers—it is my great honor and privilege to announce the arrival of your ruler. The woman who bravely stepped forward during this dark time in our Nation's history, who has taken the helm of our great country, and seeks to guide us to further greatness yet! People of the Fire Nation, I give you… Fire Lord Sue Sylvester!"

Sue steps out onto the balcony, and the crowd explodes with cheers and applause, the volume almost enough to push them back into the building. Sue holds her hands up like a victorious champion, waving to the crowd and basking in their love.

Blaine places his hand near the hilt of his short sword (the quickest way to deliver a lethal blow, as they had decided last night) and waits for his moment…

Meanwhile, near the back of the crowd, a hooded figure breaks off and heads towards one of the many watch towers. All eyes are on the Fire Lord—they are paying no attention to him. All he has to do is get into position, and wait for his moment…

When the applause dies down, Sue steps forward, a microphone projecting her voice over the loudspeakers.

"My fellow citizens," she begins. "It is my great honor to stand here today, before you and above you. For that is my rightful place as Fire Lord, is it not? Like the sun in the sky, it is my privilege, and my solemn duty to shine glorious light down upon you—to share my warmth and heat with the unfortunate, lesser souls beneath me. It's my place in life as Fire Lord, and I'm happy to fill it. Now… my fellow citizens, I ask you—as the Fire Lord is to the Fire Nation, should not the Fire Nation be to the rest of the world? Think about it. Take a second. Go on, I'll wait…"

The crowd seems a bit confused. To be honest, Blaine is as well.

"Okay, done waiting," Sue says, picking up the microphone again. "You got your dirt, and you got your water, and you got your wind and it's all very good and important and whatever—but what hangs above it all? What makes it move, makes it change, makes it live? I'll tell ya—it's the Sun, people. The Sun hangs above it all. The lies of the world would have you believe in some kind of phony-baloney balance, but the truth is right here in front of our faces—the Sun rules over all. It is the rightful lord of all the other elements."

The crowd bursts into a smattering of applause here, still seeming a little uncertain. Blaine finds his
eyes scanning the thousands of faces, wondering if they ever looked at his father this way. Wondering if they would really discard his legacy so easily.

And he sees something out of the corner of his eye. A figure in a dingy, brown hood and cloak has broken off from the crowds.

Sue continues, growing more passionate. "Therefore, as the people of the Sun, I submit to you that we are the rightful lords of all other peoples. Look around us, at the prosperity, at the technology! Look at this cool shit! I can talk into this whatchamathingy here and my voice comes out of twelve different places! How awesome is that? You think they got this kind of crap in the Earth Kingdom? Fuck, no, they don't! It's ours! And I think it's time we shared our awesomeness. It's time, ladies and gentlemen, for the Fire Nation to take its rightful place at the head of the world, above all other Nations, above even the Avatar, so that we may shine our magnificence down on those poor, miserable souls with the misfortune to be born elsewhere. It's time for the Fire Nation to shine!"

The crowd cheers louder, getting swept up in Sue's rhetoric. Blaine's hand moves to his sword, but he can't take his eyes off the mysterious figure, watching as he climbs a watchtower, his movements quick and sure.

"Now, I know a lot of you are nervous about the plague. I feel ya. Your previous Fire Lord? Well I'm ashamed to say he didn't. Anderson was soft! Soft on sickness! But not ol' Sue. Oh, no. Sue has a plan…"

The figure reaches the top. The guards do not see him, fully absorbed by Sue's speech. Blaine sees the barest glint of a knife—and down they go, one after the other, their throats slit. Blaine's heart begins to pound. What is this?

"Sue has a secret weapon, one that will enable her to annihilate the disease entirely. And that weapon is about to make its debut. We have but one final obstacle, one last test to run before we deem it battle-ready. And then, my fellow citizens, we can spread our own plague…"

David nudges him. "What are you waiting for?" he whispers intently.

Blaine shakes his head, nodding to the watchtower.

Both Wes and David follow his line of sight, and both see what he sees—a dark figure moving two bodies aside, and pulling out a bow and arrow. He notches it, and takes aim…

"Is that…?" Wes asks.

Blaine blinks, unable to speak for his heart in his throat. His hand clenches tight around his sword.

"Our very own incurable disease, the one that we have all been inflicted with since birth—Flameosis! The awesomeness of Fire, undeniable and untamable! For we are the people of Fire, and like the element itself, we were always meant to spread! We will spread to the Air Nomads, we will spread to the Water Tribes, we will spread to the Earth Kingdom! We will infect the entire world!"

The crowd is an eruption of applause and cheers, screams of adoration. Again, Sue throws her arms into the air, basking in the love of the people. Blaine clenches his teeth. 'Now!' he thinks. 'Do it now!'

But he can't. He is frozen to the spot, his eyes rooted to the mysterious figure. The figure that he knows can only be one person.
It's Sebastian. He's about to kill her. He's about to do Blaine's job for him.

He releases the arrow, and time seems to slow down. The roar of the crowd becomes muffled, muted beneath the sound of Blaine's own pounding heart. The arrow arcs high, vanishing in the morning sunlight. Sue continues to bask in the crowd's love, oblivious.

Blaine waits for the impact.

And waits.

And waits.

For a second, he fears that Sebastian choked. That for the first time since he's known him, Sebastian has missed.

Then, it happens. Sue's entire body moves suddenly, an impulse, a reflex, a flinch. She doubles over to one side, her hands clenched.

The crowd gasps, and falls silent.

Blaine holds his breath, daring to hope that maybe, just maybe…

And then, she slowly unfolds to her full height. Her hand unclenches, and Blaine is chilled to his very bone.

A broken arrow sits in the palm of her hand. The only damage to Sue is a small cut in the palm of her hand where the arrowhead scraped her flesh as she snatched it out of the air.

Blaine's heart plummets as Sue grabs the microphone. "Assassin!" she shrieks. "There is an assassin in our midst!"

The Imperials all step into motion, and Blaine realizes that it is now or never. His sword emerges from its sheath with a metallic shing, and he charges her at full speed, aiming his blade at her back.

Metal meets metal. Sue wheels around and smacks his blade aside with her microphone, grabbing his and holding him in place.

And suddenly, for the first time, Blaine Anderson is staring into the dark, hateful eyes of Sue Sylvester.

"Traitor!" she hisses, her face twisted in a terrifying scowl.

He struggles against her, but she is monstrously strong. A single palm to the chest sends him flying into the building. She stalks towards him as he tries to stand up again.

Wes and David draw their own weapons and attempt to charge her.

Without even breaking stride, she casually tosses her hands to the sides and flames them off the balcony, along with the entire rest of her entourage.

Blaine charges her again, swiping at her neck, but she dodges easily, kicks the sword out of his hand and throws an explosive punch at his head. He throws himself backwards just enough to avoid the brunt of the blow—which is still powerful enough to blast the helmet clean off of his head and send him stumbling backwards.

He recovers from the blow just in time to see the recognition dawn on her face. And Blaine learns
that the only thing scarier than Sue Sylvester's scowl… is her smile.

"Well, well, well, look who decided to drop in," she purrs. "Hello… Blaine."

He doesn't even have time to gape before she blasts him off his feet.

Skippy skids off the waters and onto the shore just shy of infringing upon military waters, giving Kurt just enough time to catch a glimpse of the obscene number of warships that Sue has ready for launch. It looks like she intends to go to war with the entire world that very day.

For a second, he finds himself hoping that Blaine succeeds.

Then he slaps himself for being an idiot. There is a right and wrong way to go about these things, and this isn't right!

…is it?

Fuck, why is this so hard?

As Skippy scampers through the city streets, the sounds of a panicking crowd grow louder and louder. Sam winds up pulling up to the side of a fairly tall building and parking Skippy behind it.

"What are you doing?" Kurt asks. "The base is that way!"

"The base is closed!" Sam says. "Something is going on, and we need to find out what! Just let me climb up here…"

He moves towards the fire escape, only for Kurt to unceremoniously yank him down and launch the both of them straight to the top on a piston of earth. Sam lands a little roughly.

"Dude, warn me next time!" Sam says, picking himself up, dusting himself off, and pulling out a telescope.

"What do you see?" Kurt asks.

"Give me a sec…" Sam says.

Realizing he doesn't necessarily need a telescope of his own, Kurt looks down towards the military base, which seems to have descended into complete chaos. The crowd mills about unpredictably, seeming to press towards the closed gates. Over the loudspeakers, an official-sounding man blares a message. "All civilians, remain calm! There is an assassin among you! Do NOT attempt to leave the premises!"

As if waiting for his cue, a figure in a dark hooded cloak scrambles to the top of the imposing wall that separates the base from the rest of the world. When he gets there, he jumps off, landing in the bushes. He gets tangled just long enough for his hood to flop down over his face, revealing—

"Sebastian?" Kurt shouts, snatching the telescope from Sam's hands.

"Hey!" Sam says.

Kurt aims it down at the figure in the bushes. "It's him!" he says. "Sebastian just jumped over the wall. It looks like he's hurt… and I think his clothes are a little burnt."

"What's he doing down there?" Sam asks.
"I have no idea," Kurt says.

Sebastian kicks himself free of the bushes and stumbles as fast as he can into the city proper. Kurt follows him with the telescope until…

"Dude, look!" Sam says, pointing.

Kurt follows his arm to see a scuffle taking place in front of the main offices of the base. It looks to be between a group of soldiers in standard black armor, and a smaller group in crimson armor. The crimson soldiers are the better fighters, and they all have bending on their side, but the troops-in-black have numbers to make up for it. There seems to be a great deal of confusion as to who the actual enemy is.

Behind them, the building is burning. Large bursts of flame periodically bellow out of the upper floors. Flaming Fire Nation flags dangle carelessly in the breeze as the fires consume them.

"What is going on over there?" Finn asks as he finishes climbing the fire escape.

"I really wish I knew…" Kurt whispers.

All he knows is that Blaine is somewhere in that chaos.

They may already be too late.

The Navy soldiers attack the Imperial Firebenders almost immediately. All they saw was that several of them tried to assassinate her. Thus, as far as the soldiers are concerned, all of them are guilty.

Wes and David manage to acquit themselves admirably in the skirmish, despite falling two full stories (they were lucky enough to have their fall cushioned by other Imperials). But they quickly realize that this fight is distracting them from what's really important.

"Come on!" Wes says, yanking David aside. "We have to go! Blaine could be in danger!"

The building rattles with the force of an explosion.

"Could be?" David says.

The helmets are stifling, so both boys shove them off. It opens their field of vision to an amazing degree, allowing Wes to spot something familiar. He smiles.

"I have an idea," Wes says. "But we need to be fast about this. Let's go!"

Thus the two boys head to greet a familiar face.

"Watch where you're goi—hey! That's my cart! You can't just—"

Whack.

Thud.

Sue Sylvester is a dynamo of destruction.

Her punches blast through walls. Her kicks smash cracks in the granite flooring. Her fireblasts are
so large and intense that the walls bulge from the pressure. Her explosions rock the building to its girders, shaking loose ceiling tiles. She is the most destructive firebender Blaine has ever seen—she gives not one single fuck about precision or care. She is all rage, all the time, and her explosive fighting style reflects it perfectly. She is relentless, powerful, and shockingly quick. *Staying alive* is a tall order, let alone fighting back.

Sue kicks a blade of flame at him. It rips through the floor, sending flaming chunks of shrapnel at him almost as dangerous as the attack itself. Blaine barely manages to flip over it, breathing heavily as he lands. The fight has already begun to tire him out and he hasn't even really done anything yet!

"Oh, Blainers," Sue says, casually sauntering towards him. "I figured you were weak, but I didn't realize you were a coward to boot."

Blaine throws a fireball at her, which Sue backhands into the wall like nothing at all. He takes a deep breath to prepare himself for a larger attack, but Sue shoots a line of flame into the ground in front of him, causing an explosion that throws on his back.

"I mean, I do have to hand it to ya," she says, shaking her head. "You at least were thorough. First you tried to shoot me, then you tried to stab me. A little explosives, and you'd have had all your bases covered. And I'd still be alive."

Blaine grits his teeth and kicks to his feet, his blood boiling with white-hot anger. He runs full speed at Sue, throwing both hands forward and blasting her with everything he has. The fire is so bright that he can't even see her through the flames. Which is why he is quite shocked indeed when a pair of hands clasp over his own, extinguishing his flames. Sue smiles at him, completely unharmed. "But a back attack?" she asks. "Really, Princess? That's not how we do things around here. No one likes a cheater."

"You——"

Sue pulls him forward and slams her knee into his chest, knocking the wind out of him. As he staggers, she turns her rising knee into a flaming thrust kick, propelling him down the hall like a human rocket. The heat and force of her fire are both incredible—if Blaine wasn't a firebender, he'd probably be dead. He flops on his back and slides several feet before coming to a slightly smoky stop.

He tries to stand, but his chest shrieks in pain and his body gives out. White hot anger becomes ice cold terror. He knew Sue was strong, but he had no idea she was *this* strong. Learning firsthand is a powerful experience; Sue is in an entirely different league from Blaine, even without the solar winds backing her.

"Wow, you suck at this," Sue says as she approaches him casually. "I'd like to say your dad was more of a challenge, but truth be told, he wasn't that much better," she sneers. "Like father, like son. Weak."

Blaine clenches his fists, tells pain to go fuck itself, and stands up again. "Bullshit," he spits. "You could never beat my father."

"Uh… pretty sure I already did that," Sue says.

The Prince stands as tall and proud as he can. "No, you didn't. You didn't deserve to win that fight. And you know it, don't you?"
The building burns around them. Smoke and ash fill the air as fire steadily spreads over everything. And yet this is the first time Sue has looked anything other than completely casual. A twitch of annoyance hits her brow. "Excuse me?"

"You couldn't beat him in a fair fight," Blaine says, smiling with pride. "So you waited until your power was boosted. And you know what the funny thing is?" He laughs. "You were still losing. You only beat him because of me!"

Sue emits a feral grow, punching a fireball at him. But Blaine is ready—he ducks underneath it and charges at her. The second he is in range, he launches a series of firecracker kicks—small explosions propelling his feet from ground to air and back again, his legs snapping at Sue like whips. She actually seems a little thrown, only able to block and dodge the furious flurry by steadily letting herself be pushed back. He ends the combo with an explosive roundhouse towards her head, coming so close to actually making contact that Sue loses about an inch off her bangs to the flames.

Blaine is just beginning to grin, his confidence returning. And then Sue pins him with the most hateful death glare he's ever seen, and he realizes he's just made her angrier.

He tries another kick, but Sue grabs his leg and whips him into the air. With a feral roar, she slams him into the ground so hard that he bounces. Before he can even land, she throws two hands at him, and fire fills his world.

She literally blasts him through a wall. If not for his armor, it might well have broken every bone in his torso and turned his organs to mush.

As it stands now, Blaine lies on his stomach, seeing nothing but white and feeling nothing but pain. He can't even think about moving. The fight is completely and utterly over. It was over before it even began.

His vision swims as he looks up through the crumbling hole-in-the-wall. Sue approaches slowly as ever, little more than a hazy silhouette against the flames, a living cloud of blackest smoke come to choke the life out of him.

"Well then," Sue says. "In that case, I guess I have you to thank for my shiny new country. So thank you, Little Prince. Thank you for being weak, and spineless, and pathetic, and needy, and selfish, and—most importantly—for being stupid enough to try and kill me all by yourself. You made my life much easier."

"I wouldn't thank him yet," says a familiar voice.

She turns around just in time to see Wes throw something at her. Just like the arrow, she easily snatches it out of the air, catching it on instinct.

Apparently, Wes was counting on this. Sue has just enough time to see what's in her hand before the fuse burns out and the rocket starts thrusting towards her face. She struggles to aim it away from her, giving Wes just enough time to dash in and bodily lift Blaine onto his shoulder.

"Just like old times, eh?" Wes jokes as he flees the Fire Lord.

Blaine smiles. "Where's David?"

"Tending to the rest of our supply," Wes says.

"Your supply…?"
Wes burst into the stairwell leading to the roof. David is already on his way up. "We should leave!" he says. "Immediately!"

"To the roof!" Wes says, and they scramble up the stairs.

Meanwhile, Sue finally wrestles the rocket in the proper position and releases it, just in time for it to whistle away and explode down the hall. She takes a second to indulge in a moment of smug satisfaction.

Then, the air is alive with the sound of whistling from a hundred more rockets. A cacophony of crackling and popping picks up as the world is flooded by of colored sparks…

"Whoa!" Finn says.

The group gapes in awe as suddenly, the military office begins exploding from the inside out. People scramble out of the building in a wild panic, including three men in their underwear and one man carrying a small girl who continually throws fire at him. Rockets begin shattering windows and exploding above the crowd as colored sparks and brilliant streams of rainbow fire burst from every orifice of the building.

"Who ordered the fireworks?" Sam asks.

Soldiers, both crimson and black-armored, abandon their fights to begin pushing the crowds away from the detonating building.

Suddenly, Mercedes spots something, and snatches the telescope away from Kurt. "That fool idiot boy! What the fuck is he thinking?"

"You see them?" Kurt asks. "Where?"

"On the damn roof!" Mercedes says. "All three of 'em!"

"What are they doing up there?" Finn asks.

"Fleeing the exploding building?" Artie says.

"GET Y'ALL'S DUMB ASSES MOVING!" Mercedes yells, as if they can hear her.

Kurt takes the telescope back and spots them immediately. Even through the smoke and ash, he can see Wes carrying Blaine, David running ahead of them. He's wondering how badly Blaine is hurt when suddenly, the Prince pushes off of Wes's shoulder and begins running alongside of him. Apparently, not too badly.

The trio takes a running leap onto the roof of an adjacent building.

The fireworks crackle, whistle, hiss, and pop. There is a brief moment of silence, and then they hit the motherload, and the whole thing goes up. The crowd reels in shock as the entire building is consumed in an enormous, sparkling explosion. A second or so after they see it, the shockwave of the blast reaches them, shaking the building beneath their feet.

"Okay, I can't be the only one who really, really hopes Sue was in that building," Artie says.

"I'm very much with you," Kurt says quietly.

The smoke from the wreckage climbs high into the heavens. Kurt keeps his eyes carefully fixed on
the Three Stupidest Firebenders Who Ever Did Live, silently willing them to leave or something. Instead, they insist on looking down at the wreckage, like they're trying to find something.

And when they finally find it, all three of them seem to very nearly pass out.

It doesn't take Kurt long to figure out why…

"No," Blaine says quietly. "That's not… there's no way!"

Oh, but Sue disagrees.

She emerges from the wreckage, her robes tattered, her hair wild, her entire body trailing smoke as if she just crawled up from the underworld. She looks a mess, but she doesn't seem seriously injured—in fact, she doesn't look injured at all.

"She's unkillable!" David breathes.

Sue stomps around with a positively feral expression, sniffing the air for her assassins. "Where are they?" she bellowls. The crowd stares at her in awe. "Where?" she barks, prompting them to fall all over themselves to get away from her.

The trio slowly begins to inch away from the edge of the roof.

Like a true predator, however, Sue is trained to spot motion. Her eyes fix on them instantly.

"DIE!" she roars.

"Run!" Wes shouts.

They dash away just as the entire corner of their building is blasted to bits by the force of Sue's attack.

They have no idea how lucky they are that Sue doesn't pursue them herself. She's just about ready to rocket after them, when she feels a small but insistent tug on her sleeve.

"Come on, Fire Lord!" Becky says. "We have to get you to safety!"

An armored transport pulls up beside the smoking ruins of the building.

Sue glares at the fleeing would-be assassins.

"I want those three roasted and served on a plate!" Sue growls to the soldiers in the area. "Find them and end them!"

She then allows Becky to lead her to the armored transport. Her six remaining Imperial Firebenders form a perimeter around her, entering alongside her as the door closes and the transport pulls away.

A second later, it stops, the door opens again, and six slightly crispy Imperial Firebenders are violently ejected with a loud cry of "Idiots!"

Then it pulls off for real.

Kurt's breath forms a wedge and sticks in his throat. He puts the telescope down, no longer needing it.
"All squads! There are assassins loose on the base! By order of the Fire Lord, they are to be found and exterminated with extreme prejudice! Assassins are currently on the roof of Yu Yan hall and heading north! They are currently wearing Imperial Firebender armor, sans helmets! Skin tones are brown, tan, and sort of white-ish tan! This is not a drill!"

The entire base seems to spin to life. Soldiers pour out of every building, seeming to emerge from cracks in the earth itself. An entire army is after them.

They aren't going to make it out of this.

Not without help.

"I'm going in," Kurt says.

"What?" Sam barks. "Are you crazy?"

"Maybe," Kurt says. "But they need my help. I have to try."

"We're right behind you," Finn says.

"No," Kurt says. "You guys stay here."

"What?" Mercedes asks. "Why?"

"Because I need to be the center of attention," Kurt says simply. "I am the Avatar. Even if Blaine is their priority now, they are going to have to devote some resources to fighting me if I show up." He smiles. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm kind of a big deal."

"We can help you!" Artie says.

"Please, stay out of it," Kurt says. "I'm worried enough about Blaine—I don't want to worry about you too!"

"What are we supposed to do?" Finn asks. "What if you get hurt, or, or, or…"

"If worst comes to worst," Kurt says gently. "Then I'll see you in the Earth Kingdom in about 16 years. You'll probably be a grandmaster by then." He puts a gentle hand on Finn's face. "You're well on your way already, so you'd better be there. I expect you to be my waterbending teacher, okay?"

"But… but…" Finn sniffs.

Kurt marches to the edge of the roof. "Not that I intend to die or anything," Kurt says, taking a second to clench his teeth. "Only a complete idiot would walk into something like this intending to die. And leaving his boyfriend with nothing but a lousy note…"

Before they can respond, Kurt flips off the roof and slams into the ground, which buckles beneath him like a pillow. He launches himself on an earth spire straight into the sea, and disappears under the water. Swimming head first into military waters, he can only hope he makes enough of a spectacle of himself to take some of the heat off of Blaine.

Time to make some noise…

Once again, Blaine finds himself roof-hopping to save his own skin. Only this time, instead of two assassins, it's roughly everyone who ever lived chasing after him.
Him, and his two best friends.

They've got a formation going on. Wes leads the charge, forming their primary offense, using powerful blasts to clear the path. David covers the rear, using a stream of fireballs to make pursuing them more difficult. Blaine is always between them, still trying to recover from the battle with Sue. She kicked his ass up and down the building, and while he's pretty sure he doesn't have any serious injuries, it still smarts.

"All squads, this is not a drill! Assassins, if you can hear me, you are so f*cked! Seriously, you might as well just give up and die!"

"That's not very professional!" Wes says, using a fire whip to smack a trio of grappling hooks off the roof before the soldiers finish climbing up.

"Get back here!" calls a small sect of swordsmen, gaining ground on David with surprising aplomb. Instead of attacking them, David blasts a hole in the roof right in front of them, into which they tumble like a set of dominos.

"Jump!" Wes calls. They leap over the edge of the roof onto the next one, which is considerably lower. Archers take pot shots at them from the ground, but fortunately, it's hard to hit a moving target.

They land in perfectly rehearsed rolls, one after the other, and continue their charge, not quite sure where they're running to.

Suddenly, the roof in front of Wes explodes, knocking him on his back. A rather surly-looking firebender pops up to meet them—and promptly pops back down again, as Blaine kicks two very forceful fireballs right into his chest. He helps Wes up with a grin. "Let me take over offense. You watch the sides, alright?"

"Yes, Prince Blaine," Wes grins.

The three begin running again, their order rearranged. David's strategy remains largely unchanged, but Wes and Blaine have new roles. Blaine leads the charge with a powerful and varied offense. He's quick and agile, and his fire has a great deal of force—where Wes and David's blows are strong enough to stagger, Blaine can knock a full-grown man on his back with a single one-handed fireball. He is a perpetual motion machine, constantly attacking without ever sacrificing stride or momentum.

Wes, on the other hand, now uses wide bursts of flame to defend them from the sides. Archers are beginning to climb upon the adjacent rooftops, so Wes uses carefully places explosions to deflect their volleys as best he can.

It's a pretty good arrangement they've got going on.

Unfortunately, they are on their way to running out of roofs. The buildings are steadily getting lower, making it easier and easier for soldiers to get up and attack them. Things become very crowded, very quick, and it doesn't take them long to realize they can't keep this up forever.

"We need to get inside!" Wes says, blasting back another volley of arrows. "We can't defend against attacks from all directions!"

"Where, exactly, do you suggest we go?" David asks, using a continuous stream of flame to beat back a soldier with a riot shield. "There are enemies everywhere! They'll just smoke us out!"
Blaine jumps up and spin kicks a couple of spinning fireballs. They curve mid-flight and explode upon impact, throwing six soldiers off the roof. "Sorry!" he calls, wincing sympathetically. He looks around, and spots a huge metal hangar. "In there!" he says. "They can't smoke us out if the building won't burn!"

"Good thinking!" Wes says.

"Come on!" Blaine says. "Let's go!"

Blaine runs ahead, only to barely dodge getting his head chopped off by a sword-wielding soldier. He leans backwards, turning his lean into a back handspring and kicking the soldier right in the helmet. The blow stuns him long enough for Wes to throw a two-handed blast and send him sailing off the roof.

"The fuck?" David says, pointing ahead.

Blaine turns to see, of all things, a damned komodo rhino on the roof.

"How did he even get up here?" Wes asks.

"Doesn't matter," Blaine says, charging headfirst. He throws a bright flare just shy of the rhino's face, causing it to rear up on its hind legs. With a look, he signals David to run over and spring off of his hand, drop-kicking the rider off of his mount just as the rhino comes back down.

"Hop on!" David says.

As Blaine climbs up, an arrow glances off his armor, dangerously close to his head. He gulps. They really do need to get inside, now.

And then…

"All squads, I repeat assassins are—wait, what the… OH SHIT! AVATAR! IT'S THE AVATAR! THE AVATAR IS ATTACKING!"

"What?" Blaine breathes. "But… no, he can't—"

"We have to go!" David says, lashing the rhino forward. It easily makes the leap onto the next roof leading them towards the hangar.

Blaine turns around in his seat, trying in vain to see what Kurt is doing.

His whole reason for this was to kill Sue without getting Kurt involved.

As it stands now, Sue is most definitely alive, and Kurt is most definitely involved.

Blaine groans. He kind of sucks at this.

The Avatar's Zedong debut is pretty spectacular, as can be expected from someone as theatrical as Kurt Hummel. He slowly rises from the sea on an enormous, swirling waterspout, bobbing back and forth menacingly like a liquid snake. When he realizes, with no small amount of disdain, that no one, not even the civilians still in the courtyard, are paying attention to him, he decides to remedy this with a little shower.

Suddenly, the crowd is drenched by a massive burst of sea-spray.
All eyes turn towards the ocean. Kurt raises his waterspout a bit higher, and throws out two large bursts of flame, just to leave no doubt in anyone's mind about exactly who and what he is.

"It's the Avatar!" someone shouts. "He's here!"

"All squads, I repeat assassins are—wait, what the... OH SHIT! AVATAR! IT'S THE AVATAR! THE AVATAR IS ATTACKING!"

Ah, music to his ears.

"All squads, report... wait, no. Ummm, half the squads! Yes! Half the squads, pursue the assassins! Other half—MOTHER FUCKING AVATAR EMERGENCY, GET YOUR ASSES OVER HERE NOW!"

Confusion ensues. The crowd panics, as crowds are often wont to do. A large group of soldiers rushes forward, eager to attack him. Kurt bobs and weaves from side to side, dodging all manner of flame and arrow and other projectiles. One hand bends the water, throwing massive splashes at the soldiers and sweeping them aside with large tendrils. The other hand bends the earth, cracking the ground beneath their feet, sinking them into holes.

Attacks from the front are easy—but several loud sirens on the water clue Kurt into the fact that he has to worry about his backside, as well. Several small-to-medium sized boats have mobilized and are currently coming at him. Kurt turns around just in time to bob to the side of a cannon shot, countering with a wave that flips the offending vessel. Another cannon fires at him. This shell, he catches in water, freezes, and returns to sender. The soldiers panic and leap free just before the explosive impact destroys their boat.

A fireball singes his shoulder, and Kurt realizes that he's too exposed at the top of the waterspout. So he sinks down inside of it, turning the whirling water tower into a protective bubble. Fireballs slam into the surface, fizzling out with barely a burst of steam. Arrows barely penetrate a foot before slowing to a halt, useless and dead in the water. Quick, snappy hand movements freeze the surface into a spiky shell, making him look like a giant boarcupine ice sculpture. He launches a quick volley of icicles, driving the soldiers back.

As he turns to launch a similar volley at the boats, he realizes his mistake right before it bites him in the ass—or more accurately, explodes in his face. Unlike water, ice is hard enough to detonate explosive shells upon impact.

A blast rips his bubble apart and sends him sailing through the air like a steaming comet. He lands on his feet in the courtyard, skidding to a halt. Those boats are going to pay for that. A soldier tries to rush him, only to run face-first into an earthen wall Kurt bends up without even looking at him, the Avatar equivalent of 'I'll get to you in a minute.' With that taken care of, Kurt takes a second to vent his full fury on the boats. His body moves as smooth and powerfully as the tides, throwing tremendous waves that flip multiple smaller boats. One of the smaller boats, he lifts on a waterspout and spins until all the soldiers fly off, before smashing it on the deck of a medium-sized boat with a satisfying crunch.

It's very cathartic.

With that taken care of, Kurt pulls up a good chunk of water from the ocean and pressurizes it, allowing it to fit neatly over his arms, just in time for his wall to be broken down and the soldiers to start their stupidly suicidal charges towards him. His arms bend the water while his legs bend the earth. He forms a liquid shield to block several fireballs, uses a roundhouse kick to earth-spike several soldiers into the sky. His tendrils bat people aside like flies. His feet stomp up human-sized
boulders and kick them like they're tiny plastic balls. He blasts soldiers with jets of water, freezes them to the ground. Water is never in short supply with the ocean around, so he has plenty of bendables to play with.

The trouble is numbers. No matter how many soldiers he smacks down, there always seems to be twenty more willing to come at him. Firebenders start showing up in greater numbers, forcing Kurt to play a bit more defensively. Though the boats won't dare fire their cannons when there's a risk of hitting their own men, they are pulling up to the docks and releasing more soldiers—and animals. Komodo rhinos, to be specific.

This time, however, Kurt is in a much better position than he was with his last clash with rhino riders, and he has no trouble hose-blasting the soldiers off the animals. Sadly, this is only a temporary solution—for every soldier he knocks off, another one just scurries over and hops back on.

"Push him away from the sea!" the loudspeaker orders.

And the strategy then becomes clear. The soldiers move around him, putting their bulk between him and the ocean, steadily pushing him inland. They're separating him from his strongest element.

And they're putting him in range of their archers.

There are about four watchtowers positively loaded with arrowmen, and as their allies push him closer, they start taking aim. He raises up a curved wall of rock to protect him from the hail of arrows, but that just pins him down for all the soldiers on his other side. He's too far from the ocean to draw from it directly now, so Kurt tightens up his control and uses his water wisely, his arm-tendrils smashing and smacking soldiers around without even losing a drop. Even with watertight control of his bending, however, there is one source of leakage he can't avoid: fire. Every time he blocks a fire attack, a piece of his water supply is boiled away. Soon, he won't have any left, which means he'll have to resort to his weaker elements.

He might be in trouble here…

Up on the rooftop outside the base, Kurt's friends watch the battle go down from a distance.

"Oh, shit!" Sam says. "Look out, Kurt!"

"He can't hear you!" Mercedes says.

"What does he need to look out for?" Artie asks.

"Tank!" Sam says. "It's rolling in from behind the wreckage of the office, and he can't see it because of his shelter thingy!"

Finn shares a look with the two earthbenders.

"He needs our help," Finn says.

"He's gonna be mad," Mercedes says.

"We don't have to get into the fighting directly," Finn says. "We can just give him a little supporting fire. You guys hit from the land, I'll take the sea."

"Lot of boats out there," Mercedes says. "You sure you can handle that much heat?"
Finn considers this for a second, and nods. "I've got a good luck charm," he says, clutching the moonstone in his shirt. "I'll be fine."

Artie's face breaks into a blink-and-you'll-miss-it smirk. Finn happens to be blinking at the time. "Sounds like a plan," Artie says. "Let's ROLL OUT!"

"Hey, Sam," Finn says. "Can I borrow your lizard?"

A few seconds later, Artie and Mercedes are on the ground and heading towards the base, while Finn is on Skippy's back, dashing towards the sea. Finn doesn't even bother to stop the lizard once it's on the water; he just lets go of the reins and falls in, relishing in the feel of the ocean on his skin (even if it is kind of grimy around here).

Paddling on the surface, he pulls out his moonstone and holds it to his mouth. "Help me out, okay?" he whispers. "Kurt needs us."

With that, he spins up to the surface and freezes a bit of water beneath him, forming a nice little icy wakeboard. With a few waves of his arms, he's skipping across the surface of the water like a pro.

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A funny thing happens when Kurt's water supply finally dwindles to zero—he remembers he knows a third element.

It's not like he didn't know it already, of course. He's been training with Blaine this entire time, he's used firebending quite a bit when he's had to, but... well, in the presence of so much water, which is far and away his best element, he kind of forgot about firebending for a bit. It's true—Kurt has a bit of a tendency to rely on what he knows, what he is familiar with.

But when your back is literally against the wall, sometimes, you have to improvise, and it turns out Kurt's pretty good at that too. His fire comes hot and ready, more easily than ever before, possibly because he knows what he's after here (Blaine) and possibly because he is ripshit pissed at that very thing. Either way, Kurt excels at firebending, blocking and countering, high-kicking and fire-slamming like he ate a dragon for breakfast.

Sadly, he's still kind of screwed. He might be a decent firebender, but he is a master waterbender and he needs master-level strength to take on this many foes at once and even stand a chance of winning.

And then, a miracle happens. A huge, wobbly globe of raises up out of the ocean and sails towards him, taking the soldiers by surprise and scattering them in an impromptu flash-flood. Getting an idea, Kurt throws himself backwards into the earth wall, slamming it with his hands and feet and curling it around him like armor. Just in time, too—no sooner than the suit is complete does an enormous, explosive fireball come right at him via a friggin' tank. Freezing the water that was just thrown at him into a sheet of ice, he dashes forward and starts skating, narrowly avoiding being blasted. The main drawback of earth armor is that it really slows him down. Fortunately, with ice to skate on, that's much less of a problem. Now that the pressure is off, he has a second to think and prioritize his targets.

At first, he intends to take out the archers. Fortunately, however, that problem is suddenly solved for him. Two of the metal legs on the closest tower suddenly creak loudly and bend in half, apropos of nothing, spilling the archers out of their perch. Looking at the base, Kurt catches a glimpse of some sitting jackass giving him a thumbs-up before sinking into the ground. A giant boulder sails over the wall as if launched from a catapult, slamming the legs of another tower and throwing the archers out.
Kurt shakes his head. His friends are simultaneously the best and worst friends anyone can ask for. He kind of loves them to death, yet he wants to throttle them at the same time. Funny, how that works.

With the archers out of the way, priority one becomes the tank, and Kurt knows just how to deal with it. He skates to the ocean, using his rocky armor to slam into a few soldiers along the way. And then he sees him.

Finn skims speedily across the surface of the water on his frozen wakeboard, weaving in and out of danger and water-blasting soldiers into the ocean like he's been doing it all his life. It makes Kurt realize two important things; 1, Finn really has gotten much better at waterbending, and 2, Kurt now has the perfect solution to this problem.

Kurt sheds his earthen armor, rolling the entire thing into a single craggy rock and blasting it into a charging soldier with a casual "Hold this."

Then he dives into the ocean, and swims to his stepbrother.

"Finn!" Kurt says. "You've just given me the perfect plan!"

"I did?" Finn asks. "Awesome! What is it?"

"We get them to the sea," Kurt says. "If we can get Blaine and his buddies to the ocean, we can evacuate them easily. No firebender stands a chance against us out here!"

"Good thinking!" Finn says.

"You stay out here," Kurt says. "Stay out of trouble as much as you can, and be ready for us!"

"Will do!" Finn says. "What about you?"

Kurt smiles, and sinks beneath the water.

"Is… is he gone? Did the Avatar retreat? I think—NOPE, NOT RETREATING, ALL HANDS ON DECK, LOOK OUT!"

The Avatar rides towards the land with a small tsunami at his back. The soldiers break ranks and run when they see the sheer ridiculous amount of water he is about to bring with him. The courtyard is several feet above sea level, so Kurt knows he's going to lose most of it when he hits land, but he has enough. How much is enough?

Enough to form into a rolling wave on the ground, with Kurt surfing on top, throwing fireballs at anyone who looks at him funny. Enough to carry him all the way across the courtyard. Enough to protect him from the tank when it tries to blast him aside, and enough for him to send that very tank surfing into a wall, where he freezes it solid.

This leaves him smack-dab in soldier central, with the Navy surrounding him on all sides. The civilian crowd, which long ago retreated to the end of the courtyard as far from the ocean as possible, watches him fearfully. The soldiers rush to attack, but Kurt counters by raising a veritable maze of earth walls, making it almost impossible to attack him directly for most of the soldiers. For the ones who can attack him, he counters with firebending, the flames extending his reach and allowing him explosive power. His practice has really improved his technique, and this sort of trail-by-fire approach should make him even better.

He's just about to make a break for Blaine, when suddenly, the air shudders with an incredibly
sound that makes everyone on the battlefield stop what they are doing to scratch their heads in wonder.

Kurt really hopes he did not hear what he thinks he just heard.

The man on the loudspeaker speaks for them all.

"Okay, was that—did something just… roar?"

Komodo rhinos are apparently pretty good at roof hopping, as long as they are hopping straight across or down. Though the chase is by no means settled, the trio is thankful to have the rhino on their side. He makes smashing through blockades much easier, for one thing. After a bit, however, the roofs start raising again, and Mr. Rhino's ability to jump up is not nearly up to par, so the trio must abandon him to climb on their own.

"How far is this stupid building?" David asks as they climb a brick wall.

"Not much further!" Blaine says.

Several soldiers chase them to the edge of the adjacent building—none of them are archers or benders, however, so they're kind of SOL.

Not that they'll let that stop them, however.

Clang!

"What the—" Wes flinches. "I think someone just threw their helmet at me!"

"Throw something back!" David advises.

All three of them throw coordinated donkey-kicks at their offenders, launching enough fire to make them think twice about what they throw next time.

When they reach the roof of the brick building, their destination stands right before them. All they have to do is dash across and climb up the fire escape. Blaine kicks the door in, and they finally find shelter. David welds the door shut to make sure no one can just barge in after them, and the trio takes a second to catch their breath.

"Well," Wes says. "That could have gone worse."

"Really?" David asks. "I don't see how."

"We could be dead," Wes says simply.

"...I suppose that would be worse," David says. "We're not out of the woods yet, though."

"Ugh," Blaine groans. "How did we screw that up so badly? How?"

"We miscalculated," Wes says. "Underestimating your opponent is the surest way to defeat."

"Next time, we'll bring something stronger," David says. "Like a cannon."

"I had one chance..." Blaine says. "One perfect chance, and I blew it."

"You didn't blow it," David says. "Sebastian distracted you, and put Sue on guard with his failed
"None of us saw that coming," Wes asks. "Though I guess we should have, given how adamant he was."

"My question is what it's actually going to take to get rid of Sue," David says. "The woman survived a building exploding on her. She's practically invincible!"

"Not invincible," Blaine says. "She can bleed. I've seen it. I think she got a little blood on my armor…"

"Well, better hers than yours," Wes says.

They rest in silence for a few moments.

"Think we'll get out of this?" Blaine asks.

"I certainly hope so," Wes says.

"For now, all we can do is try," David nods.

They share a short smile, before the moment comes crashing in.

"There they are!" a voice cries from the end of the hallway. "Get them!"

"Break's over, time to go!" Blaine says, charging the other way. Wes and David are right behind him. They round a corner, only to run into another group of soldiers.

Blaine wastes no time—he uses both hands to bend up a fireball and supercharge it, tossing it towards the soldiers and detonating it just before it reaches them, knocking them flat.

"Where are we?" Blaine asks as he jumps over the knocked-out soldiers.

"Some kind of hangar," Wes says, following suit. "For tanks, most likely."

"Maybe we can steal a tank and drive it out of here!" David says, bringing up the rear.

"Worth a shot!" Blaine says. "Come on! Into the main chamber."

They duck down another hallway running along the perimeter of the building and head through a doorway into the massive main chamber of the building. Unlike the hallways, the main chamber is pitch-black.

Blaine bends up a flame to see by. "Anybody see a light switch?"

Wes bends up a light of his own. "Not around here," he says.

"What is that smell?" David sniffs, waving his own fire in front of his face, as if trying to ignite the noxious fumes.

Blaine sniffs the air. "I don't know," he says. "It's not very pleasant, though…"

Wes sniffs as well. "It smells… familiar," he says. "It actually smells kind of like…"

He falls silent.

"Kind of like what?" David asks.
Wes looks at him. "Something's not right. It's quiet. Why is it quiet?"

Blaine realizes what he means. "No one followed us in here."

And suddenly, the door they came in through slams shut. Blaine rushes towards it, trying in vain to pull it open, but it's been locked.

"Oh, heavens," David says.

"What is—"

"Shh!" David says. "Listen."

Blaine listens. It's difficult to make out anything at first.

And then, he hears it.

"Breathing," Blaine says quietly. "Something is breathing."

David nods. "Something very, very large."

Wes takes a deep breath. "From the sound of it, I don't think it's awake yet. We might be able to sneak out if we are quiet. Let's just..."

A low groan. Something shifts in the darkness.

"Fires out!" Blaine says. "Don't move!"

The three of them extinguish their flames, plunging them into utter darkness.

The massive thing continues to shift. Blaine can hear the air moving around it as something probes the air near them. A hot, moist breeze moves against his face. *Breath. Oh God. Its face. Its face is right here.*

The air then shifts directions, moving from behind Blaine instead of in front. It's sniffing him. It smells something.

Blood…

A deep, deep breath, and suddenly, light is born in the darkness—a massive wall of flame bursts forth, illuminating an even more massive mouth full of teeth.

"RUN!" Blaine shouts. They dive out of the way just as the fire slams into the catwalk where they stood. The force of the blast causes the catwalk to come loose on one end, tilting downwards and forcing the three of them to slide off, clattering painfully to the ground.

Something groans—whether it is the creature or the building around it, they cannot say. All they know is one thing.

"We need to get out of here!" Blaine shouts.

Wes has the right idea. "Look for an exi—"

Something absolutely enormous slams into the wall right next to him. It hits hard enough to bend the metal outwards, allowing a small crack of daylight to shine through.
"Found one!" David cheerfully announces, dashing for it. Blaine and Wes follow right behind him, escaping so narrowly that the next impact knocks them all off their feet. They land in a heap on the street outside. By the time they recover their bearings, soldiers are literally pointing weapons at them from every conceivable direction.

Fortunately, they don't have to entertain the idea of surrendering for long. The wall of the building bucks outward, the impact loud enough to cause even hardened soldiers to flinch. The soldiers quickly take most of their weapons off the trio and aim them at the hangar wall, which bulges outward even further.

"Oh, shit!" one of them says. "It's awake! Run for your life!"

With no one watching them, Blaine, Wes, and David quickly kick to their feet just in time to see the final assault on the wall shatter and shred it into pieces, sending it crashing down around them in a massive cloud of debris and dust.

When the dust clears, they finally see it, in all its glory. A massive spiked shell, tall as a building, wide as a street. Tremendous clawed feet large enough to turn man into mulch with a single step. Enormous horns, wild red hair, and a mouth full of sharp teeth on a draconic head that could swallow all three of them in a single snap.

It steps forward, its eyes adjusting to the light. But it doesn't take long to pinpoint the one it wants, the one that has driven it into this frenzy.

*The one that spilled its master's blood.*

Bao Za the Giant Dragon Turtle takes one look at Blaine, throws her head back, and *roars.*

Pebbles vibrate along the ground. Windows rattle in every building in sight—some even crack. Birds for *miles* around take flight, fearing for their lives.

And everyone in the immediate area has to resist the strong urge to pass out and/or wet themselves.

Wes intends for it to be a deadpan statement of fact, but it comes out more like a tearful squeak.

"*Fucking dinosaurs.*"

**TO BE CONTINUED**

*A/N:* Oh, the next section is going to be *so much fun.* Blaine, Wes, and David must flee for their lives from a 'zilla-sized monstrosity that is dead-set on destroying them, no matter how much of *everything else* it destroys in the process. Kurt must fight his way to them before they get munch

Will he make it in time?

And what exactly does he intend to do when he *gets* there?

The Suicide Mission continues next! In the meantime, leave a review, won't you? I'd love to hear from you. ;D

P.S: Sue surviving the explosion isn't as far-fetched as it might seem. You should know from Zuko that you never try to kill a firebender with a bomb. :P
The Suicide Mission, Part 2

Author's Note: I've had some of the scenes in this chapter in my head for almost a year now, and it was still a nightmare that had to be rewritten almost four times. In the end, however, I had fun, and I hope you do too. Well, to a certain point, at least. :P

Quinn cuts through the sea of faces like a steam-powered speedboat, smacking people aside left and right. She doesn't care who she pisses off. In fact, that's kind of what she's aiming for. Part of her wants someone to step up, try and push back, just so she'll have an excuse. Anger and frustration are building up inside of her like a rising tide of paint, and if she doesn't find a canvas soon, she might just explode.

It's all thanks to the asshole. That ash-sniffing, smoke-blowing, lying motherfucking fox. If she ever sees him again, her wrath will fall upon him like a meteor. And that's not hyperbole—she fully intends to leave a crater. Maybe they'll let her name it. Something poetic, like 'The Douchebowl.'

She's busily imagining her revenge in vivid, full-color detail when suddenly, the sea of faces whips into a froth. The crowd shifts directions, and suddenly, Quinn is the one being smacked around. "What's going on? Hey! You—stop! I order you to stop! What's going on? Answer me!"

No one hears her. Her voice is swallowed in the roar of a panicked crowd.

"Fuck it," she grumbles. She wants answers and she's getting them one way or another. The next guy that slams into her gets thrown against a wall for his trouble. Quinn presses his face into the brick and bends his arm behind his back until she hears a pop. Mmmm. So satisfying.

"Owww!" the guy groans. "Fuck, just take the damn money! You don't have to break me."

"I don't want your money," Quinn says. "I want information. What happened up there? Why is everyone running away?"

"Beats me," the guy says. "Some kind of terrorist attack against the Fire Lord!"

"What?" Quinn barks. The guy starts to answer, but the question's rhetorical. She throws him down and runs towards the base without another word. The journey becomes a little easier once she adds a little incendiary to the mix—even in a panic, people know to avoid the bitch on fire.

The crowds get thinner the closer she gets to the base, but what they lack in numbers, they make up for in sheer panic. They dart around like panicked rockroaches, dashing out of cover and disappearing just as fast.

The only reason she even notices him is because he is so much slower than the others. A man in a cloak, limping slightly and clutching himself as if injured. He leans against the wall to catch his breath.

"Sir, are you alright?" she asks.

The figure freezes. "Fine," he grunts.

Quinn's hackles rise. Something is off here. There's something familiar about him… "You don't look fine," she says. "Let me take a look."
"No, really, I'm—" He tries to take a step forward, but falters, stumbling with a hiss. He wraps one hand around his torso, using the other to brace himself against the ground.

"Just hold still for a second," she says. "This won't take long." The figure doesn't move, so she closes in quickly, snatching the hood off his head.

She is disappointed for only a moment. The face is unfamiliar. But then, why would the fox's face be familiar? She's never seen it. Or at least, she's never seen all of it.

He's staring at the ground.

"Look at me," she orders.

The boy ignores her, so Quinn grabs his face and forces it towards her.

*Those eyes. Cold and hard as jade.*

"You," she hisses. Her anger roars to life, and in less than a second, she's swinging a fireball down at the fox's face.

But the fox has something of his own to swing. A handful of dirt and rocks nails Quinn right between the eyes. She staggers and sputters, coughing and wiping the dirt.

By the time she recovers, the fox is already on the move.

"You're not getting away from me again!" And off she sprints, fire fresh and flowing at her fingertips. The fox is quick, but he wasn't faking that injury. His movements are stiff, favoring his left side. He dodges the best he can, but his best is no longer good enough. Flame after flame catches him, winging his arms, scorching his shoulders, singeing his legs. She even scores a direct hit to his hip—the only hit that makes him cry out.

With each hit, she expects him to stumble, to fall. With each hit, she is disappointed. Not only does he keep running, he actually seems to *speed up*. The pain spurs him on.

The fox flits through a series of quick turns before making a break for the docks, and Quinn has had enough. Fire bellows from her hands and feet as she becomes a human rocket, skating on a cloud of combustion that propels her far faster than he can run. The fox sprints with all his might. Her fingers literally graze his collar as he dives beneath the docks. She overshoots him and very nearly lands in the ocean, forcing her to throw her arms and legs in front of her to reverse her momentum.

She lands on her butt on the beach, but takes a split-second to flip to her feet and turn around. The fox is nowhere to be seen, but he can't have vanished entirely. He has to be—*there*. The tail of his cloak flutters into the light as he dashes into a sewer tunnel. She sprints full bore. A moment's hesitation and she will lose him in the darkness. She *refuses* to lose him again. She spots his fluttering cloak as he rounds another corner, and flicks a flame onto the fabric. It catches, burning slowly, giving her a glowing beacon to follow in the pitch black pipeline.

She gains quickly. Anger and frustration spur her to new heights of athleticism, and before long, her fingers find his collar.

She grabs him, slams him against the wall, and throws him face down on the ground.

"Don't move," she says, flames at her fingertips licking the back of his head.
The fox groans and deflates.

"I thought we had a deal," she growls, kicking him onto his back. "But you failed to live up to your end of the bargain, so I have no more reason to play nice. You are going to tell me everything." She plants her boot onto his chest, digging into his ribs. "Now, do you want to talk, or should I make you sing?"

"I… I…"

Quinn blinks. That voice… that isn't…

She holds the fire to his face.

A filthy-looking hobo stares back at her, the fire flickering in his wide eyes.

"You're not him…" she says.

"Ummmm…" says the hobo. "By 'him' I'm supposin' you mean the nice fella what gave me this here cloak."

Shock. Confusion. Dismay. Disappointment. All of these things roil around inside of her, useless and conflicting. Quinn converts them to anger. "Where is he?" she demands, flames flaring dangerously close to his head. "Tell me!"

"I don't know!" the hobo says. "He asked for a favor, gave me the cloak, and sent me a-runnin'! I owed him one, you see. Nice kid gave me my very first royal treasure. A genuine Sun Warrior sword! Can you believe it?"

She can't. She cannot believe it. She absolutely fucking cannot believe any of this stupid… fucking…

"BULLSHIT!" she screams, flames pouring from her mouth and licking the top of the sewers.

"No, really!" the guy says. "I can show it to you, if you want—"

The hobo cuts off as Quinn pulls him to his feet and kicks him forward.

"Run," she says.

"But—"

A fireball flies past his head. Quinn is done fucking around. "I said run!"

The hobo panics and flails off into the darkness. Quinn throws fire at him until she can no longer see him, leaving her alone in the sewer.

Silence and darkness surround her. She hates them both.

So she kills them, throwing her head back and unleashing a second fiery scream that echoes long through the pipes.

The world swims. Images dance in and out, filtered through a churning sea. His vision fades at the edges, his ears lose all sounds but his own pounding heart, the hiss of rushing blood. Spikes of pain pierce him with every step, growing sharper as his adrenaline fades. One tide goes out, another comes in.
But he doesn't stop. He can't stop. He can't die. Not yet.

In the end, he makes it to the warehouse. He doesn't know exactly how, and he doesn't care. He'll be safe here. At least for a little while.

Safe. Ha. Like he can ever truly be safe in this godforsaken place…

Gravity shifts, and Sebastian stumbles to the wall, unable to hold himself upright. The impact jolts him, a burst of electric pain shocking him to awareness. Can't pass out. Have to stay focused…

He sinks against the wall, pulling off his shirt and tearing it into strips. A few to bandage his arms and shoulders where blondie's fireballs whiffed him. A big strip for his right hip, which will probably leave him walking funny for a bit. But the biggest piece of all goes on his torso. Rib cage on the left side. A firebender spotted him as he was climbing over the wall. Direct fucking hit. Only by the skin of his teeth did he manage not to fall and break his neck. It's a bad burn, but it won't kill him. At least… he doesn't think it will. It better not.

Not yet.

He laughs to no one at all. "Fucked up pretty good, didn't you, 'Bas?" he says, hissing as he tightens the bandage. "Real smooth. Fucking heroic, even."

He coughs suddenly, spots dancing across his eyes, and nearly laughs again. His own body is calling him on his bullshit. "Heh…" he says. "Yeah, right. Who're we kidding?"


That's why they chose him.

Heh. Fucking great idea that turned out to be…

Fuck. He starts, snaps his sagging head to attention. His body's giving out on him. Can't pass out. He's too… he needs…

The world turns sideways as he slumps over. Not even the pain of falling can keep the away the fuzzies trying to drag him into the dark. His body is done, at least for now. The wound shouldn't be fatal, but he can't be sure. If he passes out, he can't know if he's ever going to wake up.

So he just tells himself again. *Don't die*. Over and over in his head.

As the world turns into vague splotches of color, and sound is swallowed in a hiss, he repeats the mantra, over and over again.

*Don't die. Don't die. Don't die.*

As he rolls onto his back and stares up at the light…

*Don't die.*

*Don't die…*

*You're so close…*

*You can pull this out…*
"Charge!" Rachel cries dramatically. "Forthwith, we must march to the breaching point! Steady men! Hold the line!"

The Hawks have formed a phalanx in order to better push through the fleeing crowds (and keep the tiny and featherlight Rachel from being swept away in a current).

"I thought holding the line was just not moving back," Cole says.

"Well, then push it!" Rachel says. "Push the line! Forward, march! Onward and upward to the noble horn-call of destiny!"

She's doing her best to strike a courageous chord within their hearts, to grant them the strength to press on towards victory… but it seems ineffective. They all still look like nervous schoolboys.

Which, she supposes, is appropriate, given that's exactly what they are.

When they finally arrive at the base, it seems all their efforts were for naught. The massive, metal gates are shut tight.

"It's closed! Why is it closed?" Trent asks.

"I do not know," Rachel says. "We must investigate!" Her pointer fingers fly in all directions as she assumes command. "We'll split up into search parties, arranged alphabetically by last name, and scour the premises for clues."

The Hawks share some pretty powerful side-eyes.

"Or we could just ask Mercedes," Cole says, pointing her out.

Mercedes is standing in an alley across the street, stomping the ground at odd intervals, looking quite focused.

"What's going on?" Rachel asks, running up to her. "What's happen—"

Mercedes silences her with a hand. "Not now. I'm talking with Artie."

She stomps the ground a few more times, turning her foot this way and that. Suddenly, her eyes widen with shock. "No way!"

"What?" Nick asks. "What is it? Where is everyone? Why is the base closed?"

"Blaine-brains tried to ice the Fire Lord, that's why!" Mercedes says, stomping a few more times. "The whole damn army came down on his head, and Kurt went in to try and take the heat off, but now I don't even know what's going on. Something's shaking the damn ground and messing up my communications! " She shakes her head and points up to the rooftops. "Talk to Sam! He's got a better view of things. I'll keep trying to talk with Artie."
"Right!" Rachel says. "Come on, men! To the roof!"

Rachel scales the fire escape in record time, leaving the Hawks eating her dust for a bit.

"What's going on?" she asks the second she gets to the top.

"Rahel!" Sam says. "Oh, man, it's going down out there! I think a building just collapsed. There's dust everywhere—I can't see what's happening!"

"Let me see!" Rachel says, grabbing for the spyglass. Sam hands her the scope, and she peers towards the dust, spotting a tremendous shadow in the cloud. "What is that?" she asks.

Bit by bit, an image takes shape in the dust, like a nightmare emerging in the real world. Within the dust cloud is a terrapin terror unlike anything she has ever beheld, with four tremendous, muscular legs supporting a bulky, imposing shell like the craggiest of mountains. Its head is draconic, sharp horns and sharper teeth on a thick, serpentine neck, with a lengthy, spiked tail rounding out the horror.

It seems almost like an image or a statue, still and silent, too horrible to be real.

And then it roars.

And Rachel screams.

Several others scream along with her. Pretty much everyone who actually sees Bao Za; Blaine, Wes, David, the soldiers, even loudspeaker man. They all join voices, supplementing Bao Za's "RAAAAAAAAAAAWR!" with a beautiful harmonious chorus of "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Once they've all had their fill of yelling, they commence with the business of running.

Blaine, Wes, and David book it away from the beast, along with, oh, everyone else. The mass of fleeing soldiers looks like a swarm of dots to Bao Za, but the monster knows which dots it wants: the bright red ones, particularly the one that smells of its master's blood.

It lifts a claw.

Blaine finds himself overtaken by an enormous shadow.

"DIVE!" he shouts, pitching forward just as the claw comes down.

The impact is tremendous. Like a child playing in its bathwater, Bao Za slams its hand down and sends soldiers splashing in every direction. Some clatter onto the streets. Some slam against buildings. And some just smash right through them.

Blaine crashes through the second story window of a building on the left side of the street. His ears ring for a second, but fortunately, loudspeaker man gives him something to focus on while his brains get back in order.

"All units, we have a Code FUBAR! Repeat, we have a Code FUBAR! Giant monster on the loose! Seabound units, get your asses on land. Landbound units, get your asses to the tanks. Pull out those grappling hooks! We need heavy artillery and we need it yesterday! The beast is unleashed, in front of the hangar and heading east! MOVE!"

A floor-rumbling thud shakes Blaine to awareness, and he notices a few things.
One: Wes and David are no longer with him. He doesn't know where they went.

Two: Bao Za has lost track of him. It stomps down the street as it searches for him, its slow, lumbering footsteps shaking the world with every impact. Windows rattle in their panes. Walls shake loose their hangings. Shelves collapse and dump their contents onto the floor.

Blaine knows he won't last long if the thing finds him again, so he decides to go up. That thing may be big, but it isn't very tall. He should be safe on the roofs.

He turns to head up, and that's when he notices number three:

He is not alone.

A beefy-looking soldier with an oversized blade growls and charges him. He tries to split the Prince down the middle, but Blaine pivots and delivers a flaming kick right to his chest. The kick pushes him back, but fails to knock him over, and he quickly charges again. Meathead slices and dices. His blade is big and powerful, but Blaine is limber and quick. He dances around the swordsman with relative ease, trying to get into position to knock him out the window.

He's about to blast him when he sees it coming.

"Get down!" Blaine shouts, sacking Meathead to the floor just as Bao Za's carelessly swung tail annihilates much of the room.

Stone, wood, and glass shatter into dust, splinters, and shards. Bits and pieces fly by the millions, a maelstrom of devastation. Metal shears and brick crumbles as Bao Za's massive tail rakes through the second floor of two buildings without it even noticing. The monster is busy peering into buildings across the street, where little pulses of orange occasionally light up the windows.

Blaine shakes bits of broken furniture off his back and looks down at his beefy adversary.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

Meathead socks him right in the jaw.

He's pretty sure that's a 'yes.'

Blaine stands and stumbles, and Meathead tries to skewer him. Fortunately, Blaine's swivel-hips deny him a Prince-kebab in favor of drywall-on-a-stick. His sword is stuck, and Blaine is about to relieve him of it when…

"Ah! Help!"

The Prince turns and sees him. A fellow dangling on the end of Bao Za's swinging tail, looking mere moments away from falling.

Meathead pulls his sword free, but Blaine has no time for him. The Prince jumps up and uses his chest plate as a launchpad, fireblasting Meathead onto his back and propelling Blaine through the air to Bao Za's tail.

Of course, Blaine can't really do much for the guy when he just winds up dangling beside him.

"What are you doing?" the dangler asks.

"You asked for help, right?" Blaine says. The beast's tail sways idly as it peruses the windows across the street. Blaine takes a second to feel out the rhythm of the swing. "Let go, on three!"
"Are you crazy?" the dangler asks.

"Just trust me," Blaine says. "One… two… three!"

The Prince and the dangler release their grip and go flying towards the building next to Blaine's. The Prince grabs his companion and uses a little burst of flame to guide them to the partially collapsed third floor.

Blaine helps the poor guy up. "Are you alright?"

The guy looks at him like he's got purple-spotted spider-rats crawling on his face. "Ummm… yes?"

"Good," Blaine grins.

The guy just blinks at him, thoroughly confused. "Ummm… you might want to…"

That's as far as he gets before a hand wraps around his foot, yanking him down to the second floor. Meathead slams him on his back and tries to slice his legs off. Blaine folds himself in half just in time for the sword scrape his butt, and promptly snaps both feet into Meathead's chest, sending him stumbling backwards.

Blaine's had about enough of this guy. As he falters, Blaine flames him, slamming blast after blast into his thick armor and pushing him further and further back. He doesn't actually want to hurt the guy, he just wants to knock him senseless long enough to make a getaway. Meathead stumbles into a wall, and Blaine is preparing to send him through it when he sees Meathead's smirk.

And then he hears the growl from behind him.

*Found you.*

He doesn't even bother looking—he just dives.

Bao Za's head fires at him like a cannonball, its massive jaws biting into the building and snapping shut just shy of Blaine's leg. The destructive munch buries the Prince in a pile of rubble, but he'd rather be buried than eaten any day.

The monster pulls its head free, taking a sizeable chunk of the walls and floors with it. Bao Za is a sloppy eater, bits of broken boards and crumbling mortar leaking out of its mouth as it chews. After a couple of chomps, it opens its mouth and lets the whole soggy mess fall out. It didn't get him, and it knows it.

Fortunately, Blaine is currently camouflaged pretty well as a pile of rubble. If he doesn't move, he might be able to escape notice.

So of course, Meathead takes this opportunity to remind Blaine that he's still around.

"Got you now!"

Well, shit.

Meathead raises his sword. Blaine bursts out of the rubble like reborn phoenix, exploding to his feet and sending flaming wreckage in every direction. Meathead stumbles away from the heat, and Blaine glares at him.

Another growl.
There you are.

Several things happen at once.

As Blaine hears Bao Za, he turns and runs towards the wall. As Blaine runs, Bao Za opens its mouth. As Bao Za opens its mouth, Meathead runs after Blaine.

Blaine runs up the wall. Meathead grabs his ankle. And Bao Za strikes.

The sheer force of the beast's attack is mindblowing. Its head crushes brick, wood, and iron as it literally eats its way towards Blaine. The Prince is knocked through yet another wall. Fortunately, monster-related antics had already weakened it, so crumbles easily and only knocks him slightly silly.

When he recovers, he's being dragged across the floor on his back. A quick look towards his feet tells him why.

Bao Za is slowly pulling its head out of the building. It has Meathead's mangled leg in its jaw.

And Meathead still has Blaine. The Prince's ankle is in one hand, his trusty sword in the other.

He's got a pretty impressive grip.

"Let me go!" Blaine says, preparing to burn himself loose if necessary.

But Meathead is no longer snarling or smirking. He's frowning, lips quivering, eyes wide, nose already leaking snot. Ew. "Help me!" he says. "Please!"

Blaine sighs. He never could say no to a person in need.

Bao Za pulls its head up, leaving Meathead (and, by extension, Blaine) dangling from its mouth like a big, juicy piece of slobber. Blaine looks up to survey the situation.

"Give me your sword!" Blaine commands.

Meathead drops the weapon, and Blaine snatches it up.

"Swing with me! When I say 'now,' let go!" Blaine says.

Meathead complies, swinging the Prince as the Prince swings himself. It only takes a few swings to build up enough momentum, and…

"Now!" Blaine says.

Meathead releases him, and the Prince goes flying straight up. Bao Za spots him as he soars past, but it doesn't realize what's going to happen until it's too late. As Blaine reaches the apex of his ascent, the rising Prince becomes a falling comet, firebending from both legs and streaking towards Bao Za's head, sword-first.

The blade stabs right into the bridge of the monster's massive snout, sinking in and sticking there.

Bao Za's mouth immediately opens in an outraged roar, dumping Meathead onto the ground with the rest of the garbage it ate. The beast stomps and thrashes, angrily whipping its head from side to side to dislodge Blaine. The Prince flops around like a ragdoll sewn on the tail of a very happy dog, holding on as tight as he can. It is a futile effort—eventually, his grip slips, and he goes flying.
As he sails through the air, he gets a birds-eye view of the building he was just in, watching as Bao Za's frantic stomping combines with massive structural damage to bring the whole thing down. The walls fold, the roof caves, and the entire edifice crumbles and collapses, blasting the street with a shockwave of dust.

He's so busy watching where he's been that he forgets to look where he's going. As a result, the Prince smashes ass-first through a third-story window across the street. For a second, he can only lie dazed, staring at the white ceiling, lit by the occasional burst of orange. A soldier goes flying over his head, and a familiar face looks down at him, grinning as he helps him up.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Wes says. "But I'm fairly sure I just saw you risk your life to save someone who tried to kill you."

Blaine shrugs. "Only two or three times."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Wes says. "But I'm fairly sure I just saw you risk your life to save someone who tried to kill you."

Blaine shrugs. "Only two or three times."

Wes shakes his head. "Blaine, I mean this in the best way: my friend, you have a problem."

"Noted," Blaine says. "Where's David?"

"I believe he landed in the next building over," Wes says.

"Well, only one way to find out," Blaine says.

It doesn't take them long. Blaine immediately heads for his natural environment of rooftops, where David is just finishing a firefight of his own, leaving his opponent in a dazed, smoking heap. "There you are!" David says. "I wondered where you'd gotten to. Still in one piece?"

"I'm fine," Blaine says. "Just need to catch my breath a bit. I think we're safe up here."

The universe, as is customary, does not waste this opportunity to prove him wrong.

Growl.

It rises slowly from the dust, a weaving, serpentine shadow, growing taller and taller until it emerges from the cloud to look down upon them. With its neck fully extended, Bao Za really puts the dragon in dragon turtle, looking less like a firebreathing terrapin and more like a dragon that happens to be wearing a shell.

"That's an impressive neck," Wes says quietly.

The dragon turtle roars at the compliment.

"Run!" David shouts.

"I'm tired of running!" Blaine says. "Hit it with all you've got!" The three of them join to unleash a barrage of fireballs, but Bao Za ain't even bothered. It bobs its head from side to side, snaking around the blasts with ease. As it slithers, it opens its mouth and begins to take a very deep breath.

"Changed my mind," Blaine says. "Run!" He grabs his friends and breaks for the next roof. The trio jumps free just as Bao Za sets the motherfucking roof on fire in a veritable flash-flood of flame. Every square inch is covered in thick, persistent fire, which quickly begins to consume the whole building, temporarily hiding Bao Za behind a cloud of thick, black smoke.

Wes and David look slightly awed, slightly ill at the sheer amount of fire the monster just produced. They turn to Blaine as if to speak, but the roof thurs underneath them. The monster is
on the move.

"Keep running!" Blaine says, leading by example.

The next roof is a floor higher than this one. Blaine contemplates just climbing up, but the sound of another monstrous inhalation quickly changes his mind. With a breath of his own, Blaine throws a double-fisted fireblast and knocks a hole in the wall in front of them. The three boys jump from the roof of one building to the fourth floor of the next just as Bao Za burns the world behind them.

"How do we escape this thing?" David asks.

"Keep running!" Blaine says. "That's pretty much all I've got."

They climb the stairs to the rooftop, turn to the next roof, and their collective jaw drops. A veritable world of soldiers is marching straight towards them. Soldiers on the rooftops, soldiers on the ground, soldiers in tanks, soldiers on foot. Soldiers with bows and arrows, soldiers with grappling hooks, soldiers with spears, swords, staves, and fire flickering above their palms.

"Ummm," Blaine says. "Not this way."

They turn around, only to see Bao Za stick its head through the smoke. The beast sucks in another breath.

"Not this way either!" Blaine says.

The flames lick at their boots as they dive onto the lower rooftop next to them.

"There's nowhere to go!" Wes says. "We're stuck between a forest fire and a volcano!"

Blaine looks around. The soldiers are approaching fast, but so is Bao Za. Of the two, Blaine would much rather fight soldiers. Humans can get to them anywhere, but Bao Za is enormous. There has to be somewhere it can't find them.

He spots it to the north of them. Beyond a large stretch of lawn, there spreads a gigantic military complex, enormous and sturdy-looking. It's the biggest building in sight, and more than likely their best bet at shelter.

"We can hide in there!" Blaine says, pointing to the building.

"How do we get there?" David asks.

"Working on it!" Blaine says.

The Prince looks at the approaching army, and an idea is born. Taking a second to breathe and clear his mind, Blaine runs to the edge of the roof and throws a sizeable fireball up and over. The incendiary orb arcs through the air, landing right behind an approaching soldier. The explosion propels the poor fellow over two rooftops and lands him right behind Blaine.

The soldier lands on his feet, full of bravado and brandishing his grappling hook. "Ha!" he says, puffing out his chest. "You missed!"

"Wasn't aiming at you," Blaine says, grabbing his grappling hook and kicking him to the ground. "Come on!" he shouts at his friends. Blaine runs to the edge of the roof and sticks the grappling hook on a gutter, preparing to rappel down the roof just as Bao Za's head pops out to greet them again. Wes and David go first, and Blaine takes a second to indulge in a roguish grin, winking at
the beast before sliding down himself.

Bao Za grumbles in offense.

Once they're on the ground, the stretch of lawn between them and safety seems much longer. "Run for it, guys!" Blaine says. "We need to get there before the soldiers cut us off!"

They take off in the same positions as before—Blaine takes point, with Wes in the middle defending their flanks, and David in back keeping an eye on their six.

More soldiers begin to pop out of the woodwork ahead of them. Blaine lights a fire in each hand, and prepares to go to town, when suddenly—


"Hey!" David says. "I think Shell-shock is backing off!"

*Thud, thud, thud…*

"Or maybe not…" David says.

*Thud thud thudthudthudthud*—

"Oh shi—GET DOWN!" David shouts.

Blaine is tackled by Wes and David just as a small apocalypse seems to occur behind them. Dust and debris falls on them like warm, dusty rain. Window panes and door frames, chair legs and countertops, bricks, drywall, and glass; all clatters to the ground all around. A flying girder embeds in the dirt beside them, sticking out like a twisted, metal tree.

Blaine looks up, and he can hardly believe his eyes. "Agni's breath…"

Two of the buildings behind them are *gone*. Demolished utterly and completely, their remnants spread out in a wide cone of destruction. At the tip of the cone stands Bao Za, its head drawn inside its massive shell, the crags of which are positively littered with rubble and wreckage. Bits and pieces fall from it like water droplets after a dip in the ocean.

That monster just bodily demolished two buildings like they were nothing.

This changes things somewhat.

"We are so screwed," David says.


"If it's any consolation," David says. "I hate it too."

Bao Za's head emerges from its shell, and it spots them almost instantly. The beast takes a single step towards them… and lurches to a stop. Dozens upon dozens of grappling hooks shoot out from behind and around it, from soldiers and tanks hidden by the dust cloud of the collapsed building. They hook into its claws, its neck, its shell, its tail, and everywhere else they can fit. Blaine can hear the engines of numerous tanks straining against the beast, pulling the ropes taught and desperately trying to tie it down. The monster roars in agitation as it struggles against its binds.

"Now's our chance!" Blaine says. "Let's go!"
And so they charge. Certain death is behind them, a possible shelter in front, and a small army between them. All they have to do is get from one to the other.

Blaine prepares for battle, just as loudspeaker man announces his arrival.

"Assassins are heading north towards the barracks, repeat, north towards the barracks. Move to intercept! And get me more tanks on that monster, conflag it! Don't make me come down there!"

"All units, we have a Code FUBAR! Repeat, we have a Code FUBAR! Giant monster on the loose! Seabound units, get your asses on land. Landbound units, get your asses to the tanks. Pull out those grappling hooks! We need heavy artillery and we need it yesterday! The beast is unleashed, in front of the hangar and heading east! MOVE!"

Kurt pauses mid-fight to do a double-take at the speaker. "Say what?" He promptly springs up and slams the earth, rippling the ground into a rocky shockwave that clears about thirty feet worth of breathing room.

With a second to take stock of things, the Avatar looks to the end of the street, and spies what looks like a small mountain on four legs with a giant snake sticking out.

Holy shit.

And just like that, Kurt's priorities shift.

Parting the crowds with a couple of earth walls, Kurt charges through, melts the ice around the tank and once again finds himself surfing on land. He needs to get to Blaine, and he needs to get there yesterday. He doesn't know what that monster's deal is, but if it belongs to Sue, he's betting it isn't friendly.

Unfortunately, Kurt's path is a bit more cluttered than he realized. Blaine and company just beat it across these very rooftops. The entire street is lined with soldiers on every surface, including and especially archers on the rooftops.

It is at this point that Kurt realizes that his previous strategy—distracting the soldiers from Blaine—is now null and void. Shelldon the Giant Turtle-thing has that covered. Kurt no longer needs to be in the spotlight.

No, Kurt needs to vanish.

The Avatar turns his wave into a bubble and sinks inside, freezing the surface to rebuff a hail of arrows. A second later, the bubble bursts into an outpouring of fog, filling the entire street from ground to rooftop.

A din of confusion ensues, soldiers shouting and clamoring about, unable to see their hands in front of their faces.

"Where'd everybody go?"

"Where's the Avatar?"

"Where are you?"

"Where am I?"
With a wry grin, Kurt swings his fists and splits the earth, knocking out a wall on one side of the street.

"There!" a soldier shouts. "He's over there!"

The soldiers go one way, and Kurt goes the other, darting agilely to the other side of the street and ducking inside of a building. Blaine and beastie are just up the road from him, so Kurt's plan is simple; use buildings like a tunnel to hide from archers and other prying eyes. While they search for him outside, he'll sneak right under their noses and get to Blaine that much faster.

He just needs a little something to help him get started.

A tell-tale trickling echoes down the hallway, and Kurt follows his ears to a rather interesting surprise…

Private Lance knows he should probably be out fighting. It's the Avatar, you know? You don't screw around with stuff like that.

But dang it, sometimes a man's just gotta do what he's gotta do. When nature calls, you answer, and nature was calling him. Oh, man, was it ever. It was a freaking four-alarm emergency, sirens wailing, batten down the hatches, all hands on deck!

Lance whistles as he whizzes. A weird little habit, but it helps him think. Probably shouldn't have had that eighth cup of tea. Man's bladder can only hold so much, you know? This tinkle is a long one. Probably the longest he's ever taken, and man does it feel good. Almost seems a shame to finish.

But finish he does. He zips up, flushes, heads to wash his hands…

And finds himself in the eyes of the enemy. "All done?" asks the Avatar.

"What in the—you—mmmmmmm!"

The Avatar whips his arms and Lance's toilet water snatches him up like a hungry whalesquid, pulling him onto the throne and freezing him in place.

Oh, nasty! He froze him to a toilet! With toilet water! A bit of ice clamps over his mouth, and Lance gives the Avatar a look that would strip rust off of iron.

"Get over it," the Avatar says. "Just be thankful I waited until you flushed. I didn't have to."

Huh. Well, what do you know?

While Lance chews on that thought, the Avatar earth-smashes one of the sinks, breaking open the pipes and spewing water everywhere. He does some whippy, flowy arm crap, squeezing a whole mess of water into four little fist-sized balls of ice and stickin' 'em on his belt. Then he fills up a little pouch, wraps some water around his hand, and freezes the pipes shut.

"I hate to leave these," the Avatar says, kicking off his boots, "but they aren't conducive to sneaking. You can have them. Give them to your wife, or significant other. I'm sure they'll love them!" With that, he grins and heads out the door.

Lance watches him go, feeling all weird and conflicted. He's pretty sure he's committing treason by even thinking this, but you know, the Avatar might not be so bad.
Sure, he's frozen to a toilet. But he's got a nice new pair of boots out of it. Plus, he could be frozen to a toilet with *pee water*. You gotta look on the bright side of things. It could always be worse, you know?

Kurt steps out into the hallway, taking cover around a corner. He can already hear the guards chattering. Soldiers are coming in from outside, forming search parties to sweep the buildings.

"Fan out!" the leader commands. "Search every corner of this place. You find him, you scream like a gator-viper bit your toe off! Got it?"

"Yes, sir!" the guards chorus.

They spread out quickly.

Kurt's bare feet are almost completely silent as he pads down the hallway, but he has to suppress the urge to sigh. Those really *were* nice boots.

He hears two guards around the corner, walking away from him. *Easy pickings*, he thinks, taking one of the ice balls from his belt and rolling it at them. It clinks against a pair of boots…

"What the—"

…and promptly explodes. Kurt melts the pressurized ice into a blast of water strong enough to throw both guards against the wall, where Kurt freezes them. *Ice bombs*. A technique of Kurt's own invention, one of his favorite tricks.

Little icicles hang from the soldiers like solstice decorations, and Kurt winks at them as they watch him go past, unable to move anything but their eyeballs.

When he opens the door to the staircase, he is spotted almost instantly. There's a guard right in front of him.

The fellow opens his mouth and sucks in a breath to scream. Kurt can't have that, so shoves some water down in guy's gullet and washes his mouth out. *Violently*. The liquid sloshes from side to side, slamming the guard's head into the wall and knocking him out cold.

He makes sure to evaporate the water before after he pulls it out of the guy's mouth. Kurt has no interest in spitbending, thank you very much.

The second floor has only slightly less soldiers searching it. Kurt makes his way north, intending to go from building-to-building via the windows. There is a single guard on the northernmost hallway, moving away from him. Kurt takes his handwater and turns it into a lasso, roping it around the guard's mouth and slamming him into the wall.

It's effective at knocking him out, but it's a little louder than he wanted.

"What was that?"

Kurt hears footsteps coming down the hall, and looks down at the KOed guard. *Think fast, Kurt!*

The guard pops around the corner to find his buddy staring out an open window.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," his buddy says, his voice sounding a little high. "*Though I saw something over here. Come*
"here and take a look."

The guard moseys over to stare out the window. "I don't see anything," he says.

"Look closer."

And his 'buddy' promptly shoves him out the window.

Kurt steps out from behind his cover, gently bending the guard to the ground before pulling the water out of his armor. He had to use one of his ice bombs to get enough liquid to fully puppeteer the guy, but he was about to need the extra water for his next trick anyway.

The Avatar forms an ice bridge between the buildings, jumping up and sliding to the closed window on the other side. He's trying to wedge a little water between the cracks to force the window open silently when…

"Hey, that's him! AVATAAAAAR! AVATAR ALERT!"

Well, so much for stealth.

Kurt shatters the window with a flaming kick and jumps inside, making sure to land far away from the glass shards. Back in the other building, a group of guards charges towards him with weapons drawn.

No way. They're not that stupid. They can't be—

Without even a moment's hesitation, they jump up to the window and start running across Kurt's ice bridge.

Wow.

The guards are shocked—shocked!—when the ice bridge suddenly melts from underneath them, dumping them in the bushes below as it flows back to Kurt. Honestly, it's like these people have never even met a waterbender.

"He's up here!" Kurt hears someone say.

He suppresses a grumble. This might be a little harder than he thought. Blaine and his monster buddy are probably moving further away from him every second. Kurt can feel the thing's footsteps through his bare feet, even at this distance.

He needs to move faster.

Maybe the right strategy isn't fighting or stealth. Maybe it's somewhere in the middle.

Or maybe he just needs to move.

With that thought, the Avatar charges down the hall just as the guards emerge from the staircase. They don't even have time to draw their weapons before an ice bomb freezes them in their tracks. Kurt runs right past them, eying the window the next building. His strategy has shifted again—at this point, Kurt is just going to go with the flow. He's taking the fastest available path to Blaine and he doesn't care who sees him as long as they don't get in his way.

So Kurt heads north.

Apparently, he isn't the only one.
"Assassins are heading north towards the barracks, repeat, north towards the barracks. Move to intercept! And get me more tanks on that monster, conflag it! Don't make me come down there!"

"Crap!" Sam growls, peering through his scope, leaning over the edge of the roof. "Kurt's gone!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nick asks.

"He just… poof!" Sam says. "Disappeared!"

"But he can't be gone!" Rachel says. "He has to rescue his Prince from the clutches of the evil dragon monster!"

Sam lowers his telescope. "Evil dragon monster isn't the biggest problem right now," Sam says, pointing towards the base. "Look!"

They don't even need the scope to see it. A swarm of little soldier-dots is converging towards the center of the base. The whole place has been mobilized, and it's converging on them.

"Oh, man," Cole says. "That's a lot of soldiers."

"Too many," Nick says, shaking his head. "Nobody can fight off that many people at once."

"Fight?" Trent says. "Pretty soon, there won't even be room to move!"

Loudspeaker man blabs something over the PA system, and Rachel crosses her arms in a huff. "They wouldn't be in this position if Mr… Loudmouth… Talkity-Yak would shut his face and stop telling everyone where to go!" Rachel says. "Honestly, he talks more than I do! And I am very loquacious!"

"That's the Commander," Jeff says. "He directs everything on the base."

"Well," Rachel says. "He needs to… to… un-direct!"

Sam turns to the group with a glint in his eye and a grin on his lips. "Nah," he says. "He just needs a new direction."

The group looks at him, wary-but-curious.

"Dragon Hawks, I need your help," Sam says, taking another look through his spyglass. "Talky-dude has got to be calling the shots from someplace high, someplace where can see what's going on… there!" He points to metallic tower with a window on the top level, poking high above the rest of the buildings. "I need you guys to get me to that tower."

"Why?" Flint asks.

"I've got a plan," Sam says. "Just trust me."

The Hawks exchange nervous glances. "Are you crazy?" Trent asks. "We can't fight all the way to there!"

"You don't have to fight," Sam says. "You guys are still dressed like soldiers. I just need you around so I won't look suspicious. We might have to take care of a guard or two, but if you get me to the tower, I'll take care of the rest."

The Hawks indulge a bit of nervous shuffling.
Rachel calls them to action. "Come on, men!" she says, her voice adopting a dramatic quiver. "We stand upon the edge of glory, gazing into the abyss of legend! Death and pain and dismemberment may await you around the corner, but so also waits immortality, for this is how men becomes legends! Your body may be beaten, broken, smashed, dismembered, cut to ribbons, burned to ashes, or boiled alive… but your story shall live on forever! Now, I ask of you; who here is ready to become a legend?"

Silence, with a side of collar-pulling. The answer is, apparently, no one. Rachel huffs in indignation.

Fortunately, Nick's call to action is a little more successful. "Come on, guys," he says. "We said we wanted to help, right? Well, this is the real deal. This is our chance to really make a difference! It's time to step up, or step out!"

"Nick's right," Jeff says, throwing a fist-pump. "Let's do this!"

The Hawks give a resolute nod, and Rachel huffs an even huffier huff.

"We're all yours, Sam," Nick says. "What are your orders?"

"Okay, you four," Sam says, pointing out Nick, Jeff, Trent, and Flint. "You're with me. We're riding Skippy. Everyone else, stay here. Rachel, you're in charge" Sam says, handing her the scope. "Keep an eye on things, and keep Mercedes updated. I hear you're pretty loud."

"Well," Rachel says, blushing slightly. "I project well, that's all."

"Alright, let's hit it!" Sam says, heading down the fire escape, followed by a foursome of Hawks. They hop onto Sam's noble reptilian steed and dash for the docks. The lizard skims the surface like the agilest of waterbugs as they head into military waters. In and out of the boats, it dodges through the clamor and clatter, eventually finding its way to the courtyard where the civilians are gathered.

The reptile riders do not see the familiar face among the crowd as they pass.

They do not see him start to follow, nor do they see him stop, turn his nose up, and look away.

He, however, most certainly sees them, even if he chooses to pretend otherwise.

The run to the barracks is probably the most chaotic flight in Blaine's life. The small army in front of them gets less small and more army with each passing second. The only thing more dangerous than the hundreds of soldiers in front of them would be the roaring, thrashing monster behind them.

There's no time to think. Just to move.

Blaine is once again in front, in charge of path clearing. His eyes focus only on the stretch of land between them and safety, tuning out all other stimuli. He has to trust his friends. Wes will cover the sides. David will cover the rear. They will do their jobs, so he has to do his.

A group of spear-wielders moves into their path. Blaine kicks up a firewave that knocks their legs out from under them, making them easy to jump over. Sadly, they are just the first of many. Upstart soldiers pop up like molerats, attacking in scattered bits, occasionally clumping into larger groups. Clumps get flattened with explosive blasts. Individuals get a quick fireball to the chestplate. Blaine kicks and punches and bends with all his might, but for every soldier he knocks down, two more seem to pop up.
A surprise attack from his flank nearly takes him out, but Wes has him covered, sending the soldier sailing away on a fiery cloud. Blaine hears distinctive sizzle of burned flesh as he flies, and tries not to wince. 

See, Blaine is being careful. His firebending always hits the armor. Explosive blasts detonate before impact, so the soldiers are just knocked over instead of incinerated. He doesn't want to hurt these people. They're just misguided pawns in Sue's stupid games. 

Unfortunately, they don't seem to know or care that he is holding back. And they certainly aren't returning the favor. 

Just like Sebastian said…

"INCOMING!" David shouts. 

"Get down!"

Blaine dives to the ground as a massive object passes over him close enough to ruffle his hair. The thing slams the ground and digs a rut into the earth. When it finally skids to a halt, Blaine squints at it, just to make sure he's seeing it right. "Is that a tank?"

"Why would a tank fall from the sky?" Wes asks. 

"Because THAT!" David says, pointing behind them. 

Blaine follows the path of his finger to Bao Za, who has had it up to here with its captors. The beast reaches its head around and bites into a few of the cables holding it down. With the muscles in its massive neck, it swings its head, snapping the cords and lifting three tanks off the ground. The massive monster swings them around and releases them like stones from a giant sling. Two of them fly wild, but one lands mere yards away. 

"Oh, fuck you, monster!" Wes says, incredulous. "You can't throw tanks!"

"Not to rain on your campfire, but the evidence suggests otherwise," David says. 

"Come on, it's breaking loose, we have to go!" Blaine says, sprinting ahead. He dashes with all his might, arms whipping fire left and right. Blaine is carving through the crowd like a chisel through stone, when a sound brings him to a halt. 

"Gah!" David shouts. "Get off me!"

The Prince turns. Wes and David have fallen behind, locked in battle. 

He runs to them as fast as he can, but for a few moments, he can only watch. 

David grapples with another firebender. Wes quickly comes to his aid, whipping the fellow right off. He stands back-to-back with David, who blasts a flamethrower from each hand, spreading his arms wide to cover every angle. Wes supports him, lashing his fire whips in every direction, snapping them seemingly at random. The result is a chaotic, crackling hurricane of flame that would make anyone think twice about closing in. It's working beautifully, until a chain flies out of nowhere and wraps around Wes's arm, yanking him off-balance. David kicks the chain in twain, but Wes is already stumbling. A soldier rushes in and puts Wes in an arm bar. David tries to run over and help, but a soldier tackles him to the ground and pins him down. 

Everything seems to slow down for a moment as Blaine becomes hyper-aware.
He sees the larger soldier on top of David try to shove a sword into his neck. He sees David's strained face as he pushes back against the weapon, sees the beads of sweat forming as he slowly loses the fight, his enemy having both strength and gravity on his side.

He sees the soldier holding Wes, sees Wes struggling violently, thrashing and kicking wild bursts of flame that fall just short of David's attacker. He sees what Wes doesn't see—an archer taking aim at him from a good distance away, aiming to skewer him while he is helpless.

And just like that, all pretense of care vanishes.

Blaine attacks.

A fireball splinters the archer's bow, exploding with such force that the man flips as he is sent flying. A vicious flaming kick to the ribs knocks David's attacker clean off of him, sending him rolling downhill like a dropped barrel. Wes's captor gets elbowed in the spine, flipped over the Prince's shoulder, and fire-kicked before he even hits the ground. The kick turns him into a human projectile, slamming him into three soldiers mid-charge and leveling the lot of them.

Blaine eyes his fallen foes, fists clenched so hard that his arms are shaking. "Don't ever touch my friends again," he growls, shocking himself at his own ferocity.

"Blaine, are you alright?" Wes asks.

The gentle voice snaps him out of his fury. Blaine deflates, and turns to answer him.

"LOOK OUT!" David shouts.

Another flying tank makes its landing in front of them. It skids out on the soil, forcing them to dive for safety. The dust kicked up by the landing gives Blaine a second to take into account their surroundings. There are more soldiers than ever pouring onto the lawn. Soon, the place will be so packed that they'll have to crowd surf to get anywhere at all.

They need a way to push through.

"We're... alive?" the tank gunner says. "Oh, thank Agni, we're ALIIIIIIVE! I knew my baby would see us through!"

Blaine looks at the tank, and quirks his brow.

"Cover me!" he says. "I've got an idea!"

Wes and David promptly begin torching the world to keep the soldiers at bay, while Blaine dashes up the treads to the top of the tank.

"Hey!" the tank gunner says, eying him through the bending hatch. "Get your filthy boots off my baby! I just waxed her!"

"Sorry," Blaine says. "But I need this."

The gunner throws a fireball, but Blaine dives over it and slides into the tank through the bending hatch.

The ensuing fight is short and decisive. One, two, three bursts of flame, and three scorched soldiers pop out of the hatch and dive onto the lawn, rolling to put themselves out.

"Get in!" Blaine shouts to Wes and David. "You drive, I'll shoot!"
Wes and David throw a few final fireballs before dashing to the open tank and climbing in. An enemy firebender tries to turn the tank into an oven, but Blaine blasts him away.

"How exactly do you drive this thing?" Wes asks.

"I don't know!" David says. "Press something!"

Another soldier jumps on top of the tank, but before Blaine can get rid of him, the cab tilts violently backwards and catapults him clean off.

"Okay, not that one!" Wes says.

The tank rights itself again, as several soldiers begin to close in from all sides. Blaine starts laying down some covering fire, but he can't cover every direction at once. "Any time now, guys!"

"How about this one?" David asks.

Suddenly, the tank spins out. The soldiers all around them are showered with mud and dirt, diving for cover as the tank skids in a circle, one set of treads kicking at full blast.

"Let's try that on my side!" Wes says.

Finally, the other set of treads kicks to life, and the tank begins to move forward.

And by 'forward,' Blaine means 'backwards.' As in 'towards the barely-restrained giant monster.'

"Wrong way!" Blaine shouts. "Reverse!"

"On it!" Wes says.

Bao Za grabs another set of tanks by the cables, swinging them and sending them sailing hither and yon. All while the Prince's tank continues merrily on its course towards certain death.

"Reverse! Quickly!" Blaine says.

"Give us time, we're new at this!" David says.

The tank stops but a few feet from Bao Za.

Fortunately, the monster seems oblivious to their presen—

HONNNNNNNK HONK HONK HONNNNK HONK HONNNNK!

"Was that the National Anthem?" Wes asks. "How quaint!"

"Guys!" Blaine says.

"Right, sorry!" Wes says.

Bao Za looks down at them, lifting a claw and preparing to turn their luxury vehicle into a compact. With few alternatives, Blaine sucks in a breath and puts everything he has into a single explosive blast. The fire rips into the monster's paw, blasting scales loose and covering the appendage in flame. Bao Za roars and shakes its injured claw, glaring death at Blaine.

This gives them about five extra seconds. Bao Za growls and clutches its claw into a fist.

"GUYS!" Blaine shouts.
"Found it!" Wes proclaims.

The tank spins out and takes off just as the giant, flaming fist slams into the dirt behind them. The force of the impact actually propels them forward, and the sudden acceleration nearly tumbles Blaine out of the gunner's seat.

"Well, I'll be a baboon-bird's baby brother! We were going in reverse the whole time," Wes says.

"It's much faster going forward," David says, sounding vaguely impressed. "I wonder how much moosepower this thing gets…"

"Focus, people, please!" Blaine says, keeping his eyes ahead. Soldiers quickly dive out of the way as the tank tears up the terrain towards the barracks. They'll be there in moments, at this rate. They're going fast.

A little too fast.

"Might want to slow it down!" Blaine says.

"Ummm…" Wes says.

"Oh, don't say you don't know how," Blaine moans. "You just did it!"

"That doesn't mean we remember how!" David says.

The Prince closes the firebending hatch with a sigh and jumps down. "Brace for impact!" he warns. And the tank slams into the barracks, and the world rocks on its axis. Metal and mortar screech and crumble as the tank crashes through a wall and skids out. Blaine and his buddies bounce around the cab like beans in a can, until a second impact sends them crashing to the front, knocking all three of them senseless.

Loudspeaker man's voice rings in his ears as Blaine slips out of the waking world…

"The assassins have entered the barracks, repeat, assassins have entered the barracks!"

Kurt is an unstoppable force of Mother Nature.

He allows nothing to stand in his way, dashing through building after building, all pretense of stealth thrown out the window along with quite a few soldiers. Water hits them in tendrils and waves, freezes them to the floors, pins them to the walls and ceilings. Brick walls betray them, sliding back and forth, turning rooms into hallways and vice-versa. Stone flooring collapses beneath them, springs up to catapult them backwards, swallows them like quicksand. Chasing the Avatar is an exercise in futility.

Not that it stops anyone from trying, of course.

The trouble starts on the bridges between buildings. Arrows start to pepper him during transition, forcing him to set aside a little water to block them. As he runs through the next building, he looks out the windows and spots people across the street eying him through binoculars and shouting. Spotters. They're keeping him in sight, keeping the other soldiers informed of where he is and where he's going.

The strategy works pretty well. Soldiers start showing up in greater numbers, hallways quickly becoming crowded. They get smarter too. They stop clumping together, making it harder for him to
take them down in groups. Firebenders and archers start showing up at the ends of long hallways, shooting at him the second he pokes his head out, forcing him on the defensive.

Kurt growls in frustration. He's getting too predictable. When the path of water is blocked, it either builds up until it breaks through, or it finds another path.

So Kurt gets smarter as well. He turns his ice bridge into a ramp, sliding from second to third floor as he heads between buildings. He can actually hear the guards below him, clattering and scrambling to get to him as he casually sprints over their heads. He spends a few buildings on the third floor. When the soldiers seem to get wise to his strategy, he promptly turns his bridge into a slide and goes back down to the second again.

He's making real progress.

And then she shows up and ruins everything.

She smashes through a wall right in front of him, her enormous warhammer wreathed in flames. A hefty woman with a hefty weapon—one of Sue's elites, judging by her Chi-Ryu armor.

Kurt deems her Helga the Hammer.

"Buck stops here, Avatwerp," Helga says. "Are you ready for the pain train?"

"Sure," Kurt says. "Are you ready for the Avatar elevator? Because you're going down!"

He slams his foot down, and the floor underneath her starts to collapse. Helga is having none of that, however. She rocket-jumps just as her footing crumbles, soaring through the air and swinging her hammer for his head. Kurt feints to avoid a direct hit, but the impact hits him with a fiery shockwave and knocks him end-over-end.

He lands just shy of the south window, slightly singed, but mostly unharmed. At least he didn't fly out the window. Helga grins at him, a predatory display of teeth. "Elevator is out of service." She hefts her hammer. "But I've got just the thing to fix it!"

Helga charges at him, and Kurt sighs. "I don't have time for this!" He widens his stance and swings his fists, sliding a wall into her path. A second later, he dives out of the way as Helga's hammer sends it flying at him in flaming chunks.

Well… crap!" he says. He's trying to think of a way to stop her when the woman herself slides into view. She raises her hammer, and Kurt acts on pure instinct. A high-kick sends the floor underneath her straight up, slamming her through the ceiling and into the floor above him.

Kurt grins. "The elevator goes up too, you know."

He's not even three steps into his victory walk when the ceiling above him collapses and Helga very nearly falls on his head.

Kurt stumbles away from her. "Oh my La, woman! What does it take to get rid of you, a tank?"

Helga smirks. "Throw everything you got at me. You can't stop the heat!"

She swings a fireball from her hammer. Kurt ducks, and it takes out the wall behind him. This, he decides, it his cue to run. He dashes around the corner and heads north again. As he runs, he collapses the floors behind him, leaving Helga with nothing to stand on. In response, Helga wreathes her whole body in flames and rockets straight up to the next floor, effectively
circumventing Kurt's booby trap by running over it.

Kurt knocks out a window, forms an ice bridge and slides into the next building. When he looks back, he spots Helga eying him from one floor up. The mighty maiden crouches down and prepares to jump, and Kurt decides this is the perfect moment to get rid of her. As she rockets through the air towards him, Kurt turns his bridge into an extra-large water tentacle and smacks her right out of the sky, slamming her into the concrete below.

Kurt sighs as he looks down at her. It was a little harsh, but it was necessary to take extreme measures in order to *OH MY LA SHE'S GETTING BACK UP*.

He dives away from the window just as another hammer-blast demolishes it, allowing Helga to jump in through the hole.

"What the— how?" Kurt asks. "How are you still going? You're not even out of breath!"

Helga shrugs. "I'm *all muscle*, Avatwerp."

Well, that explains a few things.

Kurt tries a quick barrage of sharpened icicles, but Helga wreathes herself in flames and vaporizes them before they even get her wet. She starts coming towards him while on fire, so Kurt quickly decides on a tactical retreat. Helga charges after him.

A group of soldiers steps in his path. "Halt!"

Kurt looks at them and his first thought is *why not?* He's thrown just about everything else at her, so he snatches the soldiers in a water tendril and promptly throws them as well.

Helga keeps right on trucking, even with several panicked Navymen hanging off of her. They don't even seem to slow her down. "You can't escape me, Avatar! Your time is at an end!"

He's desperately trying to come up with another plan when the solution quite literally falls out of the sky, nearly killing him in the process.

The building implodes in front of him as something truly ginormous crashes into the roof, slams straight through the third, second, and first floors before finally hitting rock bottom in the deep, dark basement. Kurt is teetering on the edge of this abyss, having missed being taken out by the skin of his teeth. He peers into the darkness for just a second before turning around, only to meet a faceful of Helga ramming him right over the edge.

A pile of rubble cushions his fall. Well, it cushions it in the way a boxing glove cushions a punch. Kurt lies on his back for a bit as his body tries to sort through what the fuck just happened to it. As he takes a short breather, loudspeaker man gives him (and everyone else in the freaking world) an update.

"*The assassins have entered the barracks! Repeat, the assassins have entered the barracks!*"

Kurt shakes his head, shrugs off the pain and stands up again. Blaine is moving further and further away from him. He needs Kurt's help, and Kurt flatly *refuses* to let either of them go to the grave before he has a chance to yell at Blaine for being such an idiot.

He scans the basement, which seems mostly empty save some barrels of food and, of course, the unidentified falling object that nearly flattened him. It's standing on its nose, leaned up against a wall, and when Kurt finally realizes what it is, he can hardly believe it.
"So... that's a yes to tanks?" Kurt asks the universe, looking at the mangled metal contraption. "Just making sure we're clear on this."

The hatch pops open, and several dizzy soldiers fall out, stumbling a short distance away before passing out. Kurt's about to check on them when Helga quite literally drops in, slamming into the ground with explosive force.

"Nowhere left to run, Avatwerp," she growls, climbing out of the flaming crater she just created. "Time to face the music!"

Kurt's mind works a mile a minute. He glances at the tank, making a few mental calculations. "Fine then," he says. "You want to dance? Let's dance."

Helga hefts up her hammer, charges and swings with all her might. Kurt dives to one side and dashes into position. Helga chases him, and Kurt throws all his remaining water at the ground in front of her, freezing it into an ice slick. The girl skids past him, stumbling off the edge a short distance away. She quickly turns around, lifting her hammer high above her head.

Kurt melts the ice slick, flicks it onto the hammerhead and freezes it. Suddenly, Helga's hammer weighs about three times as much. Instead of swinging it forward, she tips over and falls on her back. Stone shackles wrap around her feet and hands, holding her in place and opening her up for the Avatar's grand finale. With stomping feet and swinging fists, Kurt bends the wall behind the tank and tips it over.

Helga can only watch as it falls.

CLANG.

It lands right on her. Well, not on so much as around her—Kurt was nice enough to make sure Helga was under the open hatch. He didn't want to squish her. That would just be mean. Also, gruesome. Eugh.

He casually strolls to the tank-turned cage, knocking on the metal. "You know, I was going to make a 'flat-footed' joke, but now that I think about it, it doesn't really make sense if you weren't flattened. And it would just be kind of mean if you were, so... I think I'll just say 'thanks for the workout,' and be on my wa—"

The fucking tank starts to lift. Helga growls with the strain as she bench-presses a metal vehicle five times her size.

"Oh, no you don't!" Kurt says. He stomps up three big slabs of concrete and stacks them one-by-one on top of the tank until Helga has to drop it. The trapped girl angrily bangs on the metal.

"Let me out of here so I can kick your ass!" she demands.

"Enough already," Kurt says. "It's over! You've lost!"

"Oh, it's far from over, Avatar," Helga growls. "You may have won the battle, but you will lose the war!"

"What are you talking about?" Kurt says.

"Didn't you hear the Fire Lord? She's coming for you!" Helga says. "She's coming for the entire world! The Fire Nation will soon assume its rightful place above all others. And with Sue as our glorious leader, nothing will stop us! Not even you!"
"Well, I certainly stopped you," Kurt says. "So I guess we'll see about that."

He climbs the small tower he just built on top of the tank, leaving Helga banging the metal below him. Since the tank carved such a neat path to the roof, Kurt winds up climbing clear to the top of the building to get a look at the state of things. When he sees what's going on, he can hardly suppress his groan.

The world below is teeming with soldiers. There are literally thousands of them between Kurt and what he assumes to be the barracks, with no more buildings for him to hide in along the way. It seems, for the moment, that Blaine is out of his reach. Kurt would have to carve through an army to get to him now.

His only solace is that the giant monster seems to be contained for the moment. Kurt can see it straining to escape cables on the tanks keeping it anchored.

And then, all at once, several of those cables snap, and the monster lurches forward…

A metal screech assaults his ears. Light floods his world, and Blaine shakes his aching head. A rough hand grabs him by the collar and yanks him from the tank, dropping him on a cold, stone floor. His eyes adjust slowly to the light, the world growing gradually less hazy. Soldiers surround him on all sides. They seem to be in some kind of cafeteria—tables and chairs are everywhere, many of them bent and overturned. It looks like the tank punched straight through the outer wall, skidded around and crashed into another wall right in the middle of the long room.

A grunt calls his attention back to the tank, where Wes and David are pulled out, limp and unresponsive, and dropped carelessly on the ground beside him. Blaine's heart clenches as they groan upon impact. Part of him is happy just to hear their voices, but another part seethes at their treatment.

The CO of the soldiers steps forward and starts stalking around them, arms crossed. "Well, well, what do we have here?" he says. "A couple of shitbags and a sack of vomit. Traitors all around!"

"We are not traitors…" Wes says, trying to sit up. "The only traitor is Su—"

A vicious kick to the chest sends him sprawling. A spike of anger pierces Blaine's heart, driving the pain and weakness from his blood.

"Quiet, scum!" the CO says. "We don't negotiate with traitors, and we don't tolerate cowards, so cowardly traitors like you have no legs to stand on. Did you really think the Fire Lord would fall to that underhanded bullshit?"

"She is… not… the Fire Lord…" David grunts, pushing himself up on his arms. "She—"

The CO slams a boot into his back. "I said 'quiet!'" he growls, digging his heel into his spine.

David groans, and Blaine's anger swells, a tingling heat that fills every inch of him, starting at his heart and spreading out like wildfire.

"Back off," Blaine warns, starting to rise.

The CO scoffs, marching towards him. "Fuck off, you little—"

He kicks, and Blaine catches his foot, stopping it dead. "I said 'back off!'."
Infuriated, the soldier yanks his foot free. "I don't take orders from you!" He aims a roundhouse at Blaine's head, but the Prince easily ducks underneath it and sweeps the CO's leg from under him. Not only does he fall—he lands in a perfect split, going wide-eyed and letting out a little squeak before keeling over.

"Well, maybe you should," Blaine says, rising proudly to his feet. All around him, the soldiers draw their weapons. Blaine knows he can't actually win this fight. He's surrounded on all sides, his friends are injured, and he has no back-up. But he doesn't care. He's sick of running. He's sick of hiding.

The CO scrambles to his feet, marching towards Blaine with barely-restrained fury. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"


"Yeah," the soldier says. "And I'm the Earth King's foot massager."

"Foot masseuse," one of his soldiers corrects.

"Quiet!" the CO shouts.

"Believe what you want," Blaine says. "But this is your last warning: if you touch my friends again, you will answer to me."

The CO glares at him, contempt and hate leaking from every pore, but Blaine refuses to back down. The two lock eyes, and a brief battle of wills ensues.

'Brief' because something much bigger quickly renders it irrelevant.

'Thud.'

"The fuck was that?" the CO says.

'Thud, thud, thud.'

Blaine goes wide-eyed. "Run!" he shouts, shoving past the leader to help Wes and David to their feet.

"We don't take orders from—" the leader starts.

"It's coming!" Blaine says. "Get away from the outer wall or you're dead!"

'Thud thud thud thud…'

With the room rattling, the soldiers decide to listen to their own eyes and ears and book it to the end of the room. Blaine shoves Wes and David along with them.

"Get back here!" the leader says. "I didn't give the order to—"

'Thud thud thud thud—'

Blaine grabs the CO, swings him around, plants a hand on his chestplate and firebends him clear to the other side of the room, which leaves Blaine the only one who hasn't fled. The Prince wraps himself in a bright bubble of flames and vanishes as the outer wall explodes inwards, the entirety of the building groaning, grinding, and grumbling with the force of the impact.
The aftermath is strangely silent. Wes and David hold their breath as their eyes scan the dusty wreckage.

The first thing they see is the monster. Bao Za is half-in, half out of the building, its bulky shell wedged between the walls, grinding into the floor and scraping through the ceiling. It fills width and height of the room and then some—there's no getting past it. Fortunately, at the moment, it isn't moving.

But there's still no sign of Blaine. Wes and David look as hard as they can, not realizing that all the others are looking right along with them, until…

"There!" one soldier says.

Right smack in front of Bao Za, looking like an ant in comparison, a figure kneels in a circle of flames.

"Holy shit," another soldier breathes.

He rises slowly. The ground around him is scorched and blackened, but he himself is unharmed. Not even a speck of dust falls from his armor as he stands to his full height.

"Unbe-fucking-lievable," the CO breathes.

Blaine cocks his head back and looks up at Bao Za, whose head has only just started to emerge from its shell. Wes and David both feel something twinge in their hearts as their little Prince stands unflinching in front of a monster hundreds of times his size. The beast may be enormous, but in terms of presence, Blaine positively dwarfs it.

They'll never call him short again.

"How?" one of the soldiers says. "How did he…"

"Look at the ground," Wes says. "He countered the explosion with an explosion."

"At the risk of treason," one soldier says, "that's pretty fucking badass."

The CO glares at him.

He shrugs. "Just sayin'."

"Now," David says, with a look to the CO. "What's that you were saying about cowardice?"

With an angry growl, Bao Za tries to smash Blaine, but the Prince is far too quick. He dives from under the claw, dashing onto an overturned table and blast-jumping all the way to his allies while Bao Za struggles to follow him. The monster is unable to follow, its size working against it. Its claws tear huge ruts in the floor as it tries to pull itself forward, grumbling in frustration.

"It's stuck!" one of the soldiers says.

"Not for long," Blaine says. "Is there a way out of here?"

"There's a door behind us," Wes says.

A soldier tries to open it. "It's locked!"

"Anything else?" Blaine asks.
"That thing is taking up half the room," the CO says. "It wrecked the emergency exit, and the regular doors are right by its damn claws. It'd smash us before we could get out."

"Not if it doesn't see you," Blaine says. "We'll distract it so you guys can get out."

"Yeah, nice try, Fuji Fugitive," the CO says. "You think I'm just gonna forget your little assassination attempt? I have my orders!"

The room rumbles as Bao Za pulls itself a little further in, walls groaning at the strain of keeping it wedged.

"We don't have time for this!" Blaine says. "You need to leave!"

"I am not going anywhere!" the CO says. "And neither are my troops! A Fire Nation soldier never retreats."

Blaine rolls his eyes and opens his mouth to argue when suddenly, the argument resolves itself…

Two guards stand outside the control tower as Skippy skids to a halt in front of them. The Hawks and Sam dismount and head for the door.

"Halt!" says one of two door guards.

"I'm a technician, I'm here to work on the intercom!" Sam says.

Said intercom does not cooperate with his deception. "Dad-blast it! That thing is in the barracks! It's wrecking government property! Put a freakin' leash on it already!"

The guards give him a suspicious eye. "The intercom works fine."

Sam blinks, at a momentary loss.

"Ummm… I mean, sure," Jeff says. "You think it works fine. But don't you hear the hiss?"

"What hiss?" the guard asks.

"Listen!" Nick says.

Everyone falls silent.

"There it is!" Trent says.

"I hear it, too," Flint nods.

The guards blink at each other.

"Listen carefully," Sam says.

The guards try to tune their ears to the sound. "Wait, wait, I think I hear it!"

"Really?" the other guard says.

"Yeah. Trust me, it's there" he says. He turns aside to Sam and starts whispering. "He spends a little too much time at the bomb range. Ears aren't as good as they used to be."

"I heard that!" the other guard says.
"Well, that hiss is a bad sign," Sam says. "It means the whole system could go down any minute. In a crisis situation like this, you've got to have somebody directing things. It'll be chaos and anarchy unless you let me in to fix it!"

"Of course!" the guard says. "Go right ahead."

Sam grins and marches past them.

"Hey, wait a second," the other guard says. "Where are your tools?"

Sam blinks. "My what?"

"Your tools. You need tools to work with."

"Ummm…" Sam says. "I… forgot them?"

The guards are not convinced. They look at each other for a second, and start approaching Sam. "What did you say your name was?"

"Can I see your ID badge?" the other asks.

"Ummmm…” Sam stammers.

The guards reach for their weapons. So do the Hawks.

Fortunately, a fight is avoided when a pair of metal hands suddenly flies out from nowhere and slams the guards' helmets together, knocking them out cold.

"…that was fortuitous," Flint says.

The metal gloves fly back to the hands of their owner, who sits behind the Hawks.

"Dude, we had it covered," Sam says.

"Tch, non-bender please," Artie says casually. "You suck at lying on the spot. We both know it."

Sam crosses his arms. "I do not! You… I… what are you even doing here?"

"I've been trying to figure out a way to take down Mega-Mouth up there," Artie says, pointing at the tower. "Unfortunately, he flourishes under the protection of my ancient archnemesis."

"Stairs?" Sam asks.

"Got it in one," Artie nods. "I trust you gentlemen came here to put a sock in that fool?"

"Oh, we're gonna do better than that," Sam says with a wry grin.

"Well, get on it," Artie says. "Don't let me stop you. As for me…"

And suddenly, a friggin' tank falls out of the sky. It crashes sideways into a nearby building, sticking out like a big, metal hangnail.

Artie raises his eyebrows at the sight. "I'm gonna go investigate that random-ass thing," he says. "Peace!"

He slides off without another word, heading towards the crashed tank.
Sam shrugs and looks back to the tower. "Alright, guys. Let's move!"

The staircase is kind of obnoxiously long, but they manage to make it to the top without collapsing, so that's something. After taking a second to catch their breath, they burst into the observation room, a metal room filled with doo-dads and whatsits. On any other day, Sam would be beside himself with glee, trying to take everything apart and put it back together again. But today, he's on a mission.

There are four guards surrounding the gruff, grey-haired Commander, peering through binoculars with a microphone in his hands.

"Sir," one of the guards taps his shoulder. "You have a visitor."

The Commander spins around, eying Sam suspiciously.

"Who are you?" he asks. "What authorization do you have to be here?"

"Well, sir," Sam says, walking up to him. "I'm a technician. Fire Lord sent me to work on the intercom."

The Commander eyes him suspiciously. "Where are your tools?"

Sam blanks. He wracks his brain for a convincing lie, but comes up empty. Wow, he really does suck. "...fuck it!" he shouts, lurching and grabbing the microphone, starting a tug-of-war with the Commander.

"What the—" the Commander says.

The soldiers draw weapons and start towards Sam, but the Hawks are quick to intercept. The ensuing fight is quite a sight. Nick's swordsmanship is awesome, dual blades moving as one, slashing and flashing in the morning sun. Jeff's spear thrusts back and forth faster than a paddleball, while Trent whirs his staff with enough speed to give an airbender pause. Flint's chain whips and snaps like a scorpion viper's tail, and it's only a matter of moments before all four guards are down for the count.

"Give it up!" Sam grunts, still struggling with the commander.

"Never! The Fire Nation does not surrender!" the Commander says.

Finally, Sam manages to get a bit of leverage, and twists the mic out of the Commander's hands, thwacking him with it.

"We'll see about that," Sam says.

The defeated soldiers are tied up and tossed into a closet, while Sam approaches the observation window, looking out through a pair of binoculars.

"What, exactly, are you gonna do?" Nick asks.

Sam winks at him. "I'm about to blow your mind, that's what."

He picks up the microphone, opens his mouth...

And proceeds to speak with someone else's voice.
"All units, retreat!"

Kurt's jaw drops. He looks up at the intercom, along with every other soldier. No freakin' way. Why...? What...? How?

In the mess hall, the soldiers look around in confusion. Blaine blinks up at the ceiling, not sure if he heard right.

"Repeat, all units retreat! I have just received new intelligence direct from the Fire Lord! Avatars and dragon turtles are natural enemies. If left to their own devices, they will devour each other! It was in a nature book—do not question it! Retreat, by direct order from the Fire Lord! Disengage hostilities and evacuate the base of all civilians. Repeat, civilian evacuation is now priority number one! Get those damn gates open! Tank corps, you are on delivery duty. Take these people to their houses, ASAP!"

Kurt hears several soldiers down below him. "You've got to be kidding me." "Mooseshit!" "No way he's serious."

The soldiers in the mess hall can only scratch their heads in wonder. The CO looks like someone just told him the sun was blue.

"I am deadly fucking serious, you bunch of maggots! Retreat, disengage, and evacuate, by order of the Fire Lord! You have T-minus sixty seconds to start moving before I come down there and start putting foots in asses! MOVE!"

"Sounds serious to me," a soldier says. "Alright, fall back, people! Fall back!"

The order is echoed all around the base, and like somebody unclogged a pipe, the sea of soldiers suddenly begins to drain away from the barracks, leaving Kurt an easy (if somewhat long path) between him and Blaine. He hops down from the building, shoving past the soldiers and heading towards the ass of the giant monster in front of him.

That shell looks very rocklike up close, and Kurt can't help but wonder...

Back in the mess hall, Blaine smirks at the CO. "You were saying?"

The CO glares at him. "Fine," he growls. "We have our orders."

Blaine grins and nods at his friends. "You guys ready?"

"Always," Wes says.

"Born that way," David says.

Bao Za shakes the room with a roar.

Blaine turns to stare it down. "Then come on, we've got a monster to bait!"

He charges, and as always, Wes and David are right behind him.

LINBREAK

In the control tower, the Hawks are busy picking their jaws off the floor and squeezing their eyes back into their sockets.

"What!" Trent says. "You... but... voice... make... how?"
"I think what he's trying to say is; dude, you sounded just like him! *How?*" Nick says.

Sam shrugs. "I'm a good mimic," he says simply. "All the voices I did in my story were what those people actually sounded like."

"Seriously?" Jeff asks. "I thought you were just doing crazy voices because they're funny."

"Oh, they are!" Sam says. "But they can also come in handy. Observe…"

He turns back to the microphone, and continues to bellow orders in his pitch-perfect Commander voice. "*Repeat, the Fire Lord has issued a full retreat! If I have to come down there and break my foot off in your ass, you will clean the shit off my shoes and you will provide me with a substitute foot! GET GOING!*"

By the time Quinn arrives back at the base, everything is in chaos. Tanks are ferrying civilians through the gates. Soldiers run out in disarray, panic wild in the air.

"What on earth?" Quinn asks no one in particular.

A flash of bright red catches her eye, and Quinn spots two Imperial Firebenders riding on a tank. Two Imperial Firebenders, fleeing the scene of a battle. Without the Fire Lord.

*Unacceptable.*

Quinn jumps into the air and kicks both of them to the ground.

"What is the meaning of this?" Quinn asks. "Where's the Fire Lord? Why aren't you with her?"

"Well," the Imperial begins, only to be interrupted by the loudspeaker.

"*Repeat, the Fire Lord has ordered a full retreat! If I have to come down there…*"

Quinn blinks. "That's not true."

"What?" the Imperial says. "But the Commander just said it."

"He's lying," Quinn says. "The Fire Lord would never issue a retreat. She snaps her fingers. "You two, come with me! You can explain all this along the way."

The Imperials hop up and march after her. "Where are we going?"

"To the control tower," Quinn says. "Something is fishy here, and I intend to find out what…"

As she marches off, she does not see the familiar face watching her go. She does not see the conflict on his face, the way his fingers clench the edge of the tank he is riding, the way his jaw tightens as he watches her take the same path the reptile riders headed down.

But he most definitely sees her.

And this time, he cannot turn away.

Bao Za’s frustrated attempt to claw its way further into the cafeteria are suddenly interrupted by a bunch of fire. Blaine and his buddies open with a full fireball battery as they get into position. Bao Za easily snakes around the blasts and starts breathing deep.
"Take cover!" Blaine orders. Shortly thereafter, the room is consumed in a torrent of flame. The damaged tank provides cover for the Prince and his friends. The soldiers take cover behind overturned metal tables.

When the blast subsides, David dashes out from cover and begins kicking flaming chairs at the dragon turtle's face. Wes climbs on top of the tank lashes his fire whips in the air near Bao Za. The creature is only mildly annoyed by these, but the firebending commands all of its attention, allowing Blaine to slip in close. The agile Prince rushes in, runs up a wall, and begins scaling Bao Za's shell like his own personal jungle gym, the soldiers watching in awe the whole time. He leaps, kicks, flips and scrambles, gripping the crags with ease. He even makes use of debris still stuck in the monster's shell; running up a crumbling bit of drywall, springing off a twisted girder, swinging on a toilet seat and landing on a crag right behind Bao Za's head. The Prince sucks in a breath, lets his energy build, and blasts Bao Za from behind.

The monster lurches forward, slamming and swinging its claws, slinging tables and chairs and chunks of the floor in all directions. Wes, David, and the soldiers all take cover from the flying debris.

Meanwhile, Bao Za recovers from the shock, turns its head around and glares right at Blaine.

"Now!" Blaine says. "While it's distracted! Go!"

The soldiers don't need to be told twice. They promptly book it towards the side doors near Bao Za's claws while Blaine keeps the monster occupied, slinging as fire as much and as fast as he can. At this point, Blaine is going for speed and unpredictability, trying to confuse the monster and seeing just how well it can dodge. The answer is, apparently, very well. The serpentine neck weaves around fire so easily and so deftly that it seems automatic, almost effortless.

The monster's mouth opens, and Blaine knows what comes next. He heads up, flipping and kicking off the crags as Bao Za cleanses its own shell with fire. The flames flow over the rocky, spiky shell like rising water, burning away much of the debris and leaving Blaine dangling from a rocky spike near the ceiling. Bao Za's massive teeth are on full display as it opens its mouth and prepares to eat him, but its gulp turns into a bellow when Wes whip-smacks it on the back of the head. It can't see in two directions at once.

Wes and David keep the beast busy as Blaine climbs back upright just in time to watch the last of the soldiers flits out of the room.

The soldier gives Blaine an odd look as he flees. Blaine gives him a nod, and that seems to satisfy him.

He exits, and the door closes behind him.

Blaine starts to take a breath—

The door flies open again. "Good luck!" the soldier shouts.

Bao Za immediately notices, and the soldier ducks out of the doorway just as it slams a claw into the frame, caving the doorway in. It does the same to the door on the other side, bobbing its head around Wes and David's attacks all the while.

Blaine is preparing for another full-strength strike to the back of the monster's head, when suddenly, he notices something odd sticking out of its nose.

Is that…?
Meathead's sword. It's still there!

Bao Za unleashes another fiery assault on the room in front of it. Some of the less sturdy chairs start to melt from all the heat. Wes and David hide behind an overturned table, but Bao Za's breath has enough force to slide it several feet backwards.

The Prince grins and thwaps Bao Za in the back of the head with a tiny fireball, just enough to get its attention.

The monster turns and growls at him.

Blaine indulges his childish side and blows a raspberry.

His baiting attempt works beautifully. Bao Za bares its teeth and strikes like a snake. Blaine jumps straight up just as the beast crashes headlong into its own shell. When he comes down, he plants his foot squarely on the hilt of the sword, and throws every ounce of fire and force he has straight downward, buffeting the monster's face with flame and blasting the sword deeper into its snout.

The result is spectacular. Bao Za screeches in outright agony and thrashes with all its might, its fury shaking the room and caving in much of the ceiling. Its head snaps and swings so violently that, without even meaning to, it catches Blaine in mid-air, knocking him clear to the back wall of the room.

Wes and David feel their hearts bottom out as he slams into the bricks and starts to fall.

"Blaine!" they shout, dashing out from behind cover. Flying debris and falling wreckage from Bao Za's bitch-fit land all around them, but they ignore it completely. As they run, David jumps onto Wes's hands, and the boys combine their strength to launch David as high and as far as they can. David catches the falling Prince halfway down, and uses a cushion of fire from his feet to soften their landing.

They cradle the Prince gently, laying him down behind a chunk of the ceiling. David checks his head for signs of trauma, while Wes tries to rouse him. "Blaine? Can you hear me?"

Blaine looks up at them blearily. "Wurrrs? Berrvrrd?" he slurs.

Wes shakes his head at him. "You selfless little idiot," he says fondly.

David is similarly exasperated. "Mustyou be so suicidally helpful all the time?"

Blaine laughs, shaking his head to try and clear out the cobwebs. "I'm… I think I'm okay," he says. He starts to stand, and Wes and David help him to his feet. "There. Just a little stunned. I'm fine now," Blaine grins.

"Unfortunately," Wes says. "I don't expect that will last much longer…"

Back on the other side of the room, Bao Za recovered from Blaine's crushing blow. The rage and hatred in its eyes, combined with the smoking, scorched scales on its face make it look less draconic and more demonic. The monster takes a second to glare at the trio. Then, it withdraws its head entirely, peeking out at them from the safety of its shell. With both claws at once, it reaches forward and digs into the concrete, pulling itself further into the room. Then, it does it again. And again.

The trio tries to deter it with fireballs, but they disperse uselessly against the monster's shell as it closes in on them. The walls buckle more and more, starting to crack and crumble. Tables and
chairs are ground to nothing beneath Bao Za's girth. Not even the tank survives its approach; Wes and David wince as the contraption is crushed into scrap. It is a fate they feel they will soon share.

"My friends, it has been an honor," Wes says. "I never thought I would die quite like this, but…"

"…if I must be crushed by a dinosaur," David says. "I could think of no two people I would rather be flattened with."

"I love you both," Blaine says quietly.

The monster approaches, almost close enough to smash them with its claws. The ceiling above it crumbles…

And then they see him. At the top of their vision, from behind Bao Za's shell, a shadow flits into the sky, sailing up, over, and down. It lands right on the peak of the monster's shell, and just like that, the shell's surface shatters. The craggy, rocklike material ripples and breaks loose, flying in all directions. Bao Za shudders and stumbles, its claws flailing, its roar sounding sick and slightly queasy. The monster tilts to one side and falls still and silent.

Blaine takes one look at their savior, and he can't keep the smile off his face. "Kurt!" he cries, overjoyed.

When the Avatar jumps down from the ruined shell, he's wearing a similar smile.

Then, of course, he remembers the entire reason he's here, and promptly wipes the smile off both their faces. "Don't you Kurt me!" he growls.

Blaine gulps.

"I think he's mad at you," David whispers.

"Yes!" Sam shouts, nearly losing the binoculars to the force of his fist-pump. "Kurt got it!"

"What happened?" Jeff asks.

"Oh, man, he pulled the sweetest move move—he grabbed one of the little grappling hooks stuck in its shell and did this epic rocket kick, flipped up into the air, and smashed its shell to pieces!" Sam says.

"No way!" Nick says. "He's that strong?"

"He probably just used earthbending," Trent says. "The shell did seem rather rocky."

"Still an impressive feat," Flint nods.

"And it means our work here is done," Sam says, setting aside the binoculars. "Good work, gentlemen! Let's get out of here before we get—"

The door opens.

"—caught," he finishes sheepishly.

Quinn barges into the room, flanked by two Imperial Firebenders. "What is going on up here?" she asks. "The Fire Lord would never order a retreat, so you'd better have a damn good explanation for…"
Her eyes center on Sam, and she trails off.

"You," she whispers.

Sam swallows.

"Leave us," Quinn orders.

"What?" an Imperial says. "You want us to leave you alone with—"

"Leave!" Quinn growls. "Guard the door. No one gets in or out."

The Imperials bow and sweep from the room, closing the door behind them.

A tense, electric silence fills the air, a thunderbolt looking for a place to strike. Quinn's eyes pin Sam down like a specimen to be dissected.

"I spared your life," Quinn says quietly. "And this is how you thank me?"

Sam huffs, defiant. "You want me to thank you for kidnapping and torturing me?"

"I let you go!" Quinn says. "I gave you your life, your freedom—"

"They weren't yours to take!" Sam says. "Or to give. I mean…" He sighs. "I'm glad you spared me, but I'm not going to give up on everything I believe in just because you didn't execute me. I'm not sorry."

Quinn scoffs, shaking her head. "Oh, you will be."

She walks towards him, slow and steady. Trent swings his staff at her, but she dodges, disarms him and kicks him into a wall. Flint's chain whip lashes out at her, only to wrap around Trent's staff instead, letting Quinn yank him forward and send him flying. Nick launches a furious series of sword swipes, but Quinn deflects them without even breaking stride, catching one of his swords in Flint's chain and wrenching it from his grasp before knocking him aside. Jeff is last, furiously stabbing and swinging his spear. Quinn uses Nick's sword to deflect each of his strikes and slice open his hand, forcing him to drop the spear. When she has his weapon as well, she bats him into his best friend, knocking both of them down again.

She drops the weapons on the ground behind her as she saunters up to Sam, the only one left between her and the microphone. "Step aside," she growls.

Sam sighs, hanging his head in shame. He knows there's nothing he can do to stop her, so he moves out of her way. Quinn grabs the mic and immediately rescinds his order.

"Stop!" she says. "Belay that order! The Fire Lord has NOT issued a retreat! The security of this system has been compromised. All soldiers, return to battle! The Avatar and the assassins are your priority!"

When that's done, she sets the mic aside and turns back to the room at large. Sam is helping the Hawks to their feet.

"Judging by your weapons," Quinn says. "I'm guessing you're the Prince's stooges. Still impersonating soldiers, are we? Well, I suppose that means I'll have to place you under arrest."

The Hawks line up, moving protectively in front of Sam. "We're not going down without a fight!"

Nick says.
"Glad to hear it," Quinn says. "You see, I've had a very stressful time lately, and I've been aching for a chance to work out my frustrations. And you know, now that I think of it, most of my troubles started with you idiots." As she speaks, she reaches behind her head and pulls her ponytail loose, letting her hair flow naturally.

The Dragon Hawks take a collective gulp.

Quinn graces them with a small, horrifying grin. "Now, I know this is asking a lot, but…" Flames appear above her hands. "Please try to make this interesting. I have a lot to vent."

Blaine at least has the courtesy to look ashamed. "Kurt…"

"Blaine Anderson, what is wrong with you?" Kurt asks. "Did firebeetles lay eggs in your ears? Do you have melting sickness? Or are you just really, really dumb?"

"Avatar Kurt, if I may…" Wes begins.

"You may not!" Kurt snaps at him. "You two were supposed to know better! Why didn't you stop him?"

"Well," Wes says. "It seemed like a good idea at the time…"

"No, it really didn't," David says flatly. "But we had no other options."

"Yes, you did!" Kurt says. "You could have waited!"

"Waiting is the same as doing nothing," Blaine says.

"Then you could have done nothing!" Kurt says.

"No, I couldn't!" Blaine says. "That goes against everything I know. Everything I am, everything fire is—"

"For the love of La, you are more than your element!" Kurt says. "The people of the Earth Kingdom don't just sit around like rocks all day. The Water Tribes don't just go with the flow all the time. You aren't bonfires—you're people. You're made up of all four elements! You can do whatever the fuck you want!"

"I want to stop Sue," Blaine says. "I want to save those people. That's what I want. What would you have suggested that I do?"

"I would have told you to wait. Not forever, but at least long enough to get a better idea!" Kurt says. "Long enough to think, to talk about it with your friends. Remember them? The nice foreigners who took care of you while you got better? Or do they not count now that your BFFs are back in the picture?"

Blaine looks at Wes and David, who regard him with sad eyes.

"They do count," Blaine says. "I just… I didn't want anyone else to get hurt. If I could've stopped Wes and David from coming, I would have, I'd—"

"And that's it, Blaine!" Kurt says. "That is exactly the problem. You are always doing this. You're always going off alone, trying to do everything by yourself, trying to shoulder everyone's burdens. You throw your life around like it doesn't mean anything, but it does. You matter. You matter to Finn, to Artie, Mercedes, and Rachel. You matter to me." By now, his voice is quivering and he
can barely keep his face under control. "Blaine, why are you acting like this? Do… do you want to die?"

Blaine flinches as if struck, his face opening up in shock. "What?" he says. "No, no. That's not it at all! I just… I…"

A voice from the loudspeaker cuts through his reply.

"Stop! Belay that order! The Fire Lord has NOT issued a retreat! The security of this system has been compromised. All soldiers, return to battle! The Avatar and the assassins are your priority!"

"…Quinn?" Blaine says.

"Avatar Kurt, Prince Blaine," Wes says. "I don't wish to intrude, but we really should do this later."

The Avatar takes a deep breath. "You're right," he says, gathering himself together. "Finn is waiting for us by the water," he says. "We just need to get to the ocean before—"

"Look out!"

And suddenly, Kurt's boyfriend is slamming into him, tackling him aside as an enormous claw nearly slams him into the earth.

They all look at the dragon turtle, which is slowly beginning to stir again.

"What?" Kurt barks. "How is that thing still alive? I broke its shell!"

"Actually, you broke its outer shell," Wes says. "In dragon turtles, a rocky outer shell forms over time, primarily for camouflage. The inner shell is tougher, more flexible, and much less bulky."

Bao Za shudders and rises to its feet, sticking its head out again. Curved, spinelike scales cover its back, forming the sleek, inner shell. Without all the extra bulk, the beast is small enough to stand upright in the room, yet still massive enough to make getting past it very unlikely. It stares down at the foursome with unfathomable fury in its eyes.

"So basically," Kurt says. "When I broke its shell, I made it lighter and faster."

Bao Za roars with enough force to physically slide them a few inches backwards.

"And angrier," David says. "Don't forget that part!"

The monster raises a claw, and the Avatar knocks open the back wall of the room.

"Run!" he says.

And run they do.

Sometimes, it really sucks being a nonbender.

Sam has no fight training, so in a situation like this, all he can do is not get killed. Fire and explosions fly all over the place, nobody realizing that he has, like, no protection against that crap. He ducks under windows as explosions send flaming glass everywhere, dives behind control consoles as heatwaves melt the non-metal parts. Fire tears up equipment and sunders wires. Quinn and the Hawks fight with all their might, and the room comes to pieces around them.
Sam knows who is coming out on top here. It's as clear as day. The Hawks are good, but Quinn is practically a dragon in human form. Her form is flawless, her power unmatched. Not a single blow is wasted. Every movement brings pain to her foes. Even when they block her attacks, the sheer power behind them sends them staggering. The Hawks have a hard time defending against her, let alone fighting back. She is a whirlwind of fire, a blazing dance of death, destroying all in her path. Her offense is explosive. Her only defense is more offense.

It's insane. There are four of them and they can't touch her.

Sam can already see the Hawks starting to tire out. Quinn, on the other hand, looks like she's just warming up. The more she fights, the more powerful her flames become. She blasts the Hawks left and right, slams them into the ground, burns their weapons out of their hands and kicks them aside. She defeats them a dozen times over, but she never finishes them. She keeps the fight going. Whatever the Hawks are giving her, it isn't enough. She wants more.

Eventually, the fight has to end, if only because the Hawks can go no further. They line up in front of Sam, practically shaking with the effort it takes to stand. They gasp for breath, smoke rising from their armor, skin covered in sweat, blood, and ash.

"This is insane!" Nick pants. "We can't beat her!"

"Is she gonna kill us?" Trent grunts. "Because at this point, I kind of wish she would get it over with!"

"Some animals like to play with their food before they eat it," Flint moans.

"I don't want to be eaten," Jeff moans. "I'm too beautiful to die!"

Quinn stands before them like a flaming goddess. The sunlight in her hair makes it look like she's glowing. "Is that it?" she asks. "Is that all you've got?"

The Hawks don't know how to answer her. They brandish their weapons, but it's hardly a threat at this point. A light breeze would knock them over.

"Come on!" Quinn growls. "I'm not finished yet!"

The Hawks don't move. They're done. The fight is over. It was over before it started, but Quinn can't accept that. She wants more. There is something inside of her that desperately needs to be quenched, and the Hawks aren't doing it for her.

Quinn clenches her fists as an aura of flame flickers over her entire body. "Come on!" she bellows.

The Hawks actually take a step back.

In response, Quinn throws her arms out and explodes. Flames bellow through every inch of the room, blowing out every window, wrecking every piece of equipment. The force of the blast slams the Hawks into Sam, and the lot of them against the wall. Sam can feel a hint of the heat behind the attack, and knows without question that if the Hawks weren't there to protect him, it would have killed him.

The explosion subsides. In the aftermath, the Hawks are spread out on the ground, unable to even think of rising, their weapons discarded nearby. If the fight wasn't done before, it certainly is now. Quinn glares down at them with open contempt. "Pitiful," she sneers. "Just like your Prince." She turns to the door. "Imperials!" she calls. "Get these worthless ash-sniffers out of my sight!"
"Imperials!" Quinn repeats.

That's when Sam hears it. The clash of metal on metal, rapid footsteps, roaring flames, made faint and muffled by the door. There's a fight going on outside. Quinn's fight with the Dragon Hawks was so loud, it completely masked the other fight.

Sam hears the distinct thud of a body hitting the wall, and the door opens.

"Well, that certainly was a spirited warm-up," says the figure that walks in, casually flicking his sword. He's dressed in what appears to be a school uniform, slightly singed at the edges. Sam doesn't know him, but the Hawks do, and they clue him in loud and quick.

"Thad?" they bark in unison.

"Hello, gentlemen!" Thad says brightly. "Lovely to see you all again, even in such an... unfortunate state."

"We thought Wes chased you off into the sunset!" Nick says.

"Oh, pah!" Thad says. "I ran from him because I didn't want to have to fight my best friend."

"And because Wes would have torched your ass, and you know it," Jeff says.

"That was... only part of the equation," Thad says simply.

"You," Quinn growls. "You're the leader of this bunch of misfits?"

"In a... manner of speaking," Thad says somewhat awkwardly. "They are my... well, I'm not sure, actually." He levels his sword at her. "But I will not let you harm them any further." He glances at the Hawks. "Go. I shall keep her occupied."

Nick gapes. "What the fuck?"

Trent blinks up at him. "Is this supposed to be some kind of twisted apology?"

Thad grimaces. "Think of it as a... tacit admission of possible wrongdoing on the part of one or more parties, including myself."

The Hawks blink, completely confused.

"I... I never meant for it to go this far," Thad says quietly. "Oh, for heaven's sake, will you just go?"

Sam gets up and starts helping the Hawks to their feet.

"No!" Quinn says. "You are not getting away."

She dashes for them, but Thad slides into her path. She tries to overpower him with sheer force, but Thad is able to summon up flames to match hers, at least for the moment. They lock in a clash of steel and fire, Quinn pushing hard, Thad doing all he can to keep her back. "Go!" he grunts.

The Hawks finally get to their feet and dash out the door, passing the unconscious Imperials along the way.
"That was Thad?" Sam asks. "You guys said he was a cowardly douche, but that was... kind of awesome. I'm confused here. Is he a brave and noble badass, or a chickenshit douchebag?"

The Hawks think about the question for a bit.

"A bit of column A," Flint says, "and a bit of column B."

They're near the bottom when an explosion rattles the building, and Sam looks back up to the control room. He can see the flames light up the doorway, hear the clash of metal. The fight is going strong, but he doesn't know who's winning. Thad is good, but Quinn is a girl both figuratively and literally on fire.

And the way she was acting before... if they leave there, and he can't fight her off, he might not make it out alive.

"You guys go on ahead," Sam says.

"What?" Nick barks. "Are you crazy?"


"What are you doing?" Jeff asks.

"I'm trying to save the brave and noble douchebag!" Sam says, dashing back up the stairs.

The Hawks look conflicted, but when Nick sees how many steps are already between him and Sam, he can't imagine himself climbing them without passing out. "Damn it!" he curses. "We can't help them like this. We need to get out of here."

So the Hawks rush down the steps, hop onto Skippy, and speed away. As they flee, Nick looks back at the tower, watching flames pour out of the windows...

Blaine and friends dash through Kurt's makeshift door into a massive kitchen with rows upon rows of counters, stoves, and sinks. It has a high ceiling like the mess hall, and is just as wide, if about half as long. Blaine flits across several countertops and takes cover behind a sink, expecting the wall behind him to implode at any moment.

There's a big impact—big enough to clatter the dishes in the sink. But it doesn't bring down the wall.

Mostly because Kurt is holding it up. The Avatar stands firmly rooted, arms wide and bracing towards the wall. His earthbending holds it up even as an earth-shaking monster tries to ram it down. Another impact. The wall buckles and Kurt flinches.

"I can't hold it forever!" Kurt says. "We need a plan."

"Wes!" Blaine shouts. "Everything you know about dragon turtles. Go!"

Wes pops up from behind a counter. "Well, ummm... they are supposed to be extinct."

David pops up beside him. "What, exactly, extinctified them?"

Another impact. Cracks appear in the wall, but Kurt quickly repairs them.

"According to legend," Wes says. "The entire species was hunted to extinction by a pair of
firebending brothers to avenge a kidnapped princess."

"Those things kidnap people?" Blaine asks.

"Well, legends are often romanticized," Wes says. "It's far more likely they just ate her."

Another impact. Cracks go deeper and farther, and Kurt can't quite repair them as fast. "Great, so they can be killed," he grunts. "How?"

"Well…" Wes says. "This is going to sound odd, but it's what the legend says. Supposedly, they killed them by jumping on their heads."

"What?" David says. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard! Have you seen the size of that thing?"

"The brothers were said to be quite portly," Wes says with a shrug.

A third impact. A segment of the wall near the top crumbles away. Bao Za shoves a single clawed finger through the hole—only to yelp and yank it back out as Kurt promptly crushes it. "I don't think that's an option here!" Kurt grunts, his face red with exertion. "I can't hold this up much longer. Is that all we've got?"

"Wait!" Blaine says. "That might not be such a bad idea. I managed to jam a sword in its snout. Last I checked, it was still there. With enough of an impact…"

"We can hammer it further in," Kurt says. "It might not kill it, but it'll definitely hurt."

A fourth impact. The wall holds, but only just. More pieces crumble away, Kurt's stance falters from the feedback. Blaine jumps over the counter and runs to him.

"I've got it," Kurt says. "Are there sinks in here?"

"Yes!" Blaine says. "Tons."

"Get them running," Kurt says. "All of them!"

Wes and David rush and turn on the sinks closest to them. Blaine follows suit, but quickly returns to Kurt.

"Everyone stay close to me!" Kurt says. "I can protect—"

A fifth impact is finally too much. The wall buckles, and so does Kurt. The two collapse in unison, but where the wall has nothing left to hold it up, Kurt falls right into Blaine's arms. Kurt gives him a small smile. Blaine's grin is apologetic.

The Avatar recovers quickly, standing on his own just as Wes and David arrive next to them.

And Bao Za stomps thunderously into the room, announcing its arrival with a mighty roar.

It immediately starts stomping towards them. Kurt whips the water from the sinks into blasts of icy slush, throwing them one by one at the monster's face. Bao Za doesn't even try to dodge them, which is interesting to Blaine. The icy mix seems to have little effect on the monster. It just keeps right on coming… until, that is, Kurt lands a slushy on a patch of burnt skin.

The monster immediately skids to a halt, flinching and growling, furiously flicking its face to get rid of the ice.
"Awww, what's wrong?" Kurt says. "Don't like the cold?"

Bao Za answers by opens its mouth and sucking in air.

"Fire breath!" Blaine says.

"Get close!" Kurt shouts.

The monster unleashes a tremendous torrent of flame, but the Avatar has it covered—he whips the water from the sinks into a protective bubble. All the water in the room continuously flows to the liquid shield, replenishing everything that Bao Za's breath evaporates.

"We need to get it to lower its head," Kurt says.

"How?" Blaine asks.

"That's what I'm asking you!" Kurt says.

"The monster seemed to greatly dislike ice on its burns," Wes says.

"Can you make it snow?" David asks.

"Not quite," Kurt says. "But I can do something close.

Bao Za finally runs out of breath and starts stomping towards them again. Kurt takes all the water he has and whips it into a cloud of freezing fog, sending it high up into the room. As the fog starts to fill the air, Bao Za shudders and pulls its head down, hissing at the cold.

"Wes, David, let's go!" Blaine says. The three firebenders jump up and start leaping across the countertops towards Bao Za's exposed face. The monster answers by swiping its claws, sending cookware flying everywhere. Wes gets taken out by a hail of pots. David trips and falls in his effort to avoid a storm of silverware. Only Blaine manages to duck and dodge the destructive storm and close in on the monster.

Bao Za rewards him by trying to eat him. Blaine is in the middle of his jump when the monster lunges at him. The Prince watches as the monster's maw opens, jagged teeth surrounding him on all sides…

CHOMP.

The beast bites. But it doesn't bite Blaine.

The Prince lands on the monster's tongue, and looks around see jagged pillars of ice stuck between the monster's teeth. Kurt is holding its jaw open.

"Blaine, get out of there!" Kurt shouts.

He knows he should probably just cut and run, but he can't help but see this as an opportunity. Dashing out the side of its mouth, Blaine runs up the side of its head, jumps off a horn and once again slams his foot into the sword's hilt, kicking an explosion behind him as he takes off.

The Prince soars through the air as Bao Za roars in agony behind him. He lands beside Kurt, who is very much unimpressed.

"Blaine, there is brave and there is stupid. You're teetering between them!" Kurt growls.
"I saw an opportunity and I took it!" Blaine says. "I'm still here, aren't I?"

"That is beside the point!" Kurt says.

"Gentlemen!" David shouts. "We have more pressing issues!"

Back at the front of the room, Bao Za's face is on fire and the monster doing everything it can to destroy the world. It takes claws across the ground, filling the air with broken cookware. It lurches from side to side, slamming its shell into the walls and spreading cracks all over the surface.

It's only a matter of seconds before the room starts caving in.

"Oh, crap!" Kurt says. "Run for it!"

Chunks of the ceiling slam down all around as the foursome beats it to the back of the kitchen. The dragon turtle's roar echoes behind them as Kurt smacks another hole in the wall, and they enter the next area.

The new room is a long, wide hallway full of beds. The ceiling here is about half the height it was in the kitchens and cafeteria. They must be in the dormitories now.

Kurt turns around and braces the wall again just as Bao Za slams shell-first into it. His knees shake with the effort of holding it back, but for the moment, he holds it together.

"Okay, now what?" Kurt asks. "What can we use in here?"

Blaine takes a glance at the room. "Okay, I see beds… sheets, pillows… I think I can see somebody's porn collection sticking out from under one of the mattresses…"

"Mattresses!" David says. "That's it!"

"A mattress isn't going to hurt it!" Wes says.

"No, but if we stick it on its horns, it might blind it!" David says.

"And then it would either stay blind, or lower its head to scratch it off!" Kurt says. Another impact. Kurt falls to one knee, but he still keeps the wall up. The ceiling, however, doesn't hold up so well. Bits of it break loose and fall.

"This room isn't big enough for it," Blaine says. "It's gonna cave in!"

"Then we'd better take cover," Kurt says, releasing the wall and nearly collapsing from relief. Blaine helps him up, and all four of them run to the back of the room just as the wall caves in and the ceiling collapses in waves behind them. They dive for the beds as the dust cloud reaches them.

When the carnage is done, half the upper level dormitories have collapsed into the lower level, dumping beds and mattresses everywhere. Bao Za grumbles as it searches the debris for them.

"Oh, gross!" David whispers. "I landed on a tube of… something. I don't even know what it is!"

"And to be honest, you probably don't want to," Wes says sagely.

"Focus, guys!" Blaine says. "I think I have an idea. I'll run out and distract the monster. You two, get to the upper level. When it gets close enough, drop the mattress and dig the knife in a little deeper if you can."
Wes and David nod.

"And where am I during all of this?" Kurt asks.

"Ummm…" Blaine says.

Kurt answers him by dashing out from behind cover and charging the beast headlong.

"Kurt!" Blaine shouts, running after him.

Bao Za starts to suck in a breath, but Kurt stomps up a Bao Za-bite-sized boulder and kicks it right into his mouth, plugging its fire hole. The monster's annoying grumbling is muffled by the rock, and it swings its head around to try and dislodge it.

Blaine runs up panting beside him. "Could you give me a little warning before you do that next time?"

"No," Kurt smirks. "But if it makes you feel better, I'll be happy to leave you a note."

Blaine cocks his head and looks at his boyfriend flatly. "Very funny."

Bao Za slams the boulder against the wall, cracking it slightly. Sucking in a breath through its nose, it fire-blasts the boulder into flaming debris and sends them flying at Kurt and Blaine. The Avatar is about to throw up an earth wall when the Prince jumps in front of him deflects the debris with an explosion.

"I had it covered!" Kurt says.

"I'm just trying to help!" Blaine says.

As Wes and David climb the debris to the second floor, the Avatar and the Fire Prince pepper the monster with earth and fire. Most of Kurt's stones hit home, but Bao Za always manages to slither around Blaine's fireballs. The monster rakes a furious claw across the ground, sending broken bed frames and bits of flooring flying towards them. Kurt stomps up some cover for them to duck behind.

"Why can you hit it when I can't?" Blaine says, punching a few fireballs around the rock wall. Bao Za bobs right around them. "That's very unfair!"

"It's probably a reflex," Kurt says, kicking the wall into chunks and sending them flying right into the monster's face. "Think about it; this thing probably has to deal with firebenders all the time, but I bet it's never even seen an earthbender. Watch!" Kurt throws up a sizeable flame that burns out fairly quickly, but Bao Za still instinctively moves out of its path.

"Huh," Blaine says thoughtfully.

"Ready when you are!" Wes shouts.

Bao Za gives a mighty grumble and starts to stomp towards them. In response, Kurt pulls out the last of his ice bombs and flicks it straight to the ceiling, breaking it into another cloud of chilling fog. Bao Za lowers its head to avoid the chill, watching Kurt and Blaine retreat. As the monster stomps after them, it suddenly finds its vision completely blocked by something white and fluffy.

The monster immediately throws its head back, accidentally sending Wes and David flying. Blaine goes bug-eyed with horror, but Kurt keeps his cool. He stomps and slides his foot back and forth,
sending a couple of mattresses sliding right underneath the falling firebenders, cushioning their landing.

Bao Za continues to swing its head around to get rid of the mattress over its eyes. When it finally realizes that won't work, it grumbles and lowers its head to scrape the thing off with its claws. The mattress comes off just in time for Bao Za to see the giant rock Kurt is slamming down onto its nose.

*WHUMP.*

A shockwave travels from Bao Za's head all the way to its tale. The beast snaps its head into its shell, thrashing and crashing wilder than ever. It throws its enormous ass into everything it can hit, and once again the walls and ceiling soon start falling to pieces around them.

"Next room!" Kurt says. "Come on!"

The foursome charges as Bao Za blindly wrecks the world around it. It's more than chunks of ceiling falling this time—huge, metal girders, beds from the upper level, and enormous bits of wall land in their path. Blaine sucks in a breath and goes full-on-flamethrower, throwing his arms out and blasting everything out of their path with a continuous stream of fire. When he reaches the wall, Kurt knocks a hole in it, and they dash into the next room.

Upon seeing where they are, Kurt's eyes immediately light up with joy.

"I have never seen someone so happy to step into a communal shower," Wes says.

"We have entered my domain," Kurt says with a grin. The ground rumbles, and he turns to brace the wall against Bao Za. "I need you guys to distract it. When I give the signal— " The first impact nearly knocks him over, but he recovers quickly. "—bring its head down. If you do that, I think I can finish it off."

The second impact almost knocks him on his back, but once again, Blaine is there to catch him as he stumbles. The wall crumbles more violently than ever, blasting debris and dust into the room. Through the hole it's torn, Kurt can see that Bao Za is now peeking out at them from the safety of its shell, furiously clawing at the room to tear it apart with them inside. It has already broken several pipes, so Kurt takes the water and whips it into a blizzard. A whirling cloud of fog, ice, snow, and slush spirals through the air right into the head-hole of the shell. The beast shudders and immediately backs off, leaving half the bathrooms destroyed.

The Avatar launches himself to the second floor showers and starts gathering the flowing water into a swirling, liquid orb. "Keep it busy!"

"How?" Blaine asks.

"I don't know!" Kurt says. "Throw a dance party! Strip! Put on a fire show!"

With the blizzard gone, Bao Za's head slowly emerges from its shell again. It turns its eyes to the growing orb of water, but Blaine catches its attention with little more than a cloud of flame.

"Shall we just shoot it?" Wes asks.

Blaine grins. "Nah. I've got a better idea…" He lights a fire above each palm. "*Catch!*"

And he tosses the flames to Wes and David. Both catch them on pure instinct, holding the fires at palm's length. In almost perfect unison, they look at each other and grin as the realization hits
them.

David adds a fireball to the mix. "Just like old times."

Wes bends up a flame of his own, as well. "You have to love the classics."

Together, they throw the set of four fireballs back at Blaine, who loops them wildly around his body.

Bao Za tilts its head and grumbles at the odd display, not sure what to make of it, but at the same time, unable to take its eyes off it. It recoils, hissing like a frightened snake. Blaine bends up two more fireballs as Bao Za nervously swipes at him, but Blaine just flips aside and tosses the flames to Wes.

Wes spins the fireballs around his head and legs, adding a couple more flames at the ends of his palms. Bao Za starts to stuck in a breath, but it flinches when Wes tosses the fireballs to David, who juggles half and plays a demented game of flaming hacky-sack with the other half. He kicks the lot of them to Blaine, adding yet another flame for the Prince to keep up with.

More and more fire flies faster and faster as the boys keep the game going. Fire turns and twists, ping-pongs and bounces between them, flying in lines, waves, and loops. At first, the fire only goes to one at a time, but pretty soon, it's two at once, and then suddenly all three of them are juggling and bending fireballs back and forth and around, creating patterns so elaborate that most Fire Circus acts would burst into flames of envy upon seeing it.

Bao Za turns hisses, its head pulled back, its eyes wide as it tries to keep track of all the fire. Its panic instincts are kicking in—too much bending going in too many directions. It can't keep track of it all, and it doesn't know what to make of fire that flies like this.

Blaine chances a glance up and finds that Kurt has now assembled a swirling globe of water just slightly larger than Bao Za's head. "Ready?" he asks.

Kurt's arms flow smooth and calm like the purest river as he swirls the orb in front of him. He clenches his fists, and the orb freezes. "Ready!" he says, holding it in place.

"On three!" Blaine says. "One… two… three!" In perfect unison, the trio jumps forward and hurls every last fireball in the bunch straight at Bao Za's head.

In a perfect world, or even a slightly better one, this would have worked. The monster would have dodged low, Kurt would have dropped the ball on its head, and that would have been that.

But this is not a perfect world, and in this world, there is one thing Blaine and company failed to account for. As Bao Za smashed through the kitchen, it tore loose several stoves. From the pipes beneath those stoves, gas has been slowly leaking into the air, steadily spreading out from the kitchen the entire time they've fought. The monster's rampages buried and snuffed out all the flames that might have detonated the fumes before now.

As a result Blaine, Wes, and David's big finale winds up being far more spectacular than they could ever have guessed.

The air behind Bao Za explodes. A bright, blinding wave of flame blasts in all directions, immolating the monster and shaking the entire complex to its foundations. The shockwave blows the Avatar and the firebenders clear off their feet, resulting in Kurt's enormous ice ball falling straight to the floor.
As Blaine comes to, he sees the building burning beyond them. Every room they were just in is now consumed by towering flames. The monster is in a similar position, thrashing and smashing about, its body covered in flames it can't put out. Wes and David awaken as well, and all three boys stand up, slowly stepping forward to get a clearer view of the blaze.

In a perfect world, or even a slightly better one, this would have been harmless.

But this world is not perfect, and in this world, it is this action that dooms them.

David is closest. He stands right beside Kurt's shattered ice ball, oblivious to the cracks spiderwebbing through the floor around it. His eyes are fixed on the monster as Bao Za roars and rears, rising on its hind legs and slamming its full weight into the ground.

It's the straw that breaks the world. The ground beneath David dips. His eyes widen as he looks to his friends.

Wes is closest to him. "David!" he shouts, running forward.

But he is too late. The floor collapses, and David is plunged into a pitch-black pit.

The cracks spread, and the ground continues to crumble. Wes tries to stop, to reverse and run away, but the collapse is too fast. The ground tilts beneath him as he scrambles to escape in vain.

"Wes!" Blaine shouts, foolishly running forward as well.

It is in vain. The earth gives way, and Wes falls.

Even as the sinkhole spreads towards him, Blaine is frozen. His eyes are fixed to the spots where his friends were taken. A voice breaks the ice, just barely.

"…Blaine!" Kurt says from the level above him. "Get away from there! Hurry!"

The Prince snaps out of his haze and starts to run, but he can't help one final look back. He never even sees the girder that trips him until he's face down on the floor.

The cracks surround him. He looks up. "Kurt…"

A rope of water flies from the Avatar's hand. Blaine grabs on just as the ground gives way, leaving nothing but a thin, watery thread between him and oblivion.

Blaine stares long into the abyss.

"Kurt…" he says. "Kurt, they fell. They're…"

"I know," Kurt says. "I'm sorry, Blaine. Just… hang on. Please."

The building around them is ruined, but nothing can compare to the wreckage lurking in Blaine's eyes.

"Don't let go!" Kurt says.

In the end, they have no choice. A flaming tail from the thrashing monster slams into the Avatar, dashes the thread binding him to the Prince and sending him sailing through the air. The last thing he sees is Blaine's face as he vanishes into the abyss.

Then he crashes, and an avalanche of rubble buries him.
After a few moments, the destruction subsides. Bao Za, though badly burned, manages to extinguish the flames, and searches the world for those that burned it. It sees no movement, hears no fighting. It cannot smell its master's blood.

For a moment, there is nothing but the burning building around it. All is still and silent.

And then, like the tenuous watery thread between Kurt and Blaine, the silence is abruptly and violently *shattered*.

The fight with Thad is long and gruesome, far more challenging than Quinn expected. The boy's blazing blade cuts lines into the metal room around them, singing as it flies through the air with a pure, resonant note. It clangs brightly as it clashes with her arm guards, rings low as it blocks her strikes. Boy and blade move as one, and it is clear that Thad has studied swordsmanship from a true master.

But all that changes when she relieves him of his blade. She burns his wrist mid-strike, and the sword sails out the window.

After that, there is only disappointment.

Without the weapon, his firebending is weak. Her offense overwhelms him with shameful ease. Bit by bit, burns begin to appear on his arms, his legs, his chest, his stomach. His uniform is in tatters, and though he fights as hard as he can, he just isn't enough.

The end comes. She kicks him firelessly in the face, spinning him around and raking fire down his unprotected back. He cries out in agony, falling to his knees.

"*M-mercy,*" he pleads. "*S-stop. I can't…*

"You can't?" she growls. "You can come in here, swinging your little sword around and deny me yet another victory but you can't even do the courtesy of giving me a half-decent fight? You're pathetic. We're not done yet. *Get up.*"

Thad falls to his hands and knees. "I can't…" he says, his arms shaking. "I…"

"I said *get up!*" Quinn barks. He just doesn't get it. This whelp has twice robbed her of prizes she's rightfully won. She needs him to be stronger than this. She needs catharsis. She needs a challenge. She needs *more.*

"Fight me!" she growls, kicking him over. He squeaks, folds in on himself, and then he starts *crying.*

She has never been more disgusted in her life. She hates the display of weakness. She *hates* this quivering little nothing. And without even realizing it, she begins to burn that hate. Her hand bends up a flame, coils back, strikes—

"Stop!"

And is stopped by another. She wrests her arm free and turns to find Sam, hands raised in surrender.

Anger is supplanted by confusion. "Why are you here? You escaped."

"I came back because… well, that," Sam says. "I was really worried you were going to kill him.
Looks like I was right."

"What business is it of yours?" Quinn asks.

"Well, I mean, do you really want to kill him?" Sam asks. "You don't seem like that kind of person."

Quinn gapes at him. How dare he presume to know who or what she is? She opens her mouth to reply, but a whimper from the ground calls her attention downwards.

Thad moans on the ground, writhing in agony beyond his control. A realization stutters to life within her. She nearly executed him. Not out of necessity or duty, but out of rage.

She lost control.

The Imperials stumble into the room, having regained consciousness after their thrashing at Thad's hands. "Get him out of here," she says. "And see to it that his... wounds are treated."

"What about him?" the Imperials ask, nodding at Sam.

"I will take him in myself," Quinn says.

The Imperials drag Thad roughly from the room, and he whimpers the whole way. In the end, she and Sam are left alone.

"Thank you," she says quietly. "For stopping me. He's... more useful alive."

"Is that really the only reason not to murder him?" Sam asks.

Quinn huffs, a half-laugh. "It was a mistake to come back here." She lights a fire at the end of her fingers, and points them at him. "Kneel, and put your hands..."

She trails off. The fire on her fingers curves against her will, as if blown by an unseen wind.

"What on earth...?"

All around the room, flames rise and curve, as if being bent. They all curve in the same way, pointing to one place. Slowly, curiously, Quinn follows the path of the flames and finds herself staring at the barracks.

Sam looks somewhat ill. "Are you doing that?" he asks quietly.

"No," Quinn says.

And suddenly, Sam's face is as white as death.

"Oh, no..."

"I still can't see them!" Rachel shouts, calling down to Mercedes. "The fire's too big. There's too much... smoke?"

Rachel blinks, not quite sure if she's seeing correctly. The smoke billowing from the building was, just moments before, rising high into the sky. Now, however, it seems to be swirling around the building.
Her hair whips around her face, startling her. She looks around.

How odd. The wind has shifted.

It's blowing towards the burning building. Towards Kurt.

Finn surfs idly along the coast, staying out of sight. Things have been pretty dull on his end. Well, save for that one tank that randomly fell into the ocean. That was weird.

He's cruising along when suddenly, the water surges underneath him, almost knocking him off his iceboard. Finn looks down at the ocean, trying to figure out what it's deal is. Another wave surges beneath him, carrying him for a moment. All around him, the water churns, pitches and foam. The waves lap at the sides of larger boats, nearly overturning smaller ones.

As the ocean churns, so does Finn's blood. Water does not act like this. Not unless it's being bent.

"Oh, La, no..." he whispers.

And he's off without another word, fighting a losing battle against the tides.

Artie's just gotten the tank to fall out of the building, and he's eager to see what he can bend. Theoretically, if he can bend all the bits and pieces in the tank, he should be able to drive it. He clangs his hands against the metal, feeling out the schematics of the tank, when suddenly, he feels something else instead.

The earth rumbles beneath him.

His heart quickens, and his fingers find the ground. The rumbling is faint, but omnipresent. It's all around him. Pebbles vibrate across the ground, moving like children called by their mother.

Something is calling.

And Artie has only one response.

"Shit!"

By the time the retreat was rescinded, there were only a couple hundred soldiers left on the base. But the Fire Nation trains good soldiers, and they know how to follow orders. When the order came to rejoin the battle, they turned right around and charged. They had just arrived on the lawn when the damned barracks seemed to explode right in front of them, knocking a few of them cross-eyed for a bit.

They might be good soldiers, but they aren't suicidal. They wait outside the burning building to see if anything emerges.

Something emerges alright.

The first thing that comes out is Bao Za. It flies like someone threw it, landing scorched and smoking and nearly crushing a few people. It looks back into the building with a growl, but whatever's inside causes it to whimper and duck into its shell.
The soldiers turn to see what it saw. And suddenly, they feel like whimpering too.

He floats above the flames, nothing more than a dark silhouette. Fire and smoke alike bend towards him, as if bowing, submitting to his authority. The wind whirls around him, a perfect orb of spinning air sucking in fire, smoke, debris, and everything else. Slowly but surely, the orb grows wider. Everything it touches it destroyed. Bricks are stripped to sand. Floorboards are splintered and ripped up. Metal twists and snaps, flying in all directions.

Many of the soldiers begin to retreat as debris starts to rain around them, but there is one who cannot run, who cannot look away.

He watches as the orb of wind expands. Watches as it strips the barracks to nothing, as it disintegrates and absorbs the biggest building on the base as though it was made of little more than chewed up paper.

It's the most horrifying thing he's ever seen. And he can't look away, even when chunks of building start to land beside him.

Even when a flying board slams against his head, knocking him over.

His eyes remain rooted to the floating figure. As darkness overtakes him, the last image the soldier sees is a floating silhouette, with eyes of glowing white…

**TO BE CONTINUED**

**A/N:** And just like that, it all goes (even more) horribly wrong.

As the wrath of the Avatar pours out on the Fire Nation, it's up to Kurt's friends to pull him out of the Avatar State before he destroys everything. Can they stop him before it's too late? Can they stop him at all?

And if they can't… then who can?

The fates of all have been cast to the wind. It is time to learn where they land.

The final part of *The Suicide Mission* is next.
He watched Blaine fall. Watched him vanish into a pit so deep the bottom was invisible. Watched him die, helpless and unable to save him.

And now he lies under a pile of garbage, helpless to even move. He's sick of feeling helpless, of feeling hopeless and frustrated. His mind reels, emotion drowning out all conscious thought, and with no other options available, he screams.

Not with his mouth, but with his spirit. His soul cries out.

And they hear his call.

They come from across the Spirit World, a thousand lives in a thousand lifetimes. Kurt's spirit is wrapped in a cocoon of grief and rage, and one by one, they come to him. They appear all around him, eyes closed, tall and proud and utterly still like guardian statues.

Alone, each of them carries tremendous wisdom and power.

But together, they become something far more.

As one, a thousand sets of eyes open to shine with pure white light. The Collective Spirit, the Many-Who-Are-One, focusing their energy through his body and filling him with their power.

Kurt recedes.

And the Avatar surges forth.

Kurt's sorrow and rage becomes their own as they burst from the rubble, beyond furious with the Fire Nation. Sue Sylvester's plans cannot be allowed to go forth, and so the Avatar will stop them.

Through his eyes, they see the great beast that serves the Usurper Lord, stomping and roaring in front of them. Kurt's fury peaks, and they feel it. They will bring ruin to Sue's plans, and they will do so using her own pet as a weapon.

A single burst of air carries the monster from the building, leaves it shuddering in its shell. With Kurt's arms, they whip the wind into motion, shearing the building around him to shreds and commanding the debris. Air is the arbiter of motion. All that moves must pass through it.

A system is created, a whirling tempest that devours the barracks from within and funnels the debris into a searing blast of wind. The beast known as Bao Za cowers in its shell as every brick, board, and beam in the complex is pulled into a stream and weaponized. Billions of bits and pieces buffet the beast, until the building has been consumed.

In the aftermath, the monster's shell is sanded down to a smooth finish, leaving not a single spike in
its wake. The beast is prepared for the next step of their plan, while the wreckage of the barracks spreads clear to the base's gates…

And beyond.

Skippy slides to a halt, and the Dragon Hawks slide off of her back with a moan, still smoking in places.

"What happened to y'all?" Mercedes says.

"Quinn happened," Trent groans. "She beat the crap out of us!"

"Multiple times," Jeff says. "Girlfriend has issues."

Flint sticks his head up. "As a wise man once said; 'ow, fucking mother of shit, that hurts like a bitch!'"

"Truer words have never been spoken," Nick grumbles from the bottom of the pile. "Medic!"

"Finn's not in right now," Mercedes says. "I'll see if I can—wait, where's Sam?"

The Hawks share a sickly look, but their answer is cut off by Rachel's warning of their impending demise. "OH MY GOSH, LOOK OUT!" she shrieks from the roof.

The wind howls like the heart of a spurned lover, and suddenly, it's raining bricks (and beams and everything else under the sun). Mercedes slams up a couple of slabs and forms a tent over the injured Hawks and their panicky lizard thing.

Rachel grabs the shrieking Pavarotti's cage and scrambles down off the roof with the Hawks. The wild weather turns building against building, breaking bricks with bricks and slamming beams through windows. Clatter and shatter resounds all around them, construction carnage flying on the wind well into Zedong proper. Rachel and company slide under Mercedes's tent just as the storm dies down.

The earth is rumbling. She can feel it already, and she knows all too well what a storm like this means.

Mercedes is quick to take charge. "Rachel!" she says. "Tell everybody—and I do mean everybody—to get as far away from the base as possible! Use that outside voice!"

The airbender nods and whips around to the city at large. With the deepest breath she can take, at the very tip-top of her lungs, she bellows…

"ATTENTION, ABSOLUTELY EVERYONE! LOTS OF THINGS ARE EXPLODING AND IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE ONE OF THEM, YOU SHOULD PROBABLY MOVE AWAY FROM THE NAVAL BASE! PLEASE EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY!"

Her voice rattles the ears of every Hawk, and she's facing away from them. All around them, people start poking heads out of their homes. The debris stuck in the walls and windows does a pretty good job of convincing them to high-tail it out of there.

The minor earthquake that comes next just seals the deal. They start running, fast.

Rachel catches her breath and re-enters the tent. "Mercedes, what is going on here?"
Mercedes opens her mouth up to answer, but somebody else answers for her. A Fire Nation tank rolls right up to the tent, and who should poke his head out of the bending hatch but Artie friggin' Abrams?

"Mercedes, Kurt's gone supernova!" Artie says. "Where's Finn?"

"Wait, Kurt's gone what?" Nick asks.

"What about Finn?" Rachel asks.

"We don't have time to explain right now!" Mercedes says. "We need to find Finn. Lives are at stake!"

"Whose lives?" Jeff asks.

"Everybody's, including ours!" Mercedes says. "If we don't find Finn soon, we can kiss this town goodbye!"

The Hawks-plus-Rachel gasp in shock. Pavarotti clangs and screeches in its cage. Skippy seems to be contemplating eating Pavarotti, oblivious or uncaring about the rest.

"Let's go!" Mercedes says. "Rachel, you're with me, we ridin' scaly. Hawks, y'all stay here and help your buddies. Hold down the fort, and be ready to move if we need you."

The Hawks nod.

Mercedes practically grabs Rachel and hoists her on Skippy's back, lashing the lizard into motion. Artie rolls along behind them.

Rachel speaks as the reptile runs. "I still don't understand what's going on! Did Kurt make that windstorm? What does Finn have to do with this?"

"Kurt's tearing shit up because he lost control, and Finn's our best bet at talking him down!" Artie says.

"Lost control?" Rachel asks. "What does that even mean? Why is he exploding everything?"

"Because he isn't Kurt," Mercedes says quietly. "Not anymore…"

Quinn stares through the binoculars, silent in awe as the barracks is consumed by a tornado turned on its side. The windstorm turns the whole complex into shrapnel and flings it with deadly force. The sheer efficiency is terrifying and breathtaking all at once—not a single piece is wasted.

When the dust clears, he can finally see him clearly. It's an image she's seen once before, an unforgettable tableau of a boy with glowing white eyes, laying waste to all around him.

"His eyes are glowing again…" she says quietly.

"Shit!" Sam says. "Kurt's gonna tear this place apart! We have to warn people!"

Quinn agrees, and quickly finds the microphone. "Hello? Can anyone hear me?" No sound comes out of the speakers. "Damn it! It must have been damaged in the fight."

Sam dives under the control console, examining the wires carefully. "Okay… I think I can fix it," he says. "But I need your help."
"Why?" Quinn asks.

Sam throws his hands out. "Because I can't fuse wires with my mind!"

Quinn gives him a skeptical look.

"Look, it's not a permanent fix," Sam says. "But it should get it working long enough for us to get out a message."

Quinn glances out the window at the wreckage the Avatar has already made. The decision is not a hard one.

"I'll help you," she says, sinking under the table beside Sam. "But this doesn't change anything. You are still my prisoner."

"Right," Sam nods, pointing to a broken wire. "Start with this one."

Quinn lights a flare on the end of her fingers and gets to work.

As sparks fly from her fingertips, the building rumbles and groans around them.

Quinn looks at Sam, a silent question. Should they be worried?

Sam doesn't even seem to notice. He just points to the next wire. "This one next."

She rolls her eyes. Either he's ignorant of the danger he's in, or he doesn't care. His focus in the face of disaster is almost admirable.

*Almost…*

---

*Kurt's feet touch ground, and immediately, panicked soldiers rush in from the sides, hoping to strike.*

*His fist slams the earth, sending the rock rippling into a rolling stone tsunami. Tanks, rubble, and soldiers alike are scattered and tossed like seeds in the wind, and the beast is flipped on its polished back in preparation for the next step.*

*Kurt's fists swing to cut an enormous disc of earth from beneath the shell. The Avatar continues to swing his fists in a wide circle, spinning the disc and the shell on top of it with ever-increasing speed. Kurt's foot slams down, bringing the disc to a halt while the shell keeps spinning like an enormous top.*

*With a spiraling spear of air, the Avatar launches the shell, sending it careening through the base, toppling everything it touches. When it nears the edge, they raise the earth to bounce it back. With curves and ramps, they steer the shell back and forth, carving line of devastation into the base. Offices, hangars, medical buildings, storage houses, construction cranes, anything and everything falls in the path of the shell.*

*Thus, they begin the breaking of Sue's war machine, using her own pet as a weapon…*

---

Skippy is a little freaked when the tank lands in front of them.

"Why the *fuck* do these things keep fallin' out the damn sky?" Artie asks. "Is this normal Fire Nation weather?"
"As a lifelong resident of the Fire Nation, I can safely say that it is not!" Rachel says.

"Keep running, Scales!" Mercedes says. "It's harder to hit a moving target!"

When they get to the docks, Finn washes up almost instantly. "Oh, you're already here, thank Tui!" he says, sliding to a stop on his ice board. "What happened?"

"Explosion," Mercedes says. "Big one, according to Rachel."

Finn looks sick. "You think Blaine…?"

"Why else would Kurt be like this?" Mercedes asks.

"Oh, man," Finn says quietly. "This is not gonna be easy…"

"Wait, what about Blaine? You don't… you don't think he's… oh no…" Rachel says, more distraught by the second.

"Rachel, please stay calm," Finn says gently. "I know this sucks, but I need you to keep cool so you can back me up, okay?"

Rachel purses her lips, pressurizing her emotions and shoving them in a can to be opened later. "Okay."

"Y'all take Stubby-Tail," Mercedes says. "I'll ride with Artie. We're on damage control."

She jumps off the lizard, and Rachel takes the reins. "I'll drive. I have an affinity with animals."

Finn nods and hops on behind her. "We'll meet back here when…" It's at this point that he notices Artie is in a tank. 

"Artie shrugs, casual as a Friday. "Double-A always rides in style."

Mercedes hops on top of the tank. "Then let's ride!"

"Good luck," Finn says.

"You too," Mercedes says.

They part ways, heading towards the base from different directions. As they travel, the loudspeaker system heralds their arrival with a final, static-crackling order.

"…attention, all units! This is an…" Buzz. "…gency situation! Take cover immediatel…" Hiss. "…not engage the Avatar! Repeat, do NOT engage…" Crackle. "…ordered to take cover in a secure structure! This is not a drill! Take cover imm…" Whine, and then silence.

The line goes dead.

"Damn it!" Quinn says, kicking the busted console.

"That's all we're getting out of this," Sam says, looking out the window as Kurt turns Bao Za into a spinning wrecking ball. The demolition dervish whirls back and forth across the base, getting dangerously close to the tower. Too close. Way too close! "Shit, get down!"

CLANG.
The tower tilts, and the two of them crash into a wall.

Quinn stands up carefully. "Did it hit us?"

"It whiffed us. If it'd hit us, we'd be on the ground," Sam says, noting something slightly odd as he gets unsteadily to his feet. "Is it just me, or are we… like… leaning?"

Quinn looks around. Sure enough, the exit is now just slightly uphill. "The tower is tilted," she says. "The shell must have knocked it in somewhere."

Sam looks uneasy. "We need to get out of here, before—"

Suddenly, the closet door flies open, spilling out several tied up soldiers and one very irate Commander.

Quinn glares at Sam, who blushes and scratches his neck. "Okay, in my defense, I actually forgot they were in there."

Quinn slices the soldiers free with a spark.

"Thank you, little lady," the Commander says, standing and straightening his clothes. "Men, beat that nancy-boy to a pulp!"

The soldiers immediately charge a wide-eyed Sam.

A fireburst from Quinn stops them dead. "Back off!" she warns.

"You don't give orders to me, Little Miss Sassy-fras!" the Commander says. "That punk—"

"—is my prisoner, and you will not touch him." She holds two flaming fingers at his throat to illustrate her point. "Are we clear?"

He gulps. "Crystal."

"Good," Quinn says, snuffing the flames. "And for the record? My name is Quinn Fabray."

A groan like a hungry sky bison shudders up the tower, and the tilt increases by a degree.

"Okay, we really need to get out of here!" Sam says.

"Follow me!" Quinn says, leading the way with Sam on her heels.

"I told you to stop bossing us around!" the Commander says. "If my men need to retreat, I will be the one to tell—"

"Ummm, sir, something's going on outside," one of the soldiers says.

The Commander looks out the window. Dark grey clouds are starting to fill the sky. He's never in his life seen a storm come on this fast.

"Orders, sir?" the soldier says.

The tower groans again.

"Retreat!" the Commander says, dashing towards the stairs with his men on his heels.
Soldiers attempt to stop them as they lay the base to waste. Whether they did not hear, or simply chose not to heed the order to disengage, it matters not. Their attacks are attempts on the life of the entire Avatar, and they must not go unanswered.

Archers find their arrows blown into them as sharp splinters. Sword and spearmen are catapulted by the earth in the middle of their charge. Firebenders' attacks explode in their faces and set them alight.

Eventually, their attempts wear on the Avatar's patience.

As the shell approaches, Kurt's body is born into the air on a whirlwind. The sail shells underneath, and the Avatar sails with it, riding the whirlwind as it rides the shell, the air and the beast spinning with equal speed in opposite directions. The monster smashes through numerous cranes and lifts at the docks before finally plunging into the ocean with a tremendous splash.

Kurt's arms whip the ocean into a swirl, slowly forming a tremendous waterspout beneath the shell, lifting it high into the air. The twisting tide draws all manner of boats and smaller vessels, smashing and shredding them in the swirl. The spout rises higher and higher until it towers over the base, visible to all.

Kurt's hands fly skyward, and suddenly, the waterspout becomes a smokestack, pouring clouds into the sky. Clear blue is eclipsed by ominous grey, and the world darkens.

The Avatar assumes command of the heavens, and the first order is bombardment.

Soldiers who chose not to heed the order to hide are forced to reevaluate their choices when the storm begins...

Mercedes and Artie arrive at the base just in time to watch Kurt paint the sky.

"Mountains have mercy," Mercedes breathes. "He's never done that before."

"He's never been this mad before," Artie says.

Something cold and wet smacks Mercedes upside the head, and almost knocks her off the tank. She rubs the sore spot, and comes away with little chunks of ice on her finger.

"Oh, shit!" Artie says. "Mercedes, come inside!"

He pops open the hatch, and Mercedes jumps in just as it starts. Little egg-sized clumps of ice come down by the millions, shattering against the ground and everything else, including the tank. The clatter of ice-on-metal makes a damn near impossible racket.

"A hailstorm?" Mercedes yells over the noise.

"Looks like it!" Artie shouts. "Here, hop up in the hatch. Be my eyes and I'll be your wheels."

Mercedes nods and switches places with Artie, and together, they form a bending machine. Artie uses metalbending to drive, while Mercedes looks out the covered bending hatch and tells him where to go.

"Rubble at two o'clock!" Mercedes says. "Take it to the left! Now the right! You got it!"

Artie pounds the controls and bends the gears, and the tank swerves in, out, and around rubble piles with expert precision. Its treads crush hail into slush with no fuss. There's rubble everywhere, but
in a way, that makes it easier. Buildings, you have to go around. Piles of rubble, you can crush, and failing that…

"Bending a ramp!" Mercedes says. "Hold on tight!"

A swing of her fists raises a slope in front of them, and Artie gives them a little speed boost. They fly off the ramp and clear the rubble with ease.

"See any stragglers?" Artie asks.

Mercedes looks around and spies one of the few buildings still standing. She spots it just in time to watch it get slammed inside-out by a hailstone the size of a truck.

"Holy hills!" Mercedes says. "That boy is not playing!"

And it's just the beginning. All around the base, icy meteors smash into structures, punching holes from roof to basement and forcing soldiers screaming into the streets, where fist-sized ice balls pound them into submission.

Mercedes winces. Good thing they're wearing helmets.

"Soldiers at three o'clock!" Mercedes says.

The soldiers cover their heads and try to dash through the rain of pain. A couple of them try to melt the hail with firebending, but all that does it make it a little soggy when it smacks them. They're just about driven to their knees when suddenly, a sturdy stone shelter springs up over them.

"What the—"

Artie rolls up next to them, and Mercedes peeks out at the hatch. "Need a hand?" she says.

"Earthbenders? What the—"

"You can thank us later!" Mercedes says. "Right now, you need to get somewhere safe. Where's the safest place on the base?"

"The sewers!" another soldier says. "They're deep underground, and made of metal. We can hide there!"

"Well then, get to it!" Mercedes says. "Get low and get fast. We'll cover you!"

The soldiers nod. "This way!"

They run, and Artie rolls. Mercedes lifts a couple of stone slabs and holds them steady to let the soldiers move under cover. The hail is having a weird effect on the air—the ice in the heat is starting to fog the place up, making it harder and harder to see. Eventually, however, the soldiers find what they are looking for; a thick manhole cover. With Mercedes providing cover, they pop it open and pop inside.

The soldiers climb down one at a time. The last one stops for a second just before he closes the hatch. "Umm... thank you?" he says.

Mercedes shrugs. "Ain't no thang. Now get out of here!"

The soldier nods and ducks down, closing the cover behind him.
"What's next, Mama Mercy?" Artie asks.

"Search and rescue, baby," Mercedes says. "We got more soldiers to save!"

It starts a fourth of the way down. An impossibly loud clamor, clanging like a thousand angry blacksmiths in a forge.

"What on earth?" Quinn yells over the noise.

"No idea, don't want to find out!" Sam replies. "Keep going!"

The cacophony is relentless, forcing the soldiers to cover their ears as they run down the stairs. The tower is holding steady for the moment, and the stairs, while slightly tilted, are easy enough to travel down. But the occasional groan of strained metal is enough to keep them hurrying; they know the place won't hold forever.

Catastrophe strikes about a third of the way down. Something tremendous slams into the top of the tower, and the whole thing shudders. The tower pitches with a groan, throwing them into the wall and holding them in freefall for a moment. Quinn is certain they are falling to their deaths when suddenly, the descent comes to a violent, halt, sending them crashing onto the floor… which used to be a wall.

The tilt has gotten much more dramatic. They're sitting on what used to be the east wall, now a floor with a gentle downward slope.

Sam looks around in confusion, shouting a question over the hailstorm. "What happened?"

"We fell, you idiot!" Quinn says. "We must have gotten stuck on something on the way down!"

"So we're leaning on something?" Sam asks.

"Yes, and we need to get out of here before it gives way! Come on!" Quinn shouts.

Once again, Quinn leads the charge down the tower. But things are different now. The crash knocked a lot of things loose. Staircases now function as hurdles to be vaulted over. Collapsed girders and beams litter their path, forcing Sam and the soldiers to muscle them aside. Support cables start snapping under the strain, whipping violently around the hall. One of them nearly cuts a soldier in half, but Quinn cuts the cord first, slicing it neatly in two with her firebending.

Problems come from outside as well. A chunk of ice the size of a watermelon smashes clean through the roof (that used to be the west wall). Hail falls in through the hole.

"Is this hail?" Quinn barks, unable to believe what she's seeing.

"Oh, you guys have that too?" Sam says.

"I've only heard of it. I've never actually seen it!" Quinn says.

The hail collects quickly on the floor, and the tower groans threateningly at the added weight. Realizing the danger it poses, Quinn charges in and evaporates the water. Unfortunately, there is plenty more hail where that came from.

"Punch a hole in the floor, right there!" Sam shouts, pointing to ice's landing point. "It'll fall straight through!"
Quinn melts a decent-sized hole, and sure enough the ice falls straight through. "Let's keep going!"

They move quickly, knowing the tower could fall at any minute. Their progress is steady, and soon, they can see the 'breaking point'—the spot where the shell knocked the tower in and caused it to start leaning.

Unfortunately, there's one last major obstacle in their path—a huge pile of debris, completely impassable as it stands. Quinn is fully prepared to explode the whole thing, but Sam steps in front of her.

"No explosions!" he says. "You'll bring the whole place down!"

"Well, we have to get past it somehow!" Quinn says.

Sam takes a second to study the scene. The debris in front of them, the wreckage around them…

With a grin, he dashes off and hefts a stray girder, jamming it into the bottom of the debris pile to form a wedge. His face reddens with strain as he puts all of his muscle into pushing down, lifting the wreckage just enough for people to fit through.

"Hurry…" Sam grunts. "Can't… keep…"

Suddenly, the wreckage seems a lot less heavy. Mostly because Quinn is beside him, pushing down along with him. She's stronger than she looks.

"Go!" Quinn orders.

One by one, the soldiers crawl through the wreckage. Once the Commander is through, Quinn and Sam let the pile fall back down with a sigh of relief.

"What about you two?" the Commander asks.

"Don't worry about us!" Quinn yells. "Get your men out of here!"

The Commander gives her a grim nod, and an actual salute. "Good luck, Miss Fabray." With that, he and his soldier charge ahead to the tower's breaking point, vanishing down stairs that actually go down.

"Well, now what?" Sam asks, turning to Quinn.

Quinn is about to answer when suddenly, the tower answers for her. Metal shears apart, and it sounds like screaming. The tower pitches again and slams to a stop, sending both Sam and Quinn sliding and falling end-over-end.

Sam stops his descent by grabbing a cable. Quinn stops hers by grabbing Sam.

"OW!" Sam shouts. "You've got serious claws!"

"Stop whining!" Quinn says scornfully. "Whatever's holding us up just partially gave way, and I doubt it'll hold much longer."

"I'd love to get out of here!" Sam says. "But we have a new problem!"

Quinn looks towards the exit. The tilt of the tower has reversed. What used to be a downhill slide is now an upward slope. Safety is above them, and they've slide away from it. Debris is now steadily
sliding towards them as well, along with quite a bit of hail. The metal at the breaking point actually sheared open, and now the hailstorm is fully visible.

Safety is an uphill battle, but it's one she's more than willing to fight.

"Stay close!" Quinn yells.

With that, she lets go and sprints up the fallen tower, Sam hot on her heels. She runs and firebends with reckless abandon, swatting debris aside like bothersome flies, turning hail to vapor. She is an unstoppable dynamo of demolition, and now that it's actually on his side, Sam is kind of in awe of her ferocity.

"Almost there!" Quinn shouts.

With a final burst of speed, they jump free of the tilting tower and land on a staircase in what's left of the stable base.

Their jump is the final straw. The tower screeches, shears, and snaps, shuddering violently and shaking itself loose from the building it was leaning against. With a tremendous clatter and a giant cloud of dust, the tower smashes into the street and falls to pieces.

Sam looks at Quinn, still slightly in awe. "You saved my life," he says quietly.

"Of course," Quinn says. "You're my prisoner. I can't take you into custody if you're dead."

Sam gives her an eyebrow quirk of befuddlement.

She responds with an eyeroll of exasperation. "Don't look so surprised. This isn't the first time I've saved you."

It takes Sam a second to realize what she's talking about. "That doesn't count!" he says. "That was just you not-murdering me. It's not lifesaving unless you actually do something!"

"It wasn't murder, it was lawful execution, and it does so cou..." She trails off.

"What?" Sam asks.

"It's stopped..." Quinn says. Sure enough, the hail has ceased. The world is foggy and grey and covered in broken ice. It's an odd state of affairs in the Fire Nation, to be sure. "Is it over?"

Sam looks out and sees the Avatar's whirling waterspout, holding steady and riding high. "I wouldn't count my turduckens yet," he says. "It's not over 'til it's over..."

Finn and Rachel dash straight for the heart of the problem, skipping over the sea on their speedy super lizard.

"There he is!" Finn says, pointing to the Twirling Tower of Kurt. "I need to get over there!"

"Onward!" Rachel shouts, lashing the reins.

They charge right at him, but they don't get far. Kurt's water-tornado (watornado?) quickly starts throwing the waves into conniptions.

"The ocean's too dangerous," Finn says. "We need to get on land!"
Rachel quickly steers Skippy to the shore. They make landfall just as the first hailstones start to fall, an event that freaks Skippy right the fuck out. The lizard rears and brays as an ice clump shatters near its face, forcing Rachel to fight to keep control. "Whoa!" she says. "Easy, easy! It's just a little ice."

"Actually, it's a lot of ice!" Finn shouts, pointing to the downpour coming straight at them. With no time to waste, he whips his arms into action. Just as the storm begins in earnest and ice threatens to give them a pounding, the hailstones stop and hover just above them, suspended by Finn's bending. He quickly melts the hail into a nice, slushy shield to keep them safe from harm.

Unfortunately, Skippy doesn't quite feel safe. It hisses and flicks its tongue at the hail, backing away nervously despite Rachel's attempts to keep it calm.

"Why are we going backwards?" Finn asks. "We should be going forward!"

"Skippy is scared! I can sympathize!" Rachel says, stroking Skippy's neck. "You don't like this adventure one bit, do you, you poor thing?"

Finn sighs. "Okay, I know you don't like being mean to animals, so I'm really sorry about this, but we need to go!" With that, he splashes frozen slush against the lizard's backside, which startles Skippy into taking off at a dead sprint. Unfortunately, the poor critter isn't used to running on the little balls of ice that are quickly covering the ground. Finn is forced to keep their hail shield steady with one hand and melt a path through the hail with the other.

The base is pretty much a disaster area at this point, and it's tough to get around all the crap, especially when your lizard seems to have forgotten how to slow down or stop. He washes away what he can—the rest, he has to go around or over. The ice arches he makes for Skippy to run over aren't the prettiest things he's ever bent, but they get the job done.

All the bending is super draining, but every time Finn feels like he's about to fall over, he remembers the his awesome gift from Her Moony Awesomeness, and feels a jolt of moon juice. With Tui watching over him, he keeps it together and bends kind of like a badass.

He kind of wishes Kurt could see him. He'd be really proud.

As they approach the waterspout, Finn spots shelter in the form of a giant piece of metal tubing.

"In there!" Finn says, pointing the way by melting a path for Rachel to steer through.

Once inside the tube, Skippy skids to a halt and hides its head under its claws. When Rachel reaches for them, it smacks her hand with its tongue.

"Ow!" Rachel says. "That was uncalled for!"

Skippy blows her a lizard-raspberry.

"You've traumatized the poor thing!" Rachel says. "Now it'll probably… Finn?"

Finn is standing at the end of the pipe, staring at the waterspout. The spinning sea-tower is terrifying in pretty much every way. It sucks up boats, smashes them to pieces, then sucks up the pieces and smashes those too. Finn sighs, clutching the moonstone inside his shirt and sending a silent prayer to Tui. When that's done, he turns around. "Okay, Rach," he says. "I think I can take it from here."

"What do you mean by—?" Rachel asks.
Her question is cut off as Finn's lanky arms wrap around her and squeeze her tight. "I'm glad you're here," he says. "I just... you know... wanted to say thanks. For everything. If I don't make it back..."

Rachel cuts him off. "Wait, Finn, back from where? What exactly are you planning on doing?"

Finn breaks the hug and gives her a gentle smile. "What I do best..." He places a soft kiss on her forehead... and promptly bolts from the pipe. "Something really stupid!"

Before she can stop him, he's riding a frozen surfboard over melted hail straight to the sea. "FINN!"

"I LOVE YOU!" he calls back, his voice nearly drowned out by the storm. She can only watch in silent horror as Finn, barely a dot in comparison, is steadily pulled into the monstrous whirling waters.

From the second he lands, Finn knows that this is going to be the toughest thing he's ever done in his life. The pull of the waterspout is more powerful than anything he's ever felt, and he has to fight just to keep his board underneath him. Sea spray drenches him from head to toe as he gets closer and closer to the twister's base. Bit by bit, the angle shifts, and suddenly, Finn is surfing sideways on the twister's exterior, steadily spiraling towards the top.

Waterbending is all about push and pull, and Finn has never needed them more. He has to balance them carefully; too much push, and he'll go flying off the waterspout and fall to his death. Too much pull, and he'll get sucked into the twister and torn apart, or possibly just drowned. It's a constant back and forth battle, and it takes absolutely everything Finn has to keep himself steady.

It's terrifying and amazing, all at once. The higher he gets, the harder he has to focus on not focusing on the breathtaking view. He's pretty sure he can see the whole city from here, but he really doesn't have time to look!

When he finally reaches the point where the water turns to clouds, right below the monster shell that Kurt is probably standing on, he almost loses it. Too much push detaches him from the tower and sends him flying. Only by kicking off of his surfboard does he manage to save himself, getting just close enough to pull himself into the cloud stream. Suddenly, Finn is swimming through clouds, pushing himself through an intense blast of vapor, and once again, balance is the key. If he doesn't fight the stream, he'll get thrown into the sky. If he fights too hard, he'll fall right through it. Push and pull, resistance and submission, everything is depending on him now. He can't afford to fail.

Kurt would never forgive himself if he killed Finn, even if he had no control.

Plus, you know, dying would suck.

Eventually, he swims close enough to poke his head through cloud wall, and there he is. Floating casually above the belly of the beast in all his glowy-eyed glory, giving fuel to the storm in a frenzy of water and airbending, is the Avatar.

He tries to push further in, but the wind here is intense. For now, he's stuck in the cloud wall.

"Kurt!" he shouts. "Hey, Kurt! It's me! It's Finn!"

A familiar voices reaches them, but it fails to penetrate Kurt's sorrow and fury. They ignore him.

"Kurt, can you hear me?" Finn asks, pushing as hard as he can. "I'm sorry about Blaine, bro, I
really am, but you need to stop this! You need to come back to us!"

The word 'Blaine' merely tightens the grip of emotion on the young Avatar. Again, the voice is ignored.

"Kurt, please!" Finn cries desperately. "We'll help you get through this! It'll be okay, maybe not now, but one day, I promise! But you have to stop this! You're hurting people! Kurt, listen to me!"

This reaches him, but it is not enough. Kurt's spirit is simply too deep in grief to emerge. They must protect him, fulfill his duties and protect the world in his stead.

The Avatar heeds Finn as a dragonfly might heed a gnat...

Finn's heart sinks. Kurt's never ignored him like this. He always thought he had kind of a special place in Kurt's heart, even after things got crappy between them, but…

Now, things are different. Whatever place Finn might have, Blaine's is way deeper and way more powerful. The realization hits him like a faceful of ice.

"…I can't stop him," Finn says quietly. "Oh, Tui. I can't stop him."

But even if Kurt cannot yet control them, he can influence them in small ways, even without realizing it. Some part of Finn's pleading reaches him, and his heart chimes a note that resonates within the Avatars.

Unfortunately, this has some unforeseen consequences...

Suddenly, a freaking miracle happens. The Avatar halts his cloudbending along with the hailstorm, and for one wonderful second, Finn beams, thinking he got through to him.

Then, he realizes that Kurt's eyes are still glowing.

And there's no longer anything holding him up. "Oh CAAAAAAAAAAAAAP!" He reaches for the turtle, but his fingers don't even come close.

And just like that, he's falling to his death.

Rachel spots him falling, and her stomach falls with him. "FINN!" She hops on Skippy without even thinking, and when the creature refuses to move, Rachel screams right in (what she thinks is probably) its ear. The sound resounds within the pipe, and Skippy immediately bolts to escape it.

Finn is a long way up, but he's falling faster every second. She can hear him screaming, see him desperately flailing to try and stop himself, and suddenly she realizes that even if she gets there in time, there's no way she can catch him. He's going to fall.

He's going to die, right in front of her.

And suddenly, her heart is filled with a single feeling. The desire, the need to protect Finn. To defend him. To save him.

With that as her driving force, she leaps off the lizard and stands at the point of impact.

Finn approaches the ground and prepares for the end.

The motions come naturally. Rachel whirs her arms and calls to the air.
And finally, the air listens

Finn slows to a stop, held aloft by a constant blast of wind from Rachel's outstretched arms.

"RERCHL!" Finn shouts, smiling at her even as the wind inflates his cheeks. "YERH ERBERNDERNG!"

"I'M—OH MY GOSH!" Rachel cups her hands over her mouth.

Naturally, the wind stops immediately, and Finn smacks into the ground. Fortunately, this fall is much less drastic.

"Finn!" Rachel cries as she runs to him. "I'm so sorry, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Finn says, pulling himself up. "Rachel, that was amazing! You airbent! You saved my life!"

"I just…" she shakes her head. "I couldn't let you fall."

Finn gives her a wan smile, but it vanishes quickly. "Kurt did," he says quietly.

Rachel shakes her head. "Finn, I don't understand. Kurt loves you. Why would he do that?"

"It's not really his fault," Finn says. "He's not in control when he's like this. He's… like a force of nature. Like a tsunami or a hurricane. It's got nothing against you, but if you get in the way, you're gonna get hurt. I got in the way."

Behind them, the Avatar lowers his waterspout to about half its previous height.

"So… you can't stop him?" Rachel asks.

Finn shakes his head. "No…" He swallows. "Not this time."

"Then… what are we going to do?" Rachel asks.

Finn looks helplessly up at his all-powerful little brother.

"I don't know…"

With the base ruined and the beast defeated, the Avatar prepares for the final phase of its assault, and the dragon turtle shall serve as the opening volley.

Kurt's body floats carefully around the shell as they look through his eyes to line up the shot. A single breath is drawn, a single punch is thrown, and ruin is unleashed.

The flames are breathtaking. The light is blinding, the sound deafening. The heat vaporizes the spout and boils the sea. The shockwave throws soldiers on their backs and brings weakened structures to collapse.

Bao Za sails like a flaming comet towards the fleet, smashing down and breaking through bridges, demolishing decks, and skips across no less than seven ships before finally sinking steaming into the sea.

The explosion was intended to catch attention, to center all eyes and ears on the Avatar as they prepare to deliver their final judgment…
Finn and Rachel are first to feel the blast. Finn bends up his best slush shield, but it's not quite enough to protect them completely. The heat sizzles the water and the shockwave just blasts right through it, sending Skippy and its humans rolling painfully along the ground. They are bruised, but not baked, and in the end, isn't that what really matters?

Quinn and Sam are next. Quinn twists the heat around her, but the shockwave knocks her into Sam, sending both of them tumbling down the stairs until they hit the landing below. Sam offers a hand to help her up, but she refuses, rising on her own and quickly climbing the stairs again out of sheer spite. She refuses to be knocked down, even by the Avatar.

Mercedes and Artie are last. Having already helped several groups of soldiers to the underground, they have no one to defend but themselves. Mercedes bends up a rock wall to protect them from the heat. The shockwave knocks it over on top of them, Artie infuses the metal with his bending, allowing the tank to hold steady while Mercedes breaks the rock into dust and clears it off.

When the blast is done, all eyes turn to Kurt, wondering what he will do next.

They don't have to wait long for their answer.

_The Avatar hovers high above the wreckage, surveying all below them. Their task is nearly done, and before they begin the final assault, they will deliver their judgment to all who can hear them. Taking command of the air, Kurt's mouth opens and the Avatar speaks with a thousand voices for all with ears to hear._

"Sue Sylvester, soldiers of the Fire Nation," the Avatars bellow. "You have raised an army and constructed a fleet to conquer and kill. By your own admission, you seek to dominate the other nations and subjugate them to your will to satisfy your own vanity and greed. Your actions would devastate the balance of the world, and now you will witness the price of your arrogance. Let this be a warning to all who would follow your path!"

As the Avatar speaks, everyone listens.

Finn's eyes bulge and his heart fills with dread.

Rachel feels a chill in her spine and quietly reaches for Finn's hand.

Quinn is torn between fury and fear, her pride at war with the power she is witnessing.

Sam quietly freaks the fuck out.

Mercedes's heart crumples with worry for Kurt, knowing that whatever he's about to do, he'll hate himself for it when he wakes up.

Artie sighs in resignation. There's nothing to do now but ride out the storm and hope everyone survives.

_And so it begins._

_The Avatar roars with a thousand voices, like a herd of awakened lion turtles. Tendrils of fire burst from Kurt's mouth, his hands, his feet. The clouds begin to swirl above, the ocean below. Cracks spread far and wide through the base as the earth floats up to answer the Avatar's call._
With a furious cry, the Avatar summons the power of the four elements, and prepares for battle...

Finn shares a look with Rachel.

Quinn with Sam.

Mercedes with Artie.

And all three duos echo the same sentiment.

"Let's get out of here!"

Finn and Rachel quickly speed off on Skippy, trying to outrun the cracks. But despite their best efforts, the cracks outpace them. The earth breaks into chunks and floats up around them, and suddenly, Finn and Rachel find themselves on a series of islands in the sky.

"Ah!" Rachel says. "We're flying! I don't think I'm ready for this part of the airbending curriculum!"

"I'll try to get us down!" Finn says.

Even as he speaks, he can see water dripping from pretty much every floating rock. Kurt's hailstorm drenched the area, and he's got plenty to work with. He quickly spots a slightly lower island and whips the water into an icy bridge to take them to it.

Rachel lashes Skippy into motion. It doesn't seem to have a problem with heights, but it's not too good at running on ice. Its feet slip and slide and skid. As Finn bends more bridges, Skippy seems to get worse and worse at crossing them.

At about their fourth bridge, Skippy starts getting dangerously close to the edge.

"We're gonna fall!" Finn shouts.

"No we are not!" Rachel says.

And with a whoosh, she pushes the back in the right direction, her arms flying out and blasting air. Every time Skippy gets a little unsteady, Rachel is ready to give it a push in the right direction. With Finn making the bridges, Skippy doing the running and Rachel keeping them steady, they eventually land on safe ground.

"Rachel, you are amazing!" Finn says. "How did you get so good at airbending all of a sudden?"

Rachel smiles at him. "I believe I simply shifted to the proper mindset," she says, gently touching his hand. "Air is the most defensive element, after all. I simply needed something to defend."

"Come on!" Quinn shouts. She and Sam dash out down the few stairs left at the tower's base.

"Where are we going?" Sam asks.

"Underground," Quinn says.

"Like, to the sewers?" Sam asks.
"No," Quinn says. "There's a secret tunnel that runs out of the base. It leads to the Fire Lord's secure bunker. It's our best shot at shelter."

The world crumbles and quakes around them as they run. They make it about five steps before the road cracks into pieces and starts floating up underneath them.

"Whoa!" Sam says. "Okay, this is bad!"

"Jump!" Quinn says. "Just land on a lower piece!"

She leads by example, taking a running jump to a lower section of street. Sam follows after her, though his landing is a little sloppier. She repeats the feat several more times, and Sam diligently follows after her. Unfortunately, the rising rocks float faster than she can fall. Soon, they are too high to safely jump down, and there is no more floating street beneath them.

"Damn it! We're trapped," Quinn shouts.

Sam frantically scans the world around them for something they can use. There are no more rocks beneath them… but there are plenty of big chunks above them. "I've got it!" Sam says. "Use your firebending to push against something above us, like that big rock." He points. "It should push us down!"

Quinn follows his fingers to the rock in question and lets loose with a fire stream. Sure enough, the bigger chunk remains unmoved, while Quinn and Sam are pushed towards the earth. Lower and lower they go, Quinn pushing them down while Sam monitors their height. When it's just low enough…

"Jump!" Sam shouts.

Quinn abandons her firebending and jumps down with Sam, landing with a roll in the muddy crater left behind by the Avatar's bending. Said Avatar seems to have all taken all the earth it wants for the moment, so it's a fairly easy run to the tunnel. The entrance, a metal door formerly hidden underground, is now exposed in another crater. Quinn slams a few flames into different holes in the door, there are a few loud pops, and it slides open.

They dive inside and slam it shut behind them, leaning against it to catch their breath.

Sam gives Quinn a grin. "That was a wild ride. We make a pretty good team. Thanks for looking out for me."

Quinn returns his smile. "You're welcome," she says, shortly before body-slamming him onto the floor.

"Ow!" Sam says, as Quinn flips him over and wrestles his arms behind his back. "What was that for…" Cold metal wraps around his wrists. Shackles. "…oh. Prisoner. Right."

Quinn keeps right on smiling as she stands him up and leads him into custody.

"Oh, hills no!" Mercedes says. "We're going up!

"Aw, shit. I hate flying!" Artie says, bending the brakes. "Hang on!"

Since Artie hates flying, it's only natural that he and Mercedes wind up going higher than anyone. Fortunately, Artie can't actually see how high they are, and Mercedes as no problem with heights.
Out of all of the people on this base, they probably have the biggest advantage in this situation. It's not possible for a normal bender to completely overcome the Avatar's influence, but it is possible for them to work within it.

"Full speed ahead!" Mercedes says. "I'm making us a road!"

As the earth floats in chunks around them, Mercedes reaches out and yanks them in, slamming them together and fusing them into a path. Artie bends the tank into gear and sends them scooting forward as Mercedes guides them down. It's a rough ride; the road's not exactly even, and sometimes Mercedes has to tilt them this way or that. The tank is starting to have mechanical problems from all the strain they're putting on it, but Artie holds it together.

They do just fine, up until the end. As they get lower and lower, they have less floating islands to work with. Eventually, Mercedes realizes they're just gonna have to fall and pull the ground up to catch them.

"Are we almost down?" Artie asks. "The brakes on this thing are about to give out!"

"Hold us together, baby," Mercedes says. "We're about to make a rough landing!"

Artie bends as much of the tank as he can manage as they go sailing off the end of Mercedes's street-in-the-sky. Mercedes yanks the earth into as big a ramp as he can manage, but the impact still shakes them up. Gears are grinding, bolts and belts are coming loose, and things are rapidly starting to overheat. Artie bends with all his might to keep the metal together as long as he can.

The tank holds together well, but in keeping it from falling apart, he kind of forgets to steer.

"Look out!" Mercedes says.

The tank spins out and slams tail-first into a wall. The impact flips Artie out of his seat and jams a lever right into the base of his spine—

A dark, cavernous room, it in dim greens. He stands with dozens of others, identical garb, identical stance. Their classrooms do not have seats. All lessons are learned standing. This school is not like other schools, it is...

Wait. He's... he's never been to another school. Has he? He doesn't remember ever attending another school.

If he has never been to another school, he cannot know what other schools are like.

If he does not know what other schools are like, then where did that thought come from?

He is still thinking when the Master begins his lesson. "Today is a very special day. It is one I have long looked forward to, and one that I'm sure you have been anticipating as well. Today, I am proud to say that you are finally skilled and strong enough to learn the most powerful and dangerous technique in earthbending... or so I thought. It seems that one of us is distracted. Are you listening, Arthur?"

He looks up. The Master is looking right at him.

"You seem distracted. Is there something on your mind you would like to share with us, Arthur?"

"Well, Arthur?"
"Arthur…?"

"Artie!"

"Artie, dude!" Finn says. "Wake up."

Artie snaps awake and nearly smacks Finn across the face out of sheer reflex. "Whoa!" he says. "What happened? What…?"

He's lying on the ground outside the crashed tank, with Mercedes, Finn, and Rachel all looking down at him, confused and concerned.

"You got knocked out," Finn says. "But you were… I don't know. You were making faces, like you were thinking really hard or trying to take a poop. Are you alright?"

Artie blinks, the memory still bouncing in his skull. "Uhh… yeah. Yeah, I'm fine, I'm…"

And then he stops. He can tell from their faces that Finn and Mercedes both expect him to spout bullshit. Well, he's always loved defying expectations.

And honestly… he's sick of lying to the people he loves.

"No, actually, I'm not," he says. "I'll explain later, I promise, but right now, we've got bigger things to worry about."

He sits up and turns to look at Kurt. "…holy shit," he breathes.

The others follow his eyeline.

"Ohhhhh, Tui," Finn says sickly.

"Mountains have mercy," Mercedes says.

"Heavens preserve us," Rachel says.

Their sentiments are echoed by all within eyesight.

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*The elements bend to the Avatar's will. Four elements. Four rings.*

*The first ring is water, churning in the sea below all the others.*

*The second ring is the earth, floating just above, enormous stones orbiting Kurt's body like an asteroid belt.*

*The third ring is fire, hovering above the earth, a circle of brilliant flame almost like a crown.*

*And the fourth ring is the air, highest of all, a swirling portal in the clouds that opens to the sky.*

*Through this portal, a single beam of light pierces all four rings. And in the center of the light, the center of the rings, is the Avatar, their power displayed for all to see. They give a final roar to warn of their coming, and then they strike. The four rings break into lines and swirl around the Avatar in a fourfold helix. Kurt's body dives towards the sea and banks at the last second, streaking over the water towards the final target of its fury…*

*The Fire Nation fleet.*
"Did you even get to him?" Mercedes asks.

"I got to him, but I couldn't get through to him," Finn says. "He wouldn't listen to me."

"What do we do now?" Rachel asks.

"Find somewhere to hide," Artie says quietly. "When he's done breaking shit, he'll pass out and we'll go get him."

"That's it?" Rachel asks. "We just let him… rampage until he is satisfied?"

"We can't stop him now," Finn says tiredly. "Maybe if Blaine was here…"

"Well, why don't we look for him?" Rachel asks.

Finn sighs. "Come on, Rach. You know why."

Rachel clenches her jaw. "No, I most certainly do not."

"Rachel, honey, Blaine is gone," Mercedes says. "Kurt wouldn't be like this if he was okay."

"'Not okay' is not the same as dead!" Rachel says. "If there's even a chance that he's alive, it's our duty to look for him. As Kurt's friends as well as Blaine's."

Finn gives a grim nod. "You're right," he says. "Even if he is… you know… dead," he gulps. "We shouldn't just leave him here. He deserves better than that."

Artie and Mercedes nod with him. "Well, there's only one surefire way I know of to find him," Mercedes says. "Let's go get the bird."

The four of them hop on Skippy and ride back to the Dragon Hawks.

The injured Hawks are lying Mercedes's earth tent, their buddies doing what they can for them. Cole stands on the roof with Sam's spyglass, watching the carnage and relaying updates to his teammates.

"He's going for the fleet!" he says despairingly. "Avatar Kurt is attacking the fleet!"

"Crap," Finn says. He jumps off the lizard and dashes into the tent. "Where's Pavarotti? We need —"

And suddenly, a wild-eyed Jeff grabs him and slams him against the wall.

"Dude, what the fuck?" he shouts. "Your Avatar's wrecking my country! Make him stop!"

"We're trying!" Finn says. "We need Pavarotti!"

"Holy crap!" Cole shouts. "He's destroying everything, he's—HOLY CRAP!"

Jeff goes from angry to horrified to furious, and he socks Finn in the jaw. "STOP HIM!" he shouts. "Make him stop!" He goes for another blow, but Nick throws him down and pins him to the ground.

"Dude, what is your deal?" Nick asks. "They're trying!"

"Fuck trying!" Jeff shouts, throwing a fist at his best friend. "My dad could be out there!"
"Oh, shit," Trent says. "That's right. Jeff's dad is actually in the Navy."

Jeff tries to get up, but he's injured, Nick is strong, and his adrenaline rush is gone. "Stop him!" he says, now more terrified and helpless than angry. Nick pulls him up and puts an arm around him, offering what little comfort he can.

"Somebody get the stupid bird!" Nick orders.

Ethan quietly retrieves Pavarotti's cage. Finn takes it, and promptly assumes command of the situation.

"Alright everybody, listen up," Finn says. "You three," he says, pointing to Ethan, Luke, and James. "You're with me and Rachel. We're going to look for Blaine, and we might need back-up. Everybody else, Artie and Mercedes are gonna help you get back to the warehouse. We'll meet you when this is over."

The Hawks nod, and Ethan, Luke, and James report for duty. Finn leads them out, taking a second to look down at the miserable form of Jeff before he goes.

"We're trying, dude," Finn says. "I swear, we're trying as hard as we can."

Jeff sniffs and gives a quite nod.

Artie and Mercedes trade places with the Hawks on Skippy, while Finn opens the cage and lets Pavarotti fly. He jumps on the lizard's back as the dragon hawk takes to the sky.

"Follow that bird!" Rachel orders.

Skippy rears and takes off, and Finn utters a prayer to the universe.

"Please be okay Blaine," he whispers. "Please…"

Darkness.


"Damn it!"

A voice. Someone's here.

He still can't speak. Can't move. Can barely breathe.

Can breathe. Maybe that's enough…

He sucks in air. Breath and focus. Inhale, exhale …

A tiny flame flies from his mouth.

"What was that?"

Something falls, clangs on the ground.

"Blaine? David? Is that you?"
Footsteps, slow and uncertain.

Inhale, exhale, and another flame. His lungs ache from the effort.

It's worth it. "I see you! I'm coming! Hold on..."

The pressure lessens, and the world fills with orange light that briefly blinds him. When his eyes adjust he sees a shadow near the flame, a familiar shape. "Wes?" he rasps.

The shadow shines brighter than the flame. "Blaine!" Wes says, overjoyed. "Hold on, I'm digging you out."

The light goes out, and there is movement in the darkness. Clanging and clinking, rubble tossed aside, and he's not so pressed anymore. His lungs drink deep in relief.

"Are you hurt?" Wes asks.

His limbs tingle, but there's no pain. He shakes his head.

A pair of hands grabs him and gently pulls him free, lying him on the floor. Wes bends up a flame and looks him over. "You're sure you're not injured? Are you dizzy? Weak? Nauseous?"

"No," he says, his voice slightly raspy. "Little thirsty."

"Here," Wes says, pulling out a small flask of water. "Drink this."

Blaine sips carefully at first, but the water is wonderful, and he quickly drains the whole thing. "Got any more?"

"That's the last of my supply," Wes says, putting the flask away. "And I don't think you want any of this water. I believe we're in a sewer."

He sniffs the air and wrinkles his nose. "Ew. We didn't... uhhh, land in anything, did we?"

Wes chuckles as he checks Blaine's scalp for injuries. "Ah, Blaine, you always did know how to zero in on what really matters. Don't worry. The actual sewage is flowing beneath us. You can hear it through the grates in the floor."

"Well, that's a silver lining," Blaine says.

"Ever the optimist," Wes smiles, finishing his probing of Blaine's head. "Well, I don't feel any bumps or dents. You're sure you're alright?"

Blaine nods. "Yeah, I'm fine."

And suddenly, Wes has him wrapped in a hug. "Thank Agni," he says. The embrace is brief, but intense. Wes seems a little embarrassed in the aftermath. "I'm sorry for my lack of decorum, but I woke up alone and I couldn't find either of you and I was so worried..."

From up close, Blaine notices something. "You're bleeding."

Wes wipes at the blood trickling from his scalp. "It's not as bad as it looks," Wes says. "No serious damage. You know how head wounds bleed. Very melodramatic."

Blaine smiles and nods. "Where's David?"
"I haven't found him yet," Wes says. "I've been looking searching the rubble ever since I regained consciousness."

Another distant rumble, like a lion turtle rolling over in its sleep. It's coming from above them.

"What's going on up there?" Blaine asks.

"I've no idea," Wes says. "I don't even know how long we've been down here." He squeezes Blaine's shoulder. "Are you feeling any better? Can you stand up?"

Blaine flexes his fingers and toes. "Yeah, I think I'm good."

Wes helps him slowly rise to his feet. "Careful," he says. "Not too quick. Don't want to pass out, do we?"

Blaine can't help but smile. They've been here before. Not in a sewer, but in this position. Whenever Blaine would hurt himself as a child, Wes and David were always on hand with first aid. Wes did most of the comforting and fretting, while David tended to take care actually mending his wounds. "Don't worry about me," he says. "Let's find David."

Shake, rumble, and groan. Whatever's going on up there, it's big.

"Yes, and then let's leave before any other disasters can befall us," Wes says.

Blaine nods, and bends a flame to light the dark. The simple act of firebending seems to fill him with life, and he instantly feels more awake and aware.

They comb the rubble for their friend. "David?"

"David?" Blaine says. "If you can hear us, give us a sign. Talk, bend, anything."

Silence.

A single claw of fear drags across his heart.

Then, he hears it. "Hhhh... help..."

It's a distant whisper that hits him harder than a point blank trumpet blast. "Hang on, David! We're coming!" Blaine says. He and Wes sprint to the source of the sound, putting their lights out and digging in the dark with reckless abandon. When Blaine tries to yank out a particularly heavy piece of debris...

"AH, GODS! STOP!"

...said debris turns out to be David, and Blaine drops him like a scalding hot pot. "Sorry!"

"Are you hurt?" Wes asks.

David nods. "Leg," he grunts. His face is already sweaty and he looks slightly ill.

Wes carefully pulls away the rest of the debris while Blaine provides light to keep him from hurting David by accident. Eventually, they find the problem.

"Oh, no..." Blaine instantly feels nauseous, and covers his mouth. David's left leg is stuck under a girder, but Blaine can already see that it is mangled and not bending right.
"Get it off," David groans. "Please."

He and Wes try to lift the twisted metal, to no avail. "It's too heavy," Wes says. "We can't move it as it is."

"Get it off!" David cries, piercing Blaine's heart.

"We're trying, friend," Wes says gently. "I promise we're trying."

The Prince looks at the girder that crushed his friend and feels, as any protective friend might, the urge to destroy it. That's where he gets the idea. "I know!" he says. "Cut it into pieces with firebending, then lift it. That way, we just have to lift the part that's on top of him."

"Good thinking!" Wes says, sparking a blowtorch on the end of his fingers. Blaine follows suit, and together, they steadily burn through the girder. David punctuates the silence with moans and pained breaths, and every noise makes Blaine's blowtorch burn hotter and brighter.

Eventually, the girder falls into smaller pieces, and Blaine and Wes take positions beside it

"One, two, three!" Wes says.

They heave the metal aside, and David nearly weeps with relief. "Thank you," he says. "You two are just… the buzzard bee's knees… you know?"

Wes kneels down to examine his leg in the firelight. Without the girder to hide it, it looks even worse.

"Is it as bad as it feels?" David grunts. "Because it feels really bad."

"You'll survive," Wes says. "You won't be walking for a while, but if we get you out of here, you'll be fine. Is anything else hurt?"

"Leg is a bit of an attention whore," David says with a wry grin. "If there's any other pain, it's not nearly as noteworthy."

Wes laughs. "Well, I suppose we should give it some attention," he says, standing and walking away. "I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere!"

Even in the middle of his agony, David finds a comeback. "Go fuck a campfire!"

Blaine kneels beside his friend and tries not to stare at his leg. "You're gonna be alright," he says. "We'll get you out of here, I promise."

"Heh… careful, Blaine," David chuckles. "You shouldn't swear oaths you cannot honor."

"Hey, I always honor my oaths!" Blaine says. "I'm a Fire Nation gentleman. I've got honor coming out of my ears."

David laughs, though it looks like it hurts. "Of course you do…” He hisses. "Ah, Blaine… we really bit into it this time, didn't we?"

Blaine squeezes his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he says. "It's my fault we're here. This was a stupid idea."

"Pah," David says. "Hindsight is twenty/twenty. We all thought this was the best road when we took it. You don't have to apologize to me."
"Still," Blaine says.

Wes returns with a few pieces of wood and some torn cloth. He hands a smaller piece of wood to David. "I assume you know what to do with this?" Wes asks.

David nods uneasily, and places it between teeth.


He considers saying no, but there's no real point, so he turns aside. Shortly thereafter, the screaming begins. David has no anesthetic, no painkillers, nothing to dull the agony of what Wes has to do to his ruined limb. Even with the wood in his mouth to muffle him, David's screams echo through the sewers. The sound resonates in Blaine's heart, threatens to shake his bones apart like a wine glass at the opera.

Eventually, the splint is finished, screams fade to whimpers, and Wes softly shushes his friend. "Shh, shh," he says. "It's alright. It's over now. Everything's going to be alright..." He sounds just like he's comforting Blaine, and it feels odd and wrong to hear him talk to David like that. David shouldn't be hurt. He shouldn't need this.

After a few moments, David spits the wood out. "I think I have splinters... in my teeth," he pants.

Wes shakes his head. "We'll pluck them out later. Blaine, help me get him up."

They carefully hoist David up to lean on Wes and support himself with his good leg. The splint does its job and keeps his ruined limb from jostling too much, but even the slightest movement causes pain.

"Ready?" Wes asks.

"No, but let's go anyway. It smells down here," David grunts.

Another distant quake of power.

"Are we going up?" Blaine asks.

"I don't think so," Wes says. "I don't know what's going on up there, and I'm not sure I want to. Besides, David won't be climbing any ladders in this condition. The sewer has to end somewhere. Let's just follow it."

Blaine nods. "I'll light the way." He bends a flame in each hand and takes point, guiding them away from the rubble. For a while, there's no sound but their footsteps on the metal grates, rushing water beneath them, and the occasional rumble from above. Blaine can tell by ear where the water is going, so he simply goes with the flow.

Heh. *Going with the flow*. It's almost ironic.

Eventually, they hear the sound of voices. Blaine is so shocked to hear someone else down here that he almost forgets to put out his lights and hide. The three of them press against the wall in the darkness, listening.

There are several voices, and it takes a few seconds to untangle what they're saying.

"...lucky we even got down here! How many people do you think he's killed already?"

"A hundred."
"A million."

"A hundred million!"

"There ain't that many people in the whole country, numbnuts!"

"Well, I'm counting all his other lives too, so ha!"

Blaine squints. Are they talking about Kurt?

" Fucking crazy, man. Never seen shit like that before in my life!"

"You scared?"

"Fuck yeah, I'm scared! But I'm pissed, too! Guy thinks he can just barge in here and wreck shit up, tell us what to do? Fuck him."

"He's got such a hate on for Fire Lord Sue… I betcha he's the one that sent those rubes to kill her!"

"Motherfucking traitors. Swear to the sun, if I lay eyes on those fuckers again… "

Something touches him, and Blaine nearly jumps. Wes points a tiny flame to a split in the path ahead. Blaine nods, and they slowly, quietly make their way towards it.

"Fuck, not like it even matters. Even if you killed the fucker, he'd just come back."

Blaine's eyes widen. They're definitely talking about Kurt.

"Maybe we shouldn't kill him, then. Maybe we should put him somewhere nice and quiet, and make sure he stays alive as long as possible, if you know what I mean."

"He deserves it. Deserves worse than that…"

Blaine is so busy listening to people badmouthing his boyfriend that he briefly loses sight of the ground in front of him. His foot slips into a grate, and he stumbles just loud enough to make a sound.

"What was that?"

He puts his light out again. The three of them stand very still and quiet in the darkness.

"I heard something over there."

"Probably just an elephant rat."

"Yeah, I guess so…"

Blaine breathes a quiet sigh of relief.

"… still, might as well check it out. It's fuckin' boring down here."

In the end, there is nothing they can do. They press against the wall as best they can, but the soldiers all have lamps, and there's no escaping the light

"Hey!" a soldier says. "Who goes there?"

Blaine steps forward, hands out in surrender. "Please," he says in quiet desperation. "We don't want
a fight…"

Unfortunately, the soldiers *do*. And they know exactly who they're looking at.

"Holy shit, it's them!"

"It's the assassins!"

"GET 'EM!"

"TAKE 'EM DOWN!"

Blaine growls in frustration and throws down a wall of flame. "Run!"

The trio beats it as fast as they can go, while the soldiers call out to their comrades behind them.

"ASSASSINS! WE FOUND THE ASSASSINS! DON'T LET 'EM GET AWAY!"

Their retreat is not an easy one. Blaine is a speed machine, but Wes and David have only three legs between them, and their speed suffers for it. Blaine keeps laying down fire behind them, but their behind isn't their only problem.

"Gotcha!"

Lights flicker across the walls as a group of soldiers charges from the front. Wes and David throw a few fireballs to keep them at bay, before Blaine literally jumps over them to lay down a blazing barrier.

"This way!" he says, bolting into a side path. Wes/David hobble behind him as best they can. All around them, voices are starting to echo as soldiers call to each other, trying to box them in. The sewers are a maze, and every turn Blaine makes seems to be the wrong one. Soldiers chase them from behind, cut them off from the front, try to ambush them from the sides. Blaine's firewalls are strong, but they don't hold the soldiers back for long.

It was only a matter of time. Eventually, they wind up in the middle of a long hall with no side paths and a shit-ton of soldiers on both ends. Nowhere left to run.

"We're trapped," David says.

"Yes, I can see that!" Wes says, moving to set him against the wall. Wes and Blaine take up positions facing the ends of the hall, protecting David in the middle.

The soldiers eye them with no small degree of menace. "We're gonna make you pay all of this," says one. "Everything that happened today started with you!"

The worst part is that it's basically true. "Please," Blaine says. "My friend is hurt. We'll surrender if you—"

"KILL 'EM!" the soldiers roar, and they charge.

Blaine clenches his teeth and gets to work. He firebends as best he can, but it's far from his greatest performance. The day's taken too much out of him. He's been smacked and smashed and thrown down and buried alive and his body just can't keep up with all the punishment. His fireballs are sloppy and slow. His explosions are sputtering and weak.

He's *tired*. He doesn't want to hurt them, doesn't want to fight them at all, but they won't let him *stop*. 
Behind him, Wes doesn't seem to be faring much better. Blaine can hear his breathing, heavy and exhausted. He can hear the weakened crackle of his fire whips, the unusually quiet roar of his flames. Their dim light is barely noticeable amidst the soldiers' lamps.

Wes hisses in pain, and Blaine is turning to check on him when a soldier tries to run him through with a spear. His frustration gives him a momentary fire boost, and he blasts the weapon to splinters in its owner's hands.

"Wes?" he calls.

"I'm fine!" Wes says.

That's all they have time for before the battle resumes.

More and more soldiers appear. Blaine knocks them over, but their buddies help them right back up. Firebenders start to move in, fighting Blaine's flames with their own and attacking from a distance. Blaine is able to defend against their blows, but he doesn't have time to send anything back. There are too many attacks coming at once. They've put him on the defensive.

"Fuck!" Wes grunts.

Another spike of worry. Blaine sucks in a breath and throws down a wall of flames, feeding it with his own energy.

"Wes, are you—"

"Wes, behind you!" David calls.

An explosion, and someone goes sailing over Blaine's shoulder through his firewall, landing in a flaming heap on his friends.

"I'm alright!" Wes says. "Worry about yourself!"

Blaine is about to lower the firewall when someone else does it for him. A firebender charges in and smashes right through his barrier, sending him stumbling back. He throws several fiery hooks at Blaine who feints and bobs and weaves to avoid them. He tries a few counters, but the firebender still manages to push him back and refuses to let him recover. Every step he loses is a step they gain.

And just like that, his mind awakens to what his heart already knows.

We can't win this.

There's no victory for them here. They're exhausted and surrounded, outnumbered and outfought, and this time, there is no one coming to save them.

The firebender keeps striking at the Prince, hands and feet becoming flaming blurs to the increasingly tired Prince. He starts taking small hits to the legs, the chest, being pushed back more with every blow.

A kick to the stomach winds him and forces him onto his knees, and that's when it happens.

That's when he hears it.

It's difficult to describe, exactly. Not quite a yell, not quite a scream, not quite a shriek… something he can't quite find a word for. A bark, maybe. A yelp. Harsh, high, and rasping, a cry that tears the
throat as it leaves. It starts and stops in an instant, over so suddenly that it seems someone cut it off at the ends.

It's Wes.

It's the sound he makes as he falls.

"WESLEY!" David cries.

For a moment, everything stops.

His heart stops. His mind stops. The fight stops.

For just the tiniest fragment of a second, the world holds still. Just long enough to shift on its axis.

Just long enough for a piece of Blaine to die.

And then it starts again.

Blaine roars and explodes, sending soldiers around him flying. When he turns around and sees a firebender standing triumphant over Wes, who is face-down and quivering, Blaine cannot hit him hard enough. He sails over the heads of his friends like falling star.

"Wes?" Blaine says, running to kneel near his friend. A fireball sails past his head, and for a moment, he completely fucking loses it. He snarls like an animal as he throws ten times as much fire back at them, forcing them to back off.

When he turns around, David is crawling towards Wes, his own pain forgotten. "It's okay, Wesley. It's okay. I'm here... I've got you..." He pulls the shaking boy into his arms and scoots them against the wall. "I've got you..."

He stares at them, the world growing smaller by the second. In the dim light of the soldiers' lamps, they are barely silhouettes. Blaine can't even tell where Wes is hurt, but he can see that his entire body is rigid, literally paralyzed with pain beyond expression.

They hurt him. They hurt him so much he can't even cry. He can't even scream.

And suddenly, Blaine has to concentrate very hard to breathe. Deep breaths. In and out. In and out...

The light ebbs and flows in time with his breath. Every flame in every lantern rises on his inhale, falls on his exhale. If the soldiers weren't focusing so hard on Blaine, they might notice this.

But they do not. All eyes are on the Prince. The tip of every weapon is aimed at him, the crossroads of a thousand crosshairs.

He doesn't look at them. He looks at his friends, broken and pained on the ground in front of him.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath. A single tear runs down his face.

And then he exhales, and the world goes pitch black. Every light dies.

"Oh, shit!"

"What the—"
And then, there is nothing but flame and shadow. He is everywhere and nowhere, loosing flames of blinding intensity, vanishing into darkness only to flare into existence elsewhere. He is a firefly in the distance, a dragon breathing down your neck, there and gone in a second. His speed seems impossible. They cannot even keep track of him as he destroys them.

And destroy he does. His fire crackles and roars like a beast before it stampedes over them and leaves them ruined in its wake. Bursts and pillars smash them against walls and ceilings. Infernal whirlwinds suck them in and toss them aside half-cooked. Razor-thin slices cleave through armor to sear flesh. Explosions toss them into the air like chaff. They are scattered, blasted, and blown apart.

A thousand times in a thousand different ways, he burns them, until the air is filled with the stink of scorched flesh and the cries of the injured. It is a rout. There is no other word for it. The soldiers fall over themselves and each other as they flee in the darkness.

"Run!"

"Get away!"

"Retreat!"

"Fall back!"

In the end, they stand at far ends of the pipe and stare at the Prince, surrounded by fire in the middle. He stares back, and the fire in his hands pales in comparison to that in his eyes.

"He's not human!"

"He's too fast..."

"He's too strong..."

"He's a demon!"

He issues a single order, an ultimatum delivered in a guttural growl.

"Get away from us."

The order is heeded. All back away. Several turn and run outright. Those who cannot walk are carried or given support. It is obeisance, but for whatever reason, it is not enough for the Prince.

"I said get away!" he roars.

And with that, he throws his arms to the sides and fills the pipe with fire, unleashing an infernal deluge that has soldiers with wounded legs running like trained athletes. The flames roar like a dragon as they chase them down the pipe, splitting at intersections and filling every inch of space, hungry to consume.

David watches in awe as Blaine sets the world ablaze, quietly shielding his friend's face from the heat. "It's alright, Wesley," he says quietly. "Everything's going to be alright."

And then it's over, and Blaine stumbles to his friends, just barely visible in the light of the fires he made. Wes has gone from rigid and quivering to limp and horribly still and for a second, fear forms frost in the creases of Blaine's spine.

"David," he pants, falling to his knees. "Is... is he?"
"No," David says thickly. "He's unconscious, and we should be thankful. He can't feel pain if he's
knocked out."

"Where is he hurt?" Blaine lights a flame for a closer look, but David's hand slams it into nothing.

"Not yet," David says.

Blaine squints at him, utterly baffled. "What? Why?"

"It's bad, and that's all you need to know," David says, quiet but intent. "He needs… Water Tribe.
Fuck, what's his name? Hudson. Hudson will fix him up. But you have to be quick. If he doesn't
get help, he will die, do you understand?"

Blaine nods.

David holds up Wes like an offering, and Blaine takes him, draping him gently across his
shoulders. "We need to hurry—"

"No, you need to hurry," David says. "I'm not coming."

Blaine gapes at him. "Why not?"

"I can't walk, dingbat!" David says. "You can't carry both of us, and Wes needs help more than I
do."

"They'll kill you if they find you again!" Blaine says. "How is you dying better than Wes dying?"

David ignores him. "Don't look at him, okay? Not until you get him to safety. I mean it. It won't
help."

"David," Blaine says, baffled. "I can't just leave you here!"

"You can and you will," David says. "Now, promise you won't look at him."

"David…"

"Promise me!"

"Okay, okay!" Blaine says. "I promise."

"Good," David smiles. "You always keep your promises. That's one thing I've always liked about
you." He purses his lips. "Goodbye, Blaine. You're a good friend, and you will be a great Fire
Lord. You're already the best little brother a guy could ask for."

As he stares down at David, he doesn't know if it's anger or love that pushes him over the edge. All
he knows is that he's been here before. His friends offering their lives, not wanting to hold him
back. He made the wrong choice once, and after everything else he's done today, he refuses to do
make this one. He will get one thing right. He will make one good choice.

"Fuck you," he says. "Stand up!"

"Excuse me? I can't—AH! OW! FUCK!" The injured firebender is quickly and rudely hoisted to
his feet. "Agni's third testicle, Blaine! What is the matter with you?"

Blaine shifts Wes around so he can support David's weight as well. "You're coming with me. Fuck
you, and fuck your goodbyes."
"Blaine…" David sighs. "You can't just—"

"I can, and I will," Blaine says. "I'm the Prince, I do what I want."

"Blaine, will you just list—"

"I promised you!" Blaine blurs.

David blinks at him.

"I always honor my promises," Blaine says thickly. "I'm the Prince of the Fire Nation. And I'm through leaving people behind."

David stares at him for a moment, and nods. "Well then, I suppose there's no reasoning with you," he says with a small smile. "Let's go."

And so they hobble along in the silent sewers, Blaine shouldering the weight of both his injured friends. He can't count how many times they've carried him. And now he will carry them, no matter what it takes. David lights the world ahead so Blaine can devote all of his strength to movement, and again they follow the flowing water to what they hope is an exit.

The silence is deep and terrible. Footsteps, sewage, fire and breath. Three sets of lungs, one entirely too quiet for comfort. David cannot take the quiet, so he begins to speak. His words become Blaine's mantra.

"Welsey, I don't know if you can hear me, but... we are going to get you out of here. We're going to get you out of here, because you deserve better than this. You deserve better than this miserable, stinking sewer as your tomb. You deserve better than the pain you're in. You deserve so much better, because you are the bravest, truest friend I've ever had. We've come this far together, and we are going to keep right on going. You cannot die, do you hear me? You hang the fuck on with your teeth if you must, but you hang on. Because you deserve better than this! And because... I... I can't do this without you, friend..."

A shadow flits at the corner of Blaine's vision. A soldier. An enemy. He kicks a flame at them, but they simply cower away from the trio. Well, fine. As long as they don't attack him, Blaine doesn't care what they do.

A few other soldiers dot the halls as they walk, many of them lying down or sitting against walls. They all move away from Blaine as he goes through, almost as if they're afraid of him. He doesn't care. He doesn't care about anything but getting Wes and David out of here. As long as they stay out of his way, he has no reason to hurt them.

A fireball lands at his feet.

Blaine looks up.

There is a soldier in his way.

He's wearing full armor and mask, holding a small flame above his palm. Blaine growls and kicks a flame at him, but he simply steps aside and throws another fireball at his feet.

That's when Blaine recognizes the gesture. It's a challenge. An old, non-verbal way of issuing an Agni Kai.

Fire prickles at his veins. They don't have time for this. But he can tell the idiot isn't going to let
them pass, so with a grunt of frustration, he leans David against the wall and lays Wes on the ground.

"Kick his ass, and be quick about it," David says.

Blaine nods, and turns to his opponent.

The armored man bows and takes his stance.

Blaine says 'fuck it' and throws a two-fisted flood of fire at the man, filling the pipe with his fury. If he's smart, he'll run. If not, he'll get blasted away by the flames and hopefully realize he can't win. Either way is fine with Blaine.

After a few seconds, the stream tapers off and he stares at the fire-painted sewerscape, looking for signs of his fallen enemy.

Enemy, he finds; Fallen, however, is nowhere to be seen. The soldier kneels unharmed in the flames, his arms in the shape of a V pointed at Blaine, his head tucked between them.

The stance is odd, and nothing he's ever seen before. He's so taken aback by it that he very nearly gets killed right then and there. The soldier launches at him on an explosion and nearly slams a flaming knee into his nose. The fire practically gives him as shave as he leans back, just barely dodging the blow.

He stands up and immediately takes a foot to the back, and in that moment, he's so pissed he could scream.

So he does.

He screams and snarls and fights like an animal, lashing out at the guy with all the fury he can muster. His fire burns big and strong, but size and strength mean nothing in the face of his opponent, who is so calm and collected that he makes no sound as he fights Blaine. Not a single grunt of effort, not a single hiss of pain. Blaine's fury is wasted against him. He dodges and blocks every blow, and eventually, he starts laying down vicious counterattacks, punishing the Prince for his arrogance.

Every attack is rewarded with pain. He arm is caught mid-swing and his stomach is punched. His leg is nearly broken when the man catches a wild kick with his own foot. Desperate and outraged, he backs off and tries another fire-flood, but it has the same results as before. The guy puts his arms in a V-shape and kneels down, and it's like all the fire in the world can't touch him.

The fire-flood tires him out, and his enemy seizes his weakness, launching into a tornado of flaming limbs, a wild offense that Blaine can hardly keep up with. The Prince is battered and beaten from every direction, driven back in a hailstorm of heat.

It takes a brush with death for him to finally wake up. With a roar, he throws both hands and tries to blast the guy's helmet off. The man ducks and pivots into a flaming uppercut, and his knuckle literally sears a line into Blaine's cheek. The blow sends an explosion into the ceiling, knocking loose pieces of rust.

Blaine stumbles backwards. Just an inch of difference, and that would've killed him. He would have died, and then Wes would have died, and David would have died, and it would have all been for nothing.

He almost failed them.
He's better than this. He has to be better than this. For his friends' sake. For his sake. For his country's sake.

His opponent stares at him, waiting for something.

Blaine takes a deep breath and forces himself to focus and center. Then, he sticks his hand out, and beckons his opponent for the second round.

Things are different this time around. Blaine plays defense instead of offense, watching his opponent's moves and blocking or dodging, but never striking back. He's looking at his style, trying to get a feel for the rhythm of his movements. He's clearly very skilled. Blaine will need to be at the top of his game in order to win this.

As he watches his opponent, absorbs his movements and wraps his mind around his fighting style, something odd happens. His anger starts to ebb, but it's not the only thing. His frustration, his worry, his fear, all seem to fade away, piece by piece. He forgets the rest of the day, forgets his successes, forgets his failures, forgets his very name. Nothing matters but this. This fight, this opponent, this victory, this moment.

Blaine allows himself to be swallowed by bending. He allows the fire to consume him.

The soldier throws a blow and Blaine catches his arm. For the first time since the second round started, he throws an attack of his own.

And things are different indeed.

David's jaw drops. "Wesley. Wesley, you're missing it! Blaine's blue. His fucking fire is blue!"

The fiery fist barely misses the soldier's head, and he staggers away from the heat, looking at Blaine like he's shocked.

Blaine, on the other hand, doesn't react at all. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters but the fight.

The Prince goes on the offensive, and so does his opponent, and the dark cavern becomes a storm of blue and orange. Blaine's fire burns like never before. The heat is searing, causing burns even through armor. The force is overwhelming, slamming like a hammer of solid steel. Their intensity is unbreakable, and his opponent's flames shatter against them like waves on the shore. Bit by bit, burn by burn, Blaine gains control of the fight.

And through it all, he remains utterly impassive, his face expressionless, his eyes cold. He is neither Prince, nor assassin, nor lover, nor friend. He is nothing but a body in motion, fire made flesh.

The fight is all but over, and Blaine intends to leave no doubt. He dances around his opponent, using the blue flames to blast his armor off in whole pieces. Shoulders, forearms, biceps, shins and thighs, plate by plate is blown off, leaving only the combat clothing underneath. Eventually, he is down to his chestplate and helmet, and Blaine is prepared for the final blow. A concentrated explosion sends him stumbling backwards, and Blaine steps forward, sending a brilliant blue fireball right into the man's chestplate, intending to blow it off his body and render him utterly unprotected.

The attack makes impact, and…

THOOM.
The explosion rocks the pipeline. Pieces of the rusted ceiling clatter to the floor, his hair is blown back by the shockwave, and he briefly shields his face from his own searing heat. His opponent sails far, far down the hall, slamming into the wall and slumping there.

Blaine follows him, a blue spark at the tip of his fingers, ready to continue the fight if he must. He will have victory. He will do what he must. Nothing else matters.

He approaches slowly, and aims the spark at his opponent.

And then the blue flame fizzes, sputters back to orange. His trance snaps, his heart reawakens, and the first thing he knows is horror.

He didn't blow the guy's chestplate off. He blew it in. Shattered it as if it were clay, embedding glowing-hot shards into his chest, which is now a smoking crater.

The man gurgles, chokes, and wheezes.

The realization hits him like a fall into freezing water.

He's looking at a mortal wound. He's looking at a deathblow.

He falls to his knees, crawling towards the fallen soldier. "No. No, no, no no no, oh, Agni no."

The man gasps for air and reaches for his helmet.

"No, no, hold still!" Blaine says. "Save your strength, I've got it, I've got it."

He removes the man's helmet and stares into the face of his enemy. At that moment, a piece of his heart breaks off and falls away, never to be reclaimed.

He knows this man.

… a short, graying beard, weatherbeaten skin, and surprisingly calm blue eyes that regard Blaine with something like curiosity…

"…I've never seen anybody fight like you. What do you say to a friendly match, son? I'd like to see if this old dog's still got what it takes to wrestle with the young'uns…"

"…Son, you fight like the bastard love child of Agni himself! I've never seen anyone like you in all my years of service…"

"…The Gods don't hand out skill like yours lightly. You've got a great destiny ahead of you, boy…"

"…I'd like to shake your hand if you don't mind…"

Blaine reaches for the old man's hand, taking it and pleading for… he doesn't even know. Understanding? Forgiveness? "Sir, sir I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I wasn't trying to…"

The aged officer's eyes have nothing for him but confusion. He tries to speak, but a rasp and a cough are all he manages. Drops of blood spray from his mouth and land on Blaine's armor, a wordless accusation.

"Shhh, don't talk, don't do anything, save your strength, I have… I… I have a friend, he's a healer, he can help you, he can fix you, just… hold on…" And now Blaine is gasping for air, like he's the one with a hole in his chest. How selfish of him.
The soldier's breath rattles in his throat, and all he can do is shake his head and squint, having no idea what to make of the boy before him. He opens his mouth and manages one question. "Who are you?"

"I'm…" And Blaine stops. Because he really doesn't know anymore. After everything he's done, everything he's failed to do today, he doesn't know what to call himself. "My name is…"

In the end, it doesn't even matter. The old soldier's eyes go glassy, and his grip slips. He sucks in one, rattling breath, and his head slumps to the side, blood running down his chin.

"Sir?" Blaine says.

He doesn't move. He doesn't make a sound.

He doesn't do anything.

He's dead.

Blaine killed him.

He lurches to his feet like a drunk, stumbling away from the body as if it burns, scalding and white, hotter than the sun. And much like the sun, even as it sears his eyes, he cannot look away. In its light, everything else disappears. He can see nothing else.

He cannot hear.

Can't hear David calling him, begging him to hurry. Trying desperately to get his attention because time is running out, damn it, Blaine, what are you doing?

Can't hear the screech of a bird, completely out of place in the underground.

Can't hear the litany of questions, the frantic instructions and pleading and explanations behind him.

All he hears is silence. The sound of a heart not beating. The sound of lungs not breathing. The sound of the grave.

He can barely feel the hands that turn him around, grab him, shake him, guide him to lean against a wall. Familiar faces fill his vision, and it takes him several seconds to realize they are talking. He can't make sense of their presence. He can't wrap his mind around them.

The Hawks. Rachel.

"…aine, can you hear me?" Rachel says, desperate concern in her eyes. "Please, say something!"

"…Rachel?" he croaks. "Rachel. You're… how…?"

"We followed Pavarotti down here," Rachel says, with a nod to his shoulder, and suddenly, he is aware of another touch. Soft feathers against his face, gently nuzzling him. How long has Pavarotti been there?

Rachel hugs him, and his skin tingles, burns at her touch. "Oh, Blaine… we were so worried… we were afraid that… Finn thought you were—"

The word echoes clear in his mind. "Finn!" he says. "Where's… where's Finn? Wes. Wes needs Finn. Wes is… he's…"
Rachel squeezes him tight and strokes his hair. "Shhh, shhh," she says. "Finn's with Wes right now."

"He's here?" Blaine asks. "He's… is Wes okay?"

"Shhh…” Rachel says. "We'll know soon."

Blaine blinks and turns his head. The Hawks are providing the light, and their flames illuminate a slumped shadow. The shadow accuses him, and he feels compelled to confess. "I killed him," he says softly.

The Hawks look mournfully at the man, not quite sure how to react.

Rachel sniffs, and holds him so much tighter. "I know," she says. "I'm so sorry…"

Blaine doesn't understand. Why is she sorry? She didn't do anything.

And then there are footsteps. Finn walks into the light, David braced against him. Their faces are heavy with sorrow.

"Wes," Blaine says. "Is he okay? Is he…"

Finn gives him a faint smile. "He'll live," Finn says. "It's gonna be rough, but we'll take good care of him."

Blaine nods, and turns to David. David is staring at the body, and again, he is compelled to confess. "I killed him," he says.

David breaks free of Finn and hops to him on one leg, wrapping him in a hug. "I know, buddy, I know," he says. "I'm so sorry."

He doesn't understand. Why are they apologizing? Why are they sorry? They didn't do anything. They have nothing to be sorry for, they don't… they can't…

His thoughts stutter to a halt. His voice is stuck in his throat, so he just sinks into the hug.

David breaks it and looks at him softly. "Blaine," he says. "I know you've been through a lot today, but there's one more thing you have to do."

Blaine squints. "What…?"

"People are in danger," David says. "They need you."

"People…" Blaine says. The word echoes in his mind until it no longer seems like a word.

"Kurt needs you," Finn says.

Everything else vanishes. "Kurt?" Blaine says. "What's the matter with Kurt?"

Finn looks at Rachel, pursing his lips.

"He thinks you're dead," Rachel says. "He's fighting very hard to avenge you. We need to show him that you're alive so he'll stop fighting, okay?"

Blaine nods. Yes. He'll go to Kurt. Kurt needs him. "And… Wes?"
"We'll get him somewhere safe," David says, leaning against the wall. "I'll make sure of it."


Finn nods at Rachel, and she vanishes into the darkness. David claps him on the shoulder and follows her, leaning on the Hawks for support. Pavarotti gives him one final nuzzle, and flies off after them, and he and Finn are left alone.

"There's…" Finn sighs. "There's nothing I can say that's gonna prepare you for this. What's about to happen… it's probably nothing like anything you've ever seen. Just remember two things, okay? Are you listening?"

Blaine nods.

"Thing one," Finn says. "It's going to be really, really scary. Got that?"

Blaine nods.

"Thing two, and this is the most important thing," Finn says. "No matter scary it gets, remember that Kurt is still in there, and he still loves you. You just have to remind him."

Blaine blinks, not quite able to digest the words.

"It might not make a whole lot of sense now," Finn says, "but it will. Just remember it. Kurt's still in there, and he still loves you. Okay?"

Blaine nods. "Okay."

Finn pulls some sewer water from the grates and freezes it into an ice board. Blaine steps on, and they start to surf down the pipeline, riding on a wave.

As they go, Blaine takes one final look back. He sees one of the Hawks standing quietly in front of the dead old man. With a quick look to either side, he quietly kneels down and closes the man's eyes.

Blaine looks away. He doesn't look back again.

For a while, the ride is dark and quiet, and his abused mind is able to rest, reset, put things back in order. He feels like he can think again, and spends the time trying to make sense of Finn's words.

The stillness doesn't last.

Even as they approach the end of the tunnel, Blaine can tell that something is wrong. There's a rushing, a crashing, a hiss that ebbs and flows. He smells the sea, and shortly thereafter, he sees it, blasting into the pipe in a foamy white spray. Waves are against the end of the pipe where it pours out over the sea.

Very, very high waves.

"Hang on!" Finn says.

Blaine clings to Finn like a monkey in a windstorm, and out the pipe they go.

It is at this point Blaine realizes that Finn was right. It will be a bit longer before he understands how right.
For a second, Blaine feels like he fell not into a sewer, but into another world. A world entirely different from the one he left, one of violence and destruction. The world he left was calm seas and clear skies. This world is a sea in violent turmoil, with waves that look like an army of hills on the march, foamy and white. This world is a sky dark and foreboding, the heavens howling at the earth.

It is unreal. He cannot believe it. Even as the gale deafens him and the water stings against his skin, he cannot believe it. Even as he rides over the sea and feels every muscle in Finn's back clench and strain as he fights the tides, he cannot believe it. Even as his stomach flips at a wave's crest, dips at the valleys between them, he cannot believe it. He can't. It can't be real. It shouldn't be real.

Nothing could prepare him for this.

Nothing could prepare him for broken flotsam tossed into the air like confetti, smashed and broken and smashed again by the waves. Nothing could prepare him for entire battleships torn apart and left to sink in pieces. Nothing could prepare him for holes in ships the size of a house, pouring smoke high into the heavens, melted metal steaming as it hits the sea. Nothing could prepare him for metal hulls peeled back like fruit, exposing inner framework that's crumpled and twisted like paper. Blown apart, smashed, sheared, stricken, sinking and destroyed; everywhere he looks, ships are dead and dying in a thousand different ways.

The wind shrieks and howls, and the waves are a deafening roar. For a moment, Blaine imagines a tremendous sea monster churning the waves in front of them. His mind accepts the fantasy. Kurt must be fighting the monster. They've come to help him. They've come to save him.

But the fantasy does not last.

A dot sails past them in the distance, floating in the air as if the law of gravity was mere suggestion. As Blaine watches, the dot lands on an intact ship. It turns towards the bridge and suddenly, the bridge is in ten million pieces, flying at breakneck speed on an invisible force of infinite power. The force strips the bridge to framework, bends the metal until it comes apart. When the bridge is gone, the dot moves, and the sea rises beneath the ship, piercing it with a dozen icy spires until it is tilted back and held aloft over the ocean like a monument.

Finn sees the same thing. "There he is!" he cries, and they turn towards it.

The ride towards the speared ship is chaotic. The sea turns sideways in places, and Blaine can only hold on for dear life as Finn keeps them steady. Destruction and carnage are everywhere around them. Ships come to pieces, explode in brilliant bursts of flame, tip over and capsize. One almost falls on top of them, forcing Finn to wrap them in a bubble and push them underwater.

A mere glimpse of what's below the waves is all it takes to make him feel sick. The surface destruction is merely the tip of the iceberg. The ocean is an underwater storm, a rain of iron and steel as the sea steadily claims all it touches.

Blaine closes his eyes. He can't help it. He closes his eyes and buries his face in Finn's back because he cannot believe the world around them. He cannot believe this is happening. He cannot, will not believe that Kurt is causing this. No, no, no, never, never, never.

Finn forces him to open his eyes

"The ship's too high!" he shouts.
Blaine agrees. The spires of ice holding the ship in the air are much larger up close.

"I can get you up there, but I can't come with you!" Finn says, and Blaine nearly squeezes him in half.

"I can't do this by myself!" Blaine shouts.

"Yes, you can!" Finn shouts back. "Just remember what I said! Now, hang on..."

Finn's arms furiously whip the waves, picking up speed as they sail down and up the waves, using them as a ramp. They soar high into the air, and at the apex of his jump, Finn melts his surfboard into a tendril of water, wraps it around Blaine's foot and throws him with all his might. And then he disappears beneath the waves.

Blaine soars towards the ship, steering himself with jets of flame. He flies well, but he does not land well. His whole body slams against the deck and rolls into a painful stop in the middle of the tilted ship.

The wind here is stronger and louder than ever, and he stands slowly for fear of flying off. As he rises, the high perch allowshim to see far and wide.

A single sob is ripped from his chest by the sight.

The fleet is ruined, wrecked beyond reckoning. He stands in a graveyard of ships, broken hulls jutting from the sea like tombstones. The bodies lie all around him, torn and being torn even as he watches. Tornados strip away entire decks, leaving not a single board intact. Gigantic fireballs burn through hull after hull, chasing each other like young dragons at play. Hails of boulders punch through steel as if it were tissue, slamming straight from bridge to ocean floor, leaving hundreds of perfect holes. Whole vessels are literally tossed by the sea, born skyward on geysers and gushes so tremendous that the metal ripples like water before it shears and falls to pieces.

Ruin and destruction, as far as the eye can see. The devastation extends even to the land, leaving the base a mess of craters and smoldering ruins. For a moment, Blaine fears the entire world has ended, and he is the only one left alive.

And then he remembers the other.

He stands astride the wreckage, perched high on the bow, performing every second dozens of movements too intricate for words. The conductor of the orchestra, playing all the world in a symphony of death.

Even from behind, Blaine recognizes him.

His denial shatters with his heart. Tears and sea spray mingle on his face, and a single thought, a single wish fills his mind. He takes off for Kurt at a dead run, and yells it for all he is worth.

"Stop!" he cries.

The Avatar does not heed him.

"Stop, please!" he yells.

There is no response. The destruction continues.

"Kurt, listen to me! It's okay! I'm here!" he bellows.
His voice is drowned by the wind, swallowed in the Avatar's power.

"Kurt, I'm begging you! You have to stop this!"

His voice cracks as he speaks, and the sheer force of the whipping air forces him on hands and knees. The closer he gets to the Avatar, the more violent the wind, but he presses on. He can't stop until Kurt stops.

"Please!" he sobs, crawling towards the boy he loves. "Please stop!"

He's mere feet away, and the wind shears him with such force that he fears he will be stripped to bones. He manages a single inch more, and he can go no further. All that is left within him is taken and turned into a single desperate cry that leaves him in a burst of flame. "KURT!"

Fire. Heat. A threat approaches them. The wind that shields them grows in strength.

Suddenly, Blaine is pushed down onto his stomach, completely unable to move from the sheer force of the air. Kurt turns around, and suddenly, Blaine is staring into the luminescent eyes of the Avatar. He'd glimpsed this power once before, but only now does he see how terrible and beautiful it is. The light radiates with ancient wisdom, incredible fury, and limitless, undeniable power.

And then, the Avatar actually sees him, and those same glowing eyes widen in shock.

The sight reaches through each of them and sinks into Kurt, and his cocoon shatters like sparkling glass. He falls to the ground, still not fully awake, unsure if what he is seeing could possibly be real.

The Avatar simply stares at him for a moment. The force of the air lessens, and the winds quickly die down. With nothing left to hold him back, Blaine does the only thing he can think of.

He sprints to his boyfriend and wraps him in a hug, burying his face in his shoulder. "Kurt," he says. "I'm here. It's me. It's okay. I'm here."

The sound of his voice brings him to life, and Kurt's spirit rises, born on a wave of love and relief, and he runs. As he passes the white-eyed Avatars, they each give a single nod and vanish into mist, their purpose fulfilled. Avatar Gaga is the last to vanish, and she graces him with a small smile.

The Avatar recedes.

And Kurt returns to himself.

The light fades, and Kurt sags in Blaine's arms. The power rushes out of him, leaving him barely enough strength to speak, but speak he does. One word. Just to be sure.

"Blaine?" he whispers.

Blaine clutches him tighter. "It's me. I'm here. I love you. I'm here. I'm sorry."

Kurt smiles lets himself fade, falling limp in his lover's arms, utterly at peace.

His peace does not extend to Blaine.

"I'm sorry," the Prince sniffs. "I'm sorry. I'm... sorry..."

And Blaine falls to his knees, clutching Kurt to his chest and sobbing for all he is worth.
The storm comes to an end.

Finn freaks out when he wakes up, flailing and accidentally gulping down a mouthful of seawater. He spits, coughs, and sputters until he's ocean-free, and tries to figure out what happened. The fall must have knocked him out. He's got no idea where he is or how long he's been down.

Things are definitely calmer now. The storm's over. There's even a few streaks of sunlight peeking through the clouds.

Right in the middle of a sunny streak, he sees it; the speared ship, the one he chucked Blaine at before belly-flopping into the ocean. It's looking a little wobbly. Most of the ice is melted, and it's sitting just above sea level, looking like it could fall at any moment. He spirals out of the water and surfs towards it, hoping they're still there.

They aren't hard to find. Blaine is sitting at the water's edge with Kurt in his lap, gently stroking his hair.

"Dude, you did it!" Finn says, with a bright grin. "You… Blaine?"

His smile fades fast. Blaine isn't smiling back. Blaine isn't even looking at him. He isn't looking at Kurt, either; he's just… staring. His face is a total blank.

"Blaine… are you okay?" Finn asks.

No response. Not even a glance.

"Can you even hear me?" Finn asks.

If he can, he doesn't show it.

Finn floats right up to him, and waves a hand in front of his face.

Nothing. This isn't good.

"We need to go," Finn says. "Here, let me take Kurt—"

He reaches for his little brother, and that gets a response.

Blaine pulls him in, clutching him close and shaking his head.

Finn sighs. "Blaine," he says. "We have to go. We need to get Kurt somewhere safe." He reaches for him again, but Blaine does the same thing, turning away from him.

"Okay," Finn says quietly. "That's fine. You can keep him. Just… I need you to come with me. I'm gonna take you somewhere safe, okay?"

Blaine answers by very shakily standing up. He takes unsteady steps towards Finn's ice board, Kurt hanging limp in his arms. Finn quickly enlarges the board into a quasi-boat, sculpting a little ice stump for Blaine to sit on. If the shaking is any sign, he's not going to make it standing up. "Here, have a seat, dude. You look beat."

Blaine obediently sits on the stump, and goes back to stroking Kurt's hair. Through this whole process, he never once makes eye contact with Finn or anything else. He just stares. At nothing. At everything.
And Finn is officially worried. Dude is *not okay*.

"Let's get out of here," he says, bending them over the water. The sea around them is practically coated in floating wreckage, like a layer of crumbs on a cake. Hundreds of broken ships lie dead in the water, sinking and sunk. Beams of sunlight cut the sky into stripes of light and dark, and the clouds are slowly breaking apart.

No one bothers them on their way back. No one's brave enough to have come out of cover yet, which makes it really still and really, *really* quiet. The calm after the storm, he guesses. The peace would almost be nice, if Blaine wasn't part of it. Dude is not making a sound. Finn wants to help him, but he's got no clue how to do that because Blaine won't, or *can't* tell him what's wrong.

His fingers are still running through Kurt's hair, but they're shaking now. His face is still blank as the freaking tundra.

"Blaine, seriously, are you okay?" Finn says. "Please, talk to me, dude. Say something. *Anything*.

Not even so much as a peep. It's like he honest-to-Tui doesn't even know Finn is there. Oh, *fuck*, this is bad.

Two of the uncooked Hawks—Luke and Cole, he thinks—are waiting for them when they get to the warehouse docks. They start shouting as soon as they are in sight, but Blaine doesn't respond to them either. Finn rides a swell right onto the docks, and the second they stop, Blaine stands up and starts carrying Kurt inside. He's shaking worse than ever, but he refuses to let Kurt go. He turns away from anyone who tries to take him, shaking his head and clutching Kurt until they step back.

He holds on for as long as he can. But he can't hold on forever. Near the end of the docks, his legs literally give out and he sinks to his knees. Finn kneels in front of him.

"Dude, it's okay," Finn says quietly. "It's over. Everything's okay, you can rest now. Let me take it from here. I'll take good care of Kurt, I promise."

Blaine still doesn't look at him, or even move. But this time, when Finn reaches down to take Kurt, Blaine doesn't fight him. Finn takes his little brother into his arms and *instantly*, Blaine goes white-faced and stumbles to the edge of the docks just in time to puke into the ocean.


Finn carefully carries Kurt up the stairs, where Rachel is waiting for him. She clamps her mouth and lets out a few tears when she sees Kurt draped over his arms, but other than that, she keeps it together really well. She leads them inside the warehouse, and Artie and Mercedes take them to one of the side rooms, where they've set up a makeshift bed of boxes and cloth. Gently as ever, Finn lays Kurt on the bed and squeezes his shoulder. Mercedes places a kiss on his forehead, Rachel brushes her fingers against his cheek, and Artie calmly squeezes his hand. They each take a moment to send a little love to their friend.

Then they turn away and get down to business.

"So, how bad is it?" Finn asks.

"Bad," Artie says. "Seven injured, two missing in action."

"Missing?" Finn asks.
"Sam was captured by Quinn, again," Artie says. "As was Thad."

"Thad was there?" Finn asks.

"Turned up out of nowhere to save the Hawks asses, from what I'm told," Artie says. "Go figure."

"Well, crap…" Finn says. "What about the injured?"

"You have a crap-ton of healing in your future," Mercedes says. "Hope you're feeling frisky."

Rachel pulls out a scroll. "I've made a list of the injured and their injuries in order from most to least severe. At the bottom are the four Hawks who fought against Quinn, mostly minor burns, bruises and scrapes. Above them is Sebastian, who—"

"Whoa!" Finn says. "Back up. Why is Sebastian here?"

"We found him on the floor when we got here," Artie says. "Dude was passed-the-fuck-out and halfway to extra crispy. We put him in the room across the hall. I metalbent some nice shackles, so he's not going anywhere anytime soon."

Finn sighs. "Who's next?"

"David, with several minor cuts and abrasions, and a leg broken in at least three places," Rachel says. "We don't know the exact extent of the damage, but given than David passed out from pain mere minutes ago, I'd say it's pretty bad. And finally…"

"Wes," Finn says. "He doesn't miss the grim look that dawns on Mercedes's face. "Has he even woken up yet?"

Mercedes shakes her head. "I don't know whether I should be worried or thankful."

Finn nods. "Let's go check on him. We'll work down the list."

Rachel leads them to Wes's room. "Where's Blaine?" she asks along the way.

"Outside with the Hawks, puking his guts out," Finn says. "I can't blame him. After all the crap he just went through…"

They enter Wes's room.

"What about the crap he put other people through?" Mercedes asks, her voice cold.

Wes is lying on a box-bed as well, stripped of his armor and most of his clothes. The minor burns on his body are visible, but the main burn, the one that almost made Finn lose his breakfast, is hidden under a bandage.

"I feel for him," Artie says quietly. "This is not gonna be easy."

"It just… breaks my heart," Rachel says.

"It ticks me off," Mercedes says. "He wouldn't be here… none of this would've happened if it hadn't been for—"

"Don't blame Blaine," Finn says.

"Why in the hills not?" Mercedes asks.
"Because it doesn't help anything," Finn says. "Seriously, I was kind of pissed at him too, but now I just feel bad for him."

"Yeah, well I feel worse for the people who were actually hurt by him," Mercedes says, looking at the still, silent Wes as his chest slowly rises and falls.

Finn sighs, and pulls the water from his pouch, trying to change the subject. "We need to take the bandages off. It'll be easier to heal him if—"

Something creaks, and Finn nearly drops his water. The door. They forgot to close it.

Blaine is braced against the doorway. His face is no longer blank—his eyes are wide, his mouth open, his skin white with horror.

He sees his friend's body. Sees the bruises, the burns left unbandaged for the moment. Sees the dried blood on his face, the ruined, mangled flesh peeking out from underneath the one bandage he does have.

The one wrapped around his head, right over where his eyes should be.

He sees all this, and for the first time since Finn found him, Blaine speaks, a hoarse whisper of ruin and grief…

"Wes…"

His breath hitches, his head sags, and Finn knows what comes next. He can't reach him in time.

Blaine takes a single step forward, and falls flat on his face.

And just like that, they have a fifth knock-out to accommodate.

Finn kneels down and picks gently scoops Blaine off the floor. "We'll need another bed," he says.

Rachel and Artie nod, and walk and wheel from the room, leaving Finn alone with Mercedes.

"I think…" Finn says, Blaine hanging in his arms. "…I think we should just feel bad for everyone."

Mercedes's jaw clenches, but after a second, she calms down and walks over to Blaine gently brushing a hair off his head.

"This just sucks," she says thickly.

Finn nods, and carries Blaine from the room.

There's nothing more to be said.

A/N: I'm going to go ahead and clear up the situation surrounding Wes; yes, he is blind. He took a direct hit to the eyes that would make Zuko wince. Yes, it is permanent. He's the one the last paragraph in Chapter 70 referred to. No, he will not become Firebending!Toph. Remember, Toph was born blind and she learned her bending straight from badgermoles, who were also blind. Wes has neither of those advantages and bends a completely different element.

In other bad news, Sam and Thad are in enemy hands, the Hawks got roasted, Sebastian got toasted, and David's leg bends the wrong way in multiple places. Kurt went apeshit and basically ate the entire Fire Nation fleet, ensuring that the Fire Nation will probably hate and fear him for
years to come. And as if Blaine wasn’t already traumatized enough, he got to watch him do it. Oh, and he actualfax killed someone. Can't forget that.

*cough*

So, next chapter…

**CHAPTER 74 – The Aftermath**

**WARNINGS:** Violence, Graphic Injury, Minor Character Death.
Author's Note: Back at last! I've been renewed and rejuvenated, and I'm hoping the rest of this story will go by quickly. We've got a lot to cover—the plot from here on out is not long, but it is very thick. In this chapter; Sebastian stages a coup and gets far more than he bargained for. Will the mystery of the meerkat finally be solved? Read on and find out!

Blaine Anderson is playing pretend.

There's no other way to put it, really. He's lying with his eyes closed, but he's not sleeping. There's no one in the room with him, so he isn't acting. 'Pretending' is the only word that fits, and it's every bit as childish as it sounds.

He's hiding, you see.

From what?

From everything. Everything he did, everything he caused. The friend he crippled, the friend he blinded, the friends he abandoned. The boyfriend he betrayed. The soldiers he hurt. The man he killed. It's too much, far too much for him to bear. It's a burden that will crush him if he tries to lift it.

He can't lift it. He can't accept it. He can't even fathom it.

How did all of this happen? He is just a boy. Just a stupid, selfish little boy—he should not be capable of causing this much damage. There is so much that hangs on him, yet he cannot think of a less stable lynchpin. Now, more than ever, he feels the weight of his own responsibility. He cannot handle this.

His father would be disappointed. Blaine knows this. Part of him hopes for some magical, revelatory dream like he had when he was fireless, where his father visits him along with his mother and somehow endows him with the strength to be everything he needs to be for everyone.

But it's not going to happen, he knows that. First of all, he's not even asleep, which is more or less required for dreaming. Second, even when he searches his waking mind for his father, the only image he finds is one of stern eyes and disapproval.

He has failed his father, and everyone else.

So he hides. From the world. From his dead father. From his friends. From himself.

But he cannot hide forever.

Hushed voices whisper outside of his door. He can't make out the words, but the tone is tense, and the volume is growing. The smell of conflict hangs in the air like smoke, choking him even as he tries to ignore it. Wishing it away only strengthens the hostile odor. He doesn't know who the fight will be between, or why it will start, but he knows it's coming.

He also knows that everyone here is someone he calls a friend, and the thought of them fighting each other makes him sick.

He wants to stop them. He wants a lot of things, really. But to stop them, he would have to stop
pretending, to acknowledge the world he created and the world he destroyed in order to make it.

And he can't do that…

Can he?

The thought terrifies him. Everyone will be mad at him—and rightly so. What he did was stupid and dangerous. His heart burned with urgent emotion, and he allowed that fire to drive him instead of the other way around. "The bender must control the flame," his father used to say, "or the flame will control the bender."

He thought he had mastered his fire. He thought he was in control. But he was wrong. He has much to learn before he can truly say he 'controls' anything, even himself.

He was selfish. Like an untamed flame, he thought of only himself, his needs, his desires. Only his feelings were taken into account. Even as he wrote his goodbye letter to Kurt, it was more for himself than for his beloved. He wanted to vent his feelings. Kurt's feelings did not factor into the equation, a fact that makes his skin flush red with shame. He's hurt the person he loves most. Someone so selfish cannot be trusted with the heart of someone so selfless.

And yet… Kurt trusted him anyway.

And that is the crux of the matter, isn't it?

No matter what he wants, what he deserves, what he feels or what he thinks, the world will not change for him. His actions are not erased. Injuries are not healed. The dead are not revived, and time is not reversed. The voices grow from whispers to shout. None of this is going away, no matter how hard he pretends.

His selfishness opened this wound, and now his selfishness is allowing it to fester.

He needs to get up.

He wants to get up.

But he is afraid.

The fear grips him tight, and for a moment, it feels like guilt might actually kill him. Like he will open his eyes and be physically crushed by the burden of what his selfishness has wrought—one friend blind, one crippled, possibly for life, one man dead at his hands and who knows how many others dead because of his actions? Damage and destruction impossible to imagine, all because of one selfish little boy.

The grip tightens, icy fingers crushing turning his heart to pulp. The world could revile him, and Blaine would not blame it. His friends might hate him. Kurt might hate him, and that, more than anything, is what scares him. Not defeat, injury, or even death. Loss is what he fears most. That by his own hand, he will harm the ones he loves, push them away, and be left alone. He doesn't know how to face that fear, how to even face the possibility.

It comes to him then, a memory left in his mind like a gift. An early firebending lesson, just after the first time he really burned himself.

"Come on, Blaine," his father says. "You will certainly fail if you don't even try."

"But," Blaine sniffs, clutching his bandaged hand. "I'm scared."
"There, there," his father smiles. "Courage, my boy."

"I'm too scared for courage!" Blaine says petulantly.

"Oh, that's silly," his father says. "You're never too scared for courage. Being scared is what makes courage possible!"

Blaine blinks at him, silent in befuddlement.

"Courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to move in spite of it," his father explains.

"I don't think I have that," Blaine says. "How can I get it?"

"Hmm..." his father says. "Trying saying it out loud."

"It," Blaine says.

"No, no," his father says. "Courage. Say the word. When you say 'courage,' what you are truly saying is 'I am afraid, but I will not let that stop me.' Just say it, and then do it."

"That's it?" Blaine asks.

"That's it," his father says. "Go on, give it a try."

Blaine nods, stubby legs moving into stance. He takes a deep breath.

"Courage," he says aloud. 'I am afraid, but I will not let that stop me,' he echoes in his mind.

And he doesn't. He punches forth a bright orange burst, and his father is delighted.

Blaine breathes out, heart still pounding with fear. But he understands now, even with all his fear and denial, the burden of his actions will not vanish. Even if he refuses to lift it, it remains attached to him by unbreakable chains of fate. To even try to drag it along with him seems a fool's errand. A snail's pace would make better time.

But then, the philosopher Infernicus once said: "It does not matter how slow you go, so long as you do not stop."

He has done many things wrong in his life. He has caused damage that he may not ever be able to fix. But he will never know unless he tries, and he cannot try unless he opens his eyes. He cannot undo what he has done. The only thing left to do is move forward, dragging himself with his fingernails if he must.

He has been selfish long enough.

So Blaine Anderson sucks in a breath, and whispers to himself. "Courage."

The fear does not leave him, but his heart breaks free of its grip, and he opens his eyes.

The light is bright, blinding him at first. But eventually, his eyes adjust, and he sees the world as it truly is.

It seems as fitting a metaphor as any.

---

Blaine exits his room to a sight he never imagined he'd see.
His friends are forming battle lines. The Dragon Hawks on one side, Team Avatar on the other. It's a stand-off, fraught with tension that crackles in the air like the prelude to a thunderbolt.

They're too busy staring down each other to notice him, so Blaine makes himself known. "Guys? What's going on here?"

Pause for about a dozen people turning towards him and shouting "Blaine!" near-simultaneously. And then the battle for the Prince begins.

The Hawks throw first volley.

"They won't let us see Wes and David," Jeff says.

"Because you're trying to steal them!" Finn counters.

"We're trying to help them!" Trent says. "They need a doctor, not some Water Tribe Shaman chanting gibberish and putting leechslugs on their wounds!"

"What?" Finn barks. "That's... that's not how it works!"

"How do we know that?" Trent asks.

"He healed you!" Mercedes says. "You were right there!"

"Silence, vile enchantress!" Flint counters. "She's just angry because we're onto her evil Earth Kingdom mind control scheme." He looks at Blaine. "She intended to shove ground-up rocks up Wes's nose so she could bend his mind!"

"That is outrageous!" Rachel says. "And physically impossible, or at least extremely deleterious for his mental health. Even if it wasn't, Mercedes would never do such a thing!"

"Oh, you would say that," Luke says. "You just want distract us so no one sees you take David to your nest and lay your evil airbender eggs in his nice, warm intestines. Our friends are not your incubators!"

"Airbenders do not lay eggs!" Rachel says, pausing for a second. "At least... I am 95 percent sure that they don't. And even if they did, I would never... egg someone without their informed consent! I am not an egg-rapist!"

Artie rolls his eyes and rolls his chair towards the Prince. "B-money, please, put your birds in their damn cages before—"

"Watch out, Blaine!" Cole warns. "That's the crazy murderer! He can kill you from fifty paces with nothing but a pebble!"

Artie glares at Cole and pointedly continues. "—before I have to pimp-hand somebody so hard, by Earth Kingdom law, he becomes my ho."

All this conflict has Blaine's head spinning. "Okay, everyone just calm down."

"Calm down?" Jeff barks. "How can we calm down? Our country is under attack! These people are trying to abduct you."

"Abduct?" Blaine asks. There's something familiar about that word in this situation…

"Yes, the core of their insidious plot," Flint says. "They want to take you out of the Fire Nation so
the Avatar can brainwash you and install you as a puppet king!"

"Piece by piece, they're destroying everything that keeps you here!" Jeff says. "They're just waiting for us to turn our backs so they can finish off Wes and David."

"That's not true," Blaine says, shaking his head. "That's ridiculous!"

"Is it?" Trent asks. "Don't you think it's just a little too convenient that everything went wrong when they showed up? You just happened to meet the Avatar, the Fire Lord just happened to get killed, Sue just happened to take over, you just happened to get hurt, and the Avatar just happened to be there to nurse you back to health. And now the fleet just happens to be destroyed and your friends—the last thing keeping you here—just happened to nearly die. The thread that binds you to your nation is nearly severed, and these people are running at it with scissors!"

"And that's very unsafe," Ethan says.

"It was quite the plan," Flint says. "But we have been awakened to their treachery, and I say it's time we put these foreign devils in their place."

"Boy, call me a devil again and see if I don't prove you right," Mercedes growls.

Trent approaches Artie. "I think it's time for you to roll out."

"How 'bout I roll you out, dough-boy?" Artie challenges.

"Everyone, please!" Rachel cries. "These hurtful words have to stop!"

"Shut up, you traitorous sky-slut!" Jeff says.

"Hey, don't talk to her like that!" Finn shouts, walking towards him.

"What are you gonna do about it, pissbender?" Jeff challenges, getting right into Finn's face. "Gonna get Sparkles, Destroyer of Worlds to smite us like he did everyone else?"

"Back off!" Finn warns.

"Make me!" Jeff challenges.

Finn shoves him. Jeff shoves back. Finn shoves harder. Jeff cocks his fist back and Blaine sees a spark ignite at the end, and that's the last straw.

A second later, Jeff is on the ground and Blaine is between him and Finn.

"That's enough!" he shouts. "This has gone too far!"

"You're siding with them?" Jeff says, incredulous.

"They are my friends!" Blaine says. "And so are you. I'm sick of my friends fighting each other!"

"But they're trying to abduct—"

"No, they aren't!" Blaine says. "No one is abducting anyone! Waterbenders do not use leechslugs for healing, earthbenders do bend people's minds, and airbenders do not lay eggs. Those things aren't just untrue; they're insane."

"Thank you!" says Nick.
Jeff looks at him, shocked and betrayed. "Dude!"

"What?" Nick says. "Someone had to say it!"

"Where did you even hear that stuff?" Blaine asks.

"Somebody told them," Mercedes says. "Three guesses as to who."

Right on cue, a familiar figure parts the Dragon Hawks and steps through, newly dressed in a few bits of light armor over old clothes. "Gentlemen, thanks for the duds," he says. "My old ones were a little crispy around the edges." He notices the Prince. "Blaine! You're awake! Good, that's one less person we have to carry."

"Sebastian?" Blaine says. "What are you doing here?"

"I tried to kill Sue, same as you," Sebastian says. "Ran into a little bad luck on the way back, but I'm feeling better now."

"Yeah, thanks to me!" Finn says. "If it wasn't for me, none of you would even be standi—"

"Don't interrupt," Sebastian interrupts. "It's rude. Anyway, the guys told me all about your little adventure, and I've got to say, boy was I wrong about you. Walking right up to the Fire Lord and trying to shiv her? That takes some stones, my friend, even if you got your ass kicked. You made a plan, carried it out, got within inches of success and managed to escape with your life. You even iced a dude on your way out! Your first kill…" He smiles. "I'd say congratulations, but you're probably not in the mood. Still, big milestone."

The last thing Blaine wants is congratulations. "Sebastian, you still haven't answered my question."

"Oh, you mean the reason I'm here?" Sebastian asks. "I took a few stray fire shots on my way out. Stumbled here, passed out, and when I woke up, your multiethnic band of 'buddies' had locked me up and were trying to frame me for the murders the cripple committed."

"I didn't murder anyone!" Artie shouts. "That was you! I saw you!"

"Says the guy on the wanted posters," Sebastian shrugs. "And I'm sure you've seen all sorts of interesting things, being that you're crazier than a tigerville on catnip."

Artie's eyes widen. "What the…motherfucking… I'm… I am not… how in the Hills…?"

"I was in the next room when you gave your little confession to the Avatar. Heard the whole thing," Sebastian says casually. "FYI, if you want to keep secrets, you should try a room with thicker walls."

Artie is left sputtering and speechless. Blaine is pretty sure he's never seen that before.

"As I was saying," Sebastian continues. "At that moment, I finally saw the true colors of our so-called friends here. See, I've been around. I know how foreigners operate, so once I realized they were working against us, it didn't take me long to suss out their evil plan. Unfortunately, there wasn't much I could do about it…" He nods at Jeff. "…that is, until Jeff here stumbled into my room by mistake. We had a nice long chat, and it turns out, he was just as angry about all of this as I was. So he set me free, and I decided to do my patriotic duty and inform my fellow citizens of the foreign plot to destroy our country and our freedom. We Fire Nationals look out for each other, am I right?"
"So you're the one who told them all of that stuff?" Blaine asks.

"I told them the truth," Sebastian says. "I can see how that might upset some people."

"But it's not true!" Blaine says. "None of it is true! Sebastian, you can't just go around saying stuff like that about my friends."

"Your friends just attacked your country!" Jeff interjects. "The Avatar smashed through our entire fleet. Who knows how many people he's killed?"

"We tried to stop him!" Finn says.

"And a damn fine job you did," Sebastian says. "After he'd already destroyed everything."

Blaine shakes his head. "Guys, I'm sure... I'm sure there's an explanation for that, he didn't mean —"

"Didn't mean to?" Sebastian scoffs. "You don't get out of bed and trip and destroy a fleet of warships by mistake. Kurt just annihilated half your army!"

"Kurt saved Blaine's life!" Rachel says.

"Of course he did!" Jeff jumps in. "Because Blaine is the only thing he cares about!"

"Stop!" Blaine orders. "Everyone just stop! No one is trying to abduct me! We've already been, through this, we've..."

And then it hits him.

"...we've already been through this," he repeats.

"What do you mean?" Sebastian says.

"This is the second time my friends have been convinced that someone is trying to abduct me. And it's the second time they've almost fought over it, while you stood in the middle," Blaine says. "It's almost like you're doing it on purpose..."

Blaine intends it as an observation, but Sebastian hears an accusation, and at that moment, something changes. A crack appears in Sebastian's mask—a small one, quickly mended, but enough for Blaine to see through it. Enough for him to see the cold, calculating truth beneath the charming exterior.

It's a split second that lasts a lifetime. Blaine's world shifts on its axis, and Sebastian sees it happen. He can see Blaine mentally recounting every interaction they've ever had, the meaning of every word they've spoken to each other shifting in his mind.

The game has changed. Time for a shift in strategy...

"Blaine, why are you doing this?" Sebastian asks. "I figured the choice between your people and a bunch of foreigners would be a no-brainer for the Fire Prince."

Blaine narrows his eyes at him. "I'm not 'choosing' between my friends," he says. "To me, there is no difference between them. Everyone in this room is a friend... except for maybe you. What are you, Sebastian?"

Sebastian glares at him. "I'm the guy who saved your life," he says. "And I'm trying to save you
right now, don't you get it? The Avatar is trying to control you!"

"No, I don't think so," Blaine says. "The only one trying to control me is you."

"Preach!" Artie says. "Tell it like it is!"

"Did anyone ask for the input of a legless lemurillo? Because I sure didn't!" Sebastian barks.

"What do you want from me, Sebastian?" Blaine asks. "What's your angle?"

"Angle?" Sebastian scoffs. "I risked my life to save you, and you think I'm working an angle?"

"Kurt risked his life to save me more than you, and that's what you're accusing him of," Blaine says. "Sounds to me like you might be projecting."

"Ohhhh, frostbite!" Finn says.

"Shut up, you blubbering whalesquid," Sebastian spits. "Don't you have a fishing boat to choke on?"

"Why did you save me, Sebastian?" Blaine asks. "I'm curious."

"Because I felt like it," Sebastian says. "It was a spur-of-the-moment decision."

Blaine nods. "I see. You make an awful lot of those?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sebastian asks.

"I'm just saying…" Blaine shrugs. "You turn on a copper coin. You betrayed your friends in the Navy to save me just like that. Snap. "Just the other day, you told me you didn't believe in teamwork and patriotism, but now you're all gung-ho Fire Nation. That's quite a turnaround."

"A guy can't have a change of heart?" Sebastian asks.

"You tell me," Blaine says. "It seems like every time I get a bead on you, you switch directions. You're a rich world traveler who has it all, yet you give it up. You join the Navy, even though you're not patriotic. And then you gave up the Navy to help me, because you felt like it. And now you're trying to save me from the evil Avatar, because you're suddenly patriotic again? Something about that just doesn't add up."

Blaine can see the situation slipping through Sebastian's fingers like a slime snake. But Sebastian is wilier than Blaine realizes. "Oh, no…" he says, shaking his head. "We're too late."

"What?" Jeff asks.

"They've already done it," Sebastian says, voice and expression matching in mourning. "He's brainwashed. He's one of them now."

"I'm not brainwashed, Sebastian," Blaine says.

"No?" Sebastian presses. "Riddle me this; what kind of Prince attacks the person who saved his life? What kind of Prince sides with foreigners over his own people? What kind of Prince defends a monster that just killed thousands of his own soldiers?"

The questions throw him just a bit, but fortunately, Blaine is not alone in this fight.
"The kind of Prince that had some sense in his head, that's what kind!" Mercedes calls out.

Sebastian blinks and turns up his ear. "I'm sorry, did you say something? I saw your mouth moving, but all I heard was the mating call of a female fishopotamus in heat."

You can practically hear Mercedes's patience snap. "Oh, HILLS no you did not—"

Blaine holds his hand up. "Don't," he says. "Don't let him get to you."

Sebastian shakes his head sadly. "If only you were as concerned for your own people as you were for these foreigners."

The anger comes hot and quick, but Blaine takes his own advice and pushes it away. "These 'foreigners' helped me out when no one else would. The 'monster' that just destroyed the fleet is going to save the world. And they've saved my life way more than you." He glares at Sebastian. "Now, it's my turn to ask questions: why did you save me?"

"Because I felt like it, I already told you!" Sebastian says. "Would you have preferred me to pump you full of arrows?"

"Arrows…" Nick chimes in. "Wait a second—you're the one who shot all the dogs!"

"What do you mean?" Blaine asks.

"When we were at the Navy camp, I heard a couple guys talking. All the hunting dogs had been shot. There were like a dozen of them. That was Sebastian!" Nick says.

Blaine turns to Sebastian, an unmistakable 'got you' smirk on his face. "You only shot two or three dogs when I was with you, which means you had to have taken out the rest before we even met. That doesn't sound very spur-of-the-moment."

Sebastian clinches his fist, his voice rising. "I am not the one on trial here!" he growls.

"Oh, I think the Dragon Hawks would beg to differ," Blaine says.

Sebastian turns and sees the Hawks eying him with universal skepticism. Even Jeff, his biggest ally, no longer seems certain of anything.

"You are quite the conundrum, Sebastian," Blaine says. "So many questions, so few answers. Since you don't like answering repeat questions, let's try a new one… what's a fishopotamus?"

Sebastian blinks at him, taken aback. "It's an animal."

"Really?" Blaine says. "I've never seen one. What about you guys? You know of any fishopotamuses?"

The Hawks shake their heads 'no.'

"What about you, Rachel?" Blaine asks.

"I've never even heard of such a thing," she says.


"We got plenty of fishopotamus in the Earth Kingdom," Mercedes says with a smirk.
"Legless lemurillos, too," Artie says. "Funny little things. They can't walk, but *man* can they roll."

Even Finn gets in on the action. "And just FYI," he says, mocking Sebastian. "Blubbering whalesquids only live in cold water. Like, say, around the poles. Definitely not in the Fire Nation oceans."

"That's interesting," Blaine says. "You use animals from the Earth Kingdom and the oceans to insult people without even thinking about it."

"I've traveled extensively," Sebastian says through gritted teeth. "I've been very open about that."

"It's not what you're saying that confuses me," Blaine says. "It's what you *aren't*. You didn't use any Fire Nation animals. And I can't remember you using a single Fire Nation expression in the entire time that I've known you."

"Ooh, ooh!" Rachel says. "I noticed that! I noticed that too!"

Sebastian throws his arms up. "Agni's butt plug, *so what?*"

"The more we dig, the less sense you make," Blaine says. "Who are you *really*, Sebastian? What are you trying to pull?"

Sebastian is quickly losing ground, and he knows it. But a cornered animal is at its most dangerous, and he still has one trick up his sleeve…

He turns to the Dragon Hawks, and goes full-tilt. "This is stupid. Why are we even listening to these filthybenders? Do you not remember what they *did*?" he shouts. "They destroyed a military base! They annihilated a fleet! They killed an entire army! How many people do you think were on those ships? How many bodies are floating face-down in the harbor, bloated and swollen from drowning? How many dead soldiers, burnt to a crisp, smashed into pulp, torn to shreds, the water turning red with their blood?"

The Hawks quickly tense up, none more than Jeff. His face turns red, his eyes clench shut, his lip quivers and his fist clenches so hard it shakes.

"They are the *enemy!*" Sebastian shouts. "They've already brainwashed Blaine, and unless we shut them up, we'll be next! It's time to avenge everyone that died today. It's time to stand up to the enemies of our country. It's time to get our Prince back and undo what they did to him, to show the world what the Fire Nation is made of. It's time to **fight! Are you with me?**"

Jeff throws a flaming fist towards the sky. "Burn hard!"

The rest of the Hawks (sans Nick) follow suit. "**Burn bright!**"

"**Burn them!**" Sebastian says.

The Hawks start to charge, but Blaine goes into full royalty mode and sends them screeching to a halt with a single regal hand. "Wait!" he commands. "I have one final question…"

"Don't listen to him!" Sebastian says.

"*Who won the War of the Silver Flame?*" Blaine asks.

"Go! Attack!" Sebastian says. "Why are you all staring at me?"

The Hawks seem somewhat torn.
"Why not just answer his question?" Nick says.

"Yeah, it's easy," Jeff says.

"We don't have time for this!" Sebastian says.

"Your excuses are longer than the answer," Blaine says. "Come on, Sebastian. A Fire Nation first grader could answer this question. Can't you?"

Sebastian stands and sweats. "Um…"

"You can't, can you?" Blaine grins. "Because you are not—nor were you ever—a Fire Nation first grader. You're not from the Fire Nation at all!"

And just like that, the game is over. Sebastian has lost.

The Hawks immediately turn on him, treating him with the same suspicion and hostility he tried to direct towards the others. Eight firebenders and a Fire Prince all have their bending trained on him. Sebastian raises his hands in surrender. "So, you finally figured it out," he says with a strange smirk. "Took you long enough."

"Sometimes I can be a bit too trusting for my own good," Blaine says. "The answer was 'The Andersons,' by the way."

"Shit!" Sebastian says. "I almost said that."

"You were using me," Jeff says. "You were using all of us!"

"And man, was it easy," Sebastian says. "You birdbrains pecked the lies from my hands like breadcrumbs. You'd believe literally anything I said, as long as it was about a foreigner. Hills, towards the end I was saying the craziest shit I could think of, just to see if there was a limit on your stupidity. And there wasn't. There is no bottom to how dumb, how xenophobic, how hateful you flaming assholes can be." He chuckles. "You have no idea how hard it was not to laugh."

Jeff's face is growing redder by the second.

"Enough, Sebastian," Blaine says.

But Sebastian doesn't listen. "Tell me, Jefferly, he says with a smirk. "Was dear old dad as much of a half-brained racist as his useless son? I'd ask him myself, but I'm guessing he's closer to a bowl of chunky tomato soup than a person."

"Shut up," Jeff growls.

"Don't listen to him," Nick says.

"Can't say I'm too torn up about it, though," Sebastian grins. "Get it? Torn up? Like papa was torn into string cheese?"

"I said shut up!" Jeff shouts.

"Sebastian, stop it, or I'll stop you myself!" Blaine says.

Sebastian's grin drops, and he looks at Jeff with the coldest eyes Blaine has ever seen. "I hope it hurt," he says quietly. "I hope it still hurts. I hope he's alive right now, bleeding in agony and crying because he'll never see precious baby Jeff again. Because he'll never get to tell you how
much he wishes you'd *never been born.*"

"**SHUT UP!**"

The world seems to slow down, a thousand things happening in the span of a single second. Jeff lunges at Sebastian, whose hands are still raised. Nick reaches for him, but his hand barely whiffs his armor. Jeff cocks a flaming fist, and Sebastian produces a knife from his sleeve. Blaine sprints forward as Mercedes, Artie, and Finn reach for their elements. Jeff hurls a wild punch at Sebastian's head. Sebastian sidesteps it easily and knees Jeff in the stomach, doubling him over. The knife flips in his hand and descends, aiming at the back of Jeff's neck.

And Blaine is suddenly hit with the terrible realization that he is about to watch someone else die.

But then, something unexpected happens. Blaine, at full sprint, is overtaken by an unlikely hero. Rachel dashes past him, throwing her hands and the wind towards Jeff. The firebender is blown out of harm's way, Sebastian's knife catching only empty air as it descends.

The world is still for just a moment, all present attempting to process what just happened.

The Hawks recover quickly and send several fireballs at the would-be murderer. Sebastian dodges by lunging at the person closest to him—which just so happens to be Rachel, thanks to her little stunt. The amateur airbender is much better at instinctive life-saving than she is at fighting, and it takes him less than a second to turn her into a human shield, his arm around her neck and his knife at her throat.

"Nobody move," Sebastian says.

Blaine is taken aback. "Sebastia—"

"Do not test me," Sebastian says, tightening his hold. "I am through playing around."

"Help!" Rachel cries. "He's… choking… me!"

"It's gonna be okay, Rach!" Finn says.

"Easy… for you… to say!" Rachel chokes out.

Sebastian squeezes a little tighter, just to shut her up. "Hands by your sides, people. I see bending, I start cutting."

Blaine maintains his stance. "Sebastian, let her go! You're surrounded; there's no way for you to win this."

"If I don't win," Sebastian says, now starting to choke Rachel in earnest. "Nobody wins. Got it?"

A single tense moment of hesitation, and Blaine slowly drops out of his stance. The others follow suit.

Sebastian's chokehold eases, and Rachel gasps for precious air. "Good," he says. "Hands by your sides, feet on the ground. Don't try anything. I see so much as a spark, one stray drop, or a pebble that I don't like…" He presses the knife to Rachel's neck. "…miss airbender is going to get a new airhole. Are we clear?"

Finn pales, but remains still despite himself.

Blaine tries to stay calm. "Alright, Sebastian. What do you want?"
"You," Sebastian answers. "I walk out of here and you walk with me. No one follows us. Simple as that."

"So you were after me," Blaine says. "Why?"

"Leverage," Sebastian says. "Somebody wants you. I have you. I turn you in and get something in return."

"So that's it? You just saved me for the reward money?" Blaine asks. "Why didn't you just turn me in at the beginning?"

"The money wasn't enough," Sebastian says. "I wanted something a little different. So I helped you escape and used you as a bargaining chip to negotiate new terms."

"You were using me all along," Blaine says. "I can't believe I ever trusted you."

"And I almost had it, too," Sebastian says. "I was this close. Our little mask-hunting trip? A total set-up. Kind of sad I skipped out on it; I hear you and the blonde girl know each other. Would've been an interesting reunion."

"You were taking me to Quinn?" Blaine says. "What did she have that you wanted?"

"I didn't want anything from her," Sebastian says. "She was just my liaison to the Fire Lord."

Artie glares at him. "So that's what was in your little death-note? That's what you killed people to send a message about?"

"It was the easiest way to be heard," Sebastian shrugs. "I'd have killed a hundred if that's what it took."

His cavalier attitude almost pushes Blaine over the edge. "You're sick," he growls.

Sebastian responds with shocking ferocity, his eyes almost feral. "I am what you people made me. We all are."

"What are you talking about?" Blaine shouts. "Who are you?"

Sebastian pulls Rachel's head back. "Enough! We're wasting time. I want you, and I'm not leaving here without you. Now, do we have a deal..." His knife scrapes against Rachel's throat. "...or do we have a mess?"

"Sebastian, stop," Blaine says.

The blade presses down harder. "I need an answer!" Sebastian says. "Five..."

"Don't do this!" Blaine pleads.

"Four... three..."

"Please, no!" Finn shouts.

"Two... one—"

"Okay!" Blaine shouts. "Okay, fine, take me!"

The room is silent and still. The Hawks stare at their leader in awe.
"What?" Jeff says. "Blaine, no… dude, you can't…"

"I have to," Blaine says. "I'm sorry."

Sebastian smiles. "I knew you wouldn't let me down."

Blaine's eyes are pure fire, but his face is surrender as he starts to walk.

"Ah-ah-ah!" Sebastian says, pressing the knife in again. "You didn't say 'mother may I.' Do exactly as I say, and no one gets hurt." Blaine stops and stands utterly still. "Put your hands on your head, turn around and walk backwards, slowly. You're gonna take the airhead's place as my knifing buddy."

Blaine's jaw is clenched so tight his teeth might be cracking, but he follows the orders dutifully. Sebastian's eyes never leave him as he slowly walks towards Blaine, keeping the rest of the rabble in his peripheral in case they try anything.

He's so focused, he doesn't even notice the puff of dust erupt from the ground in front of him. Nor does he notice the gentle breeze that guides it into Rachel's nostrils. The airbender sniffs at the dust, and her reaction is only natural.

"Ah… ah…"

"Be quiet," Sebastian says.

"Ah… ahhh…"

"I said quiet!" Sebastian growls.

"Ahhh-"

"Are you deaf—" He looks down at her, and his eyes widen.

"-CHOOOOOO!

And everyone goes flying. Rachel's sneeze packs a gale-force wallop that scatters the group in every direction. The Hawks sail into the warehouse proper, while Blaine and Team Avatar are blasted to the end of the hall. Rachel rockets towards the ceiling, and Sebastian slams into a wall.

The blow knocks the wind out of his lungs and the knife from his hands. He falls to his knees and scrambles the weapon in a blind panic. The second his hand grips the handle, it is engulfed in flames.

"AH!" he hisses, withdrawing the burned limb and looking up expecting Blaine.

It's not Blaine. He wishes it was Blaine. "Uh-oh."

The earth stands him up and then every element assaults him in turn. Half-frozen slush slams him in the face like a iceberg bitchslap. Stone flippers bat him back and forth like a kuei ball. Jets of flame whip across his torso like fiery lizard tongues, every hit punctuated by a command.

"DON'T. YOU. EVER. TOUCH. MY. FRIENDS…"

The relentless assault stops just long enough for him to see the Avatar's rage face as whips up some air for the finale.
"...AGAIN!"

And then Sebastian is wind-blasted clear across the warehouse, smashing a stack of crates a vanishing beneath the rubble.

"Sweet La that was gratifying," Kurt says.

"Kurt!" Blaine shouts, rushing towards him. "Kurt, are you alright?"

Kurt exhales to calm himself. "I'm fine, Blaine, I—"

A clamor erupts from the warehouse as Sebastian suddenly bursts out of the rubble, lurching forward and swinging a broken plank like a drunken dance partner. The Hawks quickly surround him, but are hesitant to move in. "Come on!" he slurs. 'I'm not done yet! I'll take... I'll take all of you! Bring it on, bring it—"

And then he is knocked thoroughly unconscious by a falling Rachel.

"You meanie!" Rachel says, stomping on his back like she's giving him the world's angriest massage. "How dare you? We had polite conversation together!"

She continues to put footprints on him until Finn rushes in and wraps her in a full body hug so she can have a nice cathartic cry.

If he gets a little teary too, it's just because he's so glad she's okay.

The Hawks drag Sebastian off to be re-restrained, with Jeff personally volunteering to tie the ropes extra-tight. After Rachel calms down, Team Avatar gathers for a little pow-wow, with plentiful 'are-you-okays' and 'yes-I'm-fines' exchanged every which way.

"I was listening to his little confession at my door," Kurt explains. "What was Sebastian even doing here?"

"He was here when we got back," Artie says. "We healed him up and tied him down, but he snake-tongued his way out of the bonds and played the Dragon Hawks like a tsungi horn."

"It wasn't that bad," Trent says petulantly.

"Like a tsungi horn," Artie repeats, miming the instrument and blowing a sour note. "WOOOOOONNNNK!"

"What should we do with him?" Rachel asks.

"Tie him up and leave him for the guards," Finn says, still practically hanging off Rachel like a large, fleshy cape. "He deserves whatever he gets."

"No," Blaine says.

Kurt blinks at him. "Please tell me you're not defending him."

"I'm not, but I still want some answers," Blaine says.

"About what?" Mercedes asks. "He confessed damn near everything."

Blaine shakes his head. "Something still doesn't add up. If he really almost had me, why did he
balk? Trying to kill Sue wrecked his entire plan. Why did he do it?"

"That is a mystery," Artie says. "One I strongly recommend we solve later. We need to bail. Thad and Sam are in enemy hands, and they know where we are. To be safe, we have to assume they'll squeal."

Kurt nods. "Good thinking," he says. "Just... one more thing." His eyes fall to the floor. "I just woke up and I don't remember the last several hours. I take it that means..." he trails off, but Finn, Artie, and Mercedes get the message instantly.

Mercedes nods. "I'm sorry, baby."

Kurt takes an unsteady breath. "How bad was it this time?"

Finn winces. "Bad," he says.

"How bad?" Kurt asks.

Artie looks down. "I don't even know where to—"

"Don't tell me," Kurt says. "Just... show me. Please."

Though hesitant, the group ultimately guides Kurt to a side room with a small window facing the sea. Kurt has to stand on a crate to look through, and when he sees the damage, he very nearly falls backwards. "Oh, no," he says, his voice almost keening.

The others move in to comfort him, but Kurt shakes his head, speaking in a broken voice. "I need to be alone for a moment."

Finn nods. "Come on. Let's help pack up."

The others solemnly exit, but Blaine remains, drawn to Kurt, yet unable to approach him. It's like a wall of polished glass stands between them. Blaine cannot look at Kurt for fear of his own reflection.

"Courage," he quietly whispers.

Not quiet enough, it seems. "I said alone, Blaine," Kurt sniffs.

"I'm sorry," Blaine sighs. "I'll go." He walks away, and Kurt doesn't even look at him, his eyes never leaving the world outside the window. In the doorway, he pauses and looks back at Kurt, willing to leave, but not without leaving something for Kurt. "It'll be okay."

Kurt turns to face him, red-eyed and wet faced, unable to even try and hide his anguish. "How can you say that?" he asks, almost angrily.

Blaine looks at him with complete honesty. "Because I believe it," he says. "Because it has to be."

The sadness remains firmly in place, but the anger, at least, seems to drain from Kurt very quickly. He sniffs. "I wish I could believe you," he says.

He turns back to the window, and Blaine quietly closes the door as he leaves, trying his hardest to keep believing it himself.

The world doesn't make it easy for him. No sooner than the door is closed, Blaine is confronted by a commanding Mercedes.
"Blaine, come with me. I need your help with Wes," she says.

Blaine feels like his soul was just yanked out through his nose. In the middle of all the drama and noise, he had almost completely forgotten about Wes and David. That they even came close to leaving his mind immediately makes him feel like The Worst Person.

His feelings must be pretty obvious, because Mercedes makes at least a half-hearted effort to comfort him. "Don't worry, he's fine. Doped out of his mind on the drugs Artie stole, but fine."

"Fine?" Blaine asks, daring to hope. "You mean… he isn't…?"

Mercedes sighs, gives him a hard look, and all pretense of comfort vanishes. "Okay, I was gonna sugarcoat this for you, but I guess I'm out of sugar. Here's the straight dope: your boy is blind. He's lucky he even still has eyes. You can thank Finn for that."

Hope has hooks. When it leaves, it always pulls a piece of you with it. "Oh…" Blaine says, trying to hide his internal bleeding.

He fails, and Mercedes is not having it. She grabs him and pulls him up straight, her grip just this side of crushing. "Stop it! Suck it up! Your friend is hurt and the last thing he needs is to hear you wibbling and weeping about it. This is not about you. Do what you want when you're alone. Scream, cry, punch the wall, I don't care. When you're around Wes, you suck it up and you be strong for him, you hear? He needs us to be strong for him right now."

It's harsh, but it's the truth. Her words feel like they should hurt, but something about Mercedes's steady grip makes him feel a little stronger. Just strong enough. "Yeah," he nods with a sniff.

"Say it like you mean it," Mercedes says. "Can you be strong for your friend?"

Blaine takes a deep breath, and speaks with utter conviction. "Yes."

Mercedes smiles and releases him. "Good. Come on."

He follows her to Wes's room, and the sight nearly levels him again. He's lying half-naked, torso covered in bandages, his eyes hidden behind a thick cloth bandage. They may be hidden now, but Blaine remembers what they looked like before. He suspects he always will. He can't even imagine what they must have looked like before Finn healed him. David not letting Blaine look at him probably saved all of their lives.

Mercedes gently prods him. "Wes? Wes, honey, wake up. It's time to go."

Wes groans. "Mercedes?"

"Yeah, it's me," Mercedes affirms.

Wes scrunches his face up. "Mercedes, am I… am I gravity? I feel… I feel as though perhaps I am not. Very… very floaty. I feel very floaty," he says, his head lulling from side to side. "Am I in space?"

"Yes, honey, you're in space." Mercedes motions Blaine over, and they help him sit up. Blaine remains silent for the time being, not trusting his voice.

"I thought so," Wes says, nodding sagely. "Are you in space?"

"Well, I must be if I'm talking to you," Mercedes says. Blaine keeps Wes upright as Mercedes
retrieves a tattered old robe.

"That is very sound logic," Wes says with a groggy smile. "You're smart."

Mercedes can't help but mirror his smile. "Yes, I am," she says. "Thank you for noticing."

Together, she and Blaine guide Wes's pliant arms into the sleeves.

Suddenly, Wes looks distressed. "Wait… why are you in space? There's no earth in space. What will you bend?"

"Sometimes rocks fall to earth from space," Mercedes says. "So there are probably more rocks up here somewhere."

"That's true!" Wes says, suddenly enlightened. "Well, I'm very glad of that. Space is very dangerous. You should never be in space without bendables."

As he ties the robes shut, Blaine can't help but chuckle at his friend's inebriated ramblings.

But his chuckle gives him away. Wes turns his head towards Blaine, and suddenly notices something very odd. "Mercedes? Did you always have four hands?"

Blaine snorts. "Wes, it's me. It's Blaine."

Wes brightens immensely. "Blaine! You're in space too!" And then it darkens again. "Wait… you shouldn't be in space!"

"I came here for you," Blaine says as he and Mercedes prepare to stand Wes up. "I'm here to help you."

They lift him up, but Wes is limp as a freshly-steamed noodle, far too wobbly to walk on his own. They are quickly forced to sit him back down again.

"No, no, no," Wes says. "Blaine, you mustn't be in space. It's dangerous. What if you fall?"

"I fall all the time," Blaine says casually.

"Yes, but space is very high," Wes says sternly. "Your father would be very upset if I let you fall from space. You must promise me you will be very careful."

Blaine's mood dims just a bit, but he keeps his voice steady. "I promise."

"Good," Wes says with a smile.

Mercedes eyes Wes carefully. "I guess I'll just have to carry him," she says. "Wes, I'm gonna put you on my back, okay?"

"Okay," Wes says. "You won't let me float away, will you?"

"No," Mercedes says. "I'll keep you safe."

"Alright then," Wes says. He holds out his arms, and Mercedes wraps them around her neck and hoists him onto her back. Blaine helps adjust his weight and steady him.

"There we go. Hold on tight," Mercedes says. They start towards the door with Blaine tailing them, unable to hide his growing grin at their exchange.
"Where are we going?" Wes asks.

"It's a surprise," Mercedes says.

"Oooh, I love those!" Wes says. "Will Blaine be there?"

"Yes."

"And David?"

"Yes, David will be there," Mercedes says.

"Wonderful..." Wes sighs, nuzzling into her neck. "Is... is Blaine still here?"

Blaine's grin slips just slightly. "I'm still here, Wes."

"Good," Wes says, with a yawn. "I'm... very sleepy," he sighs.

"You can go back to sleep," Blaine says. "We'll take care of you."

"Okay," Wes nods. "Remember... remember what I said," he drones, his head drooping. "Be very careful. Space is very high." He settles down against Mercedes, and Blaine is almost positive he's asleep when he quietly sighs one final warning for his young friends. "And... watch your step," he says. "Space is also... dark. Very... very dark..."

Blaine stops in his tracks and quietly watches them head out the door. When they are gone, he gently closes the door behind them, leaving himself alone in the small storage room.

Alone, meaning that he now has Mercedes's permission to do whatever he wants.

He makes ample use of the opportunity, doing all she suggested and more, trying in vain to drown out the small, traitorous voice in the back of his head reminding him, over and over again...

"This is your fault. You did this to him."

He emerges from Wes's room, red-eyed and drained, but feeling a little better. The first thing he sees is the Dragon Hawks in new outfits. Disguising themselves as soldiers is no longer an option, so now, they have opted to dress in rags and disguise themselves as hobos. Artie is helping by plastering them with dirt.

There is unmistakable tension in the air. The Hawks all look nervous and twitchy, save for Nick, who is nowhere to be seen, and Jeff, who sits off to the side and looking utterly wretched.

It is only just now that he realizes they aren't even supposed to be here.

"Guys," he says, walking over. "Why are you still here? I thought I told you to go home."

Trent shrugs. "We don't want to go home," he says. "We were never here for Thad. We're here for you. All of us."

"Really?" Blaine says.

"Of course," Trent says. "We're not going to risk our lives for someone we hate."

The Hawks take turns giving their collective assurances to him, and Blaine is left with a bright grin.
at the end. "Thanks, guys," he says quietly. "I'm... blown away by your loyalty, and thankful for your friendship."

He pauses for a second, taking a deep breath.

"And... as a friend," Blaine says, his smile dropping. "I have to say, I'm very disappointed in you all."

The Hawks headtilt in collective befuddlement

"How could you buy into all of that crap?" Blaine says. "How could you turn against the people who have done nothing but help us this whole time? I thought you were better than this."

They at least have the good sense to look ashamed. Blaine doesn't miss Artie's small satisfied smirk as he smears some mud over Trent's flushed cheeks.

"It's my fault," Jeff says, standing up and walking over. "I'm the one who let Sebastian out, and I'm the one who told everyone to trust him. I'm sorry. I really, am, but..." He sighs. "I was just so angry... and... and worried..."

Blaine remembers Sebastian's remark. "Your dad..."

Jeff nods. "I don't know what happened to him. He's almost always stationed on a ship, and the ships..." He takes a breath, and looks down at Artie. "Why did he do it? If the Avatar isn't evil, if he doesn't hate us, then why did he do all that? Why would he destroy so much?"

Artie pauses his make-up artistry and takes a moment to think. He looks up at Jeff. "Is a hurricane evil?"

Jeff blinks. "No, but—"

"Can a hurricane hate?" Artie continues.

Jeff shakes his head. "No..."

"So it is with the Avatar," Artie says. "What you saw wasn't Kurt. It was a force of nature acting through him. He can't control it."

"Oh..." Jeff says. "Wait, is that supposed to make us feel better?"

"Errr, what I mean is, he can't control it yet," Artie says. "It's kind of complicated, and—"

"And it's no excuse," Kurt says.

The whole room turns to see him march out of his room, sorrowful but resolute. Blaine feels something hitch in his chest as he watches Kurt steel himself and speak frankly. "The Avatar State is a defense mechanism. It happens when I get too scared, angry, or sad to think straight. The whole of the Avatar Spirit, all of my past lives, channel their energy through me and take control. The power is incredible, but it's..." He takes a moment to collect his thoughts. "...it's too big. It only cares about balance. It only sees the big picture. It doesn't see all the little people it hurts, any more than an earthbender sees all the ants he crushes."

Artie scrunches his nose. "Huh. I never thought of that. Man, it must suck to be a bug in the EK."

"I'm supposed to learn to control it, but right now I can't, and I..." A shuddery breath. "I thought Blaine was dead and I just... I lost it. I know I can never make up for the damage done here, but I
want you to know I am so, so sorry.”

Jeff looks conflicted. "I don't..." His jaw clenches. "I want to forgive you, and I know... it wasn't your fault, but I just... that doesn't... that doesn't change what happened. There's so much damage, and..."

"It's okay," Kurt says. "It's okay if you can't forgive me. I understand. The damage I did... it was terrible, and awful, and—"

"Maybe not as bad as you think," Finn says, coming from behind to wrap an arm around his brother.

"What do you mean?" Blaine asks.

"I was right in the middle of the aftermath," Finn says. "I saw a lot of stuff, a lot of wreckage, and a lot of broken ships, but I just realized something I didn't see: people."

Kurt blinks. "Really?"

Finn nods. "Not even one. Alive or dead."

"But... how?" Jeff asks. "That's—"

Trent smacks himself in the forehead. "Oh, for fuck's sake—the evacuation! Sam told everyone to beat it!"

"That's right," Flint says. "I forgot all about that."

"Oh, yeah!" Artie says with a grin. "And even before that, the commander guy ordered everyone off the ships to help fight Kurt."

"That's true..." Jeff says. "But then Quinn told them to come back. What if...?"

"INCOMING!"

That's all the warning they get before another window falls victim to the avian wrecking ball that is Pavarotti. A breathless Nick dashes in, hot on its tail as the bird casually dives down and drops a canister in Jeff’s hands.

"Open it," Nick says.

Jeff opens it and pulls out the message. His jaw drops. "It's... it's from my dad," he says, sprouting a grin that grows brighter by the second. "He's fine. He says... 'the death toll was minimal, thanks to the Fire Lord's brilliant strategic evacuation.' You guys were right!"

Kurt nearly melts with relief. "Oh, thank La. Thank the heavens. Thank... thank... Finn, get me a list of spirits, I'm too happy to remember their names and I need to thank them all."

Jeff continues to scan the letter, looking a bit confused. "He assures me he isn't hurt, though the clean-up will take a while. And he's... shocked that the news of the attack reached Dalton so quickly. Wait, did somebody send him a letter or something?"

"Yeah, that would be me," Nick says with a satisfied smile. "I saw how messed up you were, so I sent a letter to your dad that said it was from you. I didn't tell you, because... well, I didn't want to get your hopes up if it came back undelivered. Sorry if that seems a little weird, but—"
Jeff cuts him off with a hug tight enough to audibly pop his back. "You are the best friend in the world."

"Not the best," Nick says with a shrug. "Top five, maybe."

Rachel and Mercedes come in from outside. "Wes and David are strapped onto Speedy and ready to be shipped," Rachel reports.

"Y'all ready to head out?" Mercedes asks.

"Just a second," Blaine says. "Now that everyone is here..." He looks at the Hawks. "I think my friends have something to say. I trust them to do the right thing."

The Hawks adopt a collective stance of penitence. Trent speaks first. "We're sorry for... umm... you know... the whole attempted coup thing."

"And the name-calling," Cole adds.

"And the insinuations about your relatives, and the sexual proclivities thereof," Flint says.

Jeff steps out from the group to give an apology of his own. "And I'm especially sorry. I was a complete and utter toolbag to you guys, and none of you deserved it. I was being a selfish, angry dick. You guys... you saved our lives. You saved me twice!" he says, smiling at Rachel. "So thanks for that. And, again, I am really, really, super, incredibly sorry. I have never been more ashamed of myself..."

Kurt gives him a small smile. "It sounds to me like you were emotional and you just lost control. I can hardly hold that against you; I know how it feels."

Jeff grins back. "Yeah, I guess you do, don't you?"

Blaine's heart warms at the reconciliation, but he knows the apologies aren't done yet. Now, it's his turn. "I owe the biggest apology of all." He bows his head. "I thought I was protecting you all by going off by myself, but it turns out I'm the only reason you were hurt at all. I'm the only reason any of this even happened, and I don't... I don't even know how to account for all the damage I caused." He swallows. "All I can do is apologize and promise that I will never do anything like that again. I hope you can forgive me."

Kurt gives him a significant look. "I think..." he says with a small smile. "...it'll be okay. I think we'll all be okay."

Blaine grins back.

"Okay, this is touching and all, but we really should find a safer place to puke our feelings," Artie says. "Can we go now?"

Blaine turns to the Hawks. "How about it, guys? You ready?"

"Ready!" the Hawks chorus.

"Then let's move out!"

Turn out, Artie already scouted them a new hideout—an abandoned factory that was condemned for some kind of dangerous chemical spill. According to him, there are plenty of animals living there, so it can't be too dangerous. The group moves quickly, dividing into small, ever-shifting
groups so as not to draw too much attention to themselves. Artie guides them with cleverly placed markers, making sure no one gets lost.

Blaine sticks close to Kurt the whole time, watching him. Kurt, meanwhile, stares towards the ocean and the wreckage therein, still not quite able to fathom it.

Blaine moves in close. "Are you alright?" he whispers.

Kurt shakes his head. "I'm glad that few people were killed, but..." A sigh. "A few is still more than I would've wanted. The fact that no one was onboard those ships is a miracle. Sam might just be the biggest hero of us all. It was luck, Blaine. That's the only reason I'm not responsible for a massacre."

Blaine shakes his head. "Kurt, this wasn't your fault. You couldn't control yourself."

"But it's my responsibility," Kurt says. "I'm supposed to control it, but I don't know how. I don't even know where to begin!" He clenches his jaw. "I hate this! I hate waking up and wondering what kind of destruction I've caused today, I hate not being in control, I hate losing myself inside of this... thing." He swallows. "I hate the Avatar State. I'd be happy if I never saw it again."

Blaine is struck suddenly with the terrible image of a Kurt possessed, the fury of four elements using him as a human conduit. He shudders. "It is pretty scary," he admits.

Kurt looks like Blaine just impaled a puppy on his brooch. Great job, Prince Comforting! Very reassuring.

"But I guess it's supposed to be?" Blaine says. "I mean... you know, to bad people."

Kurt shakes his head and turns back towards the ocean.

"I'm sorry," Blaine says. "I'm sorry I put you through this."

"I know," Kurt says.

Blaine takes a breath. "But... you shouldn't dwell on it. Beating yourself up over it won't help."

"So what am I supposed to do? This isn't the first time I've done this," Kurt says. "But it's by far the most damage I've ever done. I can't stop thinking about it."

"I don't know," Blaine says. "I think maybe we just have to... accept it and move on."

"You make it sound so easy," Kurt says. "After this, I feel like I'm going to spend the rest of my life living in fear. Wondering when I'm going to lose control again. When I'm going to hurt someone I love. How can I just move past that?"


Kurt blinks at him. "You mean like liquid courage? Because me and alcohol do not get along—"

"No," Blaine grins. "Courage. 'I am afraid, but I won't let that stop me.'"

"Thank you, Mister Dictionary," Kurt says flatly.

Blaine tries to explain. "It's just... something my father told me once. If you can't get rid of fear, all you can do is move on in spite of it. That's what courage means. So when I you feel like you can't go on because you're too afraid... you just say 'courage' and do it anyway." He nudges him with his
shoulder. "Try it."

Kurt takes a deep breath and stares thoughtfully into the horizon, saying dramatically "Courage."

Blaine smiles. "Feel better?"

"No," Kurt says flatly.

"...oh," Blaine says, his smile faltering.

Kurt looks pensive for a moment. "Well... maybe a little."

Blaine's grin returns in full force, and Kurt mirrors it.

"I'm still mad at you," Kurt says.

Blaine nods. "Me too."

"But... I think we can move past it," Kurt says. "For now... I think I just need to find something else to focus on."

"Like what?" Blaine asks.

Kurt squints at something just beyond him. "Like that..."

And then, for some odd reason, Kurt spends the rest of the trip staring at Sebastian. The unconscious boy is being transported in a wheelbarrow, disguised (somewhat appropriately) as a pile of garbage. Kurt stares at him like he's a puzzle box that holds contain the key to all of life's mysteries. He seems determined to solve Sebastian.

By the time they get to the factory, he has apparently succeeded. "I think I know who Sebastian is," Kurt whispers to him as they enter the building.

Blaine raises a brow. "Do tell."

"Not quite yet," Kurt says with a smile. "We only get to do this once, and I want to do it right. First, I need to set the stage."

Blaine blinks, thoroughly confused. "Set the stage...?"

"Come along, darling," Kurt says, grabbing his hand and merrily dragging him off. "We have a show to prepare for..."

Sebastian awakens to an ice-cold splash of water. He full-body flinches and nearly flips out of the chair he's tied to.

He coughs and sputters as his eyes adjust to reveal a room, small and dark, dimly lit by a single oil lamp on a table in front of him. Two figures are highlighted by the light: Blaine and Kurt, their faces matching expressions cut in merciless stone. The room's other occupants are dim shadows—the Hawks on one side, Team Avatar on the other, standing around like spectators.

"Sebastian!" Kurt says, in mock joy. "So nice of you to join us."

Sebastian hides his ire behind a smile. "Cute," he says. "Is this your idea of an interrogation? 'Cause I gotta tell you, I've got nothing to say."
"But you've already told us so much," Blaine says. "Why stop now?"

Sebastian says nothing.

"What more could you possibly be hiding?" Kurt says, circling around the table.

"What further secrets do you keep?" Blaine says, circling the other side.

The two come to a stop right in front of him. Blaine lights a flame in his palm and holds it so that it casts their face in deep, imposing shadows.

Sebastian glares at them and says nothing.

"Let's look at the evidence," Kurt says. "We already know you're a liar."

"And a foreigner," Blaine adds.

"And a murderer," Kurt continues. "So whatever you're hiding must be even worse than those."

"You said you almost had me," Blaine says. "And you did. But the only reason your plan failed was because you bailed. Why would you turn on your benefactor? Why try to kill the person who has everything you need?" He strokes his chin thoughtfully. "It is a mystery. One that requires a careful mind, a keen eye, and vast, unfathomable intelligence to—"

"Oh, stop beating around the bush already!" Sebastian groans. "It's obvious you think you know the answer."

Blaine and Kurt stare at him in silence. Kurt's face is as stony as ever, but Blaine looks mildly confused. Kurt nudges him, and Blaine winces. "I'm sorry, he threw me off. I can't remember my next line."

Kurt sighs and shakes his head. "I knew we should have rehearsed this more."

Sebastian gapes. "Wow," he says. "I cannot believe I lost to this. I might actually die of shame."

"Should we just start over?" Blaine asks.

"No, the effect just wouldn't be the same," Kurt says. "I'll take it from here. I know the rest of the lines by heart."

"The spotlight is yours," Blaine says, graciously bowing and backing into the shadows.

"Could you hurry it up a little?" Sebastian asks. "If this disgusting love-fest keeps going, I might choke on my own vomit."

Kurt puts his hands on his hips. "Oh, you're not dying on us yet. Not while I still have a monologue to give." He clears his throat. "When Sue's master plan was decoded, you had quite the little episode. Your freak-out was very revealing. It was the first time I'd seen any emotion from you other than smug self-satisfaction. You cared. 'Why?' I wondered. Does he have family on the island? Friends? A lover?"

Sebastian stares at him, flatly unamused.

"'Perhaps,' I thought," Kurt continues. "'But perhaps there's more.' You see, when you snapped that day, I saw something in you... a kind of animal ferocity, a feral quality that was naggingly familiar to me. It took quite a bit of thinking, but I finally realized where I had seen it before."
Sebastian rolls his eyes, thoroughly done with this whole mess.

"That look in your eyes," Kurt continues. "It was the look of an animal. Or rather, a person who became an animal."

The shift is small, but noticeable. Sebastian suddenly becomes just a bit stiffer, his feigned nonchalance just a little less convincing.

"It was the look of someone who knows what it's like to fight for survival," Kurt continues. "Who knows what it's like to be abandoned and discarded. Someone who became an animal... because that's how they were treated."

A thin sheen of sweat has formed on Sebastian's brow. His eyes are rooted straight ahead, not looking at Kurt or much of anything at all.

"You said it yourself when you were talking to Blaine," Kurt continues. "'I am what you people made me.'"

Sebastian swallows, his breath suddenly seeming impossibly loud as the rest of the room grows silent in anticipation.

"I knew what you were then," Kurt says. "In the Fire Nation, there is one thing worse than being a lying traitor. One thing worse than being a foreigner, worse even than being a murderer. One secret... that if it were to get out... would seal your fate more surely than all of the above combined."

Sebastian closes his eyes, his posture remaining stiff.

"Do you want to say it, or should I?" Kurt asks, sounding almost sympathetic.

"Just get it over with," Sebastian says, eyes still shut.

Kurt nods, and turns calmly to his audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you..."

He gestures to his captive.

"Sebastian Smythe, Plague Survivor."

A low gasp ripples throughout the room, and it seems to push Sebastian past the breaking point. Without warning, he hacks up and spits the most disgusting wad he can manage, aiming squarely at the Dragon Hawks.

They practically fling themselves aside to escape it, falling over, around, and on top of each other as Sebastian engages in a mirthless, malicious laugh.

"What's the matter?" he asks, staring them all down with ice in his eyes. "Scared?"

A/N:

Up Next: The truth comes out at last. With nothing left to lose, Sebastian spills the beans, and not everyone is going to like what he has to say.

It's not a happy story, or a pretty one, but it's one that needs to be told.

It's the story of the survivors.
A/N 2: I am now on tumblr! You can follow me for more Solar Winds related tidbits, like unused character concepts and more fun info about the AU. Url is morkhan dot tumblr dot com.

Remember, reviews feed the muse and help me write faster. I love you all!
Exile Vilify, Part 1

Warnings: Discussion of past violence and humiliation.

Author's Note: Well, this certainly got away from me a bit! This chapter wins for 'most heavily revised in the whole damn story' because I swear I wrote it like fifty times before I was satisfied with it. There is plenty of juicy plot to be had here—and I'm not just talking about finally learning what Sebastian's deal is. ;)

Here's hoping the next chapter doesn't take me three months to write. XD


As the Hawks recover from their near-gross experience, Sebastian starts laughing. Full-body, face-reddening, breath-denying cackling.

Kurt is a bit freaked out.

"What exactly is so funny?" Blaine asks.

"Them!" Sebastian says, with a nod to the Hawks. "They're scared of me."

"We are not!" Trent protests.

"Are too, cowards," Sebastian says, smirking.

"Say that to my face!" Jeff challenges.

"Bring your face over here, and I will," Sebastian says.

Jeff starts towards him, but only makes it halfway through one step. "Oh, no you don't. I'm not falling for that again!"


"You smug little—!"

Jeff throws caution to the wind and charges. Then he throws himself to the wind to dodge Sebastian's second spitball. The Slobbering Sharp-spitter starts laughing again, only to replace cackles with coughs as his own loogie is shoved back down his throat.

Kurt lowers his bending hand and gives Sebastian a warning glare. "That's enough out of you," he says. "And I mean that literally; anything but words coming out of your mouth is going right back in. Try me. It'll be frozen next time."

Sebastian starts laugh-coughing, a mildly impressive feat.

"And as for you—" Kurt says, turning to the Dragon Hawks. "Get a hold of yourselves! Sebastian cannot infect you with a plague he doesn't have, so stop freaking out every time he looks at you."

The Hawks look suitably cowed. Sebastian, on the other hand, is still chuckling and sitting slightly crooked. Kurt squints at him. Something is... off.
"Sebastian, are you... feeling okay?" Kurt asks.

Sebastian wheezes his airway clear and sits back to stare at Kurt with wobbly eyes. "I'm dandy, Glitterbug," he says with a grin. "It doesn't matter now. I'm dead anyway."

"Then why are you laughing?" Kurt asks.

Sebastian shrugs. "If you can't laugh in the face of death, when can you?"

Artie gives him a strong side-eye. "Literally any other time?"

"No time left," Sebastian grins. "Death, remember? It doesn't matter... nothing matters. I'm done. I'm just... done."

Blaine gives him a cold glare. "Not yet, you aren't," he says. "You have a lot to answer for before we decide what to do with you, so you'd better stop laughing, and start talking."

"Talk?" Sebastian snorts so hard he sways. "Well, alright then. What do you want to talk about? Go on, ask me anything. I'm an open book... an open wound, bleeding all over your new tigerdillo rug..."

Kurt tilts his head at that image. What is going on in this boy's head?

Blaine, on the other hand, is unmoved. "Alright, how about you start by telling us who you really are?"

"Sebastian Smythe, professional Earth Kingdom rich kid." The boy boys as much as the chair will allow. "The pleasure is all yours."

"Hardly," Blaine mutters. "How did you wind up in the Fire Nation?"

Sebastian sits back with enough force to scrape the chair legs on the floor. "Parents were doing business with some Cinder Island hot shot when the plague hit."

"What business did they have on Cinder Island? I thought all international trade was suspended," Blaine says.

"Maybe, maybe not," Sebastian says. "Funny thing about laws—the richer you are, the less they matter."

"Why didn't you just leave?" Kurt asks.

"Couldn't," Sebastian shrugs. "Navy blew up our boat. Blew up all the boats, actually. Except their boats, 'cause that'd just be stupid..." He giggles. "Giggles. Just sailed up in the middle of the night, no warning or anything, and—"

What comes next can only be described as a performance piece titled 'The Coolest Fireworks Show Ever, as Rendered in Interpretive Dance by a Five-year-old in a Teenager's Body.' Sebastian starts whistling, whizz-banging, crackling, and popping, flailing and flinching with every imagined conflagration. He vividly reenacts the entire explosive affair, oblivious to the confused and frightened faces of the crowd.

Kurt's face is frozen in mortified awe as Finn leans in with a question. "Holy crap, how hard did you hit him?"

"Not that hard!" Kurt replies. "It was nothing that your healing hands couldn't fix."
Finn's mouth goes all 'o' and Kurt fights a groan.

"You did heal him, didn't you?" Kurt asks.

"Yeah, before!" Finn says. "I didn't have time to heal him when we got here."

"Oh, dear..." Kurt groans.

Sebastian's detonation derby runs out of fuel and the boy slouches breathless in his chair. "Ah, it was awesome. I guess you had to be there." He trails off. "Shame about our boat, though..." And suddenly, he is almost inaudible. "...I liked our boat."

Blaine's face is a balancing act of confusion and anger, tilting further towards confusion with every second. "How did you escape the Quarantine?"

Sebastian sits back. "Road on a boat," he says cheerily. "Shitty ride, way overpriced. Took like... like a dozen people to pay the toll..." And suddenly, he's pensive, almost sad. "They didn't... they didn't tell me. They said I'd know the signal, but I didn't... I didn't know. If I'd known... I wouldn't..."

Sebastian lapses into silence with the sentence unfinished, and now Kurt is certain. Something is definitely wrong here. He sidles up to Blaine for a pow-wow.

"I think we should stop," Kurt whispers.

"But we're getting such good information!" Blaine says.

Kurt gapes at him. "That made sense to you?"

"Well, no, not really, but..." Blaine says. "I don't know, I feel like he's telling the truth. He's so open and unguarded!"

"Because he's concussed!" Kurt says intently. "It doesn't matter if he tells the truth when the truth is gibberish!"

"Just one more question," Blaine whispers.

"Blaine, wait—"

But he's already approaching Sebastian, who is staring somewhere far outside the room.

"Why are you here?" Blaine asks.

And it's like the shattering of a lens Kurt never knew he was looking through. Something shifts in Sebastian, and suddenly Kurt is seeing a wholly different person. His formerly high-coiffed hair hangs limp with sweat. His sharp, cold eyes are unfocused and wide with fear. His once-confident posture has been replaced with an uncertain slouch, and on his mouth in place of a smirk sits a worried frown.

Suddenly, Sebastian looks young, and it's like the world has turned on its head. When Kurt first looked at Sebastian, he saw someone older, world-wise and dangerous and looking to exploit Blaine's naiveté. Now all he sees is a child, someone as young as or perhaps even younger than himself.

Suddenly, despite knowing how ridiculous it is, Kurt feels like a bully.
"Sebastian?" Blaine asks. "Answer the question."

The boy says nothing.

Kurt frowns. "Sebastian, can you hear us?"

Eyes downcast, he finally speaks. "I should've died, you know?" he says quietly. "I came close… came close all the time, like… like… when that old man caught me and I couldn't… I couldn't breathe…"

As if waiting for its cue, Sebastian's breath begins to escape him, growing faster and sharper.

"I didn't… I didn't even mean to…" he continues, his gasps disrupting his speech. "He just… he wouldn't let go… I couldn't breathe, and I just… I didn't even see where it hit him, I just swung, and then… there was blood everywhere, and I couldn't…" His torso shudders as he sucks in a deep breath. "I just wanted him to let go…"

Blaine looks at Sebastian like he's just stabbed him, gaping and silent.

"This is not good," Finn says.

"What's wrong with him?" Rachel asks.

"He's having a flashback," Artie says, almost fascinated.

"Kurt, we have to stop this!" Mercedes says.

Kurt can only stare at Sebastian in transfixed awe.

"And there were others…" Sebastian continues. "Like when I ate… I didn't know, I was just so hungry… and I got sick… I couldn't stop throwing up and Bug… took me to Madge… Madge and Joey… gave me food, Craig, Angie… Craig's on fire, and I'm… why am I here?" he cries, his voice at fever-pitch and so honestly confused that Kurt almost tears up. "I'm supposed to save them! But I don't… I don't know how! I should've died, but they wouldn't let me and now they're going to die and I can't… I can't even…"

"That's enough. We're stopping this now," Kurt says. "Rachel, clean off that table. Finn, get your water out. Mercedes, I'll untie him, help me carry him over."

Avatar and friends spring into action, while Sebastian remains lost in his own world. "I can't… I can't… no, no, I can't fail, I can't die. I can't die yet…" Kurt water-slices Sebastian's rope. Mercedes grabs his feet, and Kurt takes his shoulders.

"Careful with his head!" Finn says.

Sebastian continues babbling as they carry him over. "I'm it, I'm all there is… if I die… they all… no, no, I can't, I have to save them… I will save them…"

A mortified Blaine enters his field of vision, and suddenly, Sebastian's eyes are very, very focused.

"…from you!"

With the the strength and speed of a leopard-cheetah, Sebastian wrenches free of Kurtcedes and launches at Blaine. The Prince topples to the ground and before he can recover, Sebastian is on top of him with his hands around his neck.
Kurt watches in silent horror as it all unfolds. The Hawks scream at Sebastian, stop, no, get off, but he doesn't (or can't) hear them. Half a dozen hands move to strike, and half a dozen flames flare to life.

It will kill him. Kurt is certain of this. If he lets the flames hit, Sebastian will die.

For some reason, he really doesn't want that to happen.

With one hand, he whips out his own water; with the other, he steals Finn's. With all the speed he can muster, he whips the water into a bubble that surrounds both boys, shielding them from harm as the Hawks' flames fizzle against it.

"STOP!" Kurt shouts, pulling the water back. "You don't need to hurt him!"

"You're telling the wrong people!" Nick shouts, pointing at Sebastian.

"It's… you," Sebastian seethes as he squeezes. "This is all because of you!"

"Sebastian, listen to me!" Kurt says. "You're here to save the survivors, right?"

Sebastian ignores him in favor of Blaine's windpipe, which he seems to have mistaken for a stress ball.

"Well, you did it!" Kurt says. "They're safe! Good job!"

Sebastian's grip slackens, allowing Blaine a few desperate gasps. "I… I did?"

"Yes!" Kurt says. "Sue's fleet is wrecked! She can't hurt them now."

Sebastian shakes his head. "No… no… that's not enough… I have to get them off… get them away…"

"We'll do that!" Kurt says. "We will get them off the island."

"You… you will?" Sebastian asks.

"Yes, we will, I promise!" Kurt says. "See? You did it! You saved your friends, huzzah! No need to strangle or murder anyone!"

"No… no need to…" Sebastian tumbles off of Blaine and rises weakly to his feet, while Kurt sprints to offer a shoulder to his deflated beau.

"I'm okay," Blaine breathes, answering Kurt's unspoken question. "I'm okay."

"Oh, thank La," Kurt sighs, helping him rise and looking at the Dragon Hawks. "There, you see? No need for further violence! Blaine's fine, everyone's fine, conflict resolved and no one got—"

Sebastian chooses this moment to puke all over the floor and collapse face-first into the edge of the table, knocking himself out.

"—hurt."

Sebastian's in bad shape.

Blaine dismisses the Dragon Hawks so the room is less crowded, leaving only Team Avatar to
watch as Finn works on him. Sebastian is stripped to his underwear and strapped to the table, making it very, very clear just how physically fucked up he was and is. Burns, bruises, and abrasions cover him from head to toe. Kurt isn't sure how he found the strength to stand, let alone attempt a coup d'état.

"He looks so… fragile," Rachel says quietly.

"He looks half-dead," Mercedes says, turning to Kurt. "Baby, I know you don't like the boy, but this is a little much, don't you think?"

"That wasn't me!" Kurt says. "Well, okay, it wasn't all me."

"Kurt's right," Finn says, continuing his healing. "Most of these are injuries he already had. I didn't really get to finish healing him before he tried to usurp us."

"Usurp," Rachel corrects gently.

"I don't get it," Blaine says. "He didn't seem hurt at all. It looks like a chunk of him is missing, but he wasn't even favoring one side. How…?"

"Desperation and adrenaline are powerful anesthetics," Artie says quietly.

Kurt stares at the battered boy in silence, his thoughts churning. In the span of a few minutes, Sebastian went from a snide bastard to a quivering child to a crazy murderer and back again. The tiny glimpses into his mind afforded by his breakdown were utterly terrifying and, to be honest, confusing. Kurt was once completely certain that Sebastian was a liar, a con-artist, and a no-good bag of douche.

Now that he has concrete proof of all that and more, he is somehow less certain than ever.

Something catches his eye, and he shoulders up next to Finn. "What is that?" he asks, pointing to a thin line of discoloration running across three of Sebastian's ribs.

"It looks like a burn scar," Blaine says, sticking his head in.

"Let me see," Mercedes says, leaning over him.

"Look, there's another one!" Rachel says, poking at Sebastian's hip.

"Guys, I'm trying to work here!" Finn says, flatly unamused. "Could you maybe stop crowding the patient, please?"

The group obediently backs off.

"Thank you," Finn says, getting back to work. "And yes, those are scars. He has more on his back. I saw them when I was healing him before."

"Why is he walking around with old burn scars if he's not from the Fire Nation?" Artie asks.

"Well, it's not like the Fire Nation has a patent on fire," Kurt says. "Other countries have been known to use it from time to time."

"Besides, they're not that old," Blaine says. "Believe me, I know my burn scars… he can't have gotten these more than a year ago."

Kurt's eyes widen as he looks at Blaine. "The Quarantine started a little over a year ago, did it not?"
Blaine's eyes widen. "You're right…"

Kurt turns again to the wrecked boy on the table, his thoughts in a whirlwind. "What happened to you?" he asks.

To his surprise, he gets an answer.

"That's what I'd like to kn—"

SPLOOSH.

"Oh, shit!" Finn says.

Sebastian gives Finn a mighty one-eyed glare (as one is swollen shut), and spits out a mouthful of water. "Getting real tired of waking up to that."

"Sorry! You kind of scared me," Finn says, bending the water away and getting back to work.

Kurt approaches him carefully. "Sebastian, are you okay?" he asks. "How do you feel?"

"Like I just got skullfucked," Sebastian groans, "and now I'm skull-pregnant with a skull-baby and six hours into labor. What happened?"

"You don't remember?" Kurt asks.

"I remember you blowing my cover like a dog whistle," Sebastian says. "And then… something really, really funny. After that, things get a little fuzzy."

The gang shares a look, as if wondering 'How do we put this?'

Blaine promptly dismisses with diplomacy. "You tried to strangle me."

"After you puked your childhood trauma all over everybody in the room," Mercedes adds.

Rachel chimes in. "But before you literally vomited—"

"—and knocked yourself out against the table like a drunk-ass ho," Artie finishes.

Sebastian gapes at them. "You're joking," he deadpans.

"Not even a little," Kurt says, with a sympathetic wince. "It was… pretty intense."

Sebastian groans and covers his face with an arm. "Well, that's… that's really fucking embarrassing, is what that is. Can you just go ahead and kill me, please? I keep thinking this can't get anymore shameful and I'm really tired of being wrong."

"We're not going to kill you," Kurt says. "We're going to help you."

Sebastian's eye opens again, and it is very, very wide. "What?"

"I feel I spoke pretty clearly," Kurt say.

Sebastian just stares at them for a moment. "You're serious."

"As a case of purplepox," Kurt says.

Sebastian just gapes. "How hard did I hit my head?"
"Oh, come on!" Kurt says. "Is it really that unbelievable? I'm the Avatar. It's my job to help people."

"You hate me!" Sebastian points out. "You've been looking for a reason to get rid of me from the minute we met!"

"Because I thought you were after Blaine! Which you were," Kurt points out.

"And I'm not faulting you for being right!" Sebastian says, palms out. "I'm just saying... all you've ever talked about is beating it out of the country with your boytoy in tow. You never cared about the survivors before. Why now?"

"I've always cared about the survivors," Kurt says. "I just didn't know they needed help. I though the military was taking care of you."

"Oh, they took care of us, alright," Sebastian scoffs.

Blaine bristles at this. "Wait, what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means they treated us like crap. They left us to starve, smacked us around, herded us like cattle and gave us these—" Sebastian points to a scar. "—if we fought back."

Blaine's eyes widen. "That's... no, that's not true..."

Sebastian just shakes his head. "How did I know you wouldn't believe me?"

"If all that's true, why didn't you just tell us?" Kurt asks.

"Because that," Sebastian says, jutting his chin at Blaine. "This country fucking worships the military. The Fire Nation Motto: love your soldiers, hate and fear everything else. You saw how the chicken hawks practically melted when they found out who I am. You really think the rest of this country is any different?"

"But we're not from this country," Mercedes says. "You could've told us!"

Sebastian shakes his head. "I couldn't risk it. If the guards even got so much as a hint of the truth, I would've been flash-fried before I could open my mouth. I'm the only one they could send here—I can't afford to die."

"So that makes it okay for you to start killing people?" Blaine says, incredulous.

"No, it makes it necessary," Sebastian counters.

"That's garbage!" Blaine replies. "You could have asked—"

"I TRIED!" Sebastian barks, so loud that Finn nearly drops his water again. He takes a second to calm down before continuing. "When I first got here, I tried being nice. Making friends, asking for help... they told me it wouldn't work, but I tried it anyway. Turns out, they were right."

"So, you asked people, and they said 'no'?" Artie asks.

"No, they said 'get away from me!'" Sebastian says. "Then they ran for the guards, and I shot them in the back."

Rachel gasps.
Blaine looks aghast. "You killed them?"

"What was I supposed to do?" Sebastian says. "If I let them get to the guards, I'm the center of a public panic and a nationwide manhunt. They'd have burned me alive, Blaine. Have you ever seen someone burned alive? Do you know what that looks like? What it sounds like? What it fucking smells like? Because I do, and it's not pleasant!"

Blaine clenches his jaw. "That doesn't—"

"That's enough, Blaine," Kurt says, placing a gentle hand on his arm. "Sebastian had his reasons, and whether or not you agree with them, what's done is done. It doesn't help to harp on him now."

Blaine breathes out through his nose and falls silent, petulantly crossing his arms and looking an inch away from blowing a raspberry.

Kurt sighs, massaging his forehead. "Let's talk about something else. You said a lot of interesting things when your brains were dribbling out of your ears…"

"Oh, great," Sebastian groans.

"What, you don't feel like talking about it?" Kurt asks.

"Do I really have a choice?" Sebastian asks.

"I'm going to go with 'sort-of'," Kurt says. "If you don't feel well, we can do this later. But we're doing it eventually."

"Let's just get it over with," Sebastian says. "Not like I've got much left to hide anyway…"

"Alrighty then!" Kurt says, clapping his hands. "So, you mentioned that you came here with your family. Are they still on the island?"

Sebastian shakes his head. "Plague," he says flatly.

Kurt winces. "I'm sorry."

Blaine's stand-offish stance softens just so. "Me too," he says. "I know what it's like to lose loved ones."

"It's fine," Sebastian says flatly. "We weren't that close."

"Why did it take them, but not you?" Rachel asks.

"Fucked if I know," Sebastian says. "I was the only one taking care of them at the end… got all kinds of nasty shit on some pretty nice clothes. I thought for sure I'd be right behind them, but… nothing. I didn't even catch a cold."

"That sounds about right," Kurt says. "No one really survives the plague. The only people it leaves behind are the people who never had it."

"I thought you and your parents weren't close," Blaine says, skeptical. "Why were you taking care of them?"

"I said we weren't close," Sebastian says testily. "I didn't say I was a bad son."

Kurt gives Blaine a warning glare and attempts to move the discussion forward. "You mentioned
some names," he says. "I can't remember them off the top of my head…"

Artie rolls forward, counting off his fingers as he lists them. "Joey, Angie, Greg, umm… Marge, maybe? And something about a bug?"

"Thank you," Kurt says. "So… who are they? Friends of yours?"

Sebastian sighs and turns his head aside. "Just… people I knew on the island. They helped me survive when the going got rough."

"How rough did it get?" Mercedes asks.

"Fifty-year-old-rhinodillo-hide rough," Sebastian says. "The Navy cut us off from everything. No food, no supplies, nothing from outside the island. The Quarantine started in the middle of tourist season, so there were way more people stranded on the island than it could feed. Food got scarce, plague spread like crazy, people turned on each other, society collapsed, jungle law was instated… you know how it goes."

"Believe it or not, we do," Mercedes says.

"But that's not true!" Blaine insists.

"Blaine…" Kurt sighs.

"Oh, were you there?" Sebastian snits. "Did I miss you on the island? I didn't get the chance to meet everybody; too busy fighting for my life, I guess."

"I spied on the council meeting when the Quarantine started," Blaine says. "My father insisted that the survivors be provided for. He would never let his own people starve. The military was supposed to give you supplies!"

"And eventually, they did," Sebastian says. "But for the first few months, they just sat there and watched the island eat itself inside-out. Oh, and firebomb anybody who tried to escape."

"But that's not what my father ordered!" Blaine says. "So either the military disobeyed a direct order from the Fire Lord, or you're lying—again. Now tell me, which one seems more likely?"

Sebastian rolls his eye. "Do you want to fight, Sparknuts? Is that what this is? Got an honor-boner that needs a good, hard hate-scratching?"

Blaine turns bright red and sputters. "That's… gross! How dare you…?"

"I was there, okay?" Sebastian says. "I wasn't at your precious meeting, but I was on Cinder Island so I'm pretty fucking sure I know what happened!"

"And I'm sure that my father would never leave his people to die!" Blaine says.

"But Admiral Keros would!" Kurt counters, sucking the wind right out of his sails. "He was in charge of the Navy and running the day-to-day Quarantine, was he not?"

"…that's right," Blaine says, blushing slightly. "I remember now… Keros argued with my father. I didn't hear everything they said, but he wanted some kind of protection for his soldiers…"

"Well that explains the suits," Sebastian mumbles.

"What suits?" Kurt asks.
"When the boys-in-burgundy finally came ashore, they were covered from head-to-toe in airtight armor suits," Sebastian says. "They even came with gasmasks so they didn't have to breathe the same air as us."

"That must be why they held back for so long," Rachel says. "They had to create those suits to protect against contamination!"

"I guess that makes sense…" says a somewhat humbled Blaine.

"Yeah, you guess," Sebastian huffs.

Kurt sighs. He once would've moved heaven and earth to keep himself between Blaine and Sebastian at all times. Now, there's nowhere he wants to be less. "So, did you get those burn scars before or after the military started helping?"

"After," Sebastian says. "The soldiers were scared to touch us even with their fancy suits, so whenever they were around, they used fire to keep us in line. Luckily, they only came ashore to do the Census."

"What's a census?" Finn asks.

"It's how they kept track of us and figured out how much food to send," Sebastian says. "Every two weeks, we all lined up on the beach and stood there for hours while they wrote down who was and wasn't dead."

"So the soldiers gave you those scars?" Kurt asks. "For what?"

"Anything," Sebastian says. "If we talked, moved, stepped out of line, gave them a mean look or even breathed funny, out came the fire whips. Anything that made them nervous was a punishable offense."

"That's awful!" Rachel says. "That is almost certainly some form of human rights violation."

"So they just whipped because they felt like it?" Blaine asks, still skeptical.

"They said it was for breaking the rules," Sebastian says. "Sadly, they never really got around to telling us what the rules were, and they seemed to change a lot."

"Oh, and I'm sure you would've followed them otherwise," Blaine says coldly. "I mean, it's not like you think you're above the law or anything. I'm sure you never would've done anything to deserve actually being punished."

Sebastian goes very, very still. When he speaks again his voice is terrifyingly soft. "I've seen kids get whipped," he says, and Kurt's blood freezes. "Ten, maybe eleven years old. You want to tell me what a ten-year-old could do to deserve something like that?"

Blaine's eyes widen in horror. "I…"

"Or how about when they rounded us up for Etna," Sebastian seethes, "by telling us the Quarantine was over and we were all going home? When they lured us onto boats, trapped us in nets and threw us in cages? When they burned off everything from our clothes to our hair, and made us stand there naked while they inspected us like fucking horses for signs of disease? You want to tell me what a kid could do to deserve that? Or how about a lady old enough to be your grandma? What did she do to deserve that shit?"
Rachel cups her hand over her mouth and squeaks. Finn looks ill even as he continues working. Artie doesn't move, but Kurt can hear stone grinding as he clenches his fist. Mercedes has her eyes closed, one hand to her heart.

Blaine's mouth hangs open, his eyes wide and shining.

"I thought we were going to die," Sebastian continues. "They gave us sacks to wear and forced us all into this big metal box, and I… I thought it was an oven. I thought they were going to burn us alive…" He stops. Shakes his head. Swallows. "But I was wrong. It was just an empty supply crate. They dumped us on Etna and left us there, like garbage. That's all we were to them. Young, old, boy, girl—it didn't matter. We weren't people. We were biohazards. Disease vectors. And that's how they treated us."

Blaine swallows. "You're lying…" he says, his voice thick. "You have to be lying…"

"I'm not," Sebastian says darkly. "And you know it, don't you?"

Blaine can't even look at him anymore. He just turns away in silence.

Kurt takes a second to catch his breath. "How—" His voice hitches, and he clears his throat. "How did you escape?"

Sebastian doesn't answer for a moment. "I don't… want to talk about it," he says. "It's not something that can be repeated, if that's what you're thinking. It only worked once and that in itself was a fucking miracle."

Kurt nods. "Fair enough. You kept saying they 'sent' you. 'They' meaning the other survivors, right? This was a cooperative effort?"

Sebastian nods. "It's why I… umm… tried so hard, I guess." He swallows again. "With the way we were treated, everyone was convinced it was just a matter of time before the Fire Lord wiped us out. So they sent me to find help, and before I left, they drilled it into my head… I'm it, I'm all there is. There is no one else. If I fail, if I die, everyone out there dies with me."

"Why did they choose you?" Kurt asks, forgetting to watch his tone and coming off a teensy bit incredulous.

If Sebastian notices, he doesn't show it. "I don't know," he says. "I've asked myself that same question a hundred fucking times, and I cannot figure it out. Simon said it was because they saw something in me that no one else had. Something 'dark and dangerous' whatever that means."

"Who's Simon?" Blaine asks, seeming slightly calmer.

"Our leader, more or less," Sebastian says. "He trained me before I left… taught me how to survive at all costs."

"Taught you how to kill people, you mean," Blaine says.

"Blaine," Kurt warns.

"You know you're awful hung-up on that for a failed assassin," Sebastian challenges.

Blaine grits his teeth. "I might not have failed if it wasn't for you!"

"Oh, so that's what this is," Sebastian says. "You blame me for your colossal fuck-up!"
"I don't… it's not about…" Blaine clenches his fist. "Sebastian, I'm sorry for what happened to you, but that doesn't make anything you've done here excusable in the slightest!"

"I'm not trying to excuse it," Sebastian hisses. "I know what I did!"

"You killed innocent people!" Blaine continues. "People who did nothing to you! What if they had families? Husbands, wives, children? How many orphans, widows and widowers do you think you've made since you got here?"

"Blaine, stop it!" Kurt says.

"No!" Blaine says, near tears. "He needs to hear this! He needs to understand how wrong all of this is—none of this had to happen. None of those people had to die. If he had just asked for help… if he'd just been brave enough to trust the people around him instead of going out on his own—"

And suddenly, it all makes sense. Kurt grabs Blaine by the shoulders to get his attention. "Blaine, are you sure you're saying that to Sebastian?" he asks.

"Who else would I be talking to?" Blaine asks.

Kurt just looks at him. He can almost see the pieces falling into place in Blaine's mind as his face shifts, until suddenly, it all clicks together.

"…me," he says quietly. "I could be talking to myself… couldn't I?"

"…now I get it," Sebastian says. "You're projecting. I could hold my fingers in front of you and make shadow puppets."

"You're right," Blaine says, monotone. "I'm no different than you, am I? No better at all—"

"Oh, spare me," Sebastian groans. "If you seriously think killing one person in self-defense makes you like me, you're a moron. Get over yourself and stop being an asshole. It's weird. It doesn't suit you."

"That's… not how I would have phrased it, but Sebastian is right," Kurt says. "Killing someone in self-defense doesn't make you a murderer."

"I don't see how," Blaine says. "They're just as dead either way."

Sebastian sighs and sits up slightly, just so he can actually look at Blaine. "Look, dandy-boy, let's be honest here… I'm a dick. I wasn't picked for this job because of how nice or kind or charming I am—I was picked because I am ruthless and selfish and willing to do anything to survive, and I've only gotten worse." He pauses, swallows, and shrugs. "I'm evil," he says simply. "There's no other word for me. The things I've done, the person I've become, there's… there's no going back from it. Just because I'm working to stop something worse, that doesn't change what I am."

"Sebastian, that's—" Blaine starts.

"Don't even try to argue with me, okay?" Sebastian says. "I know what I am. I know me. But… while I might not know you well enough to know what you are, I know what you're not. And you're not me. You're nothing like me, and you never will be. Do you understand?"

Blaine just crosses his arms and looks down. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't argue, either.

Kurt suddenly feels immensely drained. "Thank you, Sebastian. I think that's enough for now."
"I'll do the best I can," Kurt says. "If nothing else, I can talk to the Air Nomads about flying to Etna and bison-busing them all to the Temples. I'm pretty sure they have some kind of cultural hospitality quota, so they'd probably be glad to do it."

"Good," Sebastian says. "For what it's worth... I'm on your side, now. For real this time," he adds with a slight smile. "As long as you're on their side, I'm on yours."

Kurt gives him an uneasy smile, not quite sure how to respond to that.

"Hey, if you don't want me, you can just say so," Sebastian says casually. "As long as the survivors get help, I could care less what happens to me. Just say the word, and I'll beat it. I'll go outside in nothing but a sundress and a smile and sing a confession to every crime I've ever committed, if it really bothers you that much."

That mental image prompts a few grimaces and at least one piqued eyebrow of curiosity.

"That... won't be necessary," Kurt says with a slight shudder. "Just stay here for now, Sebastian. We have a lot to... discuss."

Finn finishes with his healing, freezing his water and wrapping it in cloth. "Keep this against your eye," he says, handing the ice pack to Sebastian. "It'll help with the swelling."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Sebastian says, holding the ice pack to his face. "I'll be here."

One by one, the group files out of the room, leaving Sebastian to rest.

Before he steps out, Blaine stops in the doorway and looks back at Sebastian. After a moment, he speaks. "I really am sorry," he says. "For... what happened to you. I mean it."

Sebastian is silent for a moment. "It's okay," he says without looking at him. "It wasn't your fault..."

Blaine quietly closes the door behind him as he leaves.

"What are we gonna do with him?" Finn asks.

"He did say he was on our side," Rachel says.

"I'm not sure I want him on our side," Mercedes says. "Boy is ten pounds of crazy in a five-pound bag."

"Hey, don't be slaggin' on crazy people," Artie says. "For is always better than Against. If nothing else, we can dress him in bright colors and use him as a decoy."

"I think we should be careful," Blaine says. "Even if he's telling the truth, he's not the most stable individual. He changes sides quickly—he could change again."

Kurt thinks it over for a moment. "Right now, he's in no condition to hurt or help us. Let's just keep an eye on him and see what he does before we decide whether or not to keep him."

All present find various ways to nod their assent.

"Alright, so we've got 99 problems now that 'Bas ain't one," Artie says. "What about, you know, everything else?"
Blaine breathes out through his nose. "Get the Dragon Hawks. It's time for a meeting."

"Good idea," Kurt says. "You guys go ahead, we'll catch up."

The others fly off to go Hawk-wrangling, leaving Kurt and Blaine alone. "Are you alright?" Kurt asks. "You were a little all-over-the-place in there."

Blaine sighs. "I don't know. I don't know what to think. What happened to Sebastian was awful, but what he's done is awful, too, I just… and I still can't believe that Fire Nation soldiers could be so… so…"

"Awful?" Kurt asks.

Blaine nods. "It's all awful. Everything is awful," he sighs. "Why would they do that? Their own people, Kurt. Everyone out there except Sebastian is Fire Nation. Why would they treat them like that?"

"Because they were afraid," Kurt says simply. "Fear makes people into monsters."

"Fear is the enemy of Unity," Blaine says softly. "My father used to say that…"

Kurt gives him a smile. "He sounds like a very wise man. I'm sure he did the very best he could. It's not his fault things went wrong, and it's not yours, either."

"But he appointed Admiral Keros," Blaine says. "He put him in charge of everything, he trusted him."

Kurt puts a comforting hand on Blaine's shoulder. "At some time or another, everybody trusts someone they shouldn't." A meaningful nod towards Sebastian's room punctuates the statement, and Blaine smiles just so.

"I guess you're right," he says. "Now we just have to figure out what to do next."

"Don't we always?" Kurt asks.

They smile as they head to the meeting, just happy to be in each other's company.

If only they knew…

The whole gang winds up in a room full of rusty pipes on the second floor, dimly lit by patches of sunlight leaking through holes in the ceiling. Kurt and company stand against a side wall, watching the action go down.

Jeff bangs on a pipe. "Okay, everybody shut up! I hereby call this meeting of the Dragon Hawks to order."

"Wes and David are… indisposed at the moment," Trent says. "So Nick, Jeff, and I are filling in."

"Okay, let's get started," Nick says. "What's first on the schedule?"

"Well," Trent says. "Generally we would start by reading the minutes of the last meeting—"

"We don't have the minutes," Jeff says. "Also, no one cares."

"—which is why I was going to suggest, before I was so rudely interrupted," Trent grumbles, "that
we move on to new business."

"Great, so, new business—" Nick says.

"Wait, no, you can't just move the meeting forward!" Trent says. "This is a democratic institution, we have rules! Someone makes a motion, someone seconds it, and then we vote—"

"Motion for Trent to shut the fuck up," Jeff deadpans.

"Second," Nick says.

"Now wait just a minute!"

"All in favor?" Jeff asks.

Every hand but Trent's shoots up.

"Opposed?" Nick asks.

Trent sourly holds his hand aloft.

"Motion carried," Nick says. "Sorry, dude."

Trent crosses his arms and mutters 'something something anarchy.'

"So, new business?" Nick says.

Jeff snatches a piece of paper from in front of Trent and scans it briefly. "Alright, so… item 1, Wes and David are fucked up. Item 2, Thad and Sam are jailbirds. Item 3, the Fire Lord wants us dead and she has an army searching for us. Item 4, we have no weapons or armor, and we're flat broke." He lowers the list. "Basically, we're fucked upside-down and spinning."

"Must you put it so crassly?" Trent asks. "That is not what I wrote!"

"Hey, we voted you into silence," Jeff says. "Stop disrespecting democracy!"

Nick rests his head in his hands with a weary groan. "So… ummm… any ideas on how to deal with these?"

A hand shoots up, and Nick calls on him. "Luke!"

"Motion to run away really fast!" Luke says.

Nick blinks at him. "Umm… that's not…"

"Fucking seconded!" James says.

"Aw, come on, guys…" Jeff says, mildly disgusted.

"Third!" Ethan says.

"All in favor?" Luke asks.

"We are not voting on this!" Nick says.

Several hands go up anyway.
"Put your hands down, you bunch of babies!" Jeff says.

"You can't tell us what to do!" Ethan says.

"Yeah, who died and made you Fire Lord?" James asks, before realizing with no small amount of horror—"Oh, shit, sorry Blaine!"

Blaine rolls his eyes. "It's fine."

"Gentlemen, calm yourselves!" Trent says. "Luke, please explain the reasoning behind your motion."

"Okay, where do I start?" Luke asks. "Oh, how about 'we just tried to overthrow the government'? You know what that's called? Treason! If they catch us, we'll all be executed! We're schoolchildren!"

"I don't want to die a virgin!" James cries.

"I don't want to die at all!" Ethan moans.

"This is pathetic," Jeff says with a scowl. "I thought Dalton dudes were made of sterner stuff than this!"

Flint stands up to speak. "Dalton men are made of tender flesh and brittle bone, just like everyone else!" he says. "We could have died today. Many of us nearly did! This is completely and utterly insane—we are in so far over our heads that we can't even see the surface!"

Nick gapes at him. "Dude, what's gotten into you?"

"Yeah, I thought you were supposed to be all calm and wise and shit!" Jeff says.

"Oh, that's just an act!" Flint shamefully admits. "All I do is parrot lines from books I've read. Most of the time I don't even know what I'm saying! I'm just as scared as anyone. My mom will kill me if she finds out I'm a fugitive!"

"This is too much!"

"We're too young to die!"

"Agni save us all!"

And thus the room descends into chaos. Arguments and epithets fly back and forth like cows fired from catapults. Nick futilely tries to calm everyone down, while Jeff calls them all whiner babies and tries to provoke them into a courageous patriotic fervor, and over all the din, Trent melodramatically wails "Order has fallen! Anarchy reigns! The Dark Ages are upon us once more!"

"Well, uhhh… this is new," Finn says, watching the insanity with slightly bugged-out eyes.

"They're falling apart!" Rachel laments. "At this rate, it's only a matter of time before it comes to blows."

"My money's on blondie," Artie says. "He's a firecracker."

"This is serious!" Mercedes says, smacking him on the shoulder. "Beside, blondie is all skin and bones. Tubby would mop the floor with that mop-top!"
Kurt glances over to where Blaine is watching, looking utterly wretched.

"Are you okay?" Kurt asks.

He jumps at Kurt's question, snapping to attention like he's been caught doing something naughty. "I'm fine," he says.

"Should we… do something about this?" Kurt asks, nodding towards the brewing brawl.

Blaine's eyes are a storm of conflict as he watches his friends shout at each other. With a heavy sigh, he divests himself from the wall and adopts his most regal posture. "I've got it," he says, stepping forth to take command. "And Kurt…" he says, stopping only briefly. "I'm sorry."

He's off before Kurt can even ask him what for.

Blaine dashes to the front of the room and leaps onto the table, shooting a plume of fire into the air. "ENOUGH!" he calls.

The Hawks immediately quiet down, staring up at their Prince. Blaine stares down at them, his eyes scanning the crowd for someone in particular. He finds him huddled a short distance away from the rest, looking very small indeed.

"Cole," he says gently. "We haven't heard from you yet. How do you feel about all this?"

Cole looks up, eyes wide and guileless. "Ummmm… I'm…" He gets hung up on a sniffle, trying to calm his quivering voice. "I'm scared," he quietly admits. "I don't… I don't know what to do about all this. I've never… done anything like this before, and… I just… I want to go home."

The admission hits Blaine like the ground after a fall, and Kurt can almost feel the impact. Cole is clearly the youngest of the Hawks, and Blaine seems to have a soft spot for him.

"It's okay, Cole," Blaine says gently. "You don't have to be scared… I'll take you home."

Cole sniffs. "You will?"

Blaine nods, and gives him a sad smile. "I promise I'll get you home… in fact, I'll get all of you home."

The Hawks let out a collective gasp, and something tightens in Kurt's chest.

"Wait, you mean…" Jeff stammers.

"This was a mistake," Blaine says. "I'm incredibly grateful for everything you guys have done for me, but you're right. You're just schoolboys. You have no place in a war…"

"You're not much older than us," Nick says quietly.

"…and I have no business starting one," Blaine continues, ignoring him. "I'm not strong enough to beat Sue yet. I know that now, but the price for this knowledge was high. Two people I love were nearly killed today, and as it stands now, they have injuries that will haunt them for life. I won't let that happen to you. I won't let you pay for my mistakes. That's why I'm personally escorting each and every one of you back to your families where you'll be safe."

"What about you?" Trent asks.

"Don't worry about me," Blaine says. "I'll be fine. I'll go into hiding, maybe do some training…"
"What about Sue?" Jeff asks.

"Sue's not a threat to the world right now," Blaine says. "As much as I hate to say this… she can wait."

"Prince Blaine, we live all over the country," Nick says, something oddly knowing in his eyes. "It'll take months to get us all home."

"I know," Blaine says. "That's why I have one thing I would ask of you before we go…"

He looks right at Kurt, and it's like the bottom has fallen out of the world. He's in free fall.

"Avatar Kurt must continue his journey to master the elements and stop the plague," Blaine says. "So before we leave, I would like you to help me find a way to get him and his friends safely out of the country. Will you do that?"

Now everyone is looking at Kurt, their faces in varying states of ruin.

"Umm… motion to help the Avatar," Jeff stammers.

"Second," Trent says softly.

"All in favor?" Nick asks.

One by one, every hand rises. Even timid little Cole's.

"Motion carried by unanimous vote," Nick says, and Kurt would be touched if he wasn't so miserable.

"Thank you," Kurt manages to say.

Blaine gives him a wobbly smile. "It's the least we can do, after all you've done for us," he sniffs. "Maybe… maybe one day, after you've saved the world, you can come back and visit?"

The note of hope in Blaine's voice shatters Kurt's heart like a vase. "Of course," he says, keeping his voice steady. "Of course I will."

Blaine beams at him with tears in his eyes. "Good. I'm glad," he says to Kurt, turning to the room at large. "Thank you… thank you all for believing in me and standing by me. I'm… I'm sorry I let you down. But I'm going to make it right."

Blaine steps off the table, leaving the devastated Dragon Hawks to conclude their meeting.

"We should… ummm…" Jeff says thickly. "We should go ahead and get started…"

"Yeah," Nick says. "Okay, umm… split up into pairs and fan out in the city, see what you can learn."

"Remember, we're hobos now, so stick to alleyways and try to look downtrodden," Trent adds with a slight sniffle.

"Don't think we'll have a problem there," Jeff mutters, before saying louder. "Meeting adjourned."

The Hawks drag themselves miserably from the room, leaving the Prince and his not-so-merry multicultural band of brethren. Those left regard him in varying states of sadness and shock, from Artie's slightly-cracked stoicism to Rachel's barely-contained blubbering. Kurt doesn't even want to
know what his own face looks like right now.

Blaine pleads with them. "Guys, I'm so sorry," he says. "I wanted to talk about this, but everything just happened so fast, and... I can't leave my friends when they need me. Wes and David are far too weak to travel alone right now, and the Hawks need someone to look up to. I can't. I can't come with you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," says an unsteady voice that sound suspiciously like Kurt's, but can't be, because it's not okay. "It's your choice, and you know we respect that."

Finn nods. "We'll miss you, though," he says thickly.

"For real," Mercedes adds.

Artie holds out a fist. "Stay strong, B-Money."

"I just..." Rachel sniffs. "I wish..."

"Hey," Blaine says gently. "We don't... we don't have to do this now. No one's leaving yet. This isn't goodbye."

He tries to smile, but it falls flat, and the unspoken sentiment rules the silence. 'If this isn't goodbye, why does it feel like one?'

Finn wipes his eyes. "I've got a... I should probably... umm... Wes," he stammers. "I haven't checked on Wes in a while. I'll go... do that."

"I'll... the animals, someone should feed them, and... that someone is me," Rachel says, wiping her nose as she turns away.

"Intelligence work needs intelligence behind it. I'll go help with recon," Artie says, keeping his head low as he rolls out.

"I'm gonna see about rustling up some grub," Mercedes says, her face perfectly still until the split second she turns and walks away.

They leave quickly, none of them looking back, and then it's just Blaine and Kurt, and Blaine is so sad and so guilty and Kurt hates him and loves him and understands him even if wishes he didn't. It's all he can do to remind himself, over and over again, you knew this was coming, Avatar Gaga practically told you it was coming.

You have to let him go.

"Kurt, I'm so sorry," Blaine says, head hung low. "I've ruined everything."

"No, you haven't," Kurt says. "This isn't ruin, it's not the end, it's not even an end, not really..."

Blaine tries so hard to brighten up. "No goodbyes, right?"

"Never," Kurt says.

Blaine moves towards him, and the next thing he knows, they're hugging, so tight and desperate that it feels like they're trying to honest-to-goodness fuse, just so they won't have to part.

"I'm going to miss you so much," Kurt sniffs.
"Me too," Blaine says.

They hold each other for a long time.

It's not enough.

Kurt takes to a small room on the first floor to sink into the stormy depths of his own thoughts. He's only just gotten a decent brood going when suddenly, a rather loud and obnoxious ray of sunshine breaks through the clouds and blinds him.

"Kurt, there you are!" Rachel says cheerily, popping up like an unwanted zit. "I was just looking for you."

"Not now, Rachel," Kurt groans. "I'm brooding."

"Well, surely you would like some company—"

"Brooding is a very solitary activity," Kurt says. "There is no such thing as 'a brood of brooders.'"

"I'm not here to brood," Rachel says. "I'm here to help! I have just the thing to take your mind off of Blaine-related angst—Blangst, if you will."

"Blangst?" Kurt repeats skeptically.

Rachel trucks right on, oblivious as ever. "I would like for you to teach me airbending!"

Well, that's new. Kurt scrunches his nose like someone puffed air on it. "Really?"

"I am not prone to sarcasm," Rachel says archly.

"No, but you are prone to unrelenting pride and self-love that borders on masturbatory," Kurt says. "You've always turned down my help before. Why the sudden change of heart?"

Rachel plops down beside him. "I did it," she says.

Kurt blinks. "You airbent?"

She nods. "It saved Finn's life."

Kurt beams at her. "Rachel, that's incredible!"

"No, it isn't!" Rachel cries. "It's terrible!"

Kurt's smile fades and he cocks his head back. "Okay, you've lost me. Why is saving Finn's life a bad thing?"

"Oh, that's not the bad part. The bad part is that it happened when it shouldn't have!" Rachel moans.

Kurt just shakes his head. "I'm... sorry?"

"Let me explain," Rachel sighs. "When you were raining icy judgment down upon the Fire Nation, Finn tried to stop you. It was amazing, he was amazing, so brave and selfless, and he was bending so well—Kurt, you would have been so proud of him..."

"There's a 'but' coming, isn't there?" Kurt says.
Rachel grimaces. "But... when he tried to reach you, he fell. And you were... very, very high—"

"I nearly killed Finn?" Kurt says, horrified.

"Yes, but we're not talking about you right now!" Rachel continues. "He was falling from so high up, and all I could do was watch. I just knew if he hit the ground he would die, so I ran over, and... I stopped him. I airbent with all of my heart and soul and it was the most incredible thing I've ever felt."

"And that shouldn't have happened... why?" Kurt asks.

"Because I suck at airbending!" Rachel says. "Don't you see? Before that, I had never successfully airbent even once. Finn's life depended on my skill, which was essentially nonexistent! It's pure luck that he didn't splatter all over the ground—"

Not picturing that, not picturing that, so not picturing that—

"—and I cannot rely on luck!" Rachel says. "That is not how a professional operates. A true performer rehearses. She goes over every line and every note until the script is written into her bones, because so many others depend on her to do her part. Directors, stage managers, other actors, they are all there to help each other, because the most important thing isn't the performer—it's the performance. The play itself."

Kurt cocks a brow at her. "So, you're saying..."

"I'm saying I've been selfish and prideful," Rachel says. "I've put the actress before the play, my own needs over the needs of the whole. And Finn could easily have died because of it. This is serious—people's lives are on the line, and there is no place here for my pride. Therefore, I cast off the mantle of diva!" she cries, throwing an imaginary crown. "And I humble myself as your student. I intend to be the best I can possibly be, and if that means accepting help from others... then that's what I'll do." She smiles at him. "You are my friends. I refuse to let you fall."

Kurt smiles back. "That's very mature of you, Rachel."

Rachel preens. "I know!" she says brightly. "So... Master Kurt, will you please help me with my airbending?"

Kurt stands and offers her a hand. "I would be delighted, Pupil Rachel."

She takes it, and together, they walk to the factory proper, a wide room with plenty of air to practice with. The work is wonderful. Kurt expects to tire quickly due to the day's earlier events, but something about airbending just invigorates him. Rachel proves to be a quick study when she finally gets over herself, and by the end of the lesson, she has clearly made progress.

After an hour or so, Kurt suddenly understands why the Air Nomads tend to save their heads. His hair is as high and poofy as it's ever been. Rachel's hair is no better, sticking out strands in every direction like an octopus orgy. The lesson never officially ends—Kurt and Rachel just reach a point where they can't stop laughing at each other's hair, and progress stops being made.

By the end of it, they're both on the ground, and Kurt's giggle fits are slowly starting to subside. Without even meaning to, he sighs, and suddenly it's like everything comes flooding back to him.

Rachel, oddly enough, actually notices his sudden turn for the maudlin.

"He's not doing this because he doesn't love you, you know," Rachel says, poking him in the
shoulder.

"I know," Kurt says. "I know he loves me. He just… loves his friends more."

"No, that's not it at all," Rachel says. "He believes in you. He thinks his friends won't survive without him, but you, he has complete faith in. He thinks you don't need him."

Kurt rolls over to look at her. "And what if I do?" he asks.

Rachel meets his eyes and gives him a dazzling smile. "Then you'll find your way back to him," she says simply. "That's what I believe. And you should believe it, too."

Kurt wants to tell her that it isn't that simple, but he can't think of any reasons it wouldn't be.

Maybe it is that simple.

Maybe he should just believe in them.

Maybe…

"EMERGENCY!" calls a voice from below. "EMERGENCY MEETING, EVERYBODY GET DOWN HERE NOW!"

Kurt's heart leaps to his throat. Rachel leaps to her feet and helps him up and both of them run full-tilt down to the meeting room in the basement. They are the last group members to arrive, save for the injured.

"What?" Kurt asks. "What is it?"

"We found this outside," Nick says, holding up a poster for Kurt to read. "They're all over town!"

Kurt starts reading and his heart starts sinking, getting lower and lower with every word.

*The Office of the Fire Lord is pleased to announce the PUBLIC EXECUTION of two FIRE-HATING, BABYSKIN-HAT-WEARING TRAITOR-TERRORISTS (or TRAITORISTS) will be held TOMORROW MORNING in the TOWN SQUARE. The first ONE HUNDRED VISITORS will be entered into a RAFFLE for a chance to win a COMMEMORATIVE URN of traitorist ashes, which make great FERTILIZER for your HOME GARDEN!*

*The EXECUTION will be presided over by the honorable FIRE LORD SUE SYLVESTER. Anyone asking for autographs will be fined and imprisoned.*

By the time he reaches the end, Kurt's heart is flattened out against the soles of his feet, and vivid images of Sam's execution are playing over and over in his mind.

He can tell just by looking that Finn is having the same problem. He looks like he's about to vomit. That makes two of them.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Kurt announces. "Our priorities have just shifted big-time…"

He takes the poster and slams it on the table.

"We have to save them."
A/N: Coming Up – We check on Sam and Thad in prison. Sam meets with some old frenemies, while Thad faces the wrath of the Fire Lord and Quinn tries to abate the carnage. Meanwhile, Kurt and friends attempt to hammer out a rescue plan that won't get anyone killed, while Blaine has a heart-to-heart with Sebastian and learns more than he bargained for.

CHAPTER 76 – Exile Vilify, Part 2

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