Traitor's Face

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Traitor's Face

by Loopy

Summary

In this alternate world, the Lady Mai of the Fire Nation is the girl on hand when Avatar Aang emerges from a South Pole iceberg after 100 years. Aang falls in love at first sight, but Mai's loyalties are to the people she was forced to leave behind. Does she have it in her to turn the Avatar into a sacrifice for the survival of another... and will she herself survive the attempt?

This is a long, character-driven, adventure that WILL NOT rehash the cartoon. It will just feel like the first time you watched it.

Notes

First, a WARNING: Some of the comments on various chapters contain spoilers for chapters that come later. A few people left comments during re-reads, and reference future events. Be wary if you don't want to be spoiled

Author's Note: This is an Alternate Universe created For Want of a Nail. It's going to be fairly long and contain lots of surprises, and you can rest assured I'm not going to be rehashing the original cartoon for even one scene. The full extent of how Alternate this Alternate Universe is will quickly become apparent. I hope you can give it a chance, and find enjoyment.
Author's Note for Those Who Have Read 'Retroactive': This is not that. Retroactive was a focused, psychological tale, starring what was arguably a villain protagonist, which sought to challenge notions of morality and justice by presenting questionable acts with no judgmental consequences. It was very intricately crafted, such that subtle hints, descriptions, and motifs were meant to pay off chapters later, and those connections not being made could lead to vastly different interpretations of the story. If you found yourself turned off by 'Retroactive,' then you might enjoy this story better. It will be told in a more episodic manner, with clear depictions of Good and Evil, even if good people sometimes do evil and evil people sometimes do good.

Author's Note the Third: This story will not have a Mai/Sokka romance. Just getting that out there.
Three Prologues

Chapter Summary

Three prologues, at three points in time, setting up three major plot points, starring three different characters who won't appear in the first three chapters.

Prologue - The Pact (Centuries Ago)

The tip of the spear was pressed against the oily chitin of Koh's body, the Face Stealer sprawled across the floor of his fetid domain wearing the face of cat-deer, but the smile that was being turned up at Kuruk was anything but defeated. "Congratulations, Avatar. Slay me and rejoice in yet another victory for your Spirit’s glory."

Kuruk wanted to, but more than Koh's death, he wanted to smack that smile off the creature's stolen face. He wanted to see pain in Koh's eyes, and hear his cries of anguish. He wanted Koh to regret every choice in his unnatural life, wanted Koh to regret ever daring to consider joining his destiny with Ummi's. After all, Kuruk already did, and more than anything he wanted Koh to share his pain.

The Avatar tightened his grip on the spear, and forced the rage out of his snarling voice. If he gave in to even the slightest display of emotion, his controlled expression would crack and Koh would have the opportunity to steal Kuruk's face as well. "Give her back, Face Stealer. Give her back or die."

"Oh, my dear Avatar, did you entirely think this ultimatum through?" Koh's face shifted, and suddenly the creature was looking up at Kuruk with the face of Ummi herself. "Are you really going to stab through this beauty in the name of spite?"

It was disgusting to see Ummi's face on Koh's clicking, writhing insect body, but Kuruk forced himself to keep looking. If he lacked the strength to stare his enemy in the eyes, how could he possibly be strong enough to finally finish this? "If you refuse to give her back, then at least I can rid the world of its greatest pest! Do not toy with me, Koh. You don't need to see the rage on my face to know how much I hate you."

"No, I don't." Koh chuckled, its body matching the action with stomach-churning writhing. "I wouldn't have bothered you in the first place if I couldn't imagine the pain that would come oozing out of your heart. But are we really going to conduct these negotiations with your weapon between us?"

"There's nothing to negotiate." Kuruk pressed the spear down with only the slightest bit more of pressure, but it was enough to draw white stress lines on Koh's carapace. "Return Ummi's face, or die on the floor like the bug you are."

"See, this is why I had to get involved in the first place. The only match for your utter laziness when it comes to your job is your obsession with proving yourself through these tiresome displays of Water Tribe masculinity. Are you also going to roar victoriously after you kill me?" Koh's face changed again, this time to a drooling, tusked ogre. "Let me spell it out for you, just to save us some time. What do you think will happen to my faces if I were to die?"

Kuruk's stomach flipped, and it was all he could do to keep the sickened sensation from showing on
Koh grinned with the ogre's visage, slicing his own lips on the tusks protruding from his mouth. "Kill me, and the faces die with me. The faces, and the spirits of everyone they represent, will shrivel and cease to be. There will be no reincarnation for your Ummi. Just the most terrible ripping sensation, and then... nothing." Koh winked. "And she'll know you made that choice. She's watching right now. Say hello, if you want."

Kuruk's hands had grown numb, and he heard more than felt the spear tumble out of his grasp to the floor of the cave. Ummi's spirit... destroyed?

Never to reincarnate?

Nothingness?

As the Avatar, with conditional access to the knowledge and experience all of his past lives, the very thought chilled Kuruk to his bones. Ummi would be free of Koh's control, but was that worth being ripped free of the life cycle, of the universe itself? To be blinded to the essence of the all?

To...

...just stop?

Koh rose from the floor of the cavern and curled so that his face- now what might have been a human painted like a theatrical noh mask- hung right in front of Kuruk. "By all means, take the time to think about it. I'll be here, if you decide you want to kill me after all. I'll warn you not to expect a very nice welcome, but then I didn't exactly give you one this time, hm?" There was a crackling of chitin, and Koh moved to twirl slowly around the cavern like a restless worm. "Since you've been so reasonable about this, I'll even give you a boon. It's not like I enjoyed stealing what you value most, or punishing you for dereliction of duty and all of that childishly aggressive behavior you enjoyed so much. The look of terror on dear Ummi's face was quite hard to see, believe me." He turned and grinned. "You can tell by the sincere look on my face." There was a motion, and a sneering man with an eye-patch, a long curling mustache, and a gold tooth shifted into view.

The rage bubbled with Kuruk's heart again, and he felt the muscles in his lip tightening with the beginning of a snarl. Time slowed, and it seemed to him like he had a choice: he could choose right now to join his beloved in Koh's collection. They would be together forever, even if that existence was a torment.

Only the thought of associating such horror with Ummi kept him from giving in at that moment. At least if he lived, he could remember her as she was, before he- Koh- Kuruk- before he killed her.

Kuruk turned and hurried out of the cave.

He heard Koh's voice echoing from behind him and all through the cave: "Oh, did you not want to request a boon? Well, that's okay, we can defer it. I'll even make it official. I swear, on the love of my mother, that I owe you what humans call a 'favor.' What's done is done, but if at any point you need my services, I'll do as you ask. You know, just to show it's not personal. Be it stealing a face for you, or retrieving someone from the Fog of Lost Souls, or even something like getting one of the flowers from the center of Iblis' Vortex, I'll be there for you, Avatar. Until the end of time."

Kuruk was running by the time he emerged from the cave, fleeing that voice, and the failure. Beneath him, the substance of the Spirit World responded to Kuruk's anguish, despite its rock-like
appearance, churning like the seas of the north in Stormtime. Kuruk stumbled and fell, crashing painfully only a moment after his own tears splashed to the ground. He had come to save Ummi, but he failed because he couldn't let go of her.

He couldn't let go.

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**Prologue - The Choice (Decades Ago)**

The sun was rising, the humidity was climbing, and throughout the Royal Palace, servants were finishing the work that had kept them up all through the night. Fire Lord Azulon was pleased with the start of the day, and had expectations that the rest of it would be equally acceptable. If not, people would die, of course, but it had been a while since he had needed to give an order like that.

Azulon's first order of business, according to his checklist, was to wish his son a glorious Life Anniversary.

He found Iroh in the palace's War Room, as was common these days, staring up at the map of the world hung across the far wall. It was a good map, expressing the *truth* of the world, rather than mere geographical accuracies. The Fire Nation was depicted as being equal in size to the Earth Kingdom, while the Tribal infestations at the poles were minimized to the point of blending into the border decorations. A disturbing amount of the Earth Kingdom continent was still shaded in green, but Azulon and his armies were actively working to fix that, and he had no doubt that Ba Sing Se would be his in no more than a decade. With luck, by the time Iroh had offspring of his own; the idea of a world not completely ruled by the Fire Nation would be a dusty thing existing only in the history books.

Azulon stepped over to his son, and put a hand on the young man's shoulder. He had to reach down to do so, as his son had the short, stocky build of his mother, but he could feel the solid muscles resting ready beneath Iroh's silk robes. "Have you made your choice?"

"Good morning, Father." Iroh turned and offered one of the smiles that the people of the Capital found so charming. "You ask an interesting question. Have I made my choice? Well, that depends on what a choice actually is. Has the choice been made if there are still second thoughts? Then surely, any great leader must be incapable of making a choice, for great leaders must always keep the consequences in mind, and adjust their thinking when surprises come up. For haven't the great military philosophers throughout Fire Nation history all agreed that no plan survives contact with an enemy?"

Azulon shook his head. "There are choices, and there is dithering. Unexpected consequences will arise from any choice, but then it is the time for new choices, not endless examination of choices already made. Leave that to the historians. Leaders look only to the future, and the greatest of them change the world with every action they take."

Iroh dipped his head. "As ever, Father, you cut straight to the point. To answer your question, then, I do seem to have made my choice." He motioned up at the map. "Although the lands of the Earth Kingdom offer the greatest chances for victory, I find myself intrigued by the lands and the seas we have let slip from our attentions. Water Tribe culture has always fascinated me, and I wonder what secrets they keep to themselves."

Azulon frowned at the reminder. That was why he liked this map, with its focus on the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom. "They keep nothing to themselves but barbarian ways and the new Avatar. Their Waterbenders will be purged, and the Avatar will be found, if a new one was truly born after my father's purge. Then they can be left to rot in their snow." A new thought occurred to him, lifting
his heart. "Perhaps we will declare the Poles to be playgrounds for our hunters, so that they can make sport of stalking and slaying the barbarians on their own land."

Azulon looked over at Iroh, and his son shrugged in response. "If that is your wish, Father, but I think your advisors underestimate the strength of that foe. Our excursions to the North have all been turned aside, and from what I read in the reports, the threat will require more resources than we have to spare. Let me practice my Pai Sho game against the northern barbarians, and if I succeed there before Ba Sing Se falls, then I will apply my sharpened wits to the Earth Kingdom."

"So your choice is the Navy, then, over the Army." Azulon sighed. "Very well, Prince Iroh. No, Admiral Iroh. It will be as you say." Iroh clapped his hands, and unleashed one of those hugs his mother had taught him to value. Azulon endured it, and then pulled his son away from the map. "Come, your celebration will be starting soon. With the choice of your career settled, you will now have to pick between the smoked meats or the melons for your breakfast."

"As long as there is plenty of tea, that choice cannot fail to be a happy one!"

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**Prologue - The Memory (Days Ago)**

It was a lonely place to be a lemur. This One could remember a time when there had been other lemurs, beings similar to This One who ate and played and slept and flew. They had chased bugs, and scoured the place for fruits, and amused themselves, for as long as This One knew. Then, That One had stopped moving. It was troubling, not to have That One as part of the group anymore, but worse was when another That One stopped moving as well. Then the colds came, a worse cold than This One had ever seen, and all the That Ones in the nest at the Crag Around The Way had all frozen and stopped moving. Then the Danger started happening after the sun went down, and a That One had been caught outside; the next morning, she could not be found. That One's mate had stopped eating, then, and soon he stopped moving as well.

It was not long before This One was the only One left.

This One was left with nothing to do but survive and explore. It was scary to explore, since he had to be careful to not go too far lest he find himself caught outside with the Danger after the sun went down, but This One needed more than the same old Places, now that there was no One else.

Then, one day, This One found a new hole to crawl through, and followed it into the mountain. It was dark, but there were some nice spiders to eat, and at the end of the little tunnel was a massive cave big enough for fly-playing. This One flapped and looped through the cavern, enjoying the echoes that the snapping of his wings made. The only other things in the big room were standing stones, all as tall as eight This Ones and each one unique. Most of them lined the path that spiraled up along the cavern’s walls, while some stood all over the ground floor like a crowd. This One decided to investigate further, and swooped down to land on the standing stone at the very center of the floor space.

A jolt of something This One could not comprehend blazed through his body as soon as his arms and legs grasped the rock, and then he thought, "Oh, yes, I remember now."

The new memories had nothing to do with lemurs.

Well, mostly.

**THE BEGINNING**
Chapter Summary

Lady Caldera Yu Mai meets Avatar Aang. Meanwhile, a young man of the Southern Water Tribe seeks affirmation.

Water.

Earth.

Fire.

Air.

These are the four elements, the most basic components of the physical world. Everything is either an expression of one of these elements or a mix of them. Life combines all four; from the lowliest bug to the greatest king, all are composed of the same ingredients. From these elements come life, and when life is done, it is to another mixture of these elements that it returns.

Life also commands the elements.

For though these elements are the stuff of the physical world, life exists beyond the physical. Life taps into something greater, and far more dangerous.

It is the duty of the Avatar, whose origins are lost to legends, to be the bridge between the physical world and that greater something. While all life is bound by the reincarnation cycle, the Avatar alone has access to the power and knowledge of previous lives. Thus it falls to the Avatar to take responsibility for the past, and the future, of all humankind.

When the Avatar fails in this duty, the entire world suffers.

Nature falls out of balance.

Things other than the elements intrude on the world.

And that's just the beginning of the troubles...
The Heiress and the Iceberg

Avatar Aang knew nothing but peace, a state beyond suffering.

The place he occupied was no void. Though there was no physical sensation, no touch of time, his senses were filled to the point of gorging. There was light, and there was soft, comforting warmth. There was fresh air, the air of the highest peak of the Axis Mundi, at the spot where the sky met the earth. Aang was floating in the purest expression of the energy of life, and it sustained him like the water of the melting mountain snows. The harmonic ringing of this world sang to him a lullaby that kept him in perpetual half-sleep, a drowsy state where he could see clear to the end of his own existence.

It was enough to sustain him forever.

It was life itself.

Yet the horizons of his existence were so close, and in his dreaming, he imagined that he was poised to fall over the edge.

Mai knew nothing but boredom, a state smack dab in the middle of suffering. She only wished she could say that it was a new state of affairs.

But she couldn't.

Because it wasn't.

She was spending another day alone in her cabin, sprawled as much as she could be on top of the
bed without her feet dangling off the end. She would have been doing this even if she was home in the Fire Nation, but one critical thing was missing. Back home, the walls and furniture would have been vulnerable to the knives, blades, and needles she always wore hidden underneath her clothes, and she could have wiled the day away playing at target practice on every inch of the woodwork.

The ship, though, was made of metal. All the ships in the Fire Navy were made of metal. And so the walls of the room were plates of metal that had been bolted together to form a cage that might as well have been made of the physical manifestation of boredom itself. She had tried throwing her knives at the walls, back on the first day of the voyage, but that just produced an unpleasant clanging sound and the need to actually bend over to retrieve her weapon.

Mai was just reconsidering the entertainment value of such effort when the ship's engines cut out.

The new silence was almost maddening, after living with the constant mechanical thrumming during the whole voyage down across the coasts of the Colonial Continent. It wasn't that Mai liked noise—on the contrary, noise was her chief complaint about the giant leech her parents insisted was her little brother— but something about the constant rattling of the ship had helped drive away her seasickness. No such relief now. The only motion was the bobbing of the ship on the waves, an unpleasant reminder of the ocean’s vastness. Mai sighed and forced herself to crawl out of bed and throw on a fur-lined cloak. At least the deck would offer a breath of (unpleasantly frigid) fresh air, and if the seasickness got worse, the resulting mess wouldn’t be fouling up her room. Or cabin. Whatever they called it.

The sky was dark when Mai emerged outside, of course. It had been as dark as night for three solid days now, ever since they had passed into the Southern Seas, and from what her parents had said, it would remain so for months yet. At least here in the sea, the moon and stars provided some light, but once they reached the South Pole, even that much would be lost in the fury of the storms, or so she had been told. Mai wasn’t sure how she felt about the whole situation, because while she had always been fond of nighttime and shadows, an unchanging sky was boring. She elected to maintain a cautious disapproval until she could be bothered to think on the matter further.

Taking her eyes off the sky, Mai saw that she wasn’t alone on the deck. In fact, it seemed that she was late to an impromptu party. The Captain was up at the ship's bow, along with a number of her crew. They weren't wearing their armor, and no one was holding any weapons, so Mai figured that there wasn't any danger. Not that anything that represented a danger to the crew was necessarily beyond her own ability to handle, but it was a good thing to establish.

Silently gliding across the deck, Mai was soon standing directly behind the captain. Drawing herself up like the noble heiress they expected her to be, she drawled, "What now?"

The captain jumped with surprise. (It was almost amusing.) However, the older woman soon reacquired her dignity and bowed. "My lady, we hit an unexpectedly solid iceberg and our bow is hooked into the ice. We don't think there is any damage to the ship, but we're doing a full checkout while our Firebenders extricate us. You may tell your Lord Father that the ship will be back in motion in an hour. He will be able to take up his position as Chief Governor of the United South Pole Colonies before the end of the day."

But Mai had stopped listening. Instead, her attention was focused on what must have been the offending iceberg. The sharp edge of the bow was indeed jammed into the thing, and a plank had been set up leading down to the main ice body, where a number of Firebenders were applying flames to the problem.

Mai eyed the iceberg. She was no expert on chunks of ice, but she didn't think they were supposed to
be perfectly spherical and glowing blue.

That was interesting.

"My lady...?" Military people like the Captain always needed a direct reply, or they were lost.

Mai threw a glance back at her. "I'll tell my father later. I'm going over to see the glowing iceball."

"Um, my Lady, we're not sure about its structural integrity, and it's bound to be colder over there. I've been charged with the protection of your family during this voyage."

"Whatever. I'm bored, I'm light on my feet, and I don't think it can get any colder. Your objections are over-ruled, by my authority as a Weapon of the Fire Nation." She stepped out onto the plank without even looking back at the stuffy woman, and moved briskly towards the strange little ice feature. Something like a flat platform of ice surrounded the towering sphere, and five of the Firebenders were lined up in front of it, moving in unison through what looked like a simple Bending drill. They were keeping a steady stream of flame aimed at the center of the ball, but the lack of visible melting left it looking like they would be at it for a while.

As typical proof of the universe's arbitrary nature, Mai had no sooner stepped out onto the extended glacier when the iceball exploded in a shower of steam and light. The Firebenders near it all stumbled backwards, toppling to the ice and nearly sliding off into the ocean water.

Mai alone remained standing. Wind and light so thick it almost felt solid washed over her, yanking at her cape and robes, and the chill was banished from the air. For a moment, the stars and the moon were washed away by a daylight that was so much more substantial than any that Mai had seen before, a daylight the color of the sky on the day she had been born. The wind took on a thick quality, with a taste like life itself, and for a moment, Mai thought she had been knocked into the Spirit World.

Then it faded, and she was once again left standing in the everlasting night of the South Pole, wondering if the light had even been real.

When her eyes refocused, she spotted a figure standing where the iceball used to be. It was child-like in size, with eyes glowing demonically. Its head and hands were also luminescent in spots, although Mai couldn't tell why or if there was a pattern to it. The figure stumbled through a wall of steam, stepping up onto the wall of ice that used to be the foundation of the sphere.

Well, this was different. Mai's pulse quickened and she took a deep, savoring breath. She could feel every single one of her weapons against her body, and began considering which she would use in her opening attack.

The glow faded, revealing a boy - maybe a young teenager, Mai decided - with a bald head and thin sunrise-colored clothes completely unsuited to the South Pole's ridiculously cold weather. Mai raised an eyebrow, waiting to see if the boy had an explanation for all this fascinating strangeness, or if he would just cut to the fun part and attack.

He closed his eyes and fell down off the wall. He tumbled across the ice, and crumbled into a heap at her feet, no longer glowing.

Well. So much for that.

Mai leaned over, reached an arm out from beneath her heavy cape, and poked the boy a few times in the head. The spots that had been glowing were some kind of tattoos, in the shape in large arrows. (Why did that sound familiar?) The boy's eyes opened, and he looked up at her face. He must have
been delirious, because his only response to her quizzical scowl was an expression of awe, as though a Spirit had come down from the Heavens to take him to the Happy Land of Fruit Tarts. A small smile quirked his lips.

Mai straightened and kicked him in the side. "Move your iceberg already. I could be in a nice warm palace right now if it wasn't for you."

Aang barely felt the blow that landed on his ribs, so transfixed was he on the vision coalescing above him.

It was a girl.

No, a woman, a blossoming flower of femininity.

The night sky unfolded above her, but to Aang she embodied all of its most beautiful aspects. Her voice was the whisper of a midnight breeze. Her hair was the ebony of the darkness, and her eyes were the small shining diamonds of the stars. Her skin was the milky paleness of the face of the Moon itself, and her nose was just plain adorable.

He couldn't help but smile up at her, and wondered if she was a Spirit. "Will you-
"Will you-"
The woman looked down at him.

"Will you-"

She quirked an.exquisitely carved eyebrow.

"Will you go pengui-"

"Mai!"

The woman looked up at the call, no longer paying attention to Aang. He mumbled, "...penguin sledding with me?" But she wasn't listening any more. Was her name Mai, then? Aang decided it was a beautiful name, his favorite name in the whole world. He wanted to try saying, but was afraid that it might conjure the woman’s attention, and he would be found unworthy.

He felt odd, maybe just a little bit. It was like he had woken up from a dream, and grogginess slowed his thoughts, but for some reason everything around him was so vivid. Almost sharp. It was like... it was like coming back home to the Southern Air Temple after visiting Bumi or Kuzon for a few weeks. He was noticing all the stuff that had been forgotten in the background of life. Only instead of that funny statue of the burping Bison, he was re-noticing stuff like light and breathing and the feel of solid objects.

And this place wasn't home.

Aang finally managed to tear his eyes off the woman- Mai- long enough to look around. Ice, water, night sky, stormhead on the horizon, more ice, more water, and some more ice. Well, it looked like he had gotten to the South Pole after all. Oh, and there was a ship! A... big... metal... ship. That was something new. Aang wondered how it was able to float. Waterbending, maybe?

Except the people running down the ship's ramp looked didn't look like Water Tribe. They were definitely Fire Nation- all the red on their clothes and armor was a big giveaway, not to mention the topknots- and their robes and cloaks were high-class stuff, like they wore on Capital Island. Aang listened as the guy who seemed to be in charge shuffled across the ice over to Mai.
Beautiful, beautiful Mai...

Mai waited patiently while Father scooted across the ice to where she and the strange demon boy were hanging out, and let him speak first: "Mai, what are you doing out here? Who is this boy?"

Yes, he would ask the obvious questions. She looked down at where the kid was lying in the snow and ice. He smiled up at her, the kind of smile that she had always associated with drunks and bovines. Then she looked back up. "I came to look at the glowy iceball, and as far as I can tell, the boy is some kind of especially dim Spirit. Shouldn't he be freezing to death?"

That's when the boy finally spoke. "I'm fine. I know a breathing technique that keeps me warm. It's not hard."

Well, that was interesting. Mai knew that such a Firebending technique existed; Prince Lu Ten had demonstrated something like that before he and his father went off to war together. However, the prince claimed that very few Firebenders were capable of it (although he had always been something of a braggart, in Mai's opinion,) and he had actually exhaled a visible flame when he did it. This kid looked like he was just breathing normally.

Then he moved, kicking his feet in an undulating motion that flung his body into the air and landed him standing up.

Mai blinked with confusion. She could do something similar, but it was an athletic, snapping kind of motion. What this kid did, though, was slower.

It almost looked like he had been floating.

"Hi," he said. "My name is Aang."

Rather than confronting this strangeness, Mai turned back to her father. "His name is Aang. You can take over the investigation from here, right?"

Father blinked stupidly. "Er, um, yes. Thank you, Mai. Aang, who are you? How did you come to be out in this... this?"

Mai watched as Aang looked around. "Well, I was coming down to the South Pole on a penguin-sledding trip, but there was a storm..." At this, Mai noticed that Father's eyes narrowed. "...and I think I got a little lost. And I got here on my Sky Bison, of course. Hey, where's Appa? Appa! Appa!" The kid turned back to the remnants of his little ice-egg and ran over with enough swiftness to kick up a breeze.

Mai's cape snapped, and she hugged herself for some warmth. Not that she had any warmth in her blood, according to Mother, but she liked to think that it was a hereditary condition. She looked over at Father to see his reaction to the demon boy's rudeness, and was surprised to find his jaw hanging open.

"What? Shocked that he didn't bow? He probably doesn't know our importance."

Father shook his head slowly. "He said a Sky Bison."

Mai had to admit, that sounded familiar. Where had she heard of such a thing? Somewhere back in the Royal Fire Academy for Girls...

Then the Sky Bison itself appeared from around the base of the ice-egg with a roar, the demon kid
riding its head, and Mai found herself holding a pair of knives, although she couldn't remember pulling them from her sleeves.

It turned out that Appa was still a little sleepy, but Aang woke him up easily enough with a little tugging. "Come on, boy, let's go show off for Mai! You'll like her, she's beautiful and her hair is really shiny." Aang jumped into a gale he summoned with a twirl of his arms and rode it onto his place on Appa's head, right above the arrow.

Appa gave one his happy groans and began moseying out of the ice crater. Aang gave it another quick look as Appa moved, and wondered about how it came to be. The last he remembered, it was storming hard, and he and Appa had crashed into the ocean. How did they get up here on this iceberg? And how did the ice end up curving around them like that?

It probably had something to do with the rain and heavy storm winds. Aang decided not to worry about it, and be grateful that the waves had washed him up on a safe haven like this.

The Fire Nation people- including Mai- came into view again as Appa rounded the ice wall, and Aang waved. "This is Appa! Everyone say hi!" Appa bellowed a greeting like the friendly bison he was.

The Fire Nation people all jumped like they had seen a ghost. Mai's hands moved too fast for Aang to make out the details of the motion, and suddenly she was holding a pair of knives. All the soldiers took Firebending stances, and Mai's Dad's jaw was hanging open like it was unhinged.

Huh. They must not have seen a Sky Bison before. "Don't worry, everyone, Appa's nice!"

Mai's Dad pointed straight at Aang, and said, "Are you- are you an Airbender?"

Aang nodded. "From the Southern Temple!"

"Take him alive!"

It took a moment for Aang to realize what Mai's Dad had just said. Take who? Why take? What was everyone so freaked out about?

Then some of the soldiers up on the ship threw a net at him.

Aang jumped out of the way on pure instinct, grabbing a wind to push up him up into the air. The net landed harmlessly on Appa's head, and the sky bison shook it off with an annoyance that Aang shared. As he neared the apex of his twenty-foot jump, he could see more soldiers- carrying spears and more nets- running across the deck of the ship.

Were these people pirates?

Before he started to fall, Aang pushed out with his arms and let loose a wind that would splash across the whole top of the ship. The soldiers were knocked off their feet and got tangled up in their own nets, and Aang gave a little laugh as he floated back down to land on Appa's head. "I think I'll be going now. Appa, yip, yip!"

Appa roared, crouched on his six legs while raising his tail, and then launched-

-and came crashing back down on the ice. The platform splashed in the water and tipped dangerously before crashing back into place. All the Fire Nation people were knocked off their feet- all of them except for Mai, actually. She remained standing, and stared at Aang with wide eyes.
Unfortunately, Aang didn't have time to worry about her. "Appa, what's wrong? We need to fly!"
Aang, of course, could fly away on his glider, but he wasn't about to leave Appa with a bunch of Fire pirates.

Appa groaned, and laid down on the ice.

He must have been tired. Aang also felt a kind of fatigue in his own body, now that he thought about it, but it didn't take as much effort for him to ride a wind as it did for a ten-ton sky bison. Appa wasn't going anywhere unless he swam, and sky bison were far from the fastest swimmers around.

He had no choice. Aang raised his hands in surrender as the armored Firebenders circled Appa and stuck out their fists in obvious threat. Another net was thrown, and Aang let this one land right on top of him. He could feel it weighing him down with more heaviness than just rope should have, and figured it had metal sinkers in it. Of course, that didn't matter; Aang could get the net off quick enough if he wanted, but then Appa would still be stuck with these pirates, and Aang wasn't about to do anything that could get his buddy hurt.

So he let the Firebenders yank the net and pull him down onto the ice. He didn't resist as they began dragging him up the plank to the ship. He let them dump him on the deck and point spears at him.

"Wait!"

Aang looked up at the sound of Mai's voice. She climbed down onto the deck and walked right up to Aang, ignoring the soldiers around her. Aang watched as she leaned forward, and he couldn't help but notice her beauty all over again. The tails of hair dangled entrancingly over her shoulders as she said, "If you're an Airbender, do you know what happened to the Avatar?"

Mai grew up around liars. Princess Azula was a childhood friend, so it went without saying that Mai had been able to observe one of the Fire Nation's all-time great liars at work. She had also grown up in the Fire Nation's capital, Caldera City- her family's ownership of a villa there gave her the official title of Lady Caldera Yu Mai- and so over the course of her sixteen years of life she had encountered all kinds of politicians, courtiers, powerbrokers, and snobs. Mai was still a little girl when the lies became so transparent to her that they were boring, but that didn't mean she couldn't still recognize them.

As Mai waited for information about the Avatar, Aang looked away from her. He said, "Um." He stopped, schooled his features to match what he wanted to say, and then stammered, "I'm not- I don't really know. He- we were from the same temple, but- I wasn't really involved in his stuff- and- yeah, I lost track of him. Sorry."

Mai not only recognized the lie, she could tell just how profound a falsehood it was.

And she her own reasons for considering this particular subject to be important.

So an Airbender, of all things, stumbles out of magic ice a bajillion miles from any civilization. Airbenders had not been seen in a hundred years, since Sozin had them wiped out at the start of the Glorious War. This particular Airbender possessed some strong ties to, or knowledge of, the Avatar, and wanted to hide that fact. The Avatar has been missing for around a hundred years, since before the war started.

*Interesting.*

For the first time in a long time, Mai wasn't the least bit bored.
She whispered to Aang, "Stay safe, and I'll see what I can do." Then she went to follower Father back into the ship.

She had plans to make.

The workshop manager cradled the knife in his hands, turning it every which way so that the light danced across its polished blade. "This is excellent work. I think you deserve an extra Rations Token for this."

Sokka smiled, bowed his head like a good little slave, and resisted the urge to make a profoundly obscene gesture that involved three fingers and a loose fist. He wouldn't have truly meant what the gesture signified, of course, but that was more because of the lack of available tusk-whales than any good feelings Sokka had for his boss.

The manager turned the knife to look at its handle. "The grip is nice."

Sokka refrained from pointing out that his people had been making personal bladed weapons since the dawn of time, thank you very much, and had developed a few tricks of the trade along the way. "Well, the materials you provided were such wonderful quality, Master, that excellence had to follow. It was the only possible outcome, really." Sokka motioned to the left. "Great Fire Nation materials..." He motioned to the right. "Plus well-trained labor..." He motioned directly in front of his chest. "Equals excellent grip on the knife. It's like math. Only with knives." He finished that with his best ingratiating smile.

The manager nodded, and ran a finger lightly over the blade. "The Commander specified that this knife should be suitable for throwing."

Sokka bobbed his head up and down like a penguin. "Yessir, I made sure it was perfectly balanced."

"Balance, eh? And how should it be balanced? I want to check it."

Sokka wanted to demonstrate by way of taking the knife back and throwing it in the manager's face, but decided that it wouldn't be worth the trouble. Or the mess. Probably. "It's right in the center, Master. I also made sure the weapon was properly weighted. Too light, and it will be like throwing a handful of snow, you know?"

"Of course." The manager nodded like he actually knew any of that. He held out a finger and laid the knife flat across it, and sure enough, it balanced right at the center point, a short length above the hilt. "Well, it's all very nicely done, Sokka. Tell you what, the other lab helpers have been pretty lazy lately. I'll give you two extra Token Rations. Hopefully the others will realize the benefits of serving the Fire Nation well."

"Oh, thank you greatly, Master! You're so wonderful to me! It's a reward by itself to work here in the lab. But I'll still take the tokens. So that the others see the rewards that loyal service will bring, of course! And I'm so profoundly grateful that you chose me to be the first of my Lesser People to work with the White Gold- ooh, sorry, I meant platinum- medal. It was an inspiration all its own."

The manager grinned like he was considering giving Sokka a pat on the head- and that would have finally inspired Sokka to an act of violence- and fished three of the tokens out of his apron. He tossed over Sokka's daily wage plus the two rewards, and then left with the knife to deliver it to Commander Zhao.

And so Sokka was left alone after-hours in the South Pole Mining Colony's research and development laboratory with the price of selling his life to the Fire Nation.
He wanted to rage.

He wanted to curse.

He wanted to smash his little workstation, roar with manly triumph, walk out into the snowy wilderness to live off the land, and club a Fire Nation moron over the head on the way out. (That last part was just for the fun of it.)

But he had long practice at not doing any of that, of letting the cold of the longest nights settle inside of him, so he decided to keep living like he was dead. Nothing would change if he rebelled in any way, except he would maybe die, and getting himself killed wasn't exactly the kind of change he was hoping to effect. Sure, he could probably take the manager, or one of the other faux-eggheads who worked in the mine's laboratory, but what if he tried that against a soldier? It's not like he had any real fighting training.

Sokka sighed and got a move on. He stopped at the makeshift weather station to record the day's measurements, another extra job he had taken to kiss up. Then he grabbed his coat, stuffed his loose tangle of hair under his hat, and went on to check out at the lab's front gate. As soon as he stepped outside, Sokka was assailed by heavy winds and tiny snowflakes. He huddled against the attack, stomping his way through the snow back to 'town. His path followed the line of telegraph poles, visible in the dark thanks to the lanterns hanging from them. The light were the Earth Kingdom kind, made from glowing green crystals, and while their glow was kind of dark (if light could be dark), they were the only kind of lantern that could stay lit in the winds out here.

It didn't used to be like this. Even just a year ago, the skies above the mining colony were typically clear and still. At this time of year, the moon would be shining above, its light reflected off of the ice all around to make the entire world shine. The curve of the Azulon Mountains would be visible on Sokka's left, running behind him. The ocean would be a comforting dull sheen on the horizon, a promise that even if the Fire Nation had come here to ruin everything, there were other lands out there where a Man might be able to make his own way. Sure, the Fire Navy base would be sitting like a pimple on the coastline, but the Fire Nation didn't control everything. Probably.

And somewhere in the lands out there, Sokka still had family.

Probably.

The cold within him intensified, and Sokka turned his gaze down to the snow-covered path. Once he reached town, he hurried over to the Exchange House and turned in his tokens for packs of sausage and rice before the mining shift changed and the place was inundated. Not that Sokka had an aversion to miners in the abstract, but even aside from the Exchange House not always having enough food (fresh or otherwise), a lot of the miners who lived around here were pretty much jerks. Even with as few out and about as there were at this hour, Sokka still heard a few shouts of, "Traitor!" and, "Fire Nation pet!" directed his way on the wind as he trudged his way home.

He ignored those shouts even as he agreed with them.

Father called a hasty conference in his and Mother's room- or cabin or whatever- as soon as he got back aboard. Mai, of course, never had a helpful opinion on anything, so she was left to care for her brother while the adults discussed things. She didn't actually like her little bother Tom-Tom, though, so she devised a way to entertain him without actually touching or engaging him. One of the soldiers had brought to Father a staff, found tied in the sky bison’s reins, and Mai took custody of it for her own purposes. As she sat in the cabin's sole couch, she held the staff out lengthwise, extending it away from herself and balancing it on a booted foot. With lazy motions of her hands, swung it
slowly back and forth in front of Tom-Tom.

The kid was delighted and intrigued by the new acquisition, and ambled back and forth in pursuit of the thing. Either he understood that this was supposed to be a game, or else he really was as stupid as he looked, because instead of just moving towards Mai to get the stable portion of the staff, he followed and tried to grab the tip that was waving in front of his face. Mai kept directing it just out of his reach, and had enough of her attention left over to listen to the room's other occupants.

The ship's captain was saying, "We used the cranes to lift the Sky Buffalo into the cargo bay, sir. We had to move some of your luggage-"

"Oh," Mother interjected with a tone that echoed off the metal walls. "I hope your soldiers didn't scratch anything. Some of those furniture pieces are antiques from my father!"

"We were very careful, milady." The Captain turned back to Father and clasped her hands behind her back. "The boy himself has been locked in the brig. Are we taking him with us to the Colony? We'll have to arrange a prisoner transfer."

Father stroked his beard. "See if you follow my reasoning, Captain."

"Sir?"

"The boy said he was caught in a storm. The whole reason I've been dispatched to these Water Tribe colonies is to oversee the matter of dealing with mysterious storms that are increasingly plaguing the mining operations. According to the locals, the storms were limited to the South Pole itself, a relatively small area, but over the last few months it's expanded and moved to cover all the United South Pole Colonies. And now we find this Airbender boy, trapped in unnatural ice. Clearly, a lost group of Airbenders, perhaps serving the Avatar himself, have conjured this magic storm to destroy our mining colony. Since it's so important to our platinum initiatives, perhaps they're even part of the conspiracy that's been causing all the other troubles throughout the world."

Both Mother and the Captain gasped, but Mai had to keep from snorting in amusement. It was the most paranoid thing she had ever heard from someone who wasn't Azula.

"There's definitely a certain logic to it, sir," the Captain said, while Mai rolled her eyes. "What are you going to do about it?"

"We'll have to see what the boy knows. We don't have the time and facilities here for a proper interrogation, but surely at the Navy Base- the commander there, his name was- uh?"

"Commander Zhao, sir. He's known as an ambitious sort, so I'm certain he'll be keen to follow any lead."

"Excellent! It looks like we've solved the problem of the storms before we've even arrived!" Father barked a laugh, and Mother began a round of applause.

Mai resisted the urge to sigh. Instead, she slowed her movement of the staff, letting Tom-Tom brush his fingers against the wooden shaft, and then tipped it so that it sprang up above his reach. Tom-Tom turned to look at her with an expression of betrayal evident on his chubby face, and then proceeded to try to jump high enough to reach his prize.

Mai ignored him. She had her own suspicions about Aang. (Or, rather, The Boy.) If she was right and The Boy was the Avatar, then he was the ultimate prize. Once Father and this Commander Zhao knew what they had, they'd be quick to send word back to the Fire Capital. For such a prize, the Fire Lord would reward even the poorest peasant with a position in the Fire Court itself, at the very least.
Azulon’s old obsession was well known, after all. And perhaps The Boy really was partially responsible for this magic storm thing that Father was supposed to deal with; he might be the key to saving the mining colony and all the platinum that the Fire Nation oh so desperately wanted.

But Mai knew only one person in the entire world who needed to be the one to find the Avatar, the sooner, the better. For everyone else, the ensuing reward would be mere profit, but for this person, it was nothing but the most basic need.

The need to go home.

Mai looked and saw Tom-Tom getting frustrated with his jumping, shaking his tiny fists between each jump, and on his next leap, she subtly tipped the staff so that it just passed into reach as his hands clenched shut. Tom-Tom wound up in possession of a carved antique staff, and delight exploded on his face. He turned to Mai, laughed, and stuck his tongue out at her, never realizing that she had been the source of his victory.

Mai suppressed a smirk. This planning thing wasn’t so hard after all. Now she just had to figure out how she was actually going to do this thing she wanted to do.

Mai sighed, while Father and Mother poured drinks to celebrate their good fortune.

"Gran-Gran, I'm home!"

Sokka’s call resonated through all three rooms of the ugly, boxy house, bouncing off the artificial stone walls. No sooner did the echoes come back around to him (Sokka really wanted to learn how echoes worked, someday) than he was mobbed by his five little ‘roommates.’

"Sokka's back!” That was the oldest, Shila, the girl with the muddy yellow eyes.

"Yay!” That was the youngest, Naklin, the kid with skin as white and delicate as new ice.

"Did you bring jerky?” That was Quinyaya, the boy who never wore gloves outside but always had warm hands.

"Your boots are getting slush on the floor.” That was Tliyel, the girl who always shivered.

"Can I have your hat?” That was Shlim, the boy whose eyes glittered like the purest gold, and who had a delicate nose just like the administrator of the Exchange House.

Sokka tried his best to make his way into the kitchen and the warmth of the coal-burning stove there, but his attempts at locomotion were hampered by the cluster of mongrels aged four to eight that seemed to have staked out his legs as their new base of operations. "Yeah, yeah, I'm back from work. It only happens every day, so let's throw a party. Hey, be careful where you're step- Ow! That was my toe!” Sokka tried hopping the rest of the way, but the kids around him no longer seemed interested in supporting his weight, and he went down with a suddenness that made him lose track of his groceries, until they reappeared by way of landing on his head. The bags of rice landed first with all their weight, and then the links of sausages sprinkled down to drape him like cold and clammy scarves.

He still hadn’t gotten himself off the floor when Gran-Gran came out of her room. "Sokka, why are you wearing the day’s rations?”

Sokka thought about it. "Gravity, mostly.”
Gran-Gran shuffled over to him, and the kids finally scooted back over to the warmth of the stove. Sure, they respected Gran-Gran, but not the guy who brought them dinner every day. Typical, really; rudeness was in their blood. Gran-Gran picked up the rice and sausage off of Sokka and carried them over to the sole table in the house. "Three portions today?"

"Yeah, they had a special project for the big Commander up at the Navy base, using that new White Gold metal they're starting to mine. They've lined up a bunch of boring experiments with it for the next few weeks, but at least they're more interesting than tracking the storms." Electing to remain on the floor, Sokka began tugging his boots off. "They're calling the metal platinum, actually. Not sure why it's a big deal, but they wanted a knife and a set of baby spoons made out of the stuff. They ordered the guy who made the spoons to do his work over, but they liked my knife enough that I got extra rations."

Gran-Gran nodded her gray-haired head. "This will help. Thank you."

Sokka said nothing. Some help. All he was doing was pleasing the Fire Nation, and feeding the kids they left behind. He looked over at the five children gathered around the stove. They were nothing but nuisances to him, really, but Gran-Gran had declared an open invitation to any kids with nowhere else to go, which would have been fine with Sokka in theory, but the only children who didn't actually have a home were the ones who everyone could tell on sight.

They weren't Sokka's tribe, and they definitely weren't Sokka's family.

But then, aside from Gran-Gran, Sokka had no family. Everyone else was gone. Mom and Dad were dead, and Katara...

Sokka was pushing that thought aside and taking off his coat when he heard the doors open again, and Bato soon appeared in the kitchen. "Kanna, Sokka! Good to see you. I earned an extra ration in the mine and wanted to drop it off." The kids cheered, and initiated their typical greeting by way of throwing themselves at the visitor. Bato weathered it better than Sokka did, but then, Bato was something like twice Sokka's height. It must have been spectacular uncomfortable for him in the mines.

Gran-Gran gave a wrinkly smile and took the pack of rice. "Thank you. We always appreciate the help. Would you care to stay for dinner?"

Bato shook his head, and Sokka deflated. He liked Bato; aside from how helpful he always was, Bato had been a friend of Dad's, and had lots of great stories to tell about their adventures, like the time they stole a Fire Nation tug and went for a joyride. And Bato was one of the few miners who didn't give Sokka grief for working up at the lab. Whether that was because Bato wanted to honor his old pal Hakoda, or really didn't have a problem with Sokka's life choices, was a question that Sokka never wanted answered.

"I've got to get home," Bato went on to say. "The soldiers are calling a curfew, and if I don't get back in time I'll have to sleep here until my next shift. Not that you don't keep a good house, Kanna, but it's a little crowded here."

Sokka felt his ears twitch with interest. "Curfew? What for?"

"The new governor's ship is pulling into the port tonight. The base has sent out a tug already, and Zhao is putting together a big welcome. They apparently don't want us 'savages' under foot."

Wait, wait, wait. That didn't sound right to Sokka. Everyone knew that the new governor was coming, and there hadn't been any word about a curfew before now. The Navy base didn't always
talk to the mining administration, but you couldn't have a curfew if no one knew about it. It defeated the whole purpose, really. Otherwise, you'd have a cur-many, and mixing marine soldiers with cur-manys never worked out.

The cold that usually resided inside Sokka thawed a little bit, and he reached for his boots. "Hey, Gran-Gran, is it okay if I run out again before dinner? I want to get a quick look at something."

Mai took a few wrong turns trying to find the brig, and when she arrived, deep in the bowels of the ship where the only light was the red glow of the lamps, she found a pair of guards on duty outside the door of Aang's cell.

She indulged in a sigh. This was going less than impressively, so far.

Refusing to accept failure, she marched up to the cell like she belonged here and snapped out, "Lady Caldera Yu Mai, Weapon-class citizen, to see the prisoner."

The guards were both Firebenders, and wore the skull-like masks that completely hid their faces. The look was probably meant to be scary, but those eyeholes were more than big enough for Mai to use as targets. She looked back dully as one of the guards said, "On whose authority?"

"I'm Weapon-class, so technically, my authority is the Royal Family itself. Go ahead and confirm it if you need to."

The guards exchanged a glance.

Mai crossed her arms over her chest. "The ship is pulling up to the dock or whatever you call it, and we're getting ready to transfer the prisoner. You can either drag him out kicking and screaming and tossing tornados, or I can talk to him and get him to cooperate. Your choice, but I heard that when Airbenders scream, they can go so loud they shatter eardrums. Your armor would ring like a weaponized bell."

One guard said, "What do you think?"

The other shrugged with a rattle of his armor. "Let her have a few minutes. She'll just whine to her daddy, otherwise, and then we'll all get a real earful."

Mai had to suppress a snort of amusement. Let them snark at what they thought was a Spoiled Daughter, so long as they gave her what she wanted. One of the guards took a Firebending stance facing the cell, while the other set about unlocking the door. It swung open with a clang, and Aang was revealed sitting at the far end.

His arms and legs were chained to the floor.

Mai stepped inside, and the door shut behind her.

"Please, what's going on?" Aang- The Boy looked up at her with wide gray eyes tinged by the bloody light of the cell's lamp. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Mai crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. "It's the craziest thing I've ever seen. You came out of that iceberg. You were glowing in there."

"I'm in trouble for that?"

"Not exactly." Mai wanted to toy with one of her knives, but didn't dare show a weapon at this point.
"It's something like out of a legend. And this legend is about a boy who survived in an iceberg for a hundred years."

The Boy gave her a look like she was crazy. "That's impossible."

"Just like glowing people are impossible?"

"Uh..."

"I figure they're both Avatar magic, right?"

The Boy went still. "What do you mean?"

"We know who you are." On impulse, she added, "Avatar Aang."

He let his head droop between his knees. "So you're taking me back to the Southern Air Temple."

Mai took a fortifying breath. "There wouldn't be a point. There are no Airbenders at the Southern Air Temple anymore." She pondered how to say the next part, but then decided to just go ahead and get it out there. "There are no Airbenders, period. Fire Lord Sozin had them all killed a hundred years ago. The Fire Nation went to war with the world, and won."

"No!" Aang stood up suddenly, rattling his chains and stretching them to their full length. "There's no way... they couldn't all be..." He must have seen something in Mai's face, even though she was keeping it completely still. He wilted where he stood, and let the chains bend him like a willow tree. "A hundred years?"

"A hundred and one, if you want to be exact. The war started when the Fire Nation used the power of Sozin's Comet to attack the Air Nomads and the Earth Kingdom. The Water Tribes were later raided. The Southern Water Tribes were whittled down until they surrendered. The Northern Tribe was eventually conquered. The Earth Kingdom took the longest, with their capital and several major city states preserving a pretty large chunk of land under their rule.

"But then last year- a hundred years after the war began- Sozin's Comet returned, and the Fire Nation used the power to conquer the last of their enemies." Mai looked away from Aang, and her vision filled with memories from the quick tour her family had made of the Fire Nation Colonies, before coming down to the South Pole. The entire continent that used to be the Earth Kingdom was under Fire Nation control, now, and the administrators were quick to share the glory of the Homeland's culture with all the new colonies. Some villages had been converted overnight, while others were allowed to eventually accept Fire Nation greatness of their own free will, so long as they were content to remain second-class citizens. Military forces- soldiers and tanks and spies and weapons- were everywhere to maintain order in this delicate time. The most vivid thing that Mai had seen, though, were the vast streaks of ash that stretched over an entire vista, representing where the last of the Rebel Cities had stood when the Comet came. "Ba Sing Se was burned. The last pockets of resistance were overwhelmed. The Fire Nation won everything in a single day. The Earth Kingdom is now the Colonial Continent."

"We rule the world, now."

She heard the clank of metal and the rustle of saffron cloth, and Mai turned back to see Aang crumpled back down on the floor. "The Air Nomads couldn't be all gone. Maybe... maybe they're in hiding, somewhere..."

She shrugged. "My Father has some theories, but he's searching for enemies to defeat so that he can look good. I just know what I've been taught, and the Last Airbender was supposed to be the Avatar.
Our forces have been looking for him for a whole century, and now here you are, not knowing about a hundred-year war, glowing like some kind of spirit."

"...this... this is all my fault..."

Mai said nothing. She didn't know the details of how he ended up in that iceberg, but he was probably right. He wasn't there, so it was his fault. Nor was there any way he could fix things. The Avatar was supposedly a powerful Bender, but he could hardly bring back Ba Sing Se with a wave of his hands, and definitely not the people who died there.

There was a sound like a tapping on metal, and Mai looked around the cell, trying to find the source. Worried that mice might be scurrying around, she looked down-

-and saw another tear fall to tap on the metal floor beneath Aang's face.

He was crying.

All of a sudden, Mai felt uncomfortable with this. She had no relief to offer, though. Merely a trap. "Listen, you don't have long. They're going to bring you to ashore soon, to the Navy base there. They're going to ask you about the storms hitting the South Pole. They'll hurt you if you resist, and if they figure out who you are, they'll send you to the Fire Lord."

Aang didn't respond.

Mai crouched down, and whispered, "I'm working on something. Keep playing along, don't tell anyone you're the Avatar, and wait for me. I'm not going to see these people profit off of you."

Aang still didn't react, and Mai had to get going. She stood, spared him once last glance, and then turned and knocked on the door. It opened a moment later, and soon Mai was on her way out of the brig.

Now came the hard part:

Getting word to the one person in the world who could figure this whole thing out.

With Mai gone, Aang was left alone.

Even when she had been here in the cell, he had still been alone. He had been alone for a hundred years. A hundred years. It was more than he could make himself believe, so he pushed it out of mind.

That still left him with the fact that he was alone.

She was wrong. She had to be. It wasn't possible to kill a whole nation. Just like it wasn't possible to survive for a hundred years in an iceberg. This had to be some kind of bizarre mistake; maybe Aang had stumbled into some kind of isolated Fire Nation pirate society that had been cut off from the world for a million years or something, and they were all mixed up and creating legends out of bad information. Okay, maybe that was a little far-fetched. It could all just be a dream.

Aang watched the tears drip from his eyes to land on the cold metal of the floor.

Yeah, just a dream. Or crazy mixed up pirate people.

Mai didn't seem too mixed up, though. She might be mistaken about all that war stuff, but she was a good person. She wanted to help.
Aang decided to trust her. She would help, and then he could bring her to the Southern Air Temple, show her that she was wrong and everyone there was okay. Maybe Aang could even say that he didn't run away, he found out about a bunch of really confused pirates and had to go out and rescue a beautiful girl from them. The monks wouldn't be mad that he ran away, and they'd see that he didn't need to be sent away from Monk Gyatso.

Everything would be okay.

Everything.

Aang made himself believe it, but the tears continued to fall.

TO BE CONTINUED
Mai sets her plans for Aang into motion, while Sokka discovers something that may change his life forever.

Weapon of the Fire Nation

Commander Zhao, ranking officer of United South Pole Naval Base, had an appointment with Destiny.

The day had started innocuously enough, just another wind-battered collection of hours in this heat-forsaken land of ice and irrelevance. Zhao's official mission was to secure the port against both the possibility of criminal activity from the indigenous Water Tribe slaves, and any incursions from any of the non-existent pirates who might someday prey on the South Pole Seas. It was, needless to say, a complete insult to his intelligence and strength, but Zhao refused to do anything but persevere. That meant surviving the supposedly unnatural storms- what the local dogs called the Everstorm- and supporting the new Governor in restoring peace and natural weather to the United South Pole Colonies.

Now, Zhao stepped quickly through the base's administration building. The new governor's ship had just been pulled into port by one of the base's tugs, and Zhao would be there to personally greet the new arrivals. Servants hurried along beside him, one polishing his armor as he walked and another doing a last minute trim of his side-burns. Zhao waved them back as he stepped outside into the courtyard, and let his cape flare open behind him in the frigid winds, trusting in his Firebending to keep him warm. Aside from wanting to present himself in the best possible light to his subordinates, Zhao refused to relent to something as inglorious as nature, whether the storm was natural or not.

The cold could offer him no new avenues to power, and so he had no interest in bowing to it.

A squadron of his best Firebenders was assembled in parade rows in the courtyard, exactly as Zhao had ordered, but his only acknowledgement was a wave of his hand signaling them to fall in behind him. He led the whole entourage past the walls of the administration building to where the docks of the port extended out to stab into the sea. The new governor's ship was already settled into the largest berth, and Zhao recognized it as a Comet-class military transport ship. That type was the smallest the Fire Navy had for transporting people and goods, but what it lacked in bulk capacity, it made up for in grandeur and luxury. Zhao despised the Comet class, but looked forward to the day when he could hand them out as favors to his allies.

A simple nod was all it took to deploy the soldiers into an impressive line of Fire Nation might. Only an idiot could fail to appreciate the display.

The thought brought a smirk to Zhao's face as the new arrivals filed down the ramp. Lord Ukano himself descended first, leading his family and their personal guards in a stately parade. There was a pomp and ceremony to the whole procession that made Zhao want to shake his head. Even those too weak to join the military as a warrior still sought to cultivate the strength of its image, but such attempts inevitably betrayed the true weakness within. Some of the Governor's guards were hoisting torches that flickered impotently against the winds and the snow, while the rest carried long spears
best suited for defending a siege wall. Lord Ukano and his Lady Michi walked down the ramp side-by-side, the woman carrying a squirming human-shaped bundle that was probably their young son. Both of them were trying and almost succeeding to appear regal despite the bite of the storm.

It was the young lady who followed them who made no show or artifice.

She was the daughter, Mai, an ugly child made up to pass as a beautiful adult, but she didn't move like someone who cared that others might be watching. She walked with confidence within her hooded cloak, with the grace and surliness of a warrior without a battlefield, despite the long leather case strapped to her back. No doubt she refused to let anyone else handle her legendary blades. Even down here at the South Pole, Zhao had heard rumors of her importance to the various factions in the Royal Family, and though she had to be feeling the cold through her cape, she made no sign of caring.

But then, they didn't grant Weapon-class citizenship to any but the best, and even being a friend to the Royal Family wasn't enough alone to earn that honor.

Yes, Zhao would do well to keep track of this Mai, for however long he and she were stuck here together.

The procession moved off the ramp and onto the docks, everyone moving gingerly on the icy surface. Zhao pretended not to notice their discomfort and gave a minimally respectful bow.

"Welcome to the South Pole, Governor." He signaled to one of his aides with a wave of his hand, and then continued, "Allow me to present some gifts, specially commissioned for your family." The aide brought forth a box, and Zhao took it and presented it to the Governor's wife. "For your son. Tomoshibi, I believe is his name?"

Lady Michi smiled and gave an acknowledging dip of her head. "Yes, but we call him Tom-Tom." She handed the child in question- bundled up in what looked like three layers of heavy coats- to Mai, and accepted the box. She let out a coo when she opened it and saw the intricately detailed metal spoons within. Michi lifted one out and examined the detailing.

Zhao said, "It's made from the platinum we've begun mining here. It's not a hard metal, so be careful not to bend it, but it is resilient enough that even the Great Dragons probably couldn't melt it, and some people say the metal has lucky properties. May it grant your son a long and prosperous life. Don't let him put it in his mouth until you've warmed it, though. These storm winds make metal dangerous."

"Ooh, you're so thoughtful. You have our gratitude, Commander Zhao." Michi bowed at the waist.

Zhao took a second box from the aide, and stepped over to present it to Mai. "It is my honor to meet a Weapon of the Fire Nation."

The young lady stared back without expression from beneath her hood, and shoved her brother back into her mother's arms. "I suppose I'm supposed to say that the honor is all mine." Her voice was every bit as uncaring as her posture.

Zhao held back a frown. "Keep in mind, my Lady, that your position will only take you so far."

Mai quirked an eyebrow. "I'd rather it not take me anywhere. If my Weapon status were worth all that much, I wouldn't have let myself be dragged halfway around the world to the rump end of civilization."

Zhao decided that he didn't really have to deal this attitude right now. He pushed the gift box out to
her and lifted the lid to reveal a knife and a badge, both glinting with the same silver sheen as her brother's spoons. "Again, made from platinum. The knife is purely decorative, given the weakness of the metal, but we did sharpen it, and it's balanced and weighted for throwing. The badge is proof of your Weapon-class citizenship, and will grant you access to all of the secure areas here... provided you are operating under orders from the Royal Family, of course. Don't abuse your authority."

Mai took the box without any sign of gratitude, and poked at the badge with a gloved finger. "I know what being a Weapon means. Thanks for the gifts, I guess."

Deciding that he had met the minimum social obligations, Zhao turned back to Governor Ukano. "We have a vehicle ready to take you to your new residence. Unless you'd care to tour the base beforehand?"

Ukano tried to draw himself up to stand tall without risking a slip on the ice. "We have business to take care of, first. My ship encountered an enemy agent on our way here. He's an Airbender, and I suspect he has something to do with the issues with the storms that I've been sent to resolve."

An Airbender? Zhao had to keep himself from laughing. Sozin wrote of his suspicions that some might have survived the purge, but even as far back as Azulon's youth, that was a theory long discarded by all but the most paranoid. Zhao also doubted the local legends about the Everstorm, that it was a magic front of weather that never rested and served as some kind of divine agent of retribution. The storms were unusual, but the whole reason that Ukano was selected as the new governor was because of his science and engineering training. The storms were mostly likely caused by some kind of unforeseen ecological impact by the mining operation, and an administrator who understood the modern ways could properly oversee the investigation.

But if Ukano was now looking at ghosts for the explanation, perhaps he wasn't as educated as he was supposed to be.

Still, even if the face of others' madness, Zhao always saw an opportunity to make himself look good. "Well, we'll certainly look into it, my Lord. My soldiers will take custody of your prisoner, while we get your family safely to your new home."

Ukano looked back at Zhao with a certain glint in his eye. What did he find so amusing? "And what are you going to do about the prisoner's Sky Bison, Commander?"

It was a long moment before Zhao could find his voice. "The prisoner's what?"

The hardest part of getting out there to spy on the new Governor's arrival was finding a baby walrus on such short notice.

The Fire Nation didn't like having its slaves underfoot in their Navy base, so they walled it off from the Tribe's village with a massive fence. Climbing the fence was a very slippery and dangerous proposition, and that's assuming you didn't get spotted by the patrolling guards. Even if an especially manly and clever member of the Tribe theoretically worked out a way to get past the fence, there was still the issue of getting over to the docks themselves and hanging out within sight without being sighted in turn.

So Sokka snuck his way past the curfew. Soldiers patrolled the paths, but even the green crystal lanterns could only do so much against the snow and the night. Sokka stuck to the shadows, and could only hope that with his own imperfect vision didn't leave him trying to stuff himself into a shadow that was already occupied. That type of thing could get awkward.
The going was a lot easier once Sokka passed beyond the edge of the town, where he didn't have to contend with anything but the winds, and opened the shutters on his own small crystal lantern. He wasn't sure he believed the old stories about the Everstorm- it was easy to believe that some property of the South Pole made the weather there harsh, leading to legends about an everlasting storm- but the expanding stormfronts certainly had the Fire Nation worried, and Sokka could respect their science, at the very least. The word was that the new governor was supposed to be doing something about these storms, but then why would his arrival call for a curfew on everyone in the village? Sokka purposefully avoided coming up with any theories until he had more evidence, but to get that evidence, he needed walrus.

He made his way northeast, where the land met the sea at a long line of icy cliffs. He had to do some searching, walking along the coast, but eventually he found a low spot that led out onto a peninsula of ice, where a group of walruses were enjoying the awful weather and showing off their spotted blubber hides. Sokka remembered the lessons Dad had taught him before they were forced into the Fire Nation's village, before his family had-

Sokka remembered those lessons, and cupped his hands around his mouth and began yodeling at the top of his lungs.

The walruses roared back, but they didn't like the noise, and began hauling themselves back into the sea. They bumped into each other as they went, and retreated without any regard for the rest of the group. Sokka dashed into the chaos, and grabbed one of the babies- a baby that was just as long as Sokka was tall. "Don't worry, little guy," Sokka grunted as he began carrying the living, squirming pile of blubber away. "I'll bring you back when I'm done. Your poppa and your momma will be back waiting for you by then. If the Fire Nation hasn't, you know, already killed them or something. I hear that's going around a lot."

The baby walrus barked in what Sokka decided was an agreeable reply. At least, that was how he and Katara had taken such noises back when they had made the treks out of the village to play where the Fire Nation couldn't see.

Heavy as the 'little' guy was, he made an effective sled, and Sokka made great time back to the fence around the Fire Navy base. The fence went all the way to the very edge of the cliffs, but there it stopped. Tying the baby walrus to his back, and- somehow managing not to fall backwards- Sokka gently climbed down the face of the cliff, onto the nearly invisible steps that had been chiseled by the ocean into the face. While the walrus barked curiously and the winds tried to yank him into the sea, Sokka shimmied across and then climbed back up on the other side of the fence. The Fire Nation knew nothing about climbing ice, so they had no idea such a thing was possible. They were just stupid invaders. That Sokka had discovered this route completely by accident one day, while nearly tumbling into the ocean after slipping on a herring, was aside from the point.

After he hauled himself up, Sokka had to let himself drop down onto the snow and take a moment to catch his breath. As the life slowly trickled back into his arms and legs, he reflected that it was never any fun, hauling around baby walruses, especially in this kind of weather. Why did they have to be so fat and heavy, anyway? They could just wear coats like normal people.

Once he was ready to move again, Sokka began crawling along through the snow. With the baby walrus on top of him, Sokka didn't move as quickly as he had when he had been the one riding the walrus, but it was worth the lack of speed. Whenever he saw one of the Fire Nation soldiers coming along, standing out from the whites and blues and grays of the environment in their red-trimmed armor, he'd sink down into the snow and let the baby walrus on his back be his disguise.

He got all the way through the base's grounds to find a new ship moored on one of the docks. Sokka
inched as close as he could, when no one was looking, and with the snow and night providing extra cover, he was able to get within hearing range. It helped that Commander Zhao was yelling:

"It really is a Sky Bison!"

Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Come again? What was a Sky Bison? Sokka peaked out from beneath his best walrus friend and watched as a crane lifted a giant... thing off of the big ship and onto a transport pallet on the dock. It was a thing with massive curved horns, six legs, and a flat tail the roughly size of Gran-Gran's house.

Wow. That was pretty neat. Sokka immediately wanted to know more about it.

He looked over at the other people who were watching the bison's unloading. He naturally recognized the resident despot Commander Zhao, and in Sokka's opinion, the less he saw of those massive sideburns, the better the state of the world. He didn't recognize the other people- likely the passengers from the ship- but aside from all the soldier guards, the group wasn't what he was expecting. The leader guy? Sure, he looked like a typical Fire Nation politician, which probably made him the new governor. The lady carrying the toddler was a surprise, though, as was the other girl (Servant? Secretary? Fortuneteller? Political Officer?) who followed them. It was hard to think of Fire types as having families, but there you go, even rake-sharks had to reproduce, he supposed.

Still, it was a rather disappointing discovery for Sokka. Is this what the Fire Nation was so concerned about, that they had declared a curfew? Women and children? And a giant ball of fur?

One of the treaded transports- the kind enclosed for protection against the weather- rolled over to the group, and the governor's family climbed aboard. It headed off soon after, and Sokka saw that it was making for the base's side gate; it was likely going to take the long way around the town to the governor's mansion. The bison thing was rolled away on its pallet, headed in the opposite direction- maybe toward the stables, or one of the supply warehouses- and Sokka figured that the show was over. However, Zhao was sticking around, and as Sokka watched, even more of the commander's soldiers arrived and took up Firebending stances. What was that about?

Another figure was brought down off the ship by another pair of guards. Now, this one was an odd sight. It was a kid, and he wasn't wearing a coat but didn't seem to feel the cold at all.

The guards escorted the boy to where Zhao stood, and the Commander barked, "Well, boy? Are you an Airbender?"

Okay, now Sokka figured someone was messing with him.

But the boy nodded. "I am, but I think there's been some kind of mistake. I don't want to hurt anyone."

Zhao raised his hands, motioning at the wind-driven snow around him. "Then use your powers to end this storm. You can't destroy the colonies down here without killing the Tribals who serve us."

Sokka gasped beneath his walrus, and not just at the slur, but the boy shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. Airbenders can't make storms like this. I'd stop it if I could, but- well, like I said, I can't. Sorry."

Zhao crossed his arms over his chest. "You might be telling the truth, but it doesn't matter right now. My people will make sure, one way or the other. Take him to one of the maximum security cells!"

The soldiers holding the boy shoved him into motion, and Zhao followed at a quick clip.

Well, that was weird and mysterious. Sokka felt instantly better, as 'weird and mysterious' were
indeed good reasons for a curfew.

After everyone was gone from sight, Sokka began scooting his own way off the docks while his walrus partner dozed on top of him. This was a good start, but he needed more information.

He had a feeling he wasn't going to be back to Gran-Gran in time for dinner.

It was no palanquin, but Mai had to admit that the enclosed crawler, as noxious as the engine smelled, was much better than walking through the snow and the wind. The problem was that it was an especially boring ride.

The only view out of the transport was through the front port, and that was situated more for the driver's benefit than that of the passengers. Father and Mother were content to bounce regally in their padded seats, and Tom-Tom was treating the whole thing like a religious experience with wide eyes and a big smile, but Mai needed something to do, or at least look at. At one point, craning her head to see around the driver, she caught a glimpse of distant, eerie green lights out amidst the snow. The driver, a woman with dull eyes, noticed Mai's interest and said, "That's the Water Tribe slum. They used to live out in their own primitive village, but when the Fire Nation started the colonies down here, we made it illegal to live anywhere else. Everyone works for their food, either at the mine or in one of the softer postings."

Mother looked up at that. "Are any on staff at the mansion?"

"I believe so, my Lady."

Mother gave a, "Hmmm," and said no more. Mai was already bored with the conversation.

The ride, at least, didn't last too long, and soon enough the transport shuddered to a stop. Mai peaked around the driver again, and the first impression she had was of a monstrous, many-eyed face staring out through the snow. A moment's analysis, though, revealed the truth: she was staring at one of the mountains that the Fire Nation was mining down here, but instead of an industrial site, she was looking at glowing windows and reinforced doors.

Her new home was inside of a mountain. Mai's lip curled in disgust.

Before she disembarked, she spotted dark lines of some kind extending from the mountain, and traced their source to a boxy metal structure set against and into the rock, some distance from the front door. "What's that?"

The driver looked, and then made a sound of understanding. "That's the mansion's Communications office. The governor has access to his own telegraph station, so that he can send and receive messages independently of the base's workload. Until your father officially takes up his office, we're using it as a verification post."

Which meant it would be manned. Mai thought that over while she disembarked with her parents. The cold wind outside nearly chased the notion out of her head, though, and the group made a quick dash for the underground mansion's doors. They were greeted by the servant staff- and yes, there were some dark skinned and blue-eyed young ladies bowing with the more respectable servants- and then given a tour.

If Mai had any doubts about betraying her family, they were extinguished when she saw the labyrinth of caves that was to be her home.

Granted, a lot of pointless and incompetent effort had been put into making the place livable.
tunnels themselves were wide and smoothly carved, and an excess of both carpets and tapestries minimized the visible stone. Wide rooms sprung off of the hallway tunnels, and even though furniture was at a minimum, Mother was already chattering about how she wanted her own household items brought over from the boat and where they should be placed for optimum gaudiness or whatever.

Mai just sighed, and when she had the chance, drifted away to find the Communications center. It took a little searching, but she eventually found it situated next to the room that would soon be her father's office. She yanked the door open to find a startled man in a uniform hunched over a long desk covered in all kinds of equipment. When he recovered his composure, he said, "If you're the new governor, you don't look like how I expected."

Mai gave that remark all the reaction that deserved: she ignored it. "I need to send a maximum priority coded message to the Capital. You need to set that up for me." The man started to speak again, but Mai cut him off by whipping out Zhao's fancy platinum badge. "I'm a Weapon-class citizen, and this constitutes an order."

The man blinked, and then sat a little straighter. "Yes, my Lady. What kind of encryption do you require?"

"I have one of those cogs. Hold on." Mai slung her leather case off her back, and reached inside. She moved her hand over the blades in their secure cases, past the spare parts for her wrist and ankle launchers, to where her razor discs were stacked and secured by straps. One of those discs was thicker than the rest, one that she been given by Princess Azula herself. Mai slipped it out of the case, and held it up in the lantern light. Unlike her razor discs, this object was no weapon but still had teeth, several rows of them, each one marked by a character that didn't exist in any official list of Words Approved for the Glory of the Fire Nation. They corresponded to sounds that could be used to form a useful working language, while the numbered teeth were used to transform the messages written in those sounds to transmittable codes that were supposed to be completely undecipherable—except for someone with a corresponding cog at the other end of the transmission.

The man nodded much more slowly, this time, and motioned to a large machine with a keypad on the desk next to him. "You can use this encoder device. Insert the cog in that slot, and enter your message. The machine will print the code sequence on a paper tape. When you're done, I'll send that sequence out over the wire. Do you require an acknowledgement?" He suddenly blanched, and then quickly added, "No, of course not. Sorry, I forgot the protocol for a moment. I'll have to vacate the room while you compose the message, but I'll be right outside the door if you need assistance."

The encoding machine took Mai a moment to figure out, but not long after, she had transformed her short message into an encrypted set of signals, and then her treachery was flying across the world on metal cables.

Aang's theory about these guys being an isolated gang of Fire Nation pirates was falling apart pretty quickly. Their base was huge, and they had all kinds of weird machines that he had never even imagined existed. He caught glimpses of several different kinds of metal 'beasts' as he was dragged to a prison building, but it was the inside of that building that boasted the most amazing technological advance of all.

It was warm inside and there was no sign of a fire whatsoever. Hot, dry air came out of vents in the walls, and there was a metallic strumming sound that made the whole building ring.

The cells of the prison were covered in heavy metal doors, and it was into one of these that Aang was pushed. They unwrapped his chains just long enough to clasp new bindings on his wrists and
ankles, and then he found himself being pulled by his arms until they were fully extended. He was forced to stand straight and tall if he wanted to stand at all, and then the chains were locked into place and the guards left him strung up like a sacrifice.

Aang was starting to maybe wonder if trusting Mai might not have been the best idea.

Then that Zhao guy sauntered into the cell, smirking, followed by a bunch of burly soldiers. "Well, young Airbender, perhaps you can shed some light on your situation. Who are you? Where do you come from? And what is going on with this strange storm?"

Aang took a deep breath. "Okay. I don't know anything about your weather, but I'm Aang, a simple monk from the Southern Air Temple. I, uh, well, got into some trouble with the Elders, and they were going to send me to the Eastern Air Temple, but I didn't want to leave, so I ran away. I didn't know where I should fly, but then I remembered that I always wanted to try penguin-sledding, so I started heading south. Then I ran into this awful storm, and me and Appa- he's my Sky Bison companion- got forced into the ocean. Things got fuzzy after that, and when I woke up, I was in this iceberg and Mai and her family found me and started throwing nets at me. And then they brought me here. So, I'm not sure how much I can really help you."

Zhao barked a laugh. "What a load of nonsense. You expect me to believe that your response to being banished by your people was to run away? No, young Airbender, you will help me yet, but I can see that you're not going to make this easy. Perhaps a day without food or water of any kind will soften your stance on this matter." He made a hand motion towards the other soldiers, and then turned on his heel and led his subordinates out of the cell.

The door clanged shut behind him.

Aang hung from his chains and sighed. He really hoped that Mai would come through for him. She was beautiful and pure in spirit, Aang could tell, but things were looking tougher than one person could usually manage.

And Aang was starting to really wonder what the Southern Air Temple would look like, if he got back.

With nothing else to do and needing a little inner peace, Aang did his best to meditate. He wasn't exactly in a comfortable position, but his back was straight, so Aang figured it was worth a try. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing, steadying it into a soothing rhythm that pleasantly tickled his nostrils. With no distractions, Aang's thoughts gleamed brighter in his awareness, but he didn't let them become distractions to the sensation of his breathing. The flow of air was a calming influence, washing away thoughts, worries, and the scraping of steel chains against his skin.

Aang breathed in, breathed out, and enjoyed a little peace.

Above the South Pole Mining Colony, the winds and the snow abated, for a short while.

By the time Sokka returned the baby walrus to its fellows (with a friendly wave and a promise that he'd like to team-up again, if the opportunity arose), he had come to an intimate understanding of the concept of being 'dead on his feet.' He wasn't worried about becoming an actual undead horror that stalked the ice in search of manflesh to devour, but only because he barely had enough energy to stay upright, never mind doing any stalking. Besides, those were just legends.

Just about the only bright spot was that the winds died down just as Sokka started making his way
back to the mining colony, letting him just stumble along in the newly revealed moonlight without worrying about holding his lantern up or fighting the breeze. It was nice.

The curfew was apparently over by the time he got back, so Sokka was able to blend into the regular foot-traffic that preceded a shift-change up at that mines. Despite the convenience, Sokka had to keep from groaning when he saw all the people out and about; that meant he had a shift of his own coming up back at the laboratory. Hopefully, he'd have enough time to get some food at Gran-Gran's before he had to run off.

He found the house dark and quiet, except for the little kid snores that echoed out of the bedroom. Sokka tiptoed his way to the kitchen stove, and left his boots and coat there to dry. A covered bowl was waiting on top of the stove, and Sokka had to smile at his Gran-Gran's thoughtfulness. The rice and sausage was a little dry, but it was food, and almost as good as sleep.

He was so focused on shoveling his dinner into his mouth that he didn't noticing Gran-Gran herself sneaking up on him until she said, "And just where have you been, young man?" Her tone was no less harsh for her whispering.

Sokka jumped enough to toss the rice out of his bowl, but most of it landed back in. On the downside, Sokka mourned for those lost grains of rice, but on the upside, the jolt of adrenaline had woken him up a bit. "Slush, Gran-Gran," he hissed, "you surprised me."

"We'll have none of that language in this house. Now, where were you?"

Sokka bowed his head in a brief show of shame. "I went to check out the reason for the curfew. Snuck close enough to see our new governor... and get this, he brought an Airbender prisoner with him." While he ate, Sokka proceeded to give his grandmother a quick description of everything he had observed, from the Governor's retinue to the boy in saffron clothes to the giant fluffy monster. He scraped the last bit of sausage into his mouth, and said, "I heard them say that they think the Airbender has something to do with the storm. There's some weird stuff going on up there."

"You took a big risk." Gran-Gran took the empty bowl and shook her head. "Do you think this information is worth it?"

Sokka began doing some stretches, as long as he was awake enough to feel sore. "I dunno. I think this is big stuff, but... I guess there isn't much I can do about it right now."

She nodded, and shuffled over to tend the stove. "I remember. I'm surprised you do. You were little when we came to the colony. You teethed on jerky."

"Dad kept some after we came here. He'd give a bit to me, sometimes." Sokka smiled at the memory. "He never liked the colony, or living under the Fire Nation's control, but at least he had his family back then. His Mom and Dad were still alive, and Katara... The smile dropped from his face. "I gotta go to work."

Sokka went to get his boots and coat again, but then he noticed a pair of muddy yellow eyes staring at him from within the darkened bedroom. There was still a chorus of snores coming from the room, but once she realized she had been noticed, the little girl Shila stepped out of the darkness into the kitchen.

"Heya," Sokka said, biting back a sigh. "I'm just on my way out. You can go back to sleep."
She nodded, then skipped over and grabbed his hand. "I miss my mom and dad, too, but it'll be okay. Gran-Gran loves us, and we all love each other."

Sokka had no idea how to respond. Love? But the kids were Fire Nation. Well, partially Fire Nation. And he had to work so hard in order to feed them, betraying the Tribe by helping the Fire Nation with their work with platinum. And none of them were Katara.

He missed Katara most of all, which was why he hated thinking about her.

But Sokka didn't want the kids to know about any of that. It would just make things awkward. "Thanks, kid." He ruffled Shila's hair, and then went to get his boots and coat. "I appreciate that."

Princess Azula was up exactly forty-seven minutes after she normally went to bed, and the change in schedule was an annoyance, but annoyances could be tolerated for the greater glory of her family. She stalked through the quiet halls of the Fire Palace, footsteps muffled by the thick red carpets, holding her missive protectively in both hands. Delivering notes was usually work for servants, but this particular communication was both too secret and too personal. Hands that could have incinerated the paper in a second with the power of Firebending protected the note from even the light of the gas lamps that lined the hallway.

Mai had sent word, and unusually for Azula's dour friend, it was an interesting word, indeed.

Azula found her father's suite guarded, as always, by a pair retired soldiers who worked for him personally. They glanced at Azula as she approached, and one moved to knock on the door behind him. Azula waited patiently, not because these guards had any authority to stop her, but because it was her father's wish that she wait until welcomed, and she always did everything that her father commanded.

He didn't keep her waiting long. He never did, anymore. The door opened, and Father looked out with a smile that positively glowed. "Ah, Azula. You're up late. Please, come in. You know how much I love your company."

The words, the expression on his face, warmed Azula with an intensity that even her Firebending couldn't manage. She gave a quick bow and followed him back into his residential suite. The parlor was lit only by the blaze in the fireplace, and its warmth shielded the room from the chill of the early spring nights. Father took his place on a coach, and motioned at a cushioned chair nearby. "Please, sit down. It's late, and you've been working so hard lately. You need to take care of yourself."

Azula nodded, and took the seat. She didn't really need to rest, but she always did everything that her father commanded. Once she was settled, she held the note out. "Mai sent a message to me over the telegraph from the South Pole. It was encrypted with my personal code, and I decrypted it myself. No one but us knows what it says."

Father's eyebrows rose with interest, but he accepted the note without hurry. Azula had already memorized the contents, of course, in case she had been attacked on the way here from the palace's Communications hub and was forced to burn the note to keep it out of enemy hands. Or the hands of other family, but the distinction was almost invisible, in cases like this.

Mai's message had been characteristically to-the-point: "CHILD AIRBENDER DISCOVERED BY FATHER EN ROUTE TO S POLE. FATHER THINKS CONNECT TO STORMS. ZHAO AWARE. I THINK AVATAR. TOLD NO ONE. PLEASE ADVISE."

Father took his time with the note, and Azula had no doubt that he was considering every possible
angle. When he finally looked up, he was smiling again. "This is wonderful. As I recall, Mai had an attraction to Zuko, yes?"

Azula smirked at the memory. She had fond memories of exploiting that to embarrass both of them. "To a degree, but Mai is not the demonstrative type."

"Didn't her parents arrange a betrothal to Lu Ten?" Father looked over at the crackling fire. "Yes, now I remember. Iroh sent word breaking it off after he took the North Pole."

"Mai said they were quite put out, but she was relieved, and who can blame her? I have no doubt that her parents will support you against Uncle if you need them."

"Zuko needs us all. Azula, we need to find your brother. He's alive, I can feel it in my heart." Father leaned forward, and his worry for Zuko was plain in the firelight. "His banishment is the greatest regret of my life. It taught me how much I need both of my children. I never expected such generosity from your friend Mai, but she has given us a great gift. If we can arrange things properly with her, we can fulfill Azulon's ridiculous conditions, and Zuko can finally come home."

Azula merely nodded. She had her own doubts about whether Zuko still lived, given how weak he had always been, but if Father insisted on it, then she would believe anything. She was less thrilled about the idea of bringing her brother back home. Certainly, he was the ideal contrast to her own perfection, but his weakness might be a poison to their Royal faction. Also, although Azula would never admit it out loud, she wasn't sure how Zuko would affect her dynamic with Father. He had changed much since the banishment, changed in ways that Azula found surprising, but his displays of affection for her felt so... enriching, even if they were a potential weakness. Would Zuko's presence draw some of Father's regard away from her, the way a Firebender divided her power for each stream of flame she sought to project?

But Father wanted Zuko back, and she always did everything that her father commanded. "Of course. Shall I handle things?"

"Personally. Send instructions to Mai, and give her whatever help and guidance she needs." Father's eyes met Azula's with an intensity he hadn't displayed since before Zuko's banishment. "Then, I want you to go out and bring your brother home. Zuko needs to be the one who captures the Avatar, but he needs to be found, and he must be prepared. Advised. You can do that." Father leaned back, and reached for the small bell on the table beside his couch.

A single ring was all it took to summon Master Piandao out from his shadowy lurking. "Yes, Prince Ozai?"

"We will need a hunter. The best. What do you require to make this happen quickly?"

"Gold, of course." Piandao stroked his chin. "Also, something of Zuko's that still carries his scent. It will be expensive, but the hunter I have in mind will find Zuko, whatever his state."

"It will be done. I'll have the gold prepared immediately, and the contents of Zuko's room have remained untouched. Get word to your contact as soon as possible, and arrange a meeting point for Azula."

The swordmaster bowed, and his voice was not quite sardonic as he said, "As you command, Prince Ozai."

Father turned back to Azula. "And please, stay safe. I want you and brother to come back happy and healthy. I love you both so much. You know that." He extended a hand to stroke Azula's face, and
she couldn't help but enjoy the gentle touch. Father had so rarely been this affectionate before Zuko's banishment, calling it weakness, and Azula understood those lessons and appreciated the logic in them.

But such gestures were proof that she was good enough, that she was *worthy* of her Father, and that he knew she always did everything that he commanded.

"It will be exactly as you say. Anything less would be less than acceptable."

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Meetings and Minds

Chapter Summary

Mai gets a plan handed to her, but she quickly learns that no plan survives contact with the enemy. Meanwhile, Aang continues to try to make new friends, with something less than success.

Meetings and Minds

It took Mai three hours, locked in the artfully hewn cave that was serving as her bedroom, but she had finally decrypted Azula's reply.

The return message had come roughly (she had trouble telling time when it was dark all day and all night) twenty-four hours after Mai initiated the correspondence. She had kept her own message short, of course, to make it easier to code and transmit over the telegraph system, but Azula's response had been just as long-winded as one of the Princess' public speeches. The communications technician on duty at the time had actually woken Mai up in the earliest hours of the morning (or the stretch that she was treating as morning, here in this savage sunless land) with a knock on her bedroom door, and kept knocking until she answered. She had to admit, it was an impressive display of the man's sense of duty, since she had at first answered the knocking by throwing a knife at the door without even fully waking up, and then made him keep knocking while she found a dressing robe, muttered an ancient hex on the chill in the air, found her cape, struggled to put both on while preserving access to her knives, and then wrestled her wild bed-hair into something resembling a ponytail.

When Mai finally answered the door and she saw the length of the coded message, she had demanded that the tech bring a decryption machine back up to her bedroom so that she wouldn't be stuck in the cramped office for all the time it would take to render the transmission readable. Only after three hours- not including a break for tea and breakfast- had Mai finally decoded the full message, more time than it had taken the servants to unpack all of Mai's belongings in her bedroom the night before.

But at last Azula's response was revealed in full:

"FREE AVATAR. NONE CAN KNOW WHY. YOU WILL BE CRIMINAL AND TRAITOR TEMPORARILY. FOLLOW AVATAR. SEND LOCATION FOR ZUKO RENDEVOUS. ASSIST ZUKO CAPTURING AVATAR. ROYAL FAMILY INVOLVMENT TOP SECRET. YOU PARDONED AND REWARDED ONCE ZUKO RESTORED. AUTHORIZED FOR ANYTHING NECESSARY INCLUDING CRIMES AGAINST FIRE NATION. REPEAT ANYTHING. LETHAL ACTION AUTHORIZED. DETAILED INSTRUCTIONS FOR FREEING AVATAR FOLLOW."

The note went on from there, detailing (with maddeningly minimal use of prepositions) Azula's plan. It was recommended that Mai steal a particular acid from the mine's Research Center (how Azula had acquired, in twenty-four hours, a list of chemicals stocked by the laboratory down here was completely beyond Mai) that could dissolve the chains and locks used by the Fire Navy in its cold weather bases' prison facilities. Then Mai had to infiltrate the Navy base itself to free the Avatar, and Azula recommended just using her Weapon status to get access through the gate, in a way that would
make it look like an abuse of power on Mai's part. The next step, freeing the Avatar, had to be done in secret so that Mai could sneak him aboard a particular ship that would take them both away from the South Pole.

When Azula made a plan, she didn't go halfway.

Mai had to admit that she was especially impressed by that last detail. Azula had actually arranged for an order to come from the Processing Center on Kyoshi Island for an emergency supply run. If Mai was able to sneak aboard with Aang, they'd have the whole cargo hold, filled with food and other helpful items, to themselves. It would almost be like a vacation cruise, for a fairly generous definition of the idea of a vacation.

Of course, Azula's attention to detail was characteristically one-sided. Every aspect of the mission was planned except for the part where Mai was running away from home, letting her family think she had become a rebel insurgent or something, and going on the run as a wanted criminal with the most dangerous person in the world until she could somehow guide him into Zuko's path. When Mai had first reached out to the Princess with the idea, she hadn't expected such skullduggery or danger. She figured she'd get a Royal Order permitting her to take Aang out on a return trip to his temple or something, where a nice trap would be waiting for them.

But she had her orders, now. If she didn't obey Azula, only the other members of the Royal Family could possibly protect her from the political fallout. Azula was acting on Prince Ozai's behalf, of course, while Princes Iroh and Lu Ten were all the way on the other side of the world and too busy for the shenanigans of the court - especially for her, given the broken betrothal to the younger prince. And Fire Lord Azulon had no reason to intervene for Mai's sake. Not to mention that even if one of those royals did support Mai for some obscure reason, Azula might very well just decide to solve the problem by killing her, and would almost certainly succeed. It was Azula, after all. Mai liked the princess, but she had no doubt that if she ever gave Azula a reason to want her dead, Mai's ashes would be in an urn within a week. Her only choice was to betray her family, run away from the converted mines that were passing as her home right now, and hope for success.

Well, at least it wouldn't be boring, and aside from her (tediously empty) life, it's not like she had anything to lose. Mai had no real purpose here in the South Pole, and Azula was the closest thing that she had to a friend; Ty Lee was probably dead, Lu Ten was tiring even when the betrothal was active, and Zuko's exile and disappearance was what this was all about. If everything worked out, he could finally go home and be happy. With all his friends, of course. Mai's family had an estate in the Fire Nation Capital just across from the palace, and surely no one would object if, having done such a favor for a rising faction in the Royal Family, she took control of that mansion away from Father. (She decided that the rest of the family would be allowed to visit on a limited basis.)

Now she just had to figure out how to arrange a visit to the Research Center. With a sigh, she got to packing for an extended trip. Good thing she owned some really nice luggage.

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Avatar Aang knew nothing but peace, a state beyond suffering.

Then some loudmouth had to go and interrupt him. "Well, young Airbender, are you ready to tell me what I want to know?"

Aang opened his eyes, coming out of his meditation, and once again saw his prison cell around him. It wasn't a particularly interesting sight, the chains keeping him standing weren't exactly comfortable, and now that Commander Zhao was visiting again the company left a lot to be desired. All in all, it was pretty bad.
Aang smiled anyway. "Hi again! I'd be happy to tell you everything."

Zhao frowned. "So you say. Then what are you doing here in the South Pole?"

"I told you, I came down here to get away from the Southern Air Temple, and-"

Zhao cut him off with a chopping motion. "I see the hunger and thirst has done little to convince you to cooperate. But then, questions have always been inefficient things. In your case, I don't need them. Your answers are superfluous, truthful or otherwise. We know you're connected to the storms. Just minutes after we locked you in here, the winds and snows stopped for the first time in days. That's all the evidence I need. I can have you killed, and all my problems will be solved. But I'm a thorough man, and I want the entire story for my reports. Tell me how you were controlling the storms, and if any more of your people are out there looking to bury us in snow. If you cooperate, I'll be allowed to treat you as an honored ally of the Fire Nation."

Aang blinked. "Um, are you sure about all that? If your storm didn't stop when Mai's dad put me in the brig on his ship, why would it stop because I'm in here?" He tried his most respectful and ingratiating smile, like he was dealing with a cranky Elder after one of Monk Gyatso's little pie festivals. "I think there's just been a big misunderstanding."

Zhao shook his head, and turned to the guard waiting at the door. "Cut off the heat to this cell. I'll take care of the reports awaiting my attention, and then we'll see if the prisoner is more amendable to our hospitality." He faced Aang once more. "Remember, we already know you're responsible. And if you continue to tell us obvious lies, you'll just be a drain on our resources. The South Pole is too harsh a land to tolerate that for long." The Commander turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

Alone again, Aang let himself sag, stretching the chains taut. His shoulders burned with weariness, but his legs were even more tired, and he wanted to give them a rest for at least a brief moment.

Why was Zhao so convinced that Aang had something to do with these storms? Airbenders couldn't make it snow, unless maybe they had a Waterbender to help and a lot of preparation. Whether he had been here for a day or a century, storms didn't just pop up to follow the Avatar around, and no one but Mai had any idea that he was the Avatar in the first place.

Aang groaned. He needed to get out of here.

He started to meditate again, but before he let his breathing carry him back into the void, a stray thought tugged at his attention. Figuring that he had nothing to lose, Aang gave into it, and began turning his focus inward. He gazed deep within himself, but while doing so, called out for the storm.

Outside, the winds picked up, just a little.

"Azula wants me to go inspect the mining facilities or something."

Mai stood in the doorway of Father's office while she waited for a reaction to her pronouncement. The room was as nice as the rest of the converted mines that were the South Pole's Governor's Mansion, which was to say that there were enough rugs and tapestries thrown around to almost cover the visible rock. Mai thought that there was still a stony coldness to the air, and so she had taken to wearing her cloak at all times.

Mother and Father, though, seemed to be embracing the atmosphere. They both turned to stare at Mai, caught in the act of inflicting gaudy antiques and vain souvenirs of Father's career on the place.
Tom-Tom was sitting on the floor, content to ignore everything around him and play with a model of the extendable bridge that had been used to reach Omashu. The whirring of the little metal wheels in the toy was the only sound in the room for a moment.

Then Father smiled. "That sounds like a wonderful idea. I was going to take the tour tomorrow, but I can adjust the schedule a little bit. It might even be better to surprise everyone down there. Catch them in the midst of bad habits, and all that!" He rubbed his hands together like he was actually having fun.

Mai, in turn, kept her face blank and stood very still. "This is Weapon business. I'm to look for certain things and report back in code. My taking company has been discouraged." Her parents stood straighter at that, and nodded like the good little nothings they really were. Of course. Azula's name was enough to get Mai out of having to eat her peas as a child, and it was still good for enabling treason and sabotage. An idea occurred to her, and she added, "It would also be better to keep this low key. I'm going to request a blue cloak from one of the Tribal servants, to avoid the whole settlement noticing me poking around."

Tom-Tom immediately looked up. "I wanna blue!"

Mother made a tsking sound and reached down to pat his head. "Dear, wearing the colors of lesser peoples is something only spies and dishonorable traitors do. You're not either of those, right?"

"I be spy?"

Mai crouched down, resting her hands on her knees, and gave her little brother her deadest, coldest stare. "You can be a spy, but first you have to cut out your heart and give it to Princess Azula. If she accepts you as her agent, she will devour your heart and make sure you can never feel anything again as you execute her dark will. You will be one of the living dead, bound forever to a greedy crown. Also, blue is a horrible, ugly color, so you'll have to be dead inside to tolerate that, too."

"Huh." Tom-Tom blinked, and then giggled. "Mai silly."

"Yes," Mother said in that disapproving tone Mai knew so well, "your sister is very silly. Mai, must you speak of the Princess that way? We know you two are girlfriends, but other people could get the wrong idea with this talk of cutting hearts out, and now that the war is over, that could be awkward."

Mai resisted the urge to snort at Mother's idea of danger. "No one gets my sense of humor but the illiterate three-year-old." She was struck by her own words, and realized that she was almost serious with them. Sure, Azula always appreciated a good joke about stabbing people, but she still shared the common view that Mai's attitude could use some adjustments. Tom-Tom was the only person who thought Mai was just perfect as she was. Too bad he was a noisy, self-centered, foul-smelling little leech.

She said goodbye to her little brother with a lingering look that wasn't quite fond, and then stood and bowed to her parents. "I'll be going. Thanks for everything. See you later, or whatever."

They waved and wished her well, while Mai turned and walked out without another word, wondering idly if she'd ever see them again. Now, it was time to get a blue cloak and visit the 'South Pole Mining Colony's research and development laboratory.' (What a stupid name.) As Mai stalked through the tunneled halls, she passed a pair of servants hanging a long mirror up on the wall, probably in an attempt to make the place seem larger.

She looked at her reflection as she went on her way to become a traitor, and confirmed that her face was showing no expression at all.
Zhao had a map spread out on a wide table in the center of his office. It showed the South Pole and all the seas around it, with all of the various telegraph lines (aboveground and underwater) and Fire Navy outposts marked.

It was a very detailed visual summary of everything within Zhao's power.

It was the matter of the Airbender that currently captured his attention, though. He was beginning to believe that the child was being at least partially truthful about his ignorance. Governor Ukano was convinced that the boy represented some kind of enemy conspiracy, but Zhao had his doubts. The South Pole was surrounded by harsh landscape, and surely the various patrol boats would have found some sign of settlement if there were any nearby. No, something else was going on. The boy and the storms might be part of it, but it wasn't going to be a simple explanation. Still, Zhao was certain that the Airbender boy knew something useful, even if he didn't realize it, and continuing to push for a confession to the Governor's accusations might yield something.

An aide walked into the office, and after the customary bow, offered up a note. "Commander, we've received new orders over the telegraph. The installation on Kyoshi Island is in need of emergency supplies, and we've been ordered to send out a ship with whatever we can spare."

Zhao frowned. "Kyoshi Island? Let me see that." He grabbed the paper from the aide and scanned it, but sure enough, the man's report was accurate. It seemed odd that a base next to a fishing village was in need of food, never mind that it was so close to the Colonial Continent and all those other islands, but perhaps the area had been hit by some unexpected weather. Could Kyoshi Island be related to this business of storms and Airbenders? Zhao went over to his desk and found some recent reports about his own base's supplies, and there was enough to spare until the next shipment arrived. If worse came to worse, they could let some of the Tribals starve for a little while; there were more than enough of them that the mines wouldn’t be left behind schedule.

"Very well. Convey the orders for the supplies to be made ready, and a ship prepared for departure."

He made a point to speak to the assigned captain before the ship departed. He wanted to know what was going on with Kyoshi Island.

Sokka's thoughts whirled as he juggled acids and stone samples. He was alone at his station in the lab, doing the Fire Nation's work, none of it particularly engaging. Jars of chemicals, and rocks with traces of platinum within, passed through his hands like dreams though a sleeping mind. The experimental processes for isolating and purifying the platinum within the rocks mixed with memories of the Airbender boy being marched across the snow in chains, mixed with the gloom of Fire Nation rule, mixed with the empty places in his life where Dad and Mom and Katara were supposed to be, mixed with ghostly images of the baby walrus Sokka had worn as a disguise the day before.

Why couldn’t he do anything about all that loss? Why couldn’t he strike back, at least in a little way? Sokka had dreamed about that loss, after the long shift he had been forced to work without sleep. Maybe it had been something about breaking into the Navy base, or even seeing the Airbender, but once he finally got a chance to surrender to slumber, his dreams had been filled with the memories of that day a decade ago. Memories of the soldiers breaking down the door, of Mom and Dad shouting. They had pushed Sokka into the family bedroom with Katara, but the soldiers shoved past them—Sokka got a brief glimpse of Dad swinging a fist into the stomach of one of the invaders before three more jumped in- and he and Katara were dragged back out. Sokka couldn't remember exactly what everybody said, but he remembered every possible variation of the word, "Waterbender." Mom and
Dad had said it dismissively, the soldiers said it with that hollow, metallic tone, and Katara had said it
with screeching desperation. That last use was the one he remembered distinctly; one of the soldiers
said that if no one would give up the Waterbender, then everyone would be taken away and killed.
Sokka sometimes wondered what Mom and Dad would have done about that, but he would never
really know. Katara had spoken up, and said, "I'm the Waterbender! Don't hurt my family!"

And so the soldiers had indeed taken just her. Or, rather, that was their immediate intention.

Mom and Dad had tried to stop it, and soon their blood was spilled out on the floor.

Sokka had known, in that moment, that it was his responsibility to save Katara. To avenge his Dad.
To make his Mom's killer bleed like she did. But instead of acting on that, he just sat there on the
floor, and watched as his parents bled and stopped breathing, and Katara was taken away. He let his
sister be taken. He let his parents die defeated.

Sokka shook his head and forced himself to concentrate again before pouring the pink chemical into
the blue chemical to make something much more corrosive, which he would soon be applying to the
various rocks he had been given. Around him, other 'assistants' (most of them dressed in red)
conducted their own assigned experiments, piling up the resulting data for the lab's overseers. Sokka
was idly wondering what would happen if he botched the experiment and had to request more
platinum rocks when he a graceful shadow flittered at the edge of his vision. At first, he thought it
was another waking dream, but his eyes were drawn to it regardless.

That's when he spotted the woman.

The 'shadow' was merely a blue cloak, dark in shade like those favored by the Tribeswomen who
worked as servants in the Governor's Mansion. The fur-lined hood was up, but as Sokka watched,
she turned enough to give him a quick glance at the pale face (and the intense expression) within.
Her nonchalant pace didn't match that searching gaze. What was she looking for? As Sokka
watched, she spotted the sign indicating the chemical supply room, and trotted into it, leaving the
door open.

Sokka realized where he had seen this woman before. She was the one trailing behind the new
Governor and his wife. Her hair had been really shiny, like someone had worked too much blubber
grease into it.

What was she doing wearing a servant's cloak and raiding the lab's chemicals?

Sokka decided to ask her.

He stretched, made sure no one was watching, and then walked over to the supply room like he did it
every day, which he actually did, so that part was pretty easy. He found the woman peering at the
shelf with all the strongest acids, turning her gaze back and forth between the labeled bottles and a
piece of paper in one hand. Stepping quietly, Sokka moved towards her and tried to get a glance at
the paper-

-and found himself staring at a very sharp metal thing that was all crimson points and hinges and
cutting edges. It took considerable effort to move his gaze off the closest blade and onto the woman,
and her glare was every bit as sharp.

Sokka looked at the woman and gave his best grin. "Hi! Are you a thief?"

It was such a stupid grin. The Tribal was obviously trying to hide his fear and surprise, and normally
Mai would have enjoyed the moment, but this time she was too busy hating herself. Whatever she
was pretending to be in this ugly blue cloak, it certainly wasn't the type of person who would be carrying around customized throwing blades, and now she had blown that cover. Not one step into Azula's plan, and already she had bungled it. She could hardly expect this Tribal to be supportive of her plot to free the Avatar; after all, he was obviously working here in the Research Center, a prized job that would only go to a true collaborator.

Should she just kill the guy and hide the body?

Mai looked at the blue eyes and stupid grin, and her stomach did a little flip at the thought of jamming her blade into the Tribal's face. She had never actually killed anyone before.

She wound up saying, "One gold?"

The Tribal blinked. "Who the what now?"

"Two gold pieces to turn around and pretend this never happened."

"Wait. You're- you're trying to bribe me, right?"

"You want to do it?" Mai nodded at the blade she still had pointed at his face- "the other way? Just tell me how much you want. I'm on a schedule."

"Okay, okay. Slush, give me a moment, would you?" He finally stopped grinning, and glared at Mai like she was keeping him from important business. "I'm a little off kilter from the whole having a scary foldable razor shoved in my face thing, and no one has ever tried to bribe me before. Well, no one who wasn't an official representative of the Fire Nation. Actually, that's a good point; it's hard for me to ask for something if I don't know your available assets..." He looked at Mai expectantly.

"I will stab you in five seconds." Either this guy was a true collaborator and a master manipulator, or he was an idiot and an opportunist. Either way, violence was starting to look like the answer.

From his position in the doorway, the Tribal tried to peek over Mai's shoulder. "So what kind of activity am I covering up here? Are there going to be bodies turning up later?"

"Only yours. Three seconds."

"What, are you one of those private spies? Trying to sabotage our platinum production for some rival of some guy who does leader things around here?"

"You're done." Instead of stabbing the yokel, though, Mai grabbed his shirt, kicked her leg out to sweep his feet off the floor, and yanked him over her shoulder to tumble to the floor. Even before he completed his crash, she was closing the room's door. "That's what you get for wasting my time."

"Ow. Noted."

Mai once again brandished her blade. "You're going to keep quiet, except for answering my question, and then you'll help me find what I'm looking for. Then I'll give you two gold coins, disappear from your life forever, and you'll pretend you don't even know I exist. At this point, you've become enough of an annoyance that stabbing you will not inconvenience me. Understand?"

The Tribal nodded.

"Good." Mai lowered her blade. "I passed through your village on the way here, and saw the guard patrols. Do those extend beyond the village limits?"
The Tribal shook his head. "The only times soldiers leave the village and base is to change shifts at
the outposts, those lighthouses that border the bay."

"So if I wanted to avoid any patrols on my way to the Navy base?"

"Just walk out of the Research Center and skirt the village until you reach the fence. Follow it to the
left- um, your left when facing it- and you'll find the western entrance to the base."

Mai nodded. This was good information, so far. "And are any of your kind allowed in the base?"

"My kind?"

"You know, Water Tribe." At the look on the Tribal's face, Mai added, "I'm probably using poor
wording. This is the first time I've operated outside of the Fire Nation." She didn't actually care about
offending Tribals and was even mildly offended herself that they would have the pride to object to
their conqueror's terminology, but she didn't want this one to cause more trouble for her.

He seemed mollified, at least. "Okay, sure, no problem. Anyway, no, only soldiers are allowed on
base. Except for the people they specifically escort, I guess. And your- um, the Governor and his... people?"

"I'm not his people, anymore." The Tribal's answer meant that Mai would have to lose the blue cloak
before she went inside. Well, time to see if Zhao's pompous platinum badge would actually get her
through the base's gates without trouble. With that matter settled, she took Azula's message out of her
sleeve, carefully folded it so that all of the other instructions were out of sight, and held it up for the
Tribal to read. "I need these chemicals."

His face scrunched into a frown. "This is a heavy-duty acid. It'll corrode almost anything. Fast, too.
Now what-" Before Mai could cut off his speculation, his eyes went wide. "You're going to free the
Airbender! You were there when he was turned over to Zhao. You're going to sneak over to the
base, break in, and join up with the Airbender and whatever he has going on, right? You need the
acid to get him out of the prison, and then you're leaving together. A universal lock-pick, huh?"

Mai's grip tightened on her blade, but before she could make herself do what she had to, the Tribal
added, "I want in!"

"In what?"

"This rebellion thing!" The Tribal grinned. "I know a little something about pretending to be loyal to
the Fire Nation while still hating them. I want to do something about it, like you. Let me help get the
Airbender away from them. You won't even have to pay me. I mean, if you wanted to, that'd be
great, too, but it's not necessary. Whatever spare change you have on you is fine."

Mai was barely listening to him. He thought she doing this to fight the Fire Nation? And he wanted
to help? Mai's face didn't reflect any of her thoughts as she shifted from surprise to plotting. "Yes,
losing the Avatar will hurt the Fire Nation, so we have to get him away. I... have made arrangements
to get him out of here with me. You're right about the acid, and then I need to sneak onto a certain
cargo ship at a certain time. So this needs to be quick."

The Tribal nodded. "All right. Let's do this thing." He got back on his feet and immediately turned to
look at the shelf of acids with much more confidence than Mai knew she had shown. "The name's
Sokka, by the way. Ah, here it is." He grabbed a bunch of test tubes filled with a cloudy liquid and
held them out for Mai. She took one, gingerly, until she was sure that the stopper was in tight. The
glass tubes were undoubtedly fragile, but Mai was covered in very secure holsters. It was a simple
matter to make some of her razors temporarily share a sheath and use the freed space to carry the test
tubes. By the time she was done securing them, Sokka was waiting at the door. "Let me check outside to make sure no one is watching, and then we'll get you out of here. Where are you going, once you're on your ship?"

She continued to keep her face blank. "Better that you don't know."

"Oh, right, sure. I get it. It's just..." He looked down, and his hands twisted together. "A while ago, the Fire Nation took someone away from me. Family. I was just wondering if you might be going in the same direction."

Mai had no desire to get into this guy's sob-story, so she just said, "We're going to be avoiding anything involving prisons, after this. Sorry."

Sokka nodded. "That makes sense. Okay, let's get you back on schedule."

It felt good to be doing something. It felt good to be hurting the Fire Nation.

It didn't feel so good to have to explain the crazy Knife Lady to the people who noticed them coming out of the supply room after the ruckus ("Sorry, this is a... uh... lady friend... we had a bit of an argument... she's leaving now... I'll be getting back to work."). but Sokka had to admit that there was a warm glow in his heart after he sent her off with the acids that would free the Avatar.

Wait, Avatar?

Back at his station, almost ready to once again measure the rates at which platinum could be extracted from rock samples with various solvents, Sokka frowned. She had said she was going to free the Airbender, right? As Sokka ran back over the exchange in the supply room, one of the Knife Lady's quotes jumped out at him from his memory: "Yes, losing the Avatar will hurt the Fire Nation, so we have to get him away. I have made arrangements to get him out of here with me."

Huh.

He couldn't be the Avatar, could he? He was just a kid. An Airbender kid.

But then why else would a deep cover agent like the Knife Lady be setting him free?

Sokka couldn't help but feel that someone was being made to look like a fool, and he really hoped it wasn't him.

So what could he do about it? Knife Lady was gone to rescue whoever that was who everyone thought was an Airbender, and Sokka was stuck here at work. Even if he found a way to get out of here without ruining his standing with the lab's overseers, he'd have to get all the way over to the Fire Navy base, get back inside without taking the time to get ahold of a walrus, and then catch up with Knife Lady before she boarded a cargo ship that would take her to parts unknown. How was Sokka going to manage that?

Then he had a thought.

It wouldn't be any problem to walk out of here if he didn't care about coming back. If that kid really was the Avatar of legend and Knife Lady really was a freedom fighter looking to save the world...

...maybe they'd be interested in finding the last Waterbender of the South Pole.

And Sokka could finally save his sister.
It was stupid. It was idealistic. The boy probably wasn't the Airbender, and Knife Lady was probably playing some kind of corrupt game. Sokka might be throwing everything good away for nothing. Gran-Gran and the kids wouldn't have his food tokens to survive on any more. It would be completely irresponsible to take this line of thought any further. But it was perhaps the greatest chance he would ever get to do something worthwhile with his life. Could he live with the regret of ignoring it?

He took one last look around the laboratory, where everyone toiled for the advancement of Fire Nation science, turned, and walked out forever.

Aang was still trying to find that storm in his heart when Zhao returned. The screech of the cell's metal door snapped Aang's eyes open, and he could feel a warm breeze coming in from the hallway before the portal slammed shut again and left them trapped in cold, dead air.

Zhao made a show of rubbing his hands together and Bending a brief flare of flame over them. "It's quite frigid in here. If you're ready to tell me the truth, I can order the heat turned on again with a single word."

Aang pretended to shiver. It was hard, because he had never actually done it before, thanks to a breathing exercise that could keep him warm even here in the South Pole. It was one of the earliest lessons given to little Air Nomads, at least in the Southern Temple. Aang understood cold in terms of how the air would feel against his skin, but the way it actually affected his body was a very distant memory, something he knew only from seeing it in his friends around the world.

So Aang made himself shake, huddled his head down, and said, "Brrrr! It's cold in here. Really, really cold."

Zhao stared at him.

Aang gave what he hoped was a cold-looking grin.

Zhao sighed. "I've cleared my schedule for the rest of the day, so no matter how much time it takes, I'm going to have the truth out of you before I leave. I command the cold, and I command fire. Between the two, I'm sure I'll be able to arrive at some workable combination to loosen your tongue."

"Gran-Gran, I'm home!"

As usual, Sokka was first greeted in turn by such heartwarming words as, "Isn't Sokka still supposed to be at work?" followed by "He's a lazy-bones!" plus "Maybe he got fired for being dumb!" and "They must a'sent him home for napping on the job!" with a "Silly Sokka!" bringing up the rear for a rousing conclusion. He endured it all, because he realized this might be last time he ever heard those voices.

He pulled off his hat, not caring how tangled his loose hair was, and waited for Gran-Gran to come into the kitchen. He felt oddly similar to those times when he knew he was about to be caught sneaking treats before dinner. At the sight of him, Gran-Gran tensed up; she always knew when something was wrong. Sokka nodded confirmation of her wariness, took a breath, and said, "I think I kind of walked off my job so that I could rescue Katara."

For once, it was dead quiet while everyone in the house was awake. It was Shila, the oldest of the children, who looked up at Sokka with her muddy yellow eyes and broke the silence. "Katara's your
"Yeah, Katara's my sister. I haven't seen her in a while."

Gran-Gran was very still, and kept her gaze locked on Sokka. "You realize that she might be-"

"-dead," Sokka finished. "I know. But if she is, I have to be sure. And I've learned that the Airbender - you know, the one up at the Navy Base who I lost all that sleep watching? I found out that he might be the Avatar. And if anyone can help me find and save Katara, it's him. Katara used to believe those old legendy things. About the Avatar, I mean."

Gran-Gran gave a slow, single nod of her head. "I remember. But can he save us, too?"

And then Sokka realized just how stupid he had been. He had walked out of work, and even if he wasn't caught helping Knife Lady, it wouldn't take a genius (not that the Fire Nation had any, in his opinion) to link Sokka's disappearance with the Avatar's escape. And then it wouldn't take a genius to link Sokka to his Gran-Gran and the mutts living with them.

Sokka summed up the twisting in his stomach with a single, "Oh, slush."

The kids giggled, and Gran-Gran reached out to swat Sokka's ear. "Language! That word is not allowed in this house."

"Sorry, Gran. About... you know, everything." He clutched his head, trying to think. He might not be nodding off any more, but his tired brain was moving about as fast as an icebreaker in the cold season. He had to think, to come up with a solution for all this. See, this is what happens when people go with their impulses. Impulses were bad. They stomped all over rational thought and danger assessment. You couldn't-

Icebreaker.

Ship.

Sokka looked around at everyone in his house. Gran-Gran. Shila. Naklin. Quinyaya. Tliyel. Shlim. He had family outside of this house, too, like Bato. Even the the other people in the Tribe who hated him for working in the Fire Nation's lab.

"I have an idea," Sokka said, "but I'm going to need everyone's help to pull it off. And it's kind of dangerous, but you probably guessed that part already."

Gran-Gran nodded. "Nothing is too dangerous for me when it comes to my grand-kids."

Shila nodded, too. "We'll help, too!" The other kids followed her lead with, "Sokka's smart and he has a plan!" followed by "The Avatar is back!" plus "Anything is better than more rice and komodo sausage!" and "All for us and us for all!" with a "Slush yeah, uprising!" bringing up the rear for a rousing conclusion that even Gran-Gran didn't countermand.

That didn't make Sokka feel good. It made him feel rotten for thinking that these kids weren't his family. But hopefully saving everyone would make up for that, a little. "Thanks, guys. Now, first thing, I need someone to run a message up to the mines for Bato... no, wait, first I need a string. Anyone have one?"

Quinyaya stepped forward and held up a ragged blue string. Sokka reached out to take it, his fingers brushing Quinyaya's as he did so, and he couldn't help but notice the warmth in those hands. Warmth that came from the Fire Nation, originally.
Warmth that felt good, honestly.

But warmth alone wasn't going to fix things.

Sokka brushed his hair back and pulled it into a tail, and then tied it with Quinyaya's string. He tied it tight, a proper Warrior's Wolf Tail that would keep his hair out of his eyes in battle and also evoke the Wolf Spirits that had allied with the ancestors of the Water Tribe, in the before times.

It also, Sokka thought, looked really kick-butt. "Okay. Now we plot to save everyone and knock some Fire Nation heads. Who's taking my message to Bato for me?"

TO BE CONTINUED
Chapter Summary

Mai enacts the last stage of Azula's plan, but thanks to Aang and Sokka, things don't go as expected.

The Everstorm

Zhao had been right about one thing, at least. The platinum badge he gave to Mai was enough to get her though the Navy Base's gates.

She had shed the disguise of the blue robe by this point, exchanging it for her normal crimson cape. Her luggage for her new life as a royally-sponsored fugitive had been waiting exactly where she had left it outside the mine's Research Center, and it was a simple matter to brush off the snow that had covered it while she had been off stealing industrial acids. She had everything she was taking into one of her flat cases that could hang comfortably on her back, folding her clothes tightly and arranging the objects with the same efficiency that she applied to the weapons hanging on her body. Then she had dumped every blade she could fit into the thing, more worried about quantity than keeping them nice. This left the case overweight, but she had strength enough to carry it through a quiet escape.

The only other thing she brought was Aang's staff. It was too nice to leave as a toy for Tom-Tom.

Mai stalked across the snowy grounds of the base, leaning on the staff, hood held against the wind and the flurries. She passed by the docks, confirming that the large cargo ship was finishing the last of its loading and would soon be able to depart on its mission. She moved on to the prison building, went right up and hammered on the front door, and when the eye-slit opened, she held her badge up. "I am a Weapon of the Fire Nation. Let me in, now." The eye-slit closed, and Mai leaned both the staff and her luggage against the wall beside the door. No point in taking them inside, where they would just be a liability. A moment later, the door unbolted and opened for her.

Mai stepped inside, brushed her hood off her head, made sure her hair was still nice, and then turned into a tornado of violence and blades. Every move she made came with an exhalation that transformed her Qi into sheer power and slammed it into each knife that left her hand. The overall effect was enough momentum to yank a heavily armored soldier of average height and weight off his feet and nail him to a wall by the sleeves of his uniform.

Multiply over the six soldiers in the prison's front screening room, and the end result mathed out to Mai having her run of the place.

Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Daizi didn't like this storm. Not one bit. Being regularly stationed at the Navy base's eastern gate, he saw a lot of the weather, here in the South Pole. (Preferably through the windows of his nice, heated guardhouse, of course.) It snowed a lot down here as expected, but it hadn't been until they got word about the big victory over the Earth Kingdom that the snow stopped stopping. It had progressed to storming, to the point where they had the newbies constantly shoveling the base's walkways, until they brought the Airbender boy in the other day. Then it had calmed, ever so briefly, before the storm came back with a new strength.
It wasn't something that Daizi would want his commanding officers to hear, but his grandpop-pop had raised him to fear the Other Folk, back on the farm, and this stunk of Spirit stuff.

Motion outside broke through Daizi's glum thoughts. He poked his head out of the guardhouse, and looked to see a little Tribal child leaning on the bars of the gate. He squinted through the flurries, and recognized her as one of the half-breed urchins who sometimes came around looking for candy. This one was Shila; Daizi remembered her because she reminded him of his cousin, so long as he ignored her big ugly nose, but like his cousin, she could be annoying. He stepped out of the guardhouse and made some shooing motions with his hands. "Get out of here! We're... uh, running a drill, and the gate has to stay locked."

Shila stepped up to the gate and grabbed it in her mittens, staring over at Daizi with her big gold eyes. "Pleeease, sir? It's cold and I have nowhere to go. Can I just warm up in the guardhouse for a moment?"

"Get off the gate and get out of here!" When she didn't do as she was told, Daizi went and grabbed his spear. Conking her on the head with the shaft should teach her a lesson or two. He stuck the spear through the bars of the gate and was about to bring it down on the girl-when there was a blur of motion, and a larger figure in a blue parka grabbed the spear by the shaft. Daizi instinctively tried to yank it away, but the attacker yanked harder, and the last thing Daizi saw before he lost conscious was the bars of the gate rushing forward to meet his face.

The fire went away before it could touch him, and the cold air rushed back in to beat at Aang's body. It sapped the heat from his skin and muscles before he could adjust his breathing to warm himself again, but by then he had already been hit by full-body shivers.

Aang sagged against his chains.

"Why don't we take a little break? To talk." Zhao ambled back and forth across the cell, hands clasped behind his back. "This can all end once you tell me the truth. You just have to confirm what I already know, that your Airbender tribe is trying to destroy my colony here."

Aang wanted to grit his teeth against the words, but he couldn't summon the energy. Even his interrogator didn't seem particularly interested. Aang thought about livening things up by spitting a burst of air to knock Zhao off his feet, but decided against it. What would be the point?

Zhao heaved an artificial sigh. "Very well, time to bring the heat back." He shifted his stance and brought his hands up-

-and went still when the cell door rattled loudly.

It burst open a second later, and Mai stalked inside with a tri-pronged blade in each hand.

Zhao said, "What are you-" and Mai threw one of the blades at him. It streaked through the air like a hummingbirdsnake, but Zhao flicked his forearms up and deflected the projectile with his vambrace. He punched out a fireball that Mai dodged by going into a spinning sidestep. Even while she was still in motion another knife came flying out from her, the blade catching the edge of the sash Zhao wore over his chestplate, and Aang was impressed when the force of the strike actually sent the Firebender stumbling backwards. Zhao hit the wall behind him and turned the momentum of his bounce into dash at Mai, once again throwing fire at her.

Aang watched her practically leap back from the flames, springing with one leg at a time to dance
around the edge of the cell. She didn't react to the danger, but Aang's heart was pounding over how close the flames came to unprotected skin.

Then Mai glanced at him, offered a smile so fleeting it might not have been real, and threw something at him. Aang thought it was another knife at first, glittering in the dim light of the cell, but then it shattered like glass against the chain holding his right arm up and bursting into heavy mist. The links hissed and bubbled, spilling to the ground like liquid tarnish. Then the chain was broken, and Aang's arm fell to his side.

Free.

All of a sudden, finding the energy to do things didn't seem so hard anymore.

Zhao had time to look over in surprise before Aang swung out a palm strike that hammered him with wind.

As Zhao tumbled against the wall again, Mai threw more vials at Aang. Faster than he could perceive, her hands flicked in and out from her sleeves and more of the dissolving liquids burst against his chains. After only moments, Aang's legs and left arm were freed, and although they still wore the metal cuffs, he was finally able to move as an Airbender needed. Zhao threw one more punch, another fireball aimed at Aang this time, but it was a simple matter to raise his arms and snap out a wind strong enough to turn the flames into dying sparks floating back towards their maker. The air continued unabated through the fire, slamming Zhao into the cell's corner, and Aang added a few crosswinds to bounce him back and forth between the converging walls.

Zhao managed to stay on his feet. When he stopped swaying, he started to take another attack stance, but then a bolt of light flashed across Aang's vision to slam straight into Zhao's head. It was a knife, made of a metal that shined even in the gloom of the jail cell, and it struck Zhao handle-first right in the center of his forehead.

He groaned and fell to the ground.

Aang looked over at Mai. She went to retrieve the weapon, then met his stare with a look in her eye that sent a jolt through Aang's body, and said, "He gave me that knife. The metal is too soft for the blade to be any good, but he was right that it was perfectly balanced for throwing. But we need to leave." She was at Aang's side in an instant, grabbing him and yanking him along.

"Whoa, where are we going?!

Mai didn't slow as they passed out of the cell and she slammed the door behind them. "There's a cargo ship about to leave the docks. I've arranged for it to have everything we need. We'll figure out where we go once we're aboard."

Wow.

He was right about Mai.

She was amazing!

Aang could only grin as he let himself be dragged. Mai had saved him, and did it without killing anyone. She was the greatest girl ever! They skidded to another stop in the prison's front guardroom, where were struggling against knives that held them fast. Aang had time enough to wave at them before Mai was hauling him outside and skidding to a stop where his staff and a long black backpack were leaning against the building's wall.
The return of a physical symbol of his heritage reminded Aang of something. "You made sure that Appa is on this ship, too, right?"

Mai didn't say anything as she hefted her luggage onto her back.

Wait, did she know how important Appa was? Aang hadn't really talked to her about it, and he knew from his old (don't think about maybe how old) friend Kuzon that except for dragons, the Fire Nation didn't really do Spirit Companions. "Wait, I need Appa!"

Mai shoved his staff at him. "No time."

"You don't understand, we can't leave Appa, he's my best friend!"

"There isn't any-"

"Don't worry." Aang gave her a reassuring smile. "I can find him really quick. Just wait here." Then he ran, calling the wind that was already there to speed him along. The snow beneath his feet flared up into the sky as he dashed across it, and buildings blurred past him as he twisted through the Fire Navy base. He just needed to find one with an entrance big enough to get Appa through, and then he could go back to get Mai and she could help him-

Fire flared in front of Aang, and he had to make a hard turn to escape it that left him slipping and tumbling through the snow. As he pushed himself up, he heard a gong starting to clang in quick, repeating pattern, and looked around to find Fire Nation soldiers running at him from all directions. Oops.

On the proud cargo ship *Abiding*, Captain Lee frowned at the sound of the base's alarm gong. His crew had just finished loading everything for the Kyoshi Island mission, and with the snow coming as thick as it was outside of the bridge's windows, Lee could see that there was plenty of active Firebending going on across the base grounds. A battle of some kind was happening, but he couldn't see against whom it was being waged. Still, Commander Zhao had always been very clear that Lee's job was not to make decisions, but to do what he was told, and the sounding alarm meant that emergency procedures were active. All crewed ships were to lock down and await further orders.

Lee was just about to convey that to his crew when the helmsman pointed out the window and shouted, "Look, sir! A tug is pulling up in front of us."

Ah, that was either the regularly schedule crew, who needed to have the emergency procedures imparted to them by an officer of great wisdom, or carriers of further orders. Humming eagerly, Lee trotted out of the bridge and across the deck. He held onto his helmet against the roaring wind and leaned over the railing to shout down to the tug boat bobbing in the water. "Ahoy! What word?"

Belatedly, he realized that the tug's crew was all wearing blue. He didn't quite understand the reasoning behind that until he noticed that they were all holding long ropes tied pickaxe heads bent into right angles. Only after those makeshift boomerangs were being swung fast enough to blur into the snow did it dawn on Lee that his ship was under attack.

Then one of ersatz boomerangs struck him in the face before falling to hook onto the ships rail.

Aang really wished it wasn’t snowing.

Now that Zhao wasn't torturing him, the cold wasn't bothering him anymore, but the snow was
falling fast enough to make using his staff’s glider dangerous. The wings were fragile, and the driving wet snow would eat through them as fast as the fire that everyone was throwing around, so he was stuck running through the base while fighting off his attackers. Firebenders and soldiers with swords and spears were pouring out of all the buildings, but Aang refused to get pulled into a real fight. He still had to find Appa, then he had to find Mai again, and then they somehow had to get out of here. If Appa was rested enough to fly, then they wouldn’t need that boat Mai wanted to stow away on, but if not, they might have a really big problem.

Aang ran away from the group of soldiers converging on him with another boost of speed that launched the snow beneath his boots into the air, and was just starting to gain some distance when he realized that a heavy fence was looming in front of him. Aang skidded to stop in the snow quickly enough to avoid a crash, but then fireballs were once again crashing down around him.

Fine, forget running. He planted his staff into the snow like a flag, and then dodged another fireball while he pushed together and molded a little cyclone of air in his hands. He ushered some of his Qi into it to form a ball of swirling winds bigger than his head. Aang ducked under a thrusting spear, and then hopped on his globe-shaped cyclone to finalize the Air Scooter move that had earned him his arrows. It took concentration to balance on top of it while keeping the ball going, but there was no better way to travel on the ground.

No faster way, either.

Aang grabbed his staff and just before he took off through the formation of Fire Nation soldiers, swerving around each one without so much as brushing them, the air scooter’s movements as nimble as any circle-walker. Aang passed through the crowd and put on another burst of speed that kicked up enough snow to cover every single soldier, and he made himself laugh as he glanced back at their dejected and slush-covered faces. He cornered around one of the larger buildings, dismissing it as the same prison he had been stuck in for the last few days, and tried to use it to orient himself. He had already gotten a good look at most of the buildings on the west side of the base, and should really check the east side as well. He passed in front of the docks-

-and caught sight of Mai at the center of a ring of fire, desperately trying to deflect the spears thrust through the flames at her with nothing more than a pair of knives. Why didn’t she throw some of them like she did in the prison? But Aang realized that there were a lot of soldiers around her and she was moving slowly with that pack on her back-

-a fireball exploded just short of him and threw him off of his air scooter, sending him crashing and tumbling into the snow. He had to spit slush out of his mouth, and all the weariness from back in the prison was once again weighing down on him. The sounds of boots tromping in the snow grew closer, and his skin complained about the heat of the flames that streaked around him.

This-

This wasn't going well.

Mai might die.

Appa might not even be in the base.

And Aang would get sent back to that prison, and Zhao would bring back the hot and the cold-

-the snow fell around him-

-the world exploded into light, and Aang found the storm waiting for him in the glow like an old
friend.

The good news for Mai was that the ring of fire around her went out, and none of the soldiers were giving her any more attention.

The bad news was that the snow and wind suddenly decided to become a storm so big that it broke her imagination.

All visibility was lost. Wind hammered at her and yanked her hair like Azula in a bad mood. Mai crouched to the ground, trying to reduce her exposure. She tightened the ties of her backpack to make sure it wouldn't be blown away, and wrapped her cloak around her body. She began crawling as swiftly as she could to get away from her last known position, in case any of the Fire soldiers decided to take a blind shot. The cold bit through her clothes, but it found no purchase on her concentration. She looked around, hoping for at least some sign of where she was, and found nothing but a sea of flickering gray. Even the cargo ship, previously in sight, had completely disappeared.

Then Mai looked up, and found a beacon in the storm.

Literally.

There was a bright blue glow in the sky above her, of a shade and intensity that she had seen before. It was the same light unleashed from the iceberg that began her adventures here at the South Pole, the same light that heralded Aang’s arrival.

There was no doubt that Aang was the Avatar, now.

Mai called to him, but her voice was lost in the wind.

Sokka shielded his eyes from the wind and snow, and watched as the last of the Fire Navy soldiers were thrown over the side of the cargo ship. He would have liked to participate in what was probably his people's most daring strike against their crabby oppressors in decades, but he knew he was a warrior in name only, despite his new hair style. The Fire Nation didn't allow anyone in the Tribe to own a weapon, and Dad's lessons from before they left the wilderness hadn't included combat.

Sokka knew his place: watching and hoping he'd be able to do better next time.

The group of miners that Bato had assembled, though, had real veterans amongst them. They moved through the snow, up the ropes from the tug boat that Bato had captured, and across the deck of the cargo ship to attack the crew with their converted mining tools. Sokka knew all those miners; they had been warriors alongside his dad, and they were the same people who had called him names when he went to work in the Research Center. They were the same people Sokka knew that Bato would bring together to hear his message. They were the people who Sokka found he couldn't bring himself to address, once they were all gathered away from the Fire Nation’s guard patrols. Bato had given the speech that rallied those men to Sokka’s plan.

There weren’t many of them- no more than three dozen- but they were the men who pledged to help free the Avatar and sail away with their families to safety.

The plan was simple. They had taken out the soldier in the closest guardhouse and climbed the fence. From there, the plan was to steal a tug boat, seize the cargo ship that was ready to go, and ride them both away from the South Pole completely. They would escape with the Avatar, and start a new life
with the supplies on the vessel. The plan was crazy, but it had been the only way to leave to go look for Katara and keep his family and friends safe. It was the only way to keep them alive if he really did end up finding and freeing Katara.

Of course, compared to tracking Katara down and finding her alive and healthy, this might be the easy part. Sokka pushed that anxiety out of his mind as Bato jogged over. "That's the last of the soldiers. The ship is ours."

Sokka wanted to be happy, but another burst of wind hammered him with snow. "What about this weather? Can we sail in it?"

"The waves are high, but the tug can handle them. Once we're clear of the bay, this is a big and heavy ship, so if we can pull ahead of worse weather, we should be okay. Better than staying here, anyway, and it will give us some cover from anything Zhao tried to send after us." Bato looked out at the Navy base, or rather, the big blur of snow where the base used to be. "What about the women and children? How will they see our signal in this? And what of the Avatar and the traitor woman?"

"I think the Avatar is the big blue flying thing that caused the storm to get worse, so I'm hoping he can handle himself. As for our families..." Sokka knew what he had to do. "I'm going to go out and bring them here. I really hope they all remembered to stay together and stay safe."

"Wow, I've never seen so much fur in one place before!"

The monster shuffled to the back of its cage as Shila led the other kids into the stable. The building was mostly empty, since the South Pole was too cold for most of the mounts used by the Fire Navy's marines. Only a pair of yaks chewed whatever it was that yaks chew on the far side of the stable. Shila's bootsteps echoed in the vast space, but the monster grunted and blew a burst of air out of its massive nostrils, drowning out all other noises. The other kids jumped back, but Shila was no scaredy pony-cat, so she kept moving forward.

The monster rose up to its full height, standing on its back two legs, and then flopped back down with enough force to make the ground shake and send hay flying all around the stable.

Once the echoes died down again, Naklin hissed, "He gonna eat you."

Shila shook her head. "Sokka said he belongs to the Airbender Avatar, and Airbenders don't hurt people. Or didn't used to." She finally reached the cage, and the monster snorted at her, whipping her hair like stormwinds, but she reached for the latch and unhooked it, letting the front of the cage swing open.

The monster stomped out of the cage, and stared down at Shila.

Shila stared back.

The monster's eyes were brown, but there was a golden shine to them that reminded Shila of her own eyes, so different than everyone else's in the Tribe.

Then the monster licked her with a tongue bigger than her whole body.

While Shila tried to decide if she was delighted or completely grossed out, the monster flapped its tail and rose up into the air. Shila heard the other kids gasp, but could only watch as it angled to face the ceiling, and then flapped its tail again to launch itself right through the roof and into the stormy sky outside.
Shila was still standing there, staring and dripping, when Gran-Gran shuffled into the stable. "What are you kids doing in here? Come on, the storm's gotten worse, and we need to find the boat.

"...Shila, why are you a mess?"

Aang was lost in the light, lost in fury, lost in fear, lost in the storm.

He was a fountain of power, filled with so much energy that it was bursting from his body in the form of light and air. He could feel that it was enough to wipe the entire South Pole off the map, but it was still nothing compared to the power of the storm that he had awakened.

The storm had been lurking out there, tickling Aang with its presence whenever he had meditated in his jail cell, but now that he had unleashed his own inner light, the storm had responded with darkness that threatened to drown Aang and sweep him away. His own power was unending, but it couldn't push back against the storm's momentum. It had been waiting for eons in the heart of the South Pole, building its strength, and now it was spilling out to unleash its fury on the rest of the world. It wasn't limitless like Aang's power, its spread would have to halt eventually if it was to survive, but within its borders, nothing could stand against it.

Not even the Avatar.

All Aang could do was float in the focal point of the storm's fury, his own despair reflected in the howling of the frigid winds and the raking of the flying ice, and wonder if he would ever be himself again.

Then Appa called out to him, and Aang remembered who he really was.

The blue light in the distant sky above faded out, and Mai half-expected the storm to immediately die down and everything to be okay. Sadly, it seemed that there was still an optimistic part of her that needed to be put out of its misery as soon as possible. Her other half, the realistic one, noted that the storm was very much continuing. It also noted that a sky bison was falling head-first out of the sky, with Aang sitting bonelessly on its forehead.

Both halves of Mai wondered was what going on.

The wind kicked up, but in a completely different direction from the rest of the stormgusts, and Mai found herself- and Aang's stupid staff with her- suddenly lifted up from the snow into the air. The sky bison swooped down below her, and Mai tumbled butt-first into the giant saddle on the beast's back.

Aang sat up and caught his staff. "You okay?"

Mai blinked at him. "We're flying." She clutched at the saddle's side, not liking the way bison's turns made gravity change directions.

"Yeah, isn't it great?"

"We're flying." Mai swallowed against the way another movement made her weight increase, and then suddenly decrease until she was almost floating.

"Yup!"
"We're flying." Mai turned away from the wind that wouldn't stop slapping her face and yanking her hair. She had never given much thought to being in the sky, but traveling by boat across half the world had given her the opportunity to imagine being alone in a vast, bottomless ocean, and flying was worse.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm not sure my reality is ready to handle this." She scooted close to the center of the saddle, and kept her hands splayed out for support. The sky bison was solid enough, and she just had to focus on that.

"Okay?"

Mai swallowed again. "I can't see the ground in this storm."

"That's fine. So long as we keep track of up and down, we'll be okay." Aang turned around again. "Whoa, up, Appa, up!"

The wind roared over Mai's ears as the beast swooped upward, and her stomach moved in a way she had only ever experienced the time Ty Lee convinced her to try jumping from the roof of her house. She decided that she didn't really need to know how close the sky bison had just come to crashing. Right now, she had to figure out what should come next. Yes, that would be a good thing to focus on. With the weather like this, could they still sneak aboard the supply ship? Would Zhao still allow it to leave? Perhaps if they could take a hostage...

Mai shook her head. Azula always said that making plans without information was pointless, so information was needed. She pushed aside her air-sickness, telling herself that falling to her death at least wouldn't be boring, and made herself move back to the saddle's edge to peer out into the storm. She had to find something that would tell her what to do.

Kanna, known to most of the people in her life as Gran-Gran, had been in worse spots, but not in over sixty years.

The journey from her birthplace at the North Pole down to the Southern Water Tribe had been full of so many adventures that she couldn't even remember them all anymore, but back then she had been blessed by a workable combination of youthful naiveté and ingrained stubbornness. Now, Kanna knew how easy it was for people to die, having seen her family's next generation murdered by the Fire Nation. She knew how easy it was to disappear in the world, having seen her granddaughter taken away beyond her Tribe's reach. That was why she cared for the kids of the Tribe, even the ones who weren't fully of the Tribe's blood—life was too precious, and Kanna knew how to survive.

Except here in the middle of this storm, in the middle of this battlefield, in the middle of the Avatar's Return, Kanna thought she might not survive this time. She had the children gathered around her, with more women of the tribe following behind her, and she needed to get them all to the cargo ship, but none of them could see anything in the pounding snow. Every new step could just as easily bump them into a Firebender as bring them to their goal.

This was no ordinary storm. Kanna knew the legends of the Spirit’s Everstorm, which was supposed to have raged since the beginning of the world over the center of the South Pole, and she also knew that the weather lately had been worse than usual, bad enough that the Fire Nation had sent a new governor to take over in what was something like an emergency situation. And it had struck its hardest now, that the Avatar had revealed his power. Was it truly the Everstorm? Had it moved to seek out the remnants of the Tribe?
Would it now rage over Kanna's adopted home forever?

She pushed on through the wind, in the direction she thought she had last seen the ship, and wondered if perhaps the Fire Nation's reprisal against Sokka's actions wasn't the only thing their group might be fleeing.

Another step allowed a streak of black and crimson to resolve in her vision, and realized that she had failed. A Firebender had found her. She moved to stand wide in front of the children, in case the enemy hadn't seen them yet, and prepared to join the rest of her family in the Long Hunt.

Then a giant fur monster fell out of the sky, and a boy in the colors of the dawn appeared to strike the Firebender with the wind itself.

Ah.

This would the Avatar and his bison, then.

The Firebender was lost from view again, but another shape in the same colors approached out of the snow. Kanna tensed again, but the Avatar child moved to support the figure against the wind, as they got close, she realized that the newest arrival was a young woman. She was of obvious Fire Nation stock, and her eyes were bewildered as she said, "What are you people doing out here?"

Kanna nodded. "You must be the young lady who corrupted my grandson into a rebel."

"I did what?"

"My grandson is Sokka. He came up with a plan for me and most of our friends to escape together, on the cargo ship, so that the Fire Nation can't punish us for all this trouble."

The young lady's eyes scrunched closed, and Kanna's old ears were used enough to the sound of wind to hear a mumbled, "I knew that guy would be trouble." Then the Fire Nation woman looked up again. "All right, then, what's the plan? And how do we get it done fast?"

"A group of the miners should have taken the ship by now. We just need to find it."

The Avatar nodded. "Everyone, grab hands. I'll go first, and do what I can with the winds ahead of us. Appa will go last to make sure no one gets left behind!"

The Avatar had a little wisdom, at least. Kanna lined the women and children up and got them holding hands, then took the young Fire Nation lady's hand in her own mitten-covered grasp. "My grandson never got your name."

"Ugh. I'm Mai. Nice to meet you or whatever."

Well, not the most polite girl, but then, that was probably the Fire Nation upbringing. Kanna let it go as the group began moving forward. Mai held on to the Avatar's shoulder, and he walked while twirling his staff like one of the Fire Nation's mechanized propellers. The snow falling in front of him blew away, creating some visibility, and Kanna's old eyes were able to resolve something like a red star shining in the distance.

Once they were close enough, she could see that it was Sokka himself, holding a flare above his head and waving frantically.

He was always an excitable boy, no matter how much he tried to pretend otherwise.
The Avatar led the group up to Kanna’s grandson and said, "Hi, I'm Aang. You're Sokka?"

"Yeah. Need a ride out of here? I have a brand new captured ship I'm dying to try out."

"Wow, just like pirates! Can you take Appa? He can fly, but he's not fond of doing it in giant
snowstorms."

"I guess we can take on fur monsters, too." Then Sokka hunched a bit, the same way he used to
when he realized he was in trouble with his parents. "There's something I want your help with, but
we'll talk once we're out of here. For now, nice to meet you, Avatar Aang."

Kanna had been on ships before, but later when the stolen vessel pulled out of the dock with her little
bit of the Tribe aboard, she thought perhaps that it might be her best voyage yet.

They were saying that the Airbender was the Avatar. No one else had a history of glowing.

Zhao’s fury was such that he almost couldn’t feel it.

The first to spread the word was Captain Sheng, who had trained to be a Fire Sage in his youth until
he somehow wound up joining the Navy. Sheng was the kind of devout that had him handing out
little books titled 'The Call of the Flame' to everyone who didn't claim to already have one, and he
was the closest thing they had to a spiritual authority in the South Pole. He was telling everyone that
the boy's powers matched all the signs, and the return of the long lost Avatar.

To think that Zhao had the Avatar in a cell until that faithless little brat had decided to make trouble-

Warm again in his own office, surrounded by aides and staff, Zhao pushed the fury back down
again. He wouldn’t prove his old teacher right by exploding in front of his subordinates. He turned to
face the reporting officer. "And have you been able to confirm who exactly is on that ship?"

"Uh, we're not sure, sir. We're doing a headcount as fast as we can, but we do know that at least a
score of the Tribals are missing. They either walked off their jobs or didn't report at the start of their
shifts, and their homes are empty. We've found no evidence of an existing plot, so it's possible that
Avatar or Lady Mai somehow organized this themselves on short notice, but neither can we rule out
an unrelated action with very bad timing."

"An unrelated action." Zhao shook his head. "The Avatar breaks out with the assistance of the
Governor's daughter, a cargo ship is stolen, and this freak storm strikes at us all at the same time, and
there's doubt of coordination? You're hereby demoted a rank. Do you contest?"

The officer's eyes went wide, and then narrowed in anger. Zhao stared back, projecting as solid a
presence as he could command, and waited for the answer. Of course, the officer eventually bowed
his head. "No, sir."

"Good." Zhao raised a hand, summoned a bit of flame, and then smacked the demoted officer across
the face. The man took it well, not crying out, and quickly returned to a stance of attention despite
the burn that streaked from below his left eye to his nose. The modern ways freed warriors from
having to fight an Agni Kai over every insult, but the military still demanded symbolic
acknowledgement of a loss of honor. "Dismissed."

Once the man was gone, Zhao turned to his assembled aides. "New orders: I want a task force
prepared to give chase. We'll need provisions enough to get to the Southern Islands. We won't be
able to keep this quiet, not with Lady Mai involved, so I want wires sent out to all points. Say that
the Avatar was found, attacked our base here, and escaped with other fugitives. Charge Lady
Caldera Yu Mai with treason for helping him, and put out an order for her death, with a request that the Fire Palace confirm it. Also communicate that we intend to pursue, and claim priority because it is crucial to our mission of resolving the issues with the storms here." Zhao stroked his chin. "That won't keep the rest of the military from trying to steal our glory, but it should give us an edge if I outrank whoever gets in our way."

One of the staff broke protocol to ask, "You're going after them?"

"Of course." Zhao smirked. This was why he liked having an audience; it gave him a chance to look brilliant. "I'm not going to let the Avatar out of my grasp, especially not when this colony has been effectively shut down. Unless this storm abates, even all the technology of the Fire Nation won't stop the mines from being buried in snow in a month. Let Governor Ukano waste his time getting as much platinum out of here as he can, and then he can return to the Fire Nation in time to watch his daughter's execution." Zhao couldn't help but see that girl's ugly, blank face before him, challenging him in his own prison. She would regret undermining him, and he would make sure that regret was as public and painful as possible.

Now, he just had to catch her. And the Avatar, of course.

From the bow deck of the newly renamed Sea Change, Aang looked out over the still ocean, and saw a streak of color at the very line where water met sky, a color that recalled the hues of his own tunic.

They had left the South Pole. The sun was rising.

He turned back to the others, to the Water Tribe boy who had made all of this happen: Mai's friend Sokka. "I'd be happy to help you find your sister. Do you have any idea where to start?"

Sokka shook his head. "She could be anywhere in the world. Probably not the North Pole, but who knows?"

The other Water Tribe leader, the tall man named Bato, added, "The Fire Nation has stolen our Waterbenders for generations. All we know is that they take them to a special prison, or maybe one of many by now." He rubbed a hand over tired eyes. "Everything they do is one of many, these days."

The others- the old Lady Gran-Gran, the kids, the women, and the crew who weren't busy- all nodded. Aang's notions of isolated pirates couldn't survive against the weariness these people all showed every time someone said something about the Fire Nation.

He didn't want to think about that right now. If he tried to imagine what was out there in the wider world, he’d break his brain. It was just too big. But these Water Tribe people all expected him to want to do something about it. Aang was starting to realize what exactly his job as the Avatar was supposed to be about. He shook his head and couldn't help but say, "How does a nation take over the whole world?"

By working at it for a hundred years. Apparently.

Sokka leaned forward. "That's why I think this is a good thing, for all of us. You help me find and free my sister, and in the process you can learn all about the Fire Nation and what they do. It's not like you have to go beat up the Fire Lord right now, since he's already won. Yeah, it's a bad situation, what with the whole crushing-the-world-under-his-heel thing, but you have to be smart with how you handle it. You need to gather intelligence, and fight only once you know how."
"If he needs intelligence, then why would he team up with you?" Everyone turned to look at Mai. She was leaning against the rail, looking at the same sunrise that Aang had been enjoying a moment ago, but she didn't seem very happy about it. She had been quiet ever since the ship got away, except when she was saying something mean or sarcastic, and Aang couldn't figure out why she was upset. Hadn't they gotten away with a bunch of new friends and no one hurt? But she had left her family behind to save him, so maybe she was just missing them. Well, Aang would be there to support her, and make her happy again. He wanted to see her smile, to see that beautiful curve of her lips, just as much as he wanted to fix the whole rest of the world.

So Aang hopped over to her and smiled. "That's where you come in! You know all about the Fire Nation, so you can help guide us and give us all kinds of information while we look for Sokka's sister. I won't know what I need to know until I need to know it, so we'll go out as a team and find the need to know that I need to... uh... know?"

Mai sighed. "I feel better about this already."

Aang decided to take that at face value. "We'll need some supplies, but we don't want to take too much away from the rest of you."

Sokka's Gran-Gran gave a thin grunt. "We know how to live off the land and the ocean. We just need enough to see us to a place where the Fire Nation won't find us. Katara is out there waiting, and we won't leave a member of our Tribe abandoned. And you have your own needs if you're going to someday free my people."

Everyone nodded at her words, and Aang bowed in acknowledgement of his responsibility.

So they made up packs that were loaded on Appa's saddle. Once everything was ready, Sokka gave his Gran-Gran a big hug, and then he went over to the kids who followed her around and got on his knees to let them climb all over him. Aang laughed as Sokka struggled to extricate himself, and then led the older boy over to Appa. The rest of the Water Tribe people began cheering as they walked, and Aang looked over to see Sokka quickly wipe at his eyes.

He smiled, and decided not to say anything.

Mai was waiting beside Appa with crossed arms and her own case of luggage hanging from her back. She watched with obvious wariness as Sokka bounded up to grab some of Appa's fur and lift himself up to the saddle, and then turned to Aang. "Is there a way I can get on top of that thing without climbing like some kind of monkey?"

"Sure!" Aang swirled his arms, and a cyclone sprouted around Mai to lift and carry her smoothly into the saddle. He grinned at her stunned expression, and leaped up onto Appa's head. Appa, for his part, gave one of his eager rumblings. Everyone was ready to go. "All right! Where's our first stop?"

Mai straightened her hair before speaking. "If they took this Katara away from the South Pole completely, then she must have passed through the Southern Islands. There's a large military base on Kyoshi Island. They have a 'processing center' there that all the prisoners in the sector have to pass through. That's where captives are evaluated and assigned either to a labor job that suits their skills and danger level, or a prison that can handle them. The center keeps records of everything."

"That's it! Or, you know, a likely lead. At least."

Sokka pointed out an island not
far from the Earth Kingdom coast. "That's Kyoshi Island. Looks like it would have been one of the
first islands down here to be colonized."

Aang couldn't help but notice that the Southern Air Temple was on the way from their current
position. A Bender wasn't supposed to be ruled by fear, but the dread he felt at the idea of going
back home was a physical pain in his stomach. There had to be Air Nomads still living there, but if
not- and if there were Airbenders there, would they be mad at Aang for running away? But he had to
know, one way or another. Otherwise, the fear would never go away.

Besides, something strange had happened back at the South Pole, with what Sokka’s Gran-Gran
called the Everstorm. It was Spirit-weather, the legends said. Somehow, it had been drawn to Aang's
Avatar Spirit, but why? There was a chamber back at the Temple, that might hold answers, and
Aang needed to know those, too. One way, or another. "I have our route all figured out."

Sokka shuffled over to one of the handholds at the side of the saddle. "So this thing flies. For real?"

Mai sighed. "Fair warning: I may throw up on you."

Aang just grinned, made sure his passengers could see it, and then said, "Yip, yip!"

Appa launched into the sky.

"This thing flies! It’s flying!" Sokka practically hopped in his excitement, and Aang couldn’t help but
laugh. He looked back to see Sokka forcing himself back down and swallowing what looked like a
big grin. “It's- (ahem) you know, fascinating phenomena. Nice speed, too."

Mai groaned, and they all flew on to adventure.

It took the bounty hunter three days to find Zuko.

Azula had arrived on the Colonial Continent to find word waiting for her of the Avatar's return and
the treachery of Mai. She considered making a show of cursing Mai's name or something dramatic
like that, but quickly decided against it. It would be undignified, and the rabble expected their royalty
to be composed even in the face of the greatest setbacks. So Azula put all her natural acting skill to
use with a pursing of her lips into which she put volumes of betrayed expression, and then got on
with her day.

The woman, June, was waiting as ordered at the port, and overcame Azula's bad first impression of
her (really, wearing leather that tight could only impede her maneuverability) by getting down to
business immediately, confirming that a scent sample was available and going straight to a stable
where a truly ugly mount was waiting. The creature, a "shirshu," seemed to be part mole and proved
to be June's preferred method of tracking. One sniff of Zuko's old crown, and the creature was eager
to chase. It was an overall pleasing experience for Azula, despite the displeasing need to ride behind
June in the beast's saddle while it bounded across the land like a rhino with its tail on fire. Azula took
her saddle soreness with the grace appropriate to a princess, because Father would want it that way.

On the third day, the beast arrived at a small village. It shoved its way through the streets with a
directness that Azula truly loved, shouldering people and vehicles and all manner of obstacles aside
in its single-minded quest to find the source of the scent. The village itself deserved no better, being
so small and ramshackle that it didn't even merit a Fire Nation administrator. The buildings looked
fragile enough that the shirshu could knock them right over, and only Azula’s dedication to her
mission kept her from asking June to give it a try.

The shirshu stopped at the entrance to an alley that ran between two of those ramshackle structures,
and Azula wound up looking at Zuko for a full minute before she realized that it was actually him.

She turned from the huddled mass lying at the far end of the alley to glance at June, and the bounty hunter smiled in an almost insubordinate way as she said, "Found him, as commissioned. But I never guaranteed his condition."

Azula shook her head and dismounted from the shirshu. "His condition is his own fault." At the sound of her voice, the huddled figure shivered in its oversized cloak. Ah, so he was awake. And he remembered her. She approached, noting with dismay that he smelled (and not in a pleasant way). "Zuzu? Is that you? Your dear sister has come to take you home."

The hood lifted, but his face was left in shadow. "Azula?"

"Ah, you remember my name. How heartwarming."

"Wh- what do you want?"

"To take you home, dum-dum. I just said that."

"Can't."

"You presume to tell me what I can and cannot do?"

"...hn. You haven't changed. At all." The hood lowered again. "Can't go home. Leave me."

"Ah, as dramatic as ever. Very well, then. Let's do this dramatically." Azula flung her hand above her head, and summoned the flame in her heart. Blue fire- unique in all the world- sprung into existence in her hand, casting the whole alley in harsh, cold light. "Prince Zuko, the Avatar has returned. I call upon you to fulfill the terms of your banishment, and win the right to return home by bringing the Avatar back to the Fire Nation as your prisoner. Rise, and remember who you are!"

Azula wanted to laugh at the ridiculous words, but Zuzu actually responded to them as though they weren't complete nonsense. The hood rose again, and hands emerged from the robe to pull it back and reveal the face of her long-lost older brother.

The flame faltered, and Azula had to work to hide her disgust. She knew about Zuko's injury, of course, and had amused herself many times by imagining his disfigurement-

-but she hadn't expected him to be missing his left eye.

His face was marred on his left side by a burn scar that tapered back over his ear. Long, greasy hair fell to hide most of it, but it couldn't conceal the missing gold of the eye that was supposed to be at its center, or the deep shadow of the empty socket cast by Azula's flame.

Well, she'd simply have to help him learn how to fight without depth perception, then.

Zuko rose, and looked at Azula with something like a trace of his old stature. "The Avatar is back? It's not a lie?"

"It's not a lie. My old friend Mai found him- you remember her, I'm sure- and tipped us off. Father wants you back, and sent me to make sure you exploit this opportunity to the fullest. I will get you in fighting shape, and June here will assist in the hunt. She's quite professional, despite her attire."

Zuko was as still as a statue. "Father... wants me back..."

"Yes, I don't understand it either, but I have my orders, and I will see them done."
She waited while Zuko processed that. Given his living conditions, and the smell that was no doubt affecting his ability to think, he likely needed some time to remember how to communicate effectively with other humans. Azula had no hopes of anything approaching a 'thank you.'

Eventually, Zuko met her eyes again with his one. "What do I need to do?" His voice was strong and crisp.

Azula grinned. "Good boy."

TO BE CONTINUED
Going Home Again

Chapter Summary

Aang leads his friends on a return to the Southern Air Temple, but what they find there is beyond even the wildest expectations.

Going Home Again

As the last light of the sun drained from the lands, Appa finally glided down over Gale Isle. Aang steered him to a spiraling landing on the southernmost beach, and no sooner did the bison's feet touch the rocky sands than Aang was sliding off his head to stand on the land he once knew. Gale Isle had never boasted much animal life, not counting the Air Temple where the lemurs and sky bison made their homes, and the beach looked forlornly empty in the twilight. It was the opposite of Aang's visits as a child, when he and his cacophonous friends visited to play in the water and hunt for sharks to ride. (They never found any.) Now, as he looked around, he had trouble recognizing anything. Even the quiet lapping of the ocean on the shore was unfamiliar.

Either the beach had changed in a hundred and one years, or Aang had forgotten it.

He heard a soft grunt behind him, and turned to find Sokka disembarked and stretching his arms.
"Woo, I am glad to be on solid ground again. Flying is... interesting, but sitting in that saddle all day is harder than a day of work."

"Boo hoo, your butt is exhausted from sitting down all day." Mai jumped from the saddle to land easily beside Sokka, and stood with her shoulders squared. "Trust me, that's the most comfortable saddle you'll ever ride in. Other animals bounce as they move. Ridiculous flying aside, at least the bison is a smooth ride." Mai looked around the beach, and turned to Aang with a questioning eyebrow raised. "So where are we supposed to take shelter around here?"

Aang smiled and threw his arms out. "Right here! The sky is clear and it's going to be a beautiful night."

Mai looked at Aang.

Mai looked up.

Mai looked back at Aang. "I don't get it."

"He means, milady, that we're sleeping outside tonight." Sokka crossed his arms and grinned. "The peasants call it 'camping.' Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"You're joking." Mai looked back at Aang. "He's joking?"

Aang could only shrug in apology. "The only shelter on the whole island is the Southern Air Temple, and we'd have to fly half the night to get there. We can camp here, watch the sun rise over those cliffs tomorrow morning, and then fly over to the temple."

"I hope you brought a tent," Sokka said as he strolled past Mai.
The way her eyes went wide was funny, but Aang felt too sorry for her to let the joke go on. "Sokka's teasing. We have three tents we took from the cargo ship, and I don't even need one. I just sleep on Appa's tail." And because he wanted to be nice, he added, "Appa's tail is nice and warm. You can sleep there with me if you'd prefer," before realizing that it might not come across as innocently as he intended.

Mai, though, just glanced back at Appa, who gave her a welcoming groan. "I'll take the tent, thanks."

Aang caught Sokka giving him a look that said the older boy caught all the possible implications of the offer. It occurred to Aang to hope that Sokka's teasing of Mai was just friendly, and not boy-girl teasing. After all, she was really pretty, and Sokka was a teenager just like her, maybe the same age. Sokka was even posing now, with his arms on his hips, as he said, "Very well, fellow campers. As the resident Survivalist Expert, I'll oversee the setup of our Camp. Since none of you have the necessary expertise, I'll put up the tents. Mai, you get us some firewood. Dry, dead wood only, please. Don't cut any living wood unless you like your campsites covered in smoke. Aang, are there fish in these waters?"

"Um, I don't think so. I never saw any."

"Huh. Well, I guess it's Fire Navy rations for dinner, then. It'll be dark soon, anyway. Aang, you're in charge of digging them out and opening those tin cans. Any questions?"

Mai raised a hand. "Where are the bathroom facilities?"

Sokka pointed at a collection of bushes in the distance to his right. "Girls over there." Then he pointed to another set of bushes in the distance to his left. "Boys over here."

Mai's eyes went wide again. "I want to accuse you of kidding me again, but this isn't a joking matter."

Aang sidled up to her and gave his nicest smile. "Welcome to the life of a Nomad. Don't worry, it's a lot better than it seems. The sky is clear and it's going to be a beautiful night."

"...you said that already."

"Oh."

Sokka had just finished setting up the second tent when Mai stomped into the makeshift campground and dumped a bundle of branches on the rocky sand. He took a quick look to make sure she had followed his instructions about bringing only dry wood, and then motioned at the tent. "Just in time! Your humble abode awaits, my lady."

The look she gave him was frostier than a polar bear-dog's tail.

He grinned. He probably shouldn't mess with her like that, but he couldn't help but enjoy the reversal of the usual Fire/Water dynamic. The Fire Nation liked to lord their supposed superiority over the rest of the world, and it was fun to see one of their warriors so completely out of her depth. Not to mention the way she had tossed him around back in the research center at their first meeting. "Hey, Mai, did you find the bathroom okay? Not too breezy?"

She paused in the middle of unloading her travel case from Appa to hold up a gesture.

Sokka held back some laughter and went over to get the campfire started. While he worked the
wood, stacking it in a conical shape and setting up some smaller branches to act as tinder, Aang ambled over and spoke in a soft voice. "Um, I don't think you should say things like that to her."

"Yeah, okay. I've had my fun. It's just weird to get so freaked out about sleeping in a tent."

"But Mai's our friend, and we're going to be together for a while. We should try to be sensitive to each other."

"Yeah, okay."

"So you'll stop teasing her?"

Sokka struck his spark-rocks together over the tinder. It started catching, and he leaned down to blow gently, giving it the air it needed to burst into flame. Once he was satisfied that it was really starting to catch, he leaned back again and slapped a friendly hand down on Aang's shoulder. "Fine, kid, I'll be nice."

"Great." Aang looked down at the fire for a moment before speaking again. "So, what do you think of Mai?"

"Isn't that what we're talking about?"

"She's pretty, right? I mean, pretty neat, right?"

Sokka realized exactly where this was going, and it took him a moment to put the pieces of his mind back together after the realization. Aang, the last Airbender, really did have the shivers for a Fire Nation girl? Granted, Mai was neat, being a traitor to her evil masters and all, but she was still kind of messed up. Aside from being raised in the Land of Evil, she was also a woman who was a warrior, and that had to be doing bad things to her mind. Probably the reason she was so cranky; if she focused more on cooking and sewing, she'd be more easygoing.

Remembering that Aang was still hanging, Sokka shrugged. "Yeah, pretty neat, but not the type of person I'd spend time with for fun."

"Oh. That's good. Or, um, not good good since we should all be friends, but- well, I- I got the ration cans open."

"All right, dinner time! I wonder if we can heat them over the fire."

Zuko would have thought he was dreaming, if the luxuries around him had any resemblance to his usual fevered nightmares.

The warm bathwater warmed him and eased the pain of muscles that had been cramped from days on end of sleeping on the ground. His body was being massaged by massive brushes directed by silent but enthusiastic servants, against which Zuko struggled to remain upright even as they scoured the oil and dirt that had accumulated from months on the road. As they worked, he meditated on the scent of the perfume that had been added to the bathwater and let the sensations wash over him, until the brushes withdrew, and he was left feeling like a new being freshly emerged from a chrysalis. It was almost like being home, swathed in the luxury of the Fire Palace. He hadn't been back there since he had gone with Father to fight in the war. How long had it been? He was sure it had been years since he was- since Father-

There was one major difference from home. With just one eye, Zuko now had to turn his head to see the whole width of the room.
He forced strength into his voice, and looked over to the screen that had been set up on the far side of the room, next to the door. "The Avatar is really back?"

Azula's reply rang out from behind the screen: "You keep asking that. It's almost as if you don't trust me." She gave a chuckle that, even after their long separation, Zuko recognized as completely artificial. "Well, if you won't believe me, then surely you can trust Mai. She's doing this all for you."

One of the servants dumped a bucket of water on Zuko's head to wash away the shampoo in his hair, but he scarcely noticed. So much was happening, for the first time in so long. After arriving out of the night in the decrepit town where Zuko had been kicking around, Azula had whisked him away to a more civilized colony, throwing gold coins around (pure gold, shined so that each one lit up the space around it) to rent the services of an entire luxury inn. Servants had torn Zuko's clothes off and taken them away to be burned. He had glimpsed crimson silks being prepared for him as he was led into a bath bigger than most peasants’ houses. Azula had promised him weapons, and armor, and access to all the information that passed through the Fire Nation's full telegraph network.

All in service to finding the Avatar.

Zuko had seen the Wanted posters, on his way into the hotel. Mai was pretending to be a traitor, bringing the Avatar to him.

After being alone for so long, he hardest thing to believe was that people actually wanted to help him.

He looked back over at Azula's screen. "Does Mai know about... about what I became?"

"Everyone knows about your banishment, of course. Or are you referring to the... state... in which I found you? Even I didn't know what to expect, so no, she's probably still picturing the eager young man prancing about in his armor, so excited to be going to the front." Zuko's felt his face twist at the memory, and it was almost as though Azula could see his discomfort, since her next words were, "Did you do it to impress her?"

"What?"

"Begging to join Father. Did you do it to impress Mai?"

Zuko sunk deeper into the water, letting it come up to his chin. "Why would I do it to impress her?"

"Well, Lu Ten went off with Uncle just after his betrothal to her had just been finalized. I thought it might have inspired you to seek a military adventure yourself as soon as you were old enough, given the... regard you two always had for each other."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you say so." Azula's voice went lower, slower, as she added, "Uncle sent word back breaking off the engagement not long after your banishment was declared, and Mai remains unpromised. She never needs to know the state in which I found you. Things can go back to the way they were, and we can both pretend you were always the shining prince, if only you can catch the Avatar."

Zuko reached a hand up to brush his scar. If- when he returned home, he could have a glass eye made, to replace the one he lost, but for now, he supposed a patch would have to do. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm giving you incentive. One of the nice things about you, Zuzu, is that you're more than capable of dedication. If you want something, you won't stop trying to get it, even if it's completely futile. But
you've never been one to take direction, and look where it's gotten you. Do as I say, and you'll be catching the Avatar in no time at all. Then everything you want—home, a reconciliation with Father, perhaps a competent and loyal young lady friend who sighs like a bellow—will be yours. Do we understand each other?"

Zuko said nothing for a long time, and then dashed his hand against his bath water, sending it spraying all over the delicate painted walls. Let Azula pay to have them redone, if they were damaged. "Get out of here. I'm going to get dressed, and then I'm going to bed."

Azula matched the length of his own silence. "Since you asked so nicely. Sleep well, Zuzu. Your exercise regime begins tomorrow."

"And stop calling me that!"

The shutting of the door was her only reply.

Aang stretched into wakefulness, and smiled at the light of the rising sun. He snuggled into the fur of Appa's tail, thinking about snoozing for a little longer, but then he remembered that today was the day he was going home. He bolted upright, and gave a windy leap that took him over to the bushes designated as the boys' bathroom facilities. In the cool light of the morning, he decided that the whole idea of there being no Airbenders left was completely ridiculous. Sure, maybe the Fire Nation had attacked after all, and Aang was willing to allow that some of his fellow Nomads had died tragically, but they couldn't all have been killed, right?

Some wouldn't have been at one of the temples, and even for those who were caught there when this Comet came, there was no way the Fire Nation could cut off every single escape route for people who could fly. Aang was more and more confident that many had survived, and continued the Nomad traditions in secret, and a hundred years later, there wouldn't be any danger in returning to the temples. In fact, if everyone believed that the Airbenders were gone, the temples would be the best place to hide, since no one would think to look there! And the Southern Temple's Sanctuary had that secret that Monk Gyatso had talked about, the person who would teach Aang how to be the Avatar. That had to make the Southern Temple the one most worth returning to for any survivors or descendants.

Even more excited now, Aang finished his business and ran back over to the campsite. "Sokka! Sokka, time to wake up!"

Sokka's tent said nothing.

"Mai! It's a beautiful morning! Want to watch the sun rise with me?"

Mai's tent said nothing.

Aang looked over at Appa, who shook himself fully awake and gave a friendly roar. See, Appa knew how to greet the morning with a smile. Now Aang just had to wake up these lazy teenagers. Grinning, he untied the entrance to Sokka's tent, and blew a blast of air into it that inflated the whole thing like a giant balloon. The noise and sudden rush of pressure jolted Sokka awake, and before he could try to get grumpy, Aang said, "Good morning it's time to get up I'll have some rations ready for breakfast before you get your pants on so hurry up!"

Then he ducked out of Sokka's tent and turned to Mai's. Aang didn't want be as rough with her, so once he untied the tent's entrance, he peeked his head. "Mai, it's time to wake up. The sun is rising, and you can be the first outsider in a hundred years to see an Air Temple! Doesn't that sound great?"
It was dark in the tent, but just enough light was streaming in behind Aang for him to make out her shining hair curled at the head of her sleeping bag like a sharp calligraphy stroke.

Then there was a motion, and Aang got a glimpse of a pale and delicate hand just before a blur eclipsed his vision and something really hard smacked into his forehead hard enough to send him somersaulting backwards away from the tent.

Behind him, Sokka laughed.

Aang rubbed his head, and looked down to find a hairbrush lying in the sand at his feet. Apparently, she didn't need to open her eyes to hit a target.

Neat!

And painful.

Mai wasn't in anything even approaching a good mood.

The day started with a hyperactive, hyper-hormonal Airbender waking her up from a nice dream about fruit tarts, immediately followed by once again having to use a bush as bathroom facilities. That was followed by a less-than-lovely breakfast consisting of cold canned rations of a nutritional nature that Mai couldn't (and wouldn't) guess. Aang wanted to get going right after that, but Mai absolutely refused to spend another day wearing the same outfit.

"Is there anywhere around here I can get a bath?" she had asked Sokka, dreading the answer. His response had been to grin that grin again and point over at the ocean lapping quietly against the beach. Of course. Bad enough that she was forced to use wild water that a whole ocean's worth of fish pooped in, but she couldn't even get it heated. For the first time in her life, she wished she was a Firebender. Without any other options, though, she ordered the boys away, did a quick washing that left her sputtering and shivering from the cool water, and then broke a new outfit out of her luggage.

Of course, if she had thought things through, she would have known to expect her next problem: she had no way to dry her hair. Once again, she endured Sokka's superior barbarian attitude (like knowing how to live a completely uncivilized life was something to proud of!), and had a hard time trying to figure out a reason not to jam stilettos in his ears. After all, she was going to have to ditch him before meeting up with Zuko, anyway. She might have gone on with it, just then, if Aang hadn't thrown a gale-force wind at her that instantly dried her off. She was all set to actually thank the kid for it, but then her hair started puffing out wildly from the rough treatment, and she had to make herself remember that Zuko needed the Avatar alive in order to return to the Fire Nation. At least Aang gave her back her hairbrush without having to be asked, but the whole experience was enough to convince her to forgo putting on her usual makeup.

Finally, they all climbed on Appa and got going.

The trip quickly took them up over the cloud cover, as Aang guided his big dumb pet to a range of mountains that stretched across the middle of Gale Isle. Sokka curled up at the rear of Appa's saddle and was soon snoring lightly. That wasn't a bad idea, but just because she was on an arduous mission to help destroy the Fire Nation's most dangerous foe, Mai saw no reason to let her hair lose its shine. As she meticulously brushed it through, ignoring Aang's intrigued glances, she leaned against the side of the saddle and looked down at the swirling clouds. It was almost disappointing to learn that they were nothing more than soggy vapor. Looking at clouds down from the ground, they had almost seemed like they would be interesting to touch, but the truth was so much less.
That was probably a metaphor for life, or something. Mai indulged in a sigh.

She longed to be done with this job, to guide Aang and Sokka somewhere under Fire Nation control, send a telegraph, and let Zuko take care of them. Then she would be done with camping, done with hyperactive twelve-year-olds who had never seen girls before, done with arrogant barbarians, done with doing her business in a bush, done with rebels who thought she was helping them, done with all of this.

Once her hair was returned to its proper straightness and done up her preferred odango style, Mai proceeded to sharpen and polish her knives. Many people assumed that it was a boring task, but it never failed to hold her interest. One had to be careful of the cutting edges, of course, but it also took knowledge and a good eye to get the blades to their maximum sharpness, and kept her fully engaged.

Sokka woke up while she was still working, and gave a wistful sigh at the sight of all the weaponry lying around her. "Wow, what I wouldn't give for some nice weapons like those. That's some quality metal."

Mai snorted. "What do you know about metal?"

"Hey, you met me in the Research Center for the mines, remember? I probably know more about metallurgy than you do." He nodded at the knife in her hand. "That's Liu Shui steel, I can tell by the texture. Nothing stronger."

Mai stopped mid-polish. He was right. "This set came from a metalsmith who works for an old friend's father. Azula- my friend- she commissioned it for me as a going away present when my family was dispatched to the South Pole." She left out all the implications such a royal gift carried, and instead quieted as she reached for the next weapon in the pile.

She didn't recognize this blade at first, but then Sokka said, "Hey, that's my knife! I mean the one I made. The platinum knife." Sure enough, it was the blade Zhao gave her upon her arrival. So Sokka had made it, huh? As Mai looked it over, admiring the grip, he continued to say, "So what's the big deal with platinum, anyway? All of the sudden the Fire Nation wanted to dig as much of the stuff up as they could, and they're trying everything they can to harden it enough to make weapons out of it. Seems pretty pointless to me. That stuff will never work that way."

Mai shrugged. "No one tells me much of anything. I just know that there are some problems on the Colonial Continent that they're trying to keep hushed up, something spreading that our troops are having real trouble with, and the people up high think platinum is the way to solve it. Maybe our tanks and weapons corrode in swamp gas or something, so they want a different metal. I just know there's a hurry, so my dad was sent to keep things on track despite that freaky snowstorm." She held the platinum knife up in the sun, decided it was too shiny, and added, "You want this back?"

"I don't really have a use for it." He blushed, and added, "I mean, yeah, I don't have any weapons, but a bad weapon is more dangerous than no weapon at all, or at least that's what my dad said, and anyway I guess it's a symbol of my people being oppressed and all so as a sentimental thing it wouldn't really-"

Mai interrupted, "You don't have a weapon?!"

"Um, no, not if we don't count my little razor. The Fire Nation didn't let us keep anything bigger than a kitchen knife, and even though Bato's friends made some stuff out of their mining equipment, I didn't want to take any. They'll probably need those things, when they find somewhere to settle."

Mai hardly listened to his rambling. He didn't have a weapon? At all? In the Fire Nation, everyone
owned a weapon, even the lowliest peasant. And Sokka, just like her, wasn't a Bender. In her whole life, Mai knew only one person who was neither a Bender nor fought with weapons, and Ty Lee was probably dead now, showing the wisdom of that philosophy. It was unthinkable that Sokka was embarking on a globe-trotting adventure with nothing but his dim wits to protect him. Didn't he understand what kind of world it was? She was ready to give him one of her Flowing Water blades right then and there, before she remembered that she might actually have to fight (kill?) him before this whole thing was over and she was back in the Fire Nation.

But still, if Sokka were lying in front of her starving, she'd at least throw a crust of bread at his stupid face, right?

Finding one of her lesser knives, she tossed it over. "Here. Keep it." Then, on impulse, she tossed a second.

"Hey, thanks!" Sokka pulled each blade out of the sheath for a moment, admiring the edges (of course, Mai had just sharpened them), and then tucked them into his belt. His grin looked out of place on a face that usually looked depressed, or scared, or smug. It was a Tom-Tom grin, young and uncaring.

"Please don't mention it. Literally."

Sokka was looking like he was actually going to try hugging her, when Aang sat up in his position on Appa's head, and pointed into the distance. "Hey, guys, there it is! I'm home!"

Mai dutifully looked, and had to admit that the Southern Air Temple was better than she expected. She had imagined something rugged, something unfinished that was just as much cave as temple. Even if such a thing might have looked halfway decent to non-Fire Nation folk a century ago, surely the passage of time would have rendered it ruins by now, reclaimed by all the wild nature that could be found outdoors.

Instead, she found herself looking at massive towers that rose majestically from a mountain peak. The surfaces seemed to swirl like clouds, but then her sharp eyes picked out the stairs spiraling around the outside of each tower, creating the impression of rising motion as Appa approached. The towers were topped by bright blue spires that reached to the sky. Amazingly, none of the colors had faded over the last century. The blues practically glowed in the light of the sun, and the white buildings stood out brightly against the mountain rock, reminding Mai of snow in the moonlight. They were nestled into the crags of the mountaintop as if they had grown out from within it, reaching to the sky with the eagerness of one of Crawling Trees of Yukuefumei Island.

Too bad it all looked so empty. Shrugging, Mai turned away from the temple and began putting her knives back.

Sokka climbed up to the front of the saddle and pointed at platform connected to the temple complex, a bit lower on the mountain. "Make for there!"

Aang looked back with a quizzical expression on his face. "Why? Appa can just take us right to the temple, and then you won't have to walk."

"Aang..." Sokka glanced at Mai, but she had no idea what he was getting at. Seeing that she'd be no help, her turned back to Aang and put a hand on the kid's shoulder. "I don't see any activity over there. No movement, no... things... flying around, not even a single line of smoke. Let's land outside the temple, and then I'll go scout it out for you."
"Why don't we all just go? We've already waited long enough -"

"Aang, I watched my parents bleed to death on the floor of my home."

Aang's jaw dropped. Mai's head snapped up; she wasn't sure what to make of the sudden declaration. Why would he say such an awful thing? Was it even true?

Sokka reached up to tug his ponytail while his eyes drifted to his knees. "Some things... they're not good things to see, no matter how old you are. It's one thing to know about it, but seeing it- you don't want to see it. Take my word for it, okay? I'll go check things out for you, and if it's all good, you can tease me for making a snowstorm out of a flake. If not, I can come let you know, and- if you don't want to see, then fine, but if you still want to, I can at least... prepare you. You get me?"

Aang nodded slowly. "Okay. I think it will be fine, but- It's not a bad idea. Thanks, Sokka. I'll stay on the platform with Mai."

Oh, goody.

Though, she had to admit, for a barbarian who liked playing the manly macho wilderness survivor, it was surprisingly thoughtful of him. Maybe she'd only stab him in one ear when the time came.

The platform Sokka had picked out rose apart from the main mountain on which the temple was situated, but a bridge connected the two. Sokka could walk over, and then take a series of winding paths up to the temple area proper. Mai wondered if this was some kind of diplomatic receiving area; certainly, the Air Nomads themselves wouldn't have had to park a bison this far away, would they?

Appa landed, and Sokka immediately hopped off and got on his way without so much as a backwards glance. Figuring that he would be a while, Mai decided to remind her muscles of their purpose. She climbed down the platform, and ran through stretches to work some life back into her limbs. Straightening up from touching the toes of her boots, she caught Aang- still up on Appa's head- looking at her with obvious interest. As soon as their eyes met, he quickly looked away and pretended that he had been working on a knot in Appa's reins.

Well, that was worth a sigh.

Finishing with his knot, Aang hopped down and casually ambled over. "I think you'll really like the temple. It's peaceful and rich in spirit, and you can feel it just by breathing in the air! The fruit trees should have some early crop by now, and I'll make you one of Monk Gyatso's famous fruit cakes. The secret is the gooey center that you have to make light and fluffy with Airbending!"

Mai figured that there was no avoiding conversation, at this point. "Fruit cake sounds nice. Who was Monk Gyatso?"

"He's-" Aang looked down. "He was- he taught me everything I know." Aang looked up, a smile growing once again on his face. "He's the most fun monk you could ever meet. He threw some of his cakes at the Temple Elders!"

Mai smiled back. She liked the sound of this guy already. Too bad he was dead for a hundred years. "Did he know that you were the Avatar?"

"Yeah. Everyone knew. Things got weird after that." Aang looked down again, kicking his boots against the stone of the platform. He took a deep breath, and then looked back at Mai with an expression that reminded her of Tom-Tom being caught in the act of licking her hairbrush. "That's why I ran away. The Elders wanted to take me away from Gyatso, so that I could train harder to protect our people. They said a war was coming, and I had to be ready. I guess I messed that up,
huh?"

This? This was why Mai hated talking with people. She wanted to say yes, he had messed that up as badly as messes could be up, but obviously that wouldn't do in this situation. She needed Aang to trust her, to like her, so that he would listen to her when she brought him to Zuko. She needed to be his friend. Azula enjoyed blunt criticism, especially since she never actually earned any, while Ty Lee had always bounced back from it fairly quickly. Mai had no practice at this.

So she shrugged and turned away from Aang. "Why come back here? Sokka was right: whatever's up there probably isn't something you want to see."

"I have to really know for myself. And this temple has some secrets that I need to investigate. Gyatso said that the Sanctuary had someone in it who could guide me in being the Avatar."

"A hundred and one years ago, right?"

"Well, who knows what's in there? Legends are full of people who live for centuries."

Mai was going to give her opinion of the academic validity of legends, but she was cut off by the sound of boots on the stone, and she and Aang turned to find Sokka returning.

His face was grim.

Mai could practically feel Aang's mood deflate. He stepped forward and said, "What did you find?"

Sokka took a deep breath of the cool mountain air. "The whole place is empty, except for this one courtyard. Beyond it is a tunnel that leads to a big room with a fancy pair of doors on the far side. I couldn't get that open, it seems like it's locked pretty tight. But all in that courtyard, and through the tunnel, and clustered in that room-"

Sokka swallowed, and then continued, "There are bodies."

Aang's legs went wobbly, and Mai instinctively reached out to catch him and lower him to the ground.

Sokka couched beside Aang, and put a hand on his shoulder. "They're just bones now, and dusty robes. I don't know why they're all clustered like that, but it's not a burial or anything. There's no pattern. It's like they all just collapsed in the middle of a parade.

Aang's eyes squeezed shut, and Mai put her hand on his back and began rubbing. She really didn't care if some crazy Airbender felt bad that his people got on the wrong side of the Fire Nation's glory or whatever, but something about his expression reminded her of Tom-Tom in one of his sobbing moments, and Mai just had an aversion to memories of her brother wailing, is all.

That's all.

Aang's breathing took on a shuddering quality, and it was a long time before he spoke. "I-" His voice hitched, and he took a moment to swallow. "I need to see it. Those doors lead to the Sanctuary I was telling you about."

Sokka looked at Mai, and she said, "Avatar business."

Sokka nodded. "Okay, I'll show you."

It was everything Sokka said, and more than anything, Aang wanted to retreat into the storm like he
had at the South Pole. He couldn't hear the Everstorm here, but there was still that doorway within him, the doorway into which he had fallen when his despair had become overwhelming. He could feel it pulling on his thoughts, and he very well might have surrendered to its gravity now, but there was something fighting against it, something that pushed back against the storm.

Mai and Sokka stood close to Aang, close enough that he could feel the heat of them through their clothes. It was a help, knowing that they were there for him.

The whole Temple also stank of something that made Aang's very being feel watery and weak. It wasn't an actual smell, but a wrongness that Aang could feel on some level beyond his senses. The temples were supposed to promote peace, right down to their very shapes, but as he followed the paths onto the temple grounds, he could feel the wrongness blanketing everything. It smothered the familiarity of the statues and towers he passed, made Aang doubt his steps as he passed through plazas and dead gardens on his search for the Temple Sanctuary. He was starting to think he had actually gotten lost in his own home when he turned down one path and found himself stepping into the plaza outside the vestibule. Piles of bones and dusty saffron robes littered the space, trailing off into the tunnel that would lead to the vestibule.

The statue at the center of the plaza, at least, was some comfort. It was a new statue, one Aang had never seen before, but he nevertheless instantly recognized the figure depicted in tranquil meditation. Whatever had gone on here, however many had died, Gyatso probably hadn't been among them. After all, why make a statue of someone who was still around to throw cakes over the quality of the carving?

The thought threatened to make Aang smile, but then he looked again at the bones all around him. Time to get this over with, then. He had to see what was left in the Sanctuary, if anything.

Mai and Sokka followed him into the temple, to the Sanctuary Vestibule, but when Aang saw the locked doors waiting for him, he gently pushed his friends away and extended his arms into a basic Airbending form. He summoned the wind, and directed it to flow at the doors, to the pipe mechanism set between them. The doors were indeed locked shut as Sokka had described, but all Airbenders had the key. Aang's Airbending sent the wind right into the mechanism's receiving pipes, and it sounded with a horn's call that was not unlike the contented sigh of a sky bison. One carved spiral panel flipped, then a second, then a third, and then the doors parted to reveal the Sanctuary.

Aang saw nothing within but darkness.

He moved forward, Mai and Sokka in step behind him. A little light streamed in from the tunnel behind him, but before Aang's eyes could adjust to the dim illumination, his ears figured out that the Sanctuary was massive. The echoes of his footsteps bounced and expanded in an unmistakably large cavern, the sounds crisp in a way that Aang knew meant there was nothing soft or absorbent in the whole space.

He was right.

As his eyes adjusted, Aang found himself looking at statues beyond count.

He didn't know any of them, but they were all familiar in some way. He was entranced by them, finding strange interest in the features of the faces and the symbolism of their clothing. All the nations were represented, alternating in an unmistakable pattern, the placement of the statues tracing a spiral across the floor. Aang followed their path, for some reason finding it more intuitive than the Air Temple he had just passed through to come to this place, his physical senses fading with every step.

By the time he found Roku, he was lost to the void.
Finally, Sokka couldn't stand it anymore. "What's he doing? He's been standing there for half an hour now!"

Mai turned to look at him with dull eyes. "You realize that you answered your own question?"

Aang said to be nice, and she had given him knives, so Sokka was going to be nice. He didn't growl back at her as he said, "I was hoping for some extra detail, if you have any."

"Oh." Mai turned to look back over at Aang, and Sokka followed her gaze. The kid was standing in front of the statue of the old man at the very center of the sanctuary, looking up at the face with half-lidded eyes. Sokka had half a mind to go over and poke him, but Mai had told some wild stories about the kid glowing and summoning the Everstorm to his Zhao's base, so it was probably not a good idea to go making physical contact while Weird Things were happening. Finally, Mai said, "I guess he's meditating?"

Well, that was as good an answer as any. Sokka didn't really know about meditation, but he was pretty sure it was something that monks did.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a whole lot else to do in the chamber. There were the statues to look at, but once you saw a dozen carvings of dead Avatars- that was the only thing they could be, with all four nations represented- you had seen them all. Sokka looked over at one that was standing near Aang, a big guy wearing a polar bear-dog pelt on his head, and was thinking that he would love to make himself a boomerang like his Tribe's ancestral warriors, when he caught a flash of motion in the shadows behind the statue.

Sokka pulled out one of his new knives, but before the blade even cleared the sheath, the air in front of Sokka sparkled, and three of Mai's blades lodged into the ground around the moving shadow.

The shadow came to a sudden halt, and resolved in the waning light into a little flying bat thing with big, glistening eyes.

Behind Sokka, Mai hissed and said, "Is that a lemur?"

"Well, it's a flying rodent of some kind. Looks kind of small to be good eating, but it's probably better than Fire Navy rations for dinner again." He glanced back at Mai, and she was staring at him like she was waiting for a punchline. In case she was confused, he added, "Meat comes from living animals. You have to kill them and cook their bodies to make them edible."

It was tough to tell what she was thinking, the way her face was so blank, but she certainly did not look impressed.

The lemur thing moved again, and Sokka was ready to give chase, but it simply bounded over to where Aang was still standing in his trance and laid itself down around his neck like it belonged there. Sokka wasn't about to attack it while it was on top of the Avatar, so he put his knife back and gave the Sanctuary another look. "It's starting to get darker in here. The sun must be setting outside."

"Should we leave? We could probably carry Aang between the two of us."

"Nah, I have some flares in my pack that will give us light. I'm not wild about messing with whatever Avatar stuff is going on. Hey, if it weren't for all the dead people outside, I'd just go hang out there."

Mai nodded. "Crypts never really bothered me before, but something about that display out there is gross."
Sokka was about to ask what kind of crypts she had been visiting when the lemur suddenly leaped off of Aang and began flying in circles in the air above them all, screeching like someone had just ripped its tail off.

The last of the light disappeared.

The sun must have set.

Something wasn't right.

Sokka grabbed his sack, and began searching through it by feel. The rodent was screeching the whole time, making every hair on his body stand on end, but Sokka focused on the feel of every item his hand encountered and eventually got ahold of both a flare and his spark-rocks. Then it was a simple matter to get some light going, the flare's harsh red illumination revealing the Sanctuary around him once again.

Mai gasped hard and loud, and Sokka turned to find her staring out the sanctuary's entrance. The flare's glow extended out to dimly show the vestibule chamber, and in the severe mix of light and shadow, Sokka saw movement around the piles of bones.

No, not around-

-on the bones.

A substance like rotting blubber was flowing up from the center of each pile like a spring, oozing over every bone. As each one was covered, the bones themselves started moving against gravity to climb the disgusting spring. They flowed upward like some unnatural inversion of water, filling out the dusty robes and forming the shapes of human bodies. Limbs sprung out, muscles were revealed, toes and fingers made themselves evident, and then faces came forth. The bodies were stiff and awkward in posture, but it was the faces that were the worst part. They were human enough, but the features were exaggerated to the point of being monstrous. Sokka found himself unwillingly captivated by the whole sight until one of the creatures turned a head to stare at him with empty eye sockets and opened a mouth full of glowing green teeth.

Sokka started screaming exactly like the flying bat thing.

TO BE CONTINUED
Night of the Di Fu Ling

Aang gets in touch with himself, while Mai and Sokka fight off the undead horde.

Night of the Di Fu Ling

Aang didn't realize he was on a journey inside himself until he got to the destination. It was a quiet journey, starting with a sense of the familiar when he looked up at the face of the statue in the Southern Air Temple Sanctuary, traveling down the road of a name he had heard only a few times a century ago- Roku- that sprung forth from a memory older than Aang himself, arriving at a dark, quiet place underneath a glowing tree full of silver leaves.

Roku was waiting there.

Aang approached his previous life, stepping across the solid darkness beneath his feet. "You were who Gyatso said would guide me."

"As best as I can, Aang. As best as I can." Roku was a tall man even without the spiked decoration around his topknot, standing as straight as the trunk of tree behind him. He smiled at Aang, softening the regal look imparted to him by the snow white hair and beard that practically glowed in the darkness, and moved towards the tree. He motioned Aang over and sat down beneath the leaves. The movement left his elaborate Fire Nation robes in some disarray, but Roku simply smoothed them out as best he could and returned his focus to Aang. "I've wanted to meet you for a very long time. I'm glad we can finally talk."

"Yeah." Aang sat down next to his old life and leaned against the tree's trunk. It pulsed with life and light against his back. "Can you make any of this make sense? All the other Air Nomads- the Fire Nation- even before that, when I first learned I was the Avatar..."

"Being the Avatar has never been easy, but you have so much to bear. It has ever been our duty to maintain balance, but you need to restore it, after so much has been lost."

"And it's all my fault."

"All?" Roku looked over at him with raised eyebrows. "No, Aang, there is far too much fault to be given to you alone. Fire Lord Sozin was the one who looked at the world with pride and greed, and decided that war was the only solution. I failed to take his threat seriously, because I thought him my friend." Aang blinked at that revelation, but Roku kept going. "Your elders pushed the entire burden of being the Avatar on you, with no thought to your humanity. And yes, you responded poorly to that, but it was Sozin's son, Azulon, and all his descendants, who have continued to push an agenda of destruction on the world. And beyond that, there are many more lines of fault. We can trace all the influences back to the very first Avatar, if we desired."

"I don't. I know that I can't run away, now." Above Aang, the tree's glow increased. It, like Aang and Roku, existed in a never-ending plane of darkness, and so nothing new was revealed by the tree's enhanced light, but its brightness was reassuring nevertheless, and Aang spoke with more weight as the light warmed him. "I just want to help the people who are being hurt. I want to find a
way to fix things as best I can. I just don't know how, or if I can really do anything."

"But you can, Aang. Even aside from being the Avatar, you can do great things. And I will be there to help you."

The tree’s light grew so bright that Aang was surprised at the lack of pain in his eyes. He didn't even have to squint against the glare. It was a lovely light, a white light, with a beauty brought tears to Aang's eyes. Through the refraction of the moisture on his eyelashes, the light was revealed for what it truly was: an assembly of colors. All the colors were there within it, and together they combined to stand against the darkness. That's when he realized that he had been wrong, before.

There was indeed something in this place, something to be revealed.

Newly visible in the dark distances, Aang could see people standing, watching him and Roku. People from all four nations. Water, Earth, Fire, and Air. The everlasting cycle. As the light reached out, they took shape distinct from the darkness, the crowd stretching out beyond comprehension. It was like the Sanctuary room in the Southern Air Temple, but instead of lifeless statues, they were living people. As Aang stared across the sea of oddly familiar faces, Roku laid a hand on his shoulder, and suddenly he felt full of life. No, two lives.

Three.

Four.

Ten.

A hundred.

A thousand.

More.

Lifetimes worth of Aang.

That might have been enough to sustain him forever, but all too soon it faded, and Aang was once again himself, sitting under a tree with his past life.

Then Roku said, "We all stand with you, but the problem is worse than you know."

Mai had taught herself how to throw knives, but it was Princess Azula who taught her how to make war. Being able to pick a target and hit it was all well and good for fun and formal duels, but combat situations rarely offered set rules and fair play.

As Sokka and the flying lemur both squealed in terror, and the undead Air Nomad monsters started marching towards the Sanctuary in the red light of a hissing military-issue flare, Mai went to work at waging war.

She flung an arm out to launch three of her weapons from beneath her sleeve and into the air. Each one clicked in midair and expanded to form twirling razor discs that zipped past where Sokka was screaming like the useless Tribal lump he was and on to strike the first three approaching monsters right in the middle of their twisted faces. The discs sank into the faintly luminescent false flesh with ugly splatting sounds, but no blood issued forth. The discs merely stuck where they were, and while the monsters stopped their approach long enough for their features to reform, they were soon moving forward once more.
Fortunately, Mai hadn't expected that to work. Even as her razor discs were still flying at their targets, she was following them in a run. She shoved Sokka out of her way (his crash to the floor finally shutting him up) and continued on to the sanctuary's entrance. The doors were tall and heavy, but they were well balanced on their hinges, and when Mai threw her entire weight into the left one, it swung closed with enough force to smack one of the monsters back. The others were just a step from squeezing through the right side of the entrance when she got that door closed as well, and the weird Airbending lock clicked as the doors came together.

The lemur quieted at that, leaving the Sanctuary silent but for the hissing flare, and Mai relaxed. The first rule of war was to be the one in control of the impregnable fortress, but the second, according to Azula, was that there was no such thing as an impregnable fortress. Hopefully, those monsters couldn't Airbend into that lock, but the doors were still just wood. Mai looked around the massive Sanctuary, but the flare's light extended only as far as the first floor, and the Avatar statues were casting long shadows that stretched like claws across the space.

She turned to Sokka and said, "We need a plan."

"What-" From his seat on the floor, he stared up at her with eyes that were a little too wide and danced with the light of the flare. "What were they?!"

"Monsters." Mai shrugged. "The important part is that blades in their faces don't seem to bother them all that much. We need to be ready for if- when- they get in here."

Sokka planted his hands on his head. "Okay, yeah. Defend against the monsters. I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for why bones can glue themselves together and start walking. Or it's Avatar stuff. I think I'm beginning to hate Avatar stuff."

"I don't care what you hate, Tribal." Mai resisted the urge to kick him. "We need a plan." She left out that she didn't know how to make a good one.

Suddenly, the doors rocked as if struck by a great weight. The booming sound echoed harshly in the stone Sanctuary.

Sokka's gaze had snapped over to the door at the sound, but as the echoes faded, he let out a shuddering breath, and when he looked back at Mai, his eyes had settled into a more normal shape and focus. "Okay, got it, we need a plan. Coming right up." He got shakily to his feet, and threw her a glare. "And don't call me a Tribal."

"Why not? It's what you are."

"Maybe, but the only people who use it are Fire Nation, and the way you- they- say it sounds nasty."

Mai didn't have time for this. "Fine. Sorry. Now are you ready to talk about what to do about Aang?"

Sokka looked over at where the Avatar was still standing in front of the statue of the old Fire Nation man with the fancy topknot, and Mai followed his gaze. The lemur was now standing on Aang's head, looking back at them curiously.

Sokka said, "You think his magic Avatar powers can banish the undead or something?"

"Let's wake him up and try." Mai went over to Aang, ignoring another crash against the doors behind her, and punched his chest. He swayed, and the lemur took flight with a surprised squawk, but Aang stayed standing. She poked his face, but he didn't react. Finally, she swept his legs out from under him with a kick and shoved him to the floor. He crumbled, but didn't wake. "So much for
"Yeesh, you don't fool around when you try. Well, if he's not going to help, then we have to get him out of here."

"Out where?" Mai looked up at the spiraling paths that ran all along the sanctuary's walls, up into the darkness. "Do you think there's an exit at the top?"

There was another crash against the doors.

Sokka's twitch was almost too quick to see. "I don't know. It might not matter. I was just thinking, those things showed up when the sun went down. Maybe we only have to last until dawn, and then they'll go away and we can go very away. So the doors are our first line of defense, and then we can move up the spiral. Maybe knocking the statues over to make walking hazards will help a little."

The doors boomed again while Mai thought it over. "I'm not so confident about dawn saving us, but until we find another way out of here, I guess it's our only option."

Sokka nodded, and came over to pick Aang up and sling him over his shoulder.

The doors shook again, and to Mai's ears, there was a lot more rattling this time.

"Worse?" Aang frowned and leaned forward where he sat. "How can things be worse than me being the last Airbender and the Fire Nation being an evil empire that's taken over the world?"

"The very substance of the world itself is in great danger. Soon, the physical realm may be completely inhospitable to people of any nation." Roku's eyes narrowed, and there was a chill in his voice. "It started when Sozin's forces used the power of a Comet to kill your people. The energies it excited enhanced their Firebending, and gave them power comparable to the Avatar Spirit itself. Using that power for death on such a scale had repercussions. Then the war they started went on for an entire century. So many people died, their natural lives taken from them and leaving echoes of injustice. Burial customs were ignored, and the spirits of the dead were left restless and far from their homes. This went on for a hundred years, Aang, and then Sozin's Comet returned."

Aang nodded slowly. "Mai said that's how the Fire Nation won the war. They attacked the last Earth Kingdom cities with their comet power."

"Yes. More death, countless lives lost, and more power unleashed. More spirits dishonored by the treatments of their bodies. Now, things have reached a tipping point, Aang. Even if the Fire Nation imposed something like peace from now until the end of time, the world has still been wounded, and it cannot heal. The borders between the physical world and the Spirit World are becoming thin, and the natural cycles are breaking down. The order of the physical and spirit worlds are the Avatar's responsibility. Not only does the Fire Nation need to be stopped, but the damage its armies have inflicted must be repaired."

Aang shook his head. Now he had even more to do, and he knew he had to do it quickly, but he didn't even have the foggiest idea how! He went limp against the stress and let the glowing tree prop him up. "What am I supposed to do? I need your guidance, Roku."

"I know, Aang. But I'm not sure, myself, how things can be set right."

Sokka scrunched his legs against the wall of the sanctuary, pressed his back against the statue behind him, and pushed with all his strength. His legs shook as they extended, almost in time with the
banging against the Sanctuary door down below, but the statue began tipping, and then it was falling
and Sokka quickly scrambled away to avoid any debris-related accidents. The crash against the
ramp’s floor echoed through the whole sanctuary, temporarily drowning out the terrible noise against
the doors, just as the destruction of the previous ten statues had done. Sokka looked down the ramp,
at the skull-sized rocks that littered the path, and nodded. He didn't know how balanced the
shambing undead monsters were, but they'd have to step carefully, at least. It was a shame that such
an old, neat statue had to be destroyed, but Sokka felt that it would be a worse shame if he were torn
apart by monsters.

Sokka lifted his flare and looked up the ramp, ignoring the sounds of the assault on the doors. Aang
was still trancing, or whatever, where he had been laid down. The lemur (at least, that's what Mai
had called it) was standing on all four paws on top of Aang, tensed and looking around. Sokka
nodded at it, grateful that it was standing watch. No need to worry that evil monsters were coming
from behind while the screechy bat-animal thing was there.

Sokka was about to get started on shattering another statue when the doors to the Sanctuary finally
broke down with one last massive crash.

From down below, Mai's voice rose up over the echoes of the destruction of the doors: "Get Aang
out!"

Sokka looked, and saw that as they had agreed, she was standing tall in the center of the room,
seemingly unafraid of the monsters marching through the doorway. Sokka had scattered his flares all
around the floor, so that she'd have illumination enough to work, and in the harsh red light, he saw
the twinkle of polished metal in Mai's hands.

Then she moved.

It was a fighting style like none Sokka had ever seen. Mai simply didn't stop moving- it started with a
throwing motion that sunk a knife into the face of one monster, and then she was twirling like a
dancer as more arm and hand motions scattered blades, small arrows, and razors amidst her attackers,
each strike halting a monster while their bodies regenerated. Her twirl became a somersault on the
floor out of which she sprung with a sweeping kick that fired even more bolts from the launchers she
apparently wore on her ankles, and then she was upright again, weaving back through the spiraling
array of statues.

It was a wonder to behold.

It was also a terrible plan.

Dawn was hours and hours away. They needed every moment they could get. Sokka couldn't fight
worth a pile of slush, but the monsters had to be occupied while Aang was carried as high up the
Sanctuary as could be gotten. That left Sokka as the Avatar-carrier, and Mai as the distraction. She
was supposed to merely fight a delaying action, falling back as needed, but keeping the monsters
engaged for as long as she could. That meant she pretty much had to fight flawlessly for about ten
hours, and hope that she lasted to dawn.

It was a terrible plan.

But it was their only one.

Gritting his teeth, Sokka ran over to Aang, picked the kid up again, and carried him further up the
spiraling path. He heard the echoes of Mai's fighting, but the sounds were increasingly distant as he
ran up into the darkness.
By the light of the moon, Zuko squatted as low as he could go, wincing from the pain that flared through his legs and backside. His body dripped with sweat, despite his wearing nothing but a pair of pants in the cool night air. Ignoring the agony, he pushed himself back up to a standing position and reflexively exhaled at the relief, but he still tottered with a lack of balance for a moment.

"That's it princey-pants, you're done."

Zuko looked with irritation at Azula's hireling, the June woman. She was leaning against the railing of the inn's deck where he had been exercising, watching him with obvious boredom. "No one asked you, bounty hunter."

"Wrong, princey-pants. Your sister, the glorious Princess of Fire, is paying me to help get you into fighting shape. My job is to be the answer to the questions you should be asking."

"I should get on with my workout."

"Wrong again. Your muscles are weak, and I saw that look on your face. You're starting to hurt now, so you're done for the day. In your condition, your body needs rest just as much as it needs exercise, and when you feel pain, that's your body telling you it's time to call it a day. You want to do something useful, relax and go order a fish dinner."

Zuko glared at her as best he could with one eye, but the woman continued to stare back at him with a bored, half-lidded look. Zuko stepped towards her, but she didn't react. Finally, he closed his eye and reached within himself, stretched his will to places that he had ignored for years now, and took hold of the anger in his heart. He tore that anger apart, breaking it down into its component energy, and sent it flowing along his Qi-paths. Finally, he opened his eye again and punched his right fist out at June. He was still several arm-lengths away from her, but that didn't matter. He willed fire to emerge from his strike, just enough to blossom in front of her, blasting her face with dry heat and nothing else as a show of the power he could command, and the respect he deserved.

Yet when his fist snapped into place, nothing flicked out from it but the sweat from his skin.

June's eyebrows rose questioningly, and Zuko turned away from her and headed for the door that would take him back inside.

He found Azula standing in the doorway, looking at him. "You tried to Firebend just now, didn't you?"

Zuko said nothing.

Azula looked over his shoulder at June and snapped, "Leave us."

Zuko stared at his own bare feet and listened to the sounds of June's quick departure. He continued looking down as Azula stepped closer to him.

Her voice was like thorns covered in honey. "You can't Firebend. Not even a little flame."

Zuko looked up again and squared his shoulders, trying to look as big as possible. It had been months since he had tried Firebending, fearing the continued lack of flame, but he was sure that with the Avatar in his sights, it was only a matter of time. "I just have to build my strength back up. I'll be ready to face the Avatar when we hear about his location."

Azula's lips twisted in a way that was clearly not happy. "Strength is one thing, but fire comes from will. I've gone to great lengths to haul you out of that gutter, and I won't look like a failure in Father's
eyes because you lacked the will to seize what is being given." The finger she jabbed at him flared briefly with a blue flame.

Zuko reached up and ripped the eyepatch from the damaged side of his face. "Then here, take your 'great lengths' back. I'll capture the Avatar on my own." He threw the patch straight at Azula's face with all his strength.

She caught it in the air and it burst into fire in her grip.

Then, once it was ash, she used that same hand to smack Zuko across his scar.

The heat roared within Zuko, and he gave it voice with a growl as he launched himself at his sister, reached for her throat with his right hand. Her only reaction was to bring her other hand up to deflect his attacking arm, smacking it aside. She put no real strength into the blow, though, and Zuko was still able to shift his aim and grab her skull. He hand settled over her left eye, the same eye that Zuko himself had lost. He squeezed his threat, and stared down at his sister.

She looked back with no expression, her left eye meeting his right eye. "Go ahead, Zuzu. Burn me just like Father burned you. Take half my face for daring to insult you. Take my sight."

Zuko tightened his grip, squeezing her skull with all the strength in his hand.

She reached up to grab his wrist, and pulled so that his hand was pressing even tighter over her eye. "Do it. Show me the man you've grown into. Show me your fire! Burn me!"

Zuko ground his teeth together, but there was no decision to agonize over. He wanted to scream with hatred, but there was no fire in his heart to answer it. He yanked his hand away and turned his back on his sister.

His sight once more fell to his feet.

Azula simply said, in her sweet and sharp voice, "Don't worry, Zuzu. I'll find a way to fix this for you. Father commanded me to help you, and I will not fail."

He stayed out in the darkness after she returned to the inn.

Mai was never more grateful for Ty Lee's friendship.

Back in the Fire Nation, when they were little girls just starting to explore their chosen specialties, Ty Lee had insisted that Mai and Azula both learn some of her acrobatics. Azula had been curious, but little Mai had snorted at her dippy friend and said, "Why would I want to jump and roll around like a hog-monkey? You go ahead and learn your tumbling, but I'm staying with my knives."

Ty Lee had reached for Mai's hand, then, and stared back with a quivering lip. "But knives can't protect you! What if you miss, or there are more baddies than you have knives for? You'll have to be able to dodge out of the way! Please, Mai, let me teach you so that you won't get hurt! I love you and don't want you to get hurt!" And then she started crying, so Mai agreed just to shut her up.

Now, in the Sanctuary of the Southern Air Temple, Mai bent backwards, dipping just below the clawing hand of an undead monster, and twisted into a sideways roll that brought her to safety. She pulled a pair of knives as soon as the roll came to an end, caught another monster's reaching arm between them, and then applied pressure to the captured forearm at a certain angle that snapped the old bone beneath the white glowing flesh. The monster hissed, but didn't chase after her as she scrambled back a few steps. Broken bones seemed to be the only thing the monsters couldn't heal, so
that was one grabbing hand she wouldn’t have to worry about any more.

Mai wished Ty Lee were alive so that she could say thanks, and that she returned the acrobat’s love a hundred times over.

Around her, the monsters closed in.

Some of Sokka’s flares had gone out a while ago, so the ground floor of the Sanctuary was a twisted mix of blood-red light and shadow. The monsters moved slowly, but dozens, perhaps a full hundred, had pressed into the space of the ground floor. They were all focused on Mai—part of the plan was at least working—approaching through the forest of statues of dead Avatars and coming for her with their clawing, knotted hands. Mai couldn’t help but wonder how far away dawn was; it felt like she had been fighting all night, but she knew that time was always distorted in the middle of a fight, so it might simply have been nothing more than a quarter of an hour. She was starting to think that it might have been better to feed Sokka the stupid Tribal to the monsters to see if gnawing the flesh from his bones appeased them.

Mai backed up and bumped into the statue that Aang had been staring at, the Fire Nation guy with the beard. Her eyes scanned the scene in front of her, measuring placement and distances, while another piece of her attention quested across her body to gauge how many weapons were still pressing against her flesh. The assessment came up with two razor wings, the platinum knife, and way too many monsters.

One of them dashed forward, squealing like a broken duduk, and reached for Mai. She grabbed the tall statue behind her and used it to hoist herself up, then kicked off its stone chest and went flying over the first wave of monsters. She landed right in front of the first monster in the second wave and jammed one of her razors through its rotted robe and into a knee joint. The creature tumbled, its leg no longer supporting it, and Mai took the platinum knife and threw it with all her Qi-enhanced strength at the next monster in line. The blade flashed in the light of the flare, struck the monster in the neck, and kept going. The head popped off, and the blade continued on to land in the monster behind that one with enough force to knock it to the floor.

She was prepared for that one to get back up in a few seconds, but instead it writhed on the floor and gave a sound like a wind over an empty field.

Then it turned to dust.

The platinum knife was left lying in a pile of not-a-monster-anymore.

Huh.

She would have gone for the weapon again, but she detected a looming presence behind her, and she turned around and slashed horizontally with her final razor. The blade slowed as it dragged through the flesh trying to grab at her, but it wasn’t a substantial cut. The undead army around her closed in.

Mai dashed through the hole she had forced in the assaulting waves, trying to find the platinum knife, but the monsters kept coming, and she lost her sense of direction as she was forced to dodge and weave through the crowd, slashing at anything that came close. Her vision was clouded by pasty white bodies in filthy robes, the lights of the flares struggling inadequately against the obstructions, and it seemed like she was lost in a never-ending forest of corpses. One of the monsters tried to tackle her, but Mai sidestepped it, stabbed at another monster that she wound up brushing against, tried to back away, felt the small razor yanked from her hand as it stuck in the unnatural flesh, shoved against the cold bodies closing in-
- her wrists and ankles were grabbed by ice-cold hands, and Mai was dragged to the floor.
Cold writhing forms piled on her, burying her in a sea of monsters. Mai struggled against them, but it
was like a net woven out of bodies. One of the creatures swung down to loom over her, its faces in
hers, and as an army of hands tightened all over her, it opened its mouth in a silent scream. Mai's
breath stirred within her lungs, and began crawling up her throat and out of her mouth against her
will.
Her lips were forced apart, and she watched her breath waft out of her like a mist, spiraling up into
the mouth of the monster above her. Her body grew cold, and her limbs became like stone. Mai
could actually feel the flow of her blood slowing, could feel the Qi draining from the paths in her
body to leave her weak and lifeless. She tried to bite down on her own breath, but the mist resisted
her teeth, and she choked on her own spit as it slid down her overwhelmed throat.
The Sanctuary quieted, the monsters on top of her stilled, and the light grew dim as the last of Mai's
breath leaked upward"WATER TRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIBE!!!"
-and then the roar of a teenage Tribal ripped through the gloom.
A rock of some kind swung out of nowhere to crash into the head of the monster above Mai, and she
found herself looking up at Sokka. He had something long in his hands- a stone arm- and was
swinging it like a club. The monsters rose up from on top of Mai to reach for their new prey, but with
every one of Sokka's strikes, old bones shattered and bodies fell back. Mai tried to get up, to stand
and join the counterattack, but her body disagreed, preferring to stay crumpled on the ground. That
was annoying, but once Sokka had beaten away enough monsters, he reached for her with one hand,
and yanked her up to slump against him.
She held on with what little strength she had in her fingers, and managed to stay upright long enough
for Sokka to hoist her up on one of his shoulders and begin running. She clutched his shirt and tried
to be as light as possible while he dashed for the spiraling ramp. He slowed as he came to the rubblestrewn path, but pressed on and stumbled around the remnants of the shattered Avatar statues with a
clumsiness that was so lacking in grace that it looped back around to have an elegance all its own.
Maybe he wasn't such a useless Tribal after all.
When what seemed like the longest and bumpiest ride of her life came to a stop, Mai saw that they
had reached the top of the spiral- leaving all the monsters behind- where one last flare illuminated the
dead end that was the peak of the Sanctuary. Blank walls bordered by decorative panels curved up to
meet at a point that was solid rock. As she was set down beside Aang and the lemur, she wished for
the first time in her life that she was an Earthbender. Her attention was drawn away from the lack of
escape by Sokka lightly smacking her cheek.
"Mai! Mai, are you okay?"
She tried to tell him that if he touched her face again, she'd feed him his own hand, but all that
emerged from her mouth was a slow gasp. She tried to push herself up off the stone floor, but her
body struggled to move at all, and she lacked the strength to counteract her own weight.
What was wrong with her?
She looked up at Sokka and tried to will her distress into her gaze.
Sokka stared back helplessly.


Then Mai felt something soft land on her head, and she thought for a moment that one of the monsters had snuck up on her, but then the lemur walked its way down her face and took up Sokka's role as concerned deliverer of stares.

To Mai's confusion, the lemur leaned forward and started licking her nose. The warmth of its saliva spread down to her face, and she gasped as the strength soaked back down into her body. The sound startled the lemur, sending it bounding away, and she was left alone with Sokka. She tried moving her limbs, and they actually responded. As she pushed herself up into a sitting position, Sokka moved to support her, but she ignored him and looked for the lemur. It was sitting on Aang's sleeping form now, seemingly unconcerned with her.

First crazy platinum knives that turned monsters to dust, and now gross lemur spit that could heal monster paralysis? She was discovering all kinds of weird science tonight.

Sokka leaned into her vision. "You look okay now. Are you feeling okay now? More specifically, are you feeling okay enough to grab a rock and back me up as I make a foolish last stand against the incoming waves of undead horrors?"

"No." Mai stood up anyway, nearly toppled over again, and braced herself against the wall. "Give me a weapon anyway."

Aang could only express his frustration by standing and pacing around the glowing tree. "Well, if you don't know, then how am I supposed to figure it out? I don't exactly think the Fire Nation is just going to stop ruining everything and start looking for all the bodies of their victims if I explain and ask nicely!"

Roku stood as well, his expression never changing. "Your path will be difficult. But I can offer you one thing."

"What?" Aang stopped and looked over. "Some help?"

"I told you, we all stand with you." Roku smiled. "The Avatar State is a defense mechanism, one designed to empower you with the skills and knowledge of all the past Avatars. The glow is the combination of all your past lives, focusing their energy through your body. In the Avatar State you are at your most powerful, and not only because of the strength we can lend you. That which exists beyond the visible world will respond to you."

Aang nodded. "It saved me from that storm, a hundred years ago. And the Everstorm..."

Roku nodded, and his smile drained away. "But you must be careful. If you are killed in the Avatar State, the reincarnation cycle will be broken and the Avatar will cease to exist. And if your death comes from energies or events that are contributing to the world's imbalance, I shudder to think of the effects. It might be the beginning of the end of everything. Are you ready to accept this burden, and this mission?"

The tree's glow had been fading as Roku spoke, revealing the living wood beneath the ethereal light. It was strong, and solid, and Aang wished he could know it better, but now he had work to do. He looked down at his hands, and found the arrows on the back of his hands glowing. He could feel his Qi lines afire, and when he looked back up at Roku, he could sense the light of the tree shining out through his own eyes. When he spoke, it was with the voice of the tree, and every one of the rings on the grain within.

"I've been ready."
Sokka swung the stone arm he had appropriated from a Water Tribe Avatar's statue and knocked the
head clean off one of the monsters, but three more surged forward to take its place, and he knew he
was about to die.

The monsters had finally navigated their way to the top of the ramp now, and it was hours to dawn
yet. Sokka and Mai had swung their stone weapons in defense of every step, and with each blow, he
had felt the some of the strength draining out of his limbs. Mai was weak, too; while she had
recovered from her corpse-like state, she wasn't at anything close to full strength, and had been
forced to play support to his line of defense. He saw her swing the leg from a Fire Nation Avatar's
statue into the chest one of the monsters dashing at them, but another two got right past her defenses
to rush at Sokka, and their cold hands clamped down around on his body. One on his left shoulder,
one around his right forearm, one on his head, as he started to fall- the heat being sucked out of his
body by the monsters’ touch- another grabbed his neck.

A wretched face pushed in front of Sokka's, and its mouth popped open like it was screaming, but no
sound emerged. Instead, the air in Sokka's own body was moving, pushing its way up and out like a
case of bad jerky. He heard Mai cry out for help from somewhere, but it was a distant echo of a
world in which Sokka no longer existed. His entire reality was the not-quite-human face looming
over his, and the misty breath that was erupting from his mouth to fill the monster's.

Sokka grew colder, and stiller, and the dark cavern became even darker.

His last thought was an apology to Katara.

Then there was a bright light, and he thought no more.

Back in that dark inner space, Roku looked up into the leaves of the glowing tree and said, "Take
care of him, old friend. I'm sorry you had to wake up, but soon enough we will all be able to rest."

Aang woke up with a start and was standing before he even knew where he was. The only light was
the harsh, hissing glow of a military flare, and it the terrible red glow he saw an army of Air Nomads
trying to kill his friends.

Bodies were everywhere, a terrible mockery of the nation that Aang had once called his own, flesh
glowing inhumanly with features exaggerated in a twisted parody of the people he had once known.
Elder Pasang was holding Sokka down and stealing the Water Tribe boy's soul, while Elder Tashi
had pushed Mai up against a wall so hard that cracks were radiating around her. And all around them
were gathered the defiled corpses of Tsering and Rabten and Tseten and Chodak and Tsewang and
Thokmay and Lobsang and Gyaltsen and Yonten and Jinju and Choejor and Dhargey and Ngawang
and Sngye and Choden and Samdup and Afiko and Tinley and Kalsang and...

Everyone.

They were all here.

They were all dead.

They were all twisted.

And it was all Aang's fault, and all Aang's responsibility.

So he accepted the help that Roku had offered, and surrendered to his pain.
The flare's red light died out, but it was no longer dark.

Aang was supplying all the light anyone could need, the blue glow of life.

Aang himself was in a waking sleep, and his dream was the dream of vengeance. He summoned the winds of a tornado, and let them lift him up off the floor. The Di Fu Ling monsters- ghosts looking for justice for their deaths- turned to regard him, and Avatar Yangchen supplied an answer to their questioning gazes with her Wind Launch move, which used deceptively simple hand-motions to compress the tornado around Aang's body into the form of a spring that launched him straight at the army of undead corpses. He landed with the breeze shields of Avatar Dawa cushioning his own body while they slammed into the monsters with enough force to send them flying off the ramp. Aang's body kept going, guided down the winding path by the Wind Tunnel of Avatar Jampa, knocking monsters away as he went.

This was no brawl, no accident. Aang dreamed that the other Avatars had a plan.

By the time he reached the bottom and was once more held aloft by a harmless little tornado, the Di Fu Ling had all been herded to the Sanctuary's ground floor, piled up in an uncoordinated, writhing mass of bodies. The ones broken apart by the fall were even now knitting themselves back together, while the monsters which were still whole fumbled to escape the pile and once more try to kill Aang's friends. He dreamed that he didn't want that, and Avatar Norbu answered with a plan, but it was plan that required Earthbending.

A name in Aang's dreaming mind lit up, the name of the island where Sokka wanted to look for his sister- Kyoshi- a name that became a path leading to a massive woman with a painted face. Avatar Kyoshi had Earthbending and knew what to do. She guided Aang to raise a slab of stone from the floor where the doors to the Sanctuary had once stood, preventing all escape. The slab fused with the walls, forming an airtight seal. Kyoshi kept acting, extending her will into the walls of the Sanctuary, and they grew thinner as a new ceiling extended several stories above Aang. He dreamed his agreement with that move, because Sokka and Mai were still at the top of the Sanctuary, and would need to be protected.

The new ceiling was strong, and also airtight, leaving Aang's sleeping, flying body locked in with every single one of the Di Fu Ling. They screamed their desire to destroy him, to once more make him one of them, but Aang was asleep, and all the Air Nomad Avatars since the beginning of time instead offered a response.

Guided by the Avatar Spirit, Aang's body slammed its hands together, putting all the power of the assembled Avatars into creating a burst of air that would fill the Sanctuary.

But the Sanctuary was already full of air, and sealed so tightly that there was nowhere to which that air could displace.

So instead it compressed.

Instantly.

The noise of the Di Fu Ling cut out all at once as the atmosphere around them pressurized hard and fast enough to shatter every single one of their bones into the finest dust.

The new ceiling crumbled, and the slab over the doorway blew out, but by then, Aang was alone once more.

Sokka awoke to find the lemur standing on top of him, looking at him with what seemed like
curiosity. "Mmmmmmmrrghhhhh. 'm fine, and 'm awake. Don't suppose you've seen the others?"

The lemur cocked its head.

Sokka groaned and made himself get up. The lemur bounded away at having its seat suddenly start standing, but parked itself just a short distance away as it continued to watch Sokka. It turned out that Mai was right behind where the lemur landed.

Sokka hurried over to her. "Hey! Are you alive? Are you awake? Are you capable of answering those questions?"

Mai groaned and opened her eyes. She glared up at Sokka and said, "Why are you waking me up? I'm pretty sure I didn't sleep well."

Sokka laughed in relief and nearly slumped back down to the ground. "Come on, we have to find Aang. Before I lost it, I think he was glowing again."

"Oh." Mai squeezed her eyes shut, and forced herself to her feet. "This is going to be bad, isn't it?"

Sokka didn't answer until he had shuffled over to the ramp that would take them down. In the open space of the Sanctuary, he could see all the way down to the ground floor, where new sunlight was streaming in through the massive doorway to make the white walls of the place positively glow. That explained why Sokka could see, but he didn't like what he saw. Ragged rocks the same color as the walls were scattered around the floor, as was a massive amount of white dust that wasn't the same color as the walls and the rocks. Knives and blades of various shapes and sizes were also scattered about, all them coated in that pale dust. And lying in the center of the mess, eyes closed, arms and legs splayed out like he was making a snow spirit, was Aang.

Sokka hoped the kid wasn't dead.

He hurried down the ramp, Mai right behind him, and was soon kneeling beside Aang. Sokka hesitated to touch him, not sure if it was safe, but Mai pushed right past him and pulled Aang into a hug. As Sokka watched, Aang slowly opened his eyes, but not in a sleepy way. There was weariness there, but also sadness.

When Mai pulled away, Aang said, "My people are dust now."

Sokka looked around at the mess on the Sanctuary floor. "Better than being abandoned bones or monsters. And the Fire Nation burns their dead, so I bet Mai can tell us how to respectfully deal with the ashes."

Mai blinked in surprise, but then nodded. "We put them in urns, which are housed in crypts. Sometimes, people request that their ashes be scattered some place special to them."

"Not like that." Aang shook his head. "They can't remain here, where they died. It isn't safe. We'll give them to the winds."

Sokka pulled the kid into his own hug, and said, "All right. Let's clean all this up, and take it outside. As many trips as it takes."

An hour into 'The Great Dusting,' as Mai thought of it, she found the platinum knife.

She half expected to feel something as she picked it off the Sanctuary floor, but there was nothing but the usual cool bite of the metal. The blade itself was slightly bent from being thrown through the
head of a monster, and she could see that the edges had been worn, but there was nothing to indicate
the way it had disintegrated the monster in which it had been imbedded.

Had that really happened?

Was that why the Fire Nation wanted platinum so badly and so quickly?

If that was the case, what was the Fire Nation fighting, that it needed weapons of this nature?

Silent but full of questions, Mai discreetly returned the knife to one of her holsters, and continued to
help with gathering the ashes of the Air Nomads. She could always fix it up and sharpen it later.

Hours later, Aang overturned the clay jar in his hands, and let the last of the ashes fall out to catch the
wind. He was standing on the Sunrise Observation platform, Appa behind him creating the wind
with reverent tail motions, and watched as the ashes blew out into the clear air over the mountains, to
be carried out into the desolate lands.

It wasn't ideal, but it was appropriate.

"Come on, Appa. Sokka and Mai are waiting for us." He started to lead the Sky Bison back to the
Temple area proper, but as he started walking, a flying lemur flapped to a landing right in his path.
"Oh, hi, little guy. I didn't think any of you were left."

The lemur chittered, and scammed down a set of stairs to the right of the main path. Aang
recognized that they would lead to the lowest level of the Temple on the mountain, where there was
a small building used as a sutra repository for beginner-level texts. Aang had studied there with the
other kids, learning the basics of Airbending and the wisdom that went into the style. Curious, he
followed the lemur and found the repository building exactly where he expected. The lemur ducked
under the ragged tarp covering the entrance.

Aang stepped within after only a moment of hesitation.

It turned out that instead of a repository for books, the building was now a tomb.

The texts had all disintegrated, or perhaps were deliberately burned. Either way, the Firebender
armor scattered around was a clear sign of who was responsible. The suits of armor were not whole;
it was like they had been torn apart, but not before they had been struck with blows hard enough to
dent every piece. Aang could see pieces of human bone littering the floor as well, and could guess
what had happened here. Judging by the rust and dust on the armor, these Firebenders had died long
ago, and had likely lain here until the Di Fu Ling of the Nomads had come to unlife. Whether the
monsters would have known that the Firebenders were long dead was a mystery, but Aang could
easily see them attacking the bodies and breaking them up like this.

Then he heard the lemur chittering, and looked over to find one last corpse hidden in the corner.

It was a whole skeleton, wearing familiar orange robes. Around its neck hung a wooden prayer
necklace with a pendant bearing the sigil of the Air element. Aang had seen that necklace before on
Monk Gyatso.

So his mentor hadn't died before the Comet came, after all.

Looking at the skeleton, Aang smiled, and felt tears running down his face. However Gyatso had
died, he had passed on in peace. Otherwise, he would have become one of the Di Fu Ling attacking
the night before. Gyatso was at rest, and had reincarnated. Aang hadn't been forced to destroy his
It was as much as he could hope for, for any of his people.

"Thanks, little guy," he croaked to the lemur. "I needed to see this." It chittered back, almost as if it understood, and scampered over to Aang and up his body to perch on his shoulders, then settled in to lie around his neck.

Aang would have to take care of Gyatso's bones as well, but he'd need Sokka and Mai's help. He went to go find them, petting the lemur as he walked. "Come on, little guy. You can come with us. We're on a quest to save the world, but first we have to find my friend's sister. You'll like him, he's kind of grumpy, but he's a good guy. And Mai is just perfect. You'll need a name, too, if you're going to be part of the group. How about... Hey, do you know what Monk Gyatso's favorite food was? Fruit pies with peach filling! So how about we call you the Old Word for peach- Momo!"

The lemur- Momo- cooed, and snuggled against Aang's neck.

As the sun set, they left the Southern Air Temple, and Aang couldn't help but think that it would be the last time he would ever see it.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Aang, Mai, and Sokka visit Kyoshi Island, and in an unfortunate case of random bad timing, so does Commander Zhao.

The Warlords of Kyoshi

From the level of the clouds, Aang looked down at a land named for one of his past lives and said, "I think it looks nice." And it did, aside from the sprawling military complex that sat like tarnish on the warmly-hued eastern coast.

Appa bobbed on the air currents high above Kyoshi Island while Aang, Mai, Sokka, and Momo all leaned over the side of the saddle and checked things out. Aang was pleased to see that there was active sea life in the island's bays, brightly-colored elephant koi that jumped above the waves and splashed back down in rainbow sprays of seawater. Those things must be fun to ride.

In deeper waters, a fleet of old fishing ships were hunting smaller prey, while merchant vessel traffic clustered around the docks that extended from various points on the island. Amidst all the activity, it was almost possible to miss the Fire Nation patrol boats that watched over the proceedings. Aang shifted his gaze back to the island to admire its clean and quiet beaches, paralleled by green, pulsing forests that moved in time with the winds. He couldn't help imagining that the entire physical world wasn't in trouble, that he was just on another trip to see more of life and could spend a week enjoying the beaches with his friends.

On that note, Aang scooted closer to Mai, startling Momo and sending the lemur hopping to the other side of the saddle. "Maybe we can visit one of the beaches before we go. Just an afternoon, and I can teach you how to surf! First we'll do it on a board, and then those giant fish!"

Mai's face didn't move, but her voice took on that tone, the one she used whenever talking about camping or using bushes as bathrooms. "Pass. Beaches are nothing but sun, sand, and ocean, and I don't like any one of those. And I think if I touched a fish that wasn't well-cooked, I'd probably throw up."

Aang decided that Mai just hadn't spent time at the right beaches. They'd have to fix that, but not just this moment. He looked over at Sokka to see the older boy staring down through a telescope with a grim face. "Hey, Sokka, what do you see?"

"Trouble. I've been scoping out the main village around the military base; it's got defensive walls-wooden and simple but fairly high- and there's a decent soldier presence in the town itself. The base has its own metal walls, and a lot better security than the one at the South Pole. This thing is more like a fortress, which actually makes sense if they hold prisoners here, even temporarily."

"We'll need papers to get into town," Mai said. "Anytime the military takes over a settlement like this, they put posts at all the entrances and check all newcomers for transit papers. It lets them track the perpetrators of any dissent or rebellion. Of course, as a natural born citizen of the Fire Nation, I have a passport that allows me to travel anywhere, but I'm thinking that I should probably avoid using my name, considering that everyone at the South Pole saw me rescuing Avatars and throwing
Sokka put the telescope down, and looked over with a big grin on his face. "So if we don't have transit papers, we need disguises and a good story! The key to selling it is having backstory which naturally supports our appearance. Mai, you and I are the same age, so we'll be twin Fire Nation siblings. (We'll need to raid your wardrobe for costumes.) I'm Wang Fire, a traveling student doing research for a book about the human condition that I'm hoping will win me entrance into a prestigious university despite my lack of status. You're my sister Saaf Fire, accompanying me in order to get away from a betrothal that our father- a retired military man with a bad leg who tries to make up for a lingering sense of failure in his life by controlling ours- has set up for you with one of his drinking buddies. You're perpetrating a correspondence romance with an Earth Kingdom boy you met during our travels, but you're keeping it a secret from me because you hate feeling emotionally vulnerable and you're not sure how serious the relationship is yet. Aang, you're my assistant, Tok-Tok, who we found living alone in a tree on an island in the Crucible Sea. You decided to join us after you helped us foil the plans of a group of evil poachers who- you're both laughing at me."

Aang wanted to deny it, because he didn't want to make Sokka feel bad, but he wasn't so good a liar that he could explain away the high-pitched braying he was doing, so he merely covered his mouth with his hands. Mai herself wasn't actually laughing, but she was giving that smirk that always made Aang's heart hammer like a nervous Earthbender.

"Fine, you think you can do better?" Sokka crossed his arms over his chest and sat back against the edge of Appa's saddle. "Then don't blame me when we're all arrested by the first soldier who takes a good look at us."

Mai leaned and grabbed Aang under his chin, pulling him over so that their faces were side-by-side. He felt his cheeks burning up at the closeness, but Mai ignored him and said, "See our skin tones? Aang and I are a lot closer in looks than anyone from the Water Tribe will ever be to me. I'm thinking Aang is my little brother Lee, we're from the Fire Nation, and you're our servant from the colonies. All the backstory in the world isn't going to get us over the village walls, though."

"No, but Airbending can!" Aang offered a hopeful smile and luxuriated in the continued pressure of Mai's hand holding his head up. "I can hop us right over those walls. Appa will have to stay outside town, though, but there's a pretty thick forest out there, so he'll be out of sight and have plenty to eat, right, boy?"

Appa gave an agreeing roar.

Sokka rubbed his chin. "That should work well enough. Of course, getting into the village without being arrested is the easy part. Once we're in, we have to study that fortress up close, then figure out how to get in and find the records that will tell us where Katara is."

Mai finally let go of Aang, to his disappointment, and said, "I can find the records, but that whole 'in' thing is going to be a problem."

Aang stood up, and hopped over to Appa's head to grab the sky bison's reins. "We'll figure something out, I'm sure of it! And the sooner we start, the sooner we'll be done. Appa, yip-yip!"

With a tug of the reins, Aang directed Appa into a curving descent that would take them out over the sea again so that they could approach the island again more discreetly. As tough as the situation was, it wasn't anything that couldn't be handled by staying smart and thinking things through.

Aang was sure everything would work out for the best.
Kyoshi Island was sunny, and warm, and gorgeous, and Commander Zhao hated that.

He stepped off his flagship and onto the fortified docks of island’s Fire Navy garrison, not even attempting to hide his discontent. Even aside from his purpose here, he didn't have any good feelings for this place. A more prestigious posting than the South Pole, and infinitely more comfortable, a command post on Kyoshi Island had long been one of Zhao's personal goals. Of course, just because he was now chasing the Avatar and looking for a promotion directly to the Homeland didn't mean that he couldn't still resent the situation.

And then there was the navy base's commander. Zhao approached and didn't bow.

The man himself, Yon Rha, didn't seem bothered by Zhao's attitude. He was frowning, of course, but that was because his face naturally fell that way, either by design or many years of ugly expressions. Even his smiles were more like grimaces, but Zhao was spared that sight for now. Yon Rha gave a lazy bow and said, "Welcome to my port, Commander Zhao. It's a pleasure to see you again, but I'm surprised you came up from your little snow fortress. I presume you found an excuse to chase that Avatar the telegraphs are all so excited about?"

"The Avatar is my jurisdiction, and my task force is pursuing some leads that have brought us to the seas here, but until something takes me away, I'm here on other business. Your base issued this response to a query I sent before I left the South Pole." He thrust the paper with the copied message out, hoping to see Yon Rha flinch.

In that, he was disappointed. Yon Rha merely took it and gave it a glance, his frown never changing. "Yes, I stand by this. We are fully stocked in all supplies, and have been so for quite some time. I made no request to Command asking for emergency provisioning."

Zhao pulled another roll of paper from his belt. "Then how do you explain this? Just before the Avatar escaped, I received orders for a supply run to this island, and it has all the proper codes and headers. The ship I prepared for that mission was stolen by a coordinated effort between the Avatar and local Tribals, as if they knew it would be waiting for them with all the provisions they could want for an escape. I sent a message to Admiral Chan, and he confirmed that he received a request from your base for the listed supplies. The admiral has authorized me to investigate, as long as I'm in the area. How do you explain what happened?" Zhao put on his best sneer. "Rebel activity?"

Yon Rha merely raised his eyebrows. "Admitting to being that thoroughly compromised is hardly an excuse. No, there are some troublemakers in the village here, but it's nothing I don't already have a handle on. Either the headers and codes on the message were faked- which would be a considerable embarrassment to Admiral Chan's security- or someone on my staff is operating without authorization. I don't suppose you'd care to stay and investigate for me?"

Zhao blinked with surprise. "You're inviting me to interrogate your people?"

Yon Rha gave one of his trademark ugly smiles, his wide mouth pointing up at the ends like a smear, and started walking back towards the main complex of the base. He waved Zhao to follow. "I remember my old allies, Commander Zhao. Perhaps we didn't part on the best of terms, but I'm well aware that it was your work that identified the Waterbender, and it was her capture that got me my promotion. I'm quite content ruling my little island paradise here, so if you want to seize the glory in this situation, the least I can do is help. Of course, if this leads you to the Avatar, and his capture is your path to returning to the Capital, then having a friend in Command certainly isn't going to hurt me, is it?"

A grin tugged at Zhao's face, and he strode with proud shoulders as he stepped into the Kyoshi
Island command center. "No, Commander. Having friends has never hurt anyone."

Destiny was truly on his side.

Watching Sokka and Aang strut around in some of her favorite clothes, Mai's only consolation was that if everything worked out and she delivered the Avatar to their hands, Azula and Zuko would have to buy her a whole new wardrobe at least in order to properly reward her.

Aang had landed Appa in the one of Kyoshi Island's forested areas, and Mai went into her luggage case to dig out what clothing she had managed to fit. She had cycled through wearing each outfit a few times over the course of the journey from the South Pole, and while it would have been nice to get it all washed while she was on Kyoshi Island, it was all needed now to assemble a proper set of disguises. Aang's tattooed head, of course, was the most important thing to hide, so she gave up several of her favorite black scarves to turn into a head-wrap for him. A pair of her shorter black pants tucked into his boots worked well enough, and the long sleeves of her only bright red shirt would hide his arrow tattoos until they could get him a pair of gloves. Still, a maroon shawl was needed to hide how baggy the shirt was on his little body, but the overall effect was enough for him to pass as both Fire Nation and not a hobo.

The worst part of the process was how quickly Aang had stripped to his small clothes right there in front of her. Mai had quickly averted her gaze and focused on finding an outfit for Sokka.

The Tri-Water Tribe boy was simpler to outfit. He was only a little taller than Mai, and her preference for loose and baggy clothing meant that everything would fit fairly well on him. Since he was playing a servant, she gave him a plain robe and a puffy cap she had never actually worn to hide the shaved sides of his head. (Why did she even have the cap? Was it a present from someone?) Sokka had started pulling off his shirt right there, but moved behind a tree when he noticed her offended glare.

Of course, neither boy had offered to bathe before touching Mai's clothes to their sweaty skin, and she was well aware that the last time they had indulged in a washing was when they had cleaned off after the Southern Air Temple. (Mai briefly remembered the feel of that dust on her hands, dust that she kept telling herself was the remains of monsters, not humans. She pushed the thought away, not wanting to flash back to the gritty feeling between her fingers and they were monster remains, not humans.) Mai herself, who bathed every day, but was still looking forward to buying a bar of soap as long as they were in town infiltrating military complexes, didn't intend to change what she was wearing, but before they got going, Sokka held up a hand. "Shouldn't you do something about your face? Your parents would have been able to provide a description of you, if not a full sketch."

She suppressed the urge to kick him. "Are you saying that my mother and father are aiding the military in hunting me down and killing me?"

"Am I?" Sokka blinked. "I guess? Isn't that a worry?"

"Huh?" Oh, right, everyone thought she was the worst traitor in the history of the Fire Nation. But would Mother and Father really want her dead? "Maybe. What's your point?"

"Well, there might be an alert out for you. Something to keep everyone on the streets from seeing your face would be a good idea."

Aang had bounded over with one of her longer scarves, left over from his improvised head-wrap. "Here, put this over your head like a hood, and only people who stare at you straight on will see your face." Perched on Aang's shoulder, Momo made a grab for the bolt of cloth, but Mai took it first.
While she artfully arranged her hood around her hair-tails, Aang said goodbye to his animals, and then the group got on with their infiltration.

As they walked through the forest, Mai said, "I've actually been here before. My family stopped at this island on our way to the South Pole, but I didn't see much. We had a fish dinner with the commander in his personal residence, and there was some kind of talk of local trouble, but it was all very boring."

"Trouble?" Aang said. "Like spirits and ghosts trouble, or high taxes trouble?"

Memories her breath being torn out of her lungs through her mouth flashed through Mai's mind, but she pushed the thoughts away. "Eh, probably pickpockets. I think I've heard that lots of colonies with direct Fire Nation oversight have problems with pickpockets."

Sokka hopped down from an outcropping and came to a rambling trot beside Mai. "You know why that is, right?"

"What?"

"Why all those places have problems with thieves?"

"Bloody-minded hatred for the Fire Nation?"

"Oh, well, sure. Partially. But people also have to be really frustrated with the lives the Fire Nation makes them lead. The military comes in, forces everyone into 'manageable' settlements, designates what jobs are available based on what the colony is supposed to produce, and won't even let people have their culture to help them get by. Combine that with the low wages- if they even get paid in money, which I wasn't- and people want to strike back in a way that will improve their own lives, hence petty crime."

Mai snorted. "Because uprisings are too much trouble?"

"Because uprisings are too fatal." Sokka gave her a raised eyebrow so sharp, it might have come from her own face. "People don't like dying, if they can help it. Usually."

Well, that point at least was fairly sensible. Mai would have been content to let the conversation drop there, but Aang scampered ahead a few steps and turned around so that he was walking backwards and looking directly at her. "I visited the Fire Nation a few times, a hundred years ago. Sounds like the leaders now are trying to do something similar to the Vassal Islands."

Mai had to think for a moment before she remembered the term. "That thing Sozin's father did?"

"Yup! My friend Kuzon explained to me that after the civil wars, the people on the Outer Islands were given a chance for peace by becoming vassals to the Capital. The people and the Fire Lord didn't really trust each other, so the agreement was a way to connect them and make them trade partners, uniting all the islands under the Fire Lord's name. There weren't any punishments for the general uprisings, just a chance to make the whole nation a better place."

Mai vaguely recalled the story, but the account she knew was more about how the Fire Lord had quelled the uprisings with a show of strength and the Outer Islands submitted to his power, becoming the Vassals. It had inspired Sozin in his plan for the rest of the world, or something like that. "So why isn't that working for the colonies? They get the jobs, and the chance to produce something for the Fire Nation that makes them important."

Aang shrugged. "Well, no one asked the Earth Kingdom and Water Tribes if they wanted to do that,
right? And from what Sokka's saying, the deal being forced on them isn't fair. During my visits I saw that the people on the Vassal Islands were pretty comfortable. They got a fair trade for what they produced. You can't just expect it to work because this system looks kind of like the old one."

Beside Mai, Sokka nodded. "Yeah, the shape is kind of the same, but the details are completely different, not to mention kind of evil. And then there's what Avatar Roku told you about everything else."

Mai ignored him. "I'm not a You."

Aang blinked, and then made a quick convulsion that ended with him grabbing his shirt. What was that about? Rather than commenting on it, though, Aang spun around to look where he was going again and said, "What do you mean?"

"You said 'you can't expect it to work,' about the new Vassal system, but I never said I expected it."

"Oh, yeah, I meant 'you' like... you know, people. You're obviously on the right side, helping save us from the Fire Nation." Aang turned again to give her a quick thumb's up. "You're our friend!"

"Okay." Mai let things go at that. It wasn't that she was against what the Fire Nation was doing—obviously, she was one of the most loyal servants it had, both by bringing down the Avatar and aiding in the rise of the best faction of the Royal family—but she didn't theoretically have a problem with loosening up some rules if they really were causing crime. And if Prince Ozai wasn't smart enough to see that when he became Fire Lord, then surely Azula would figure it out for him. The Earth Kingdom and Water Tribes were too backward to govern themselves, but Mai was on the side of the people who wanted to do it smartly. And whatever the ghost of Aang's Avatar predecessor claimed, the platinum mining was probably proof that they wanted to fix that problem, so they couldn't be causing it. It was only logical. "Is that the village wall?" Sure enough, as they emerged from the tree line, the stripped and planted logs of the defensive wall became visible. The tops of the logs were carved into points, but they didn't seem particularly sharp. "So, up and over, huh? Please no tornados this time."

Aang grinned. "Then all you have to do is rest in my arms!" His grin abruptly faltered, and his face went bright red. "I mean, you know, I can carry you. You and Sokka. Both. One at a time, I mean."

Mai sighed. "Maybe the tornado would be faster."

It was the most disappointing interrogation of Zhao's entire career, made all the worse by the fact that he was getting all the information he wanted. "What do you mean that you take all responsibility?"

Sitting in a rusty chair at the center of the cramped little room, Warrant Officer Lee's face was as blank as an empty sky. "I do, sir. Now that you describe the incident, I realize I miscoded the whole transmission and attached the wrong headers. The request for emergency supplies was completely erroneous, and entirely my fault. I was not paying sufficient attention."

Zhao ground his teeth together, trying to decide how to handle this. It was just like his attempts to interrogate the Airbender, but in this case, he didn't even have the luxury of a theory to confirm or disprove. He turned to look where Yon Rha was leaning against the door, but the other commander simply shrugged. Looking back to Lee, he said, "If that's true, then you're guilty of gross incompetence. You'll be forced to defend your career in an Agni Kai, which might result in your death. If you survive and lose, you'll be dishonorably discharged. If you decline the Agni Kai, you'll be branded and dishonorably discharged. If by some strange contrivance you actually win the duel and survive, you'll be transferred to the worst hole in the entire world, and given tasks that will be
designed to result in your death. No matter what happens, you will be miserable for the rest of your days."

Lee's face didn't move, and he nodded as if told what the weather was like outside. "I understand, Commander."

This was ridiculous! Zhao refused to accept that a mere accident of transcription resulted in an order that was perfectly constructed to appear legitimate, and played such a large and beneficial role in the Avatar's escape. There was no doubt that this man was hiding something.

Well, if interrogations wouldn't work, there were other options. "Commander Yon Rha, I believe you mentioned that you had active rebels on this island?"

"Every colony has some rebel activity, but I told you, I have a handle on it. It's a small group, and I have an informant planted there. I would have known if they had any interest in the Fire Nation's telegraph network, never mind my communications center."

"Well, there's certainly nothing guaranteeing that just one group of rebels here, now is there? I recommend adding a full regime of physical coercion to the interrogation to confirm that Warrant Officer Lee hasn't betrayed you. I trust you have experts available? I've no objection to doing it myself, but having to coordinate the search for the Avatar in this region, my time is limited."

Yon Rha shrugged again. "If you want him tortured, then we'll torture him."

"Good." Zhao turned to look once again at Lee, but even that failed to get a reaction from the man. "Don't hold back. I don't care if he dies." He spun on his heel and marched out of the interrogation room, Yon Rha falling into step behind him.

As they walked, the other commander said, "Did you mean that about killing him, or were you just trying to provoke the moron?"

"No, I mean it. His claim is ridiculous, and if he is a traitor, then we'll have to kill him either way."

"It was unnerving, though, that rebel forces could have turned a skilled soldier so thoroughly. Such loyalty was unheard of. But then again, maybe not. "Commander, could I ask one more favor of your staff?"

"Get to the point, Zhao."

"I'd like a message sent back to the homeland. I want Warrant Officer Lee's family investigated."

"Why? I doubt foreign rebels have much influence over civilians back in the Fire Nation, and there's nothing special about Lee's family."

"Oh, I'm sure." Zhao felt a grin spreading on his face as he considered the possibilities. "But a person doesn't have to be special to be useful as leverage."

After that comment about having Mai in his arms, Aang wanted to smack his head against the village wall, but Monk Gyatso had always said that wisdom could not be beaten into a mind, it had to be carefully planted.

At least there hadn't been any trouble getting Sokka and Mai over the wall. Aang had hopped up to the top, listened and watched to make sure there were no witnesses, and then summoned a wind that launched his friends up and over, with a supplementary gust to cushion their landing. With a pause only to adjust their disguises again, the three made their way into the village proper.
Of course, Aang had to be careful of his clothes. Mai's stuff was loose on him, but that was only the start of the problem. While she had been tying her hood and Sokka was admiring his cap in a reflection in a puddle, Aang had tried to say goodbye to Appa and Momo, but the lemur had been antsy, and kept grabbing for Aang's mouth as a sign of wanting food. Since leaving the Southern Air Temple, fruit had been scarce, and Aang had only been able to feed his new pet a few dried bits each day. Momo had been forced to catch bugs to round out his diet. No doubt he was hungry for something sweet again.

So Aang had whispered, "Okay, you can come and I'll get you a peach or something, but you have to hide and behave." And then he had made use of all the extra room in his shirt by letting Momo cling to his chest, just like the lemurs back home had clung to trees when sleeping.

So with a lemur hiding in his shirt and his arrows hidden with a head-wrap, Aang walked down the streets of Kyoshi Island's main village.

The people of Kyoshi Island mostly wore blue, like the Water Tribes, and their presence in the streets became like a flood as Aang and his friends approached the civilian docks. There was scattered red in the crowds, both civilians and armored police soldiers. The armor of the latter wasn't full-body like the soldiers at the South Pole, and the helmets even left their wearers' faces uncovered.

The crowd spread out a bit as Aang and company stepped into a plaza not far from the biggest docks. There were all kinds of merchants hawking raw and cooked seafood, carved trinkets, foreign fruits, clothes from the Fire Nation, practical goods, furniture made from local wood, toys from the Earth Kingdom, and everything else needed for a glorious day of bargaining.

Aang wasn't much of a shopper himself, but he loved the chance to haggle. "Hey, do you think we have time to look around a little before we check out the navy base? This place looks like a lot of fun."

Sokka scratched his chin. "On the one hand, I almost feel like any indulgence we take that isn't strictly part of our mission will be punished with disaster. I mean, we're in an occupied town, so lots of things can go wrong."

Aang heard Mai give a little snort and mutter, "Paranoid."

Sokka didn't seem to pick up on that, and looked around the market with eyes that reflected the sun. "On the other hand, I would like to get a few things as long we have the chance, but I don't have any money." He glanced over at Mai.

Her face was blank, but Aang caught her eyes shifting over to look at a stand that was selling soaps carved into all kinds of neat shapes. "We should probably check the base first, in case there's trouble. And since neither of you brought your own money, hanging out here for too long would maybe be a waste of time." Her eyes turned back to Aang, wide and a little pleading. She was looking for him to contradict her!

"Well," he said, "maybe if we talk to some people, we can learn things about the base that we can't get just by looking at it."

Sokka stood up even straighter. "That's true! Even if the navy personnel live on the base, they'd have to come out here on their off-duty hours, just to live a little. There are probably all kinds of useful intelligence waiting to be uncovered."

Mai was silent for a moment, and then nodded. "Okay, we'll look around. I'm buying some soap."
She was instantly on the move, but Aang quickly stepped to cut her off. "First, can I borrow some coins?"

"What for?"

"Some fruit—er, you know, some fresh food for dinner tonight. I'm getting tired of military rations, aren't you?"

"Ehhhh, okay, I guess you can have—"

Sokka suddenly stepped right between Aang and Mai. "Can I have some money, too?"

"What do you—"

"Supplies! We left most of the supplies on the ship with my Gran-Gran, and we could use some practical stuff."

"I don't have a lot—"

"Won't take a lot, I'm just getting some of the basics."

"How much will—"

"Oh, you know, not more than a couple of silverish pieces."

Aang hopped so that he could see Mai's face over Sokka's shoulder. "And I can help him haggle! I've visited bazaars all over the world, so I know how to talk those prices down!" He felt Momo shift position under his shirt, and ducked down so that Sokka would be blocking the view.

Mai sighed. "All right, just try to keep it low key. We're fugitives, remember? And—really—watch what you spend. I only have what I could steal from my parents, and I don't know when we're going to be able to get more." She produced a bag of coins from somewhere in her robes and tossed it to Sokka, then went on to the soap seller.

Sokka divided up the coins, and Aang immediately went over to the stand with all the fruit. He made sure his head-wrap was on right and smiled up at the old man running the place. "That, my boy, is an ash-banana from the Fire Nation. You have to boil them before you can eat them."

"How about something soft that can be eaten raw?"

"I have some white pears in fresh from the mainland."

"Ooh, how much?"

"Well, for a first time customer like yourself, I can do—hey, it's nabbing my juicy fruits!"

Aang looked down to find that Momo had poked out from the bottom of his shirt, and was grabbing whatever he could get his hands on and stuffing it in the folds of the cloth. "Um, I can pay for all this."

"How much have you stolen?" The old man was shuffling around the stand, to confront Aang directly. "Open your shirt! I won't be ripped off by you Fire Nation tourists!"

"No, it's okay, we'll round up, just don't—"
"Aang, what's going on?" Sokka stepped up from behind, a shopping bag in his hands. "If this is how you haggle, I'll do without your help, thanks."

"Sokka, I'm going to need some more coins."

"Off with the shirt! My melons are being hijacked!" Aang backed away as the old man grabbed for him, but bumped into Sokka, and then Momo made a break for it and took flight with his mouth full of cherries, and Aang tried to grab after the lemur, but the old man tugged at the shirt at the same time, and the next thing Aang knew, there was a tearing sound and he and a part of his disguise had parted ways.

Standing there in the market, the arrows on his back and arms exposed to the world, Aang really wished he had brought his glider. And had left his lemur back with his bison.

Mai was going to kill him.

There was a long moment where the entire marketplace came to a halt as eyes took in the ancient, honorable tattoos, and the meaning registered in minds. Then, like a single organism spread across multiple bodies, all the Fire Nation soldiers in the plaza stepped forward, emerging from the crowd to form a loose circle around Aang and Sokka and taking tonfa clubs in hand.

"It's the Avatar!"

Sokka shifted position, and Aang heard the sound of a knife being drawn from its sheath.

Then a blood-red skull sailed out of nowhere to smack one of the soldiers right in the face. The man went down like a sack of ash-bananas, and Aang followed the macabre projectile's path back to the source to find Mai standing in front the soap stand, a carved soap-skull in each hand. Behind her, the salesman squeaked and crawled beneath his booth.

As the shopping crowd receded from the scene like waves from the shore, some of the soldiers charged at Mai, but novelty soaps traveling at hurricane speeds stopped them in their tracks with sounds of meaty impact. The other soldiers closed in, and Aang shoved Sokka- knives, shopping bag, and all- out of the way as he also took a spinning sidestep. Tonfa attacks came in at him while Aang ducked and bobbed through a circle-walking maneuver, and when he saw one of the soldiers shifting his attention to Sokka- who was holding up one of his knives defensively as he clutched his shopping bag- Aang let loose with an Air Blast sent both the soldier and Sokka flying in opposite directions.

Even if he had brought his glider, Aang couldn't abandon Sokka to this fight. Mai was a true warrior, and would be all right, but Sokka had no training, and these were real soldiers used to keeping the peace on a populated island. It would be no contest.

Aang ducked one more swinging club, then reversed his dodge into a forward step and brought both his hands up to smack the outsides up against the chestplate of the soldier. The impact summoned an explosion of air that sent the man crashing into the fruit stand where all the trouble had started.

When Aang looked around again, he realized that he had lost track of Sokka, and more soldiers were streaming into the plaza.

Across the plaza, Sokka lunged forward to stab with his knives at the soldier he had chosen to challenge, but his aim was off, and the blades impacted harmlessly against the small chestplate. The man swung his tonfa weapon and connected with Sokka's side, but luckily it smacked against the shopping bag hanging from his shoulder. Instead of breaking a rib, it was only enough of an
impact to bring tears to his eyes and send him sailing into a stack of furs piled up on one of the market's abandoned tables. The thing held for precisely half a second before it crumpled to pieces beneath Sokka and deposited him on the plaza's dirt ground.

This was what happened when he tried to be a true warrior.

A shadow rose up to block the sun, and Sokka looked to find the soldier bringing his tonfa down in an arc aimed right for Sokka's head-

Another shadow cut across the club's path, a fast-moving human figure that grabbed the soldier's outstretched arm and twisted in some way that was made the two shadows merge. The next thing Sokka knew, the soldier was flying through the air above him to go crashing into a barrel of supposedly fresh fish. Sokka looked back at the rescuing shadow, purposefully not hoping that this might be a good thing because hoping was just asking for trouble, and grabbed his knives. The figure shifted so that it was no longer backlit by the sun, and the shadowy figure resolved into-

-a girl?

Yes, it was a girl, wearing the same shade of blue (a warrior girl in blue?!?) as everyone else in the market, but she was obviously no idle shopper. She was lean and tough, tensed in a fighting stance that loudly told the world to back the slush off. Sokka looked to her face, and gasped at the inhuman whiteness unto which blood-red lines of fierce expression had been drawn. He couldn't tear his eyes off that face as she reached down, grabbed him by his shirt, and yanked him back up to a standing position. "Come on," she said in a clear, steady voice, "we have to get you out of here."

Sokka replied, "Huh?"

The girl ignored him, turned to the wider brawl where Aang was blasting soldiers with hurricanes and Mai was throwing whatever she could get her hands on, and let out a shrill whistle. Sokka caught a quick blur of motion that moved in a direct line down from the sky into the center of the brawl, and he had only a moment to register the item as an arrow before it exploded into a world of white smoke.

Sokka's vision was completely obscured, so he experienced the next part solely as a series of yanks on his shirt carrying him in a stumbling, twisting path through the marketplace that had his shopping bag bouncing painfully against his chest. The girl with the painted face (it had to be paint, it would be too much to deal with spirit monsters twice this month) didn't seem at all inconvenienced by having to drag Sokka along, her auburn hair bouncing as she ran.

When she finally came to a stop beside a stack of crates and an abandoned hay cart, the strength in her arms was enough to decelerate Sokka so that he didn't so much as bump into her. "Down here," was all she said as she crouched and began brushing sandy dirt from the marketplace ground. Sokka was about to ask her if she planned on digging her way to safety when he noticed the trap door that was being uncovered, a crude wooden affair with a metal lifting ring bolted to the center. The painted girl flung the door open, and pointed at the ladder within extending down into a dark shaft. "You're not afraid of caves, are you?"

Even if he was, he couldn't let a challenge like that go, not after his pathetic showing in that fight.

The climb down was no fun with his bruised side, but Sokka managed it without dropping his shopping back or falling. He found himself in a small room of some kind, the walls formed from old planks of wood hammered together to hold back the sand and dirt. Still, they couldn't keep the moisture out, and the place had a decidedly funky smell to it. Sokka was almost glad that the only illumination was the sunlight that made it down the shaft, because he did not want to see what was
growing in the corners down here.

He heard the painted girl hop off the ladder behind him, and he turned to face her. "What about my friends?"

Her facepaint practically glowed in the low light. "They're coming right now." She nodded at the top of the ladder, and sure enough, Mai was climbing down, with another painted girl behind her. Once those two reached the bottom, Aang (still missing his shirt, but clutching that ungrateful flying rat Momo) dropped down through the shaft, completely ignoring the ladder. Another face-paint girl followed, and when she got off the ladder, the one who had rescued Sokka said, "What about our sniper?"

"Right behind me, chief." Sure enough, a young man with a conical hat on his head and a longbow on his back began coming down the ladder, and when he was safely in the room, the painted girl who had spoken swung her hands above her head. In time with her motion, the top of the shaft closed off by itself, and before the light completely disappeared, Sokka caught a glimpse of the dirt and sand of the marketplace's ground moving of its own accord to cover the opening. Huh. Earthbender.

In the pitch darkness, there was only silence until Mai's voice echoed through the little underground room: "I remember now: the problems on this island were small uprisings by warriors with painted faces. I don't know how I confused that with pickpockets."

There was the sound of sparkrocks being struck together, and then a flame lit up to chase away the darkness. The painted girl who had rescued Sokka was holding up a candle, her eyes shining in its light. "Avatar, it is our honor to assist you. I am Suki, the tall girl is Chijin, the Earthbender is Sabure, and our sniper calls himself Longshot. Welcome to Kyoshi Island, but I'm sorry you couldn't have had an easier homecoming."

The kid grinned. "Pleased to meet you all! And thanks for rescuing us. I'm Aang, he's Sokka, and she's-"

"Hey," Mai interrupted. "No names until we know we can trust these people. Just because they don't want the Fire Nation to kill us doesn't mean they're friends."

Suki smirked in the candlelight. "Lady Caldera Yu Mai, your reputation precedes you. And by that, I mean I've seen your Wanted poster."

Sokka couldn't help but chuckle.

Aang laughed, too, as he petted Momo. "Good one!"

Suki let the mirth continue for a moment, and then she dipped her head to Mai. "Seriously, though, you have our thanks for returning the Avatar to the world. Just the rumors of his return have brought hope to Kyoshi Island after many years."

Mai didn't say anything, and Sokka decided to rescue her from what must have been an awkward moment. "This is a smuggler's hideout, right? It must let out somewhere besides the plaza."

Suki smiled. "Good guess! The sandy soil made it tough, but some enterprising Earthbender smugglers dug tunnels to avoid the Kyoshi Warriors who used to police this island." She turned and held her candle out to illuminate the wall behind her. Sokka could see now that there was another hatch set into it. "We'll take the tunnel here to one of our safe houses. There's track laid down for a cart, but it's all rusted, so we'll have to walk. As you can probably guess, it didn't quite work out for
the smugglers, but the tunnels remained in the secret lore of the Kyoshi Warriors."

Aang gasped. "That's where I recognize the face paint! You're wearing it just like Avatar Kyoshi!"

"So, wait," Sokka said, "that means you're these 'Kyoshi Warriors'? What *are* Kyoshi Warriors?"

"Guardians of this island, inspired by Avatar Kyoshi." Suki shook her head. "We wear their faces, but there haven't been any for a generation. The paint hides our identities from the Fire Nation, and serves as a symbol to the people of Kyoshi Island. Or, at least, that's the idea. I'd be happy to explain more, but we should get moving. The Fire Nation will be looking all over for you, but we have a safehouse where you can rest comfortably." She turned and yanked open the hatch, revealing the smuggler's tunnel in all its dark, dank, dusty, spider-fly-webby glory.

As the group got moving, Sokka heard Mai mutter, "Great, more dust, and I didn't even get to buy my soap."

Yon Rha shook his head at the sight of the wrecked marketplace. "This is exactly the kind of trouble I didn't want."

Zhao had to keep from rolling his eyes. Some things were just not becoming of an officer of the Fire Navy, no matter how stupid the provocation. "Don't you see what an opportunity this is?"

"The opportunity, Commander, would have been if my soldiers could have *caught* the Avatar." Yon Rha looked over to where a group of merchants were haranguing one of the squad commanders about the ruminations they thought they deserved for their wrecked merchandise. "Now, we'll have to search the whole town- probably the whole *island* before we're done- and disrupt all the sea traffic with a blockade. This will be expensive."

Now, Zhao allowed himself a smirk. Propriety was one thing, but no proper officer would pass up a chance to look good. "On the contrary, Commander, the situation couldn't be cheaper or easier. If your soldiers could have captured the Avatar here, yes, that would have been perfect, but the reports implicated your local rebels in his escape."

"So?"

"So, he came to this island for a reason, and he's going to stay until he gets what he wants. All you have to do is keep the pressure on, put on a little show of force to scare him from operating openly, and he'll have to rely on the rebels for as long as he's here. And you mentioned before that you had an informant in the rebels- do I really need to spell out how that can be exploited to guide the Avatar right into our hands?"

Yon Rha's frown wasn't as deep as usual, but he was still clearly skeptical. "I would be taking a big risk, all based on your suppositions."

Zhao waved the notion away. "The risk can be all mine, since the reward will be for me as well. After all, I have jurisdiction in the search for the Avatar, so you *naturally* had to defer to my command. That should be more than enough insulation for you, yes?"

Not only could Zhao's destiny not be denied, it was practically eager to be fulfilled, and he would do whatever it took to prove worthy.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
The Rebels of Kyoshi

Chapter Summary

Meet the rebels of Kyoshi, but are they what they seem?

The Rebels of Kyoshi

"We're trying to find the last Waterbender of the Southern Water Tribe, my sister." Sokka said, to the gasps of his audience. "But our story begins a hundred years ago, as Avatar Aang made his way to the South Pole..."

The face-paint people all leaned forward with interest, but Mai just rolled her eyes and began tuning the proceedings out. It wasn't easy, because interesting sights were at a minimum in this supposed 'safehouse.' It was really just an undocumented basement below a lumber warehouse, and the only good thing about it was that it wasn't a smelly fish warehouse, an equally likely option given Kyoshi Island's trade practices. There was just enough space for three people to survive a single day without getting on each other's nerves, and so of course Suki the Chief Face-Paint Girl had brought her whole rebel posse to cram in for an Avatar meet'n'greet.

Reclining on a long box that had been repurposed as the world's most uncomfortable couch with Momo hiding behind her from all the strange people, Mai idly looked over the assembly. Aang stood at the front beside Sokka, and was visibly thrilled at the attention and ready to start an official fanclub. Sokka was holding forth about their mighty quest to save the world and puffing up his chest like a robinjay in mating season. The rebel women were happily giving him their attention, and Mai took a brief moment to examine the horrible colors of their facepaint. Most of them had decorated their visages like Avatar Kyoshi, even the men, while a minority favored an alternate form of face-painting done in grays and blacks, evoking what one man had said was, "The unagi who lives in the ocean and eats elephant koi." Because it wasn't bad enough that they were rebels, it was apparently mandatory that they look ugly, too.

The only one without paint on his face was the sniper, 'Longshot.' Mai decided that he was her favorite of the bunch.

"And so we need to get into the Fire Navy's prisoner processing center right here on this island," Sokka was finishing. "They have to have some kind of records somewhere, and we can use them to find my sister."

Longshot crossed his arms tightly over his chest while everyone else chattered.

It was Suki who eventually stepped forward to voice the consensus. "That's going to be tough. Security is really tight around the base, and if these records go back years, then it's not going to be a quick search."

Mai stretched on her couch-box. "We can probably thank your team here for the high security. Whatever you've been doing, you've probably kept the base on some level of constant alert." She saw Sokka grimace at that, but didn't care enough to find out why.

Suki, for her part, just shrugged. "Probably, but it's a prison and processing center for all the captives
taken in the Southern Seas. I doubt things would be lax even if everyone here had spent out whole
lives bowing to statues of Fire Lord Azulon. Blame all the local piracy, too."

"Pirates?" Aang's expression visibly brightened. "Maybe we can recruit some to help us! We can
form a pirate army and capture the base!"

Everyone was silent for a moment, and then Longshot gave a loud snicker-snort.

Suki smiled. "Our sniper is right, that's probably not our most likely plan. Still, the idea of an attack
isn't a bad idea. Maybe we can cause some trouble on the other side of the village, and when the
police and soldiers turn their attention to us, a small team can sneak into the base."

"Sneak," Mai repeated. Ashes, that woman's painted face was so bright and ugly. "Yes, an
installation of the most advanced naval force in the entire world is going to completely empty itself
over a small rebel uprising, allowing a bunch of obvious infiltrators to make their way into one of the
administrative buildings simply by tiptoeing from shadow to shadow." Realizing that everyone was
glaring at her, she added, "Sarcasm is a viable and effective method of criticism. You all got my
point, didn't you?"

Everyone's painted faces ranged from annoyed to outright angry, except for Longshot (who showed
no expression whatsoever) and Suki (whose look seemed more evaluating than anything, just like
Azula's whenever Mai had talked back to her).

To Mai's surprise, Sokka then said, "She's right; we're going to need something better. Back at the
South Pole, I was able to do my share of sneaking, but even just from my few minutes of running
around the marketplace here, I can tell the Fire Nation is taking things a lot more seriously. Let's not
rule out a distraction of some kind, but our plans need to detail the whole path to the records room
and back out again, or we're going to wind up learning the hard way how prisoners are processed
here."

NO, that wouldn't do. Mai needed the Avatar to be captured by Zuko, not whoever the local
overlord was. (Her family had taken dinner with the guy on their way down to the South Pole, but it
was such a boring experience that Mai hadn't paid much attention.) Moreover, if she failed Azula,
there was a good chance that she would be left to rot in the Fire Nation's prison system, and even her
uncle's influence as a High Warden probably wouldn't help her.

Suki stepped over and leaned against Mai's box-couch. "It sounds like we need some time to think
and work out all the details, and for that, we'll need to get you out of the village. The longer you stay
here, the better the chance that Commander Yon Rha's forces will notice something going on. Don't
worry; we have someplace comfortable in the forest. Right, Sabure?"

The Earthbender rebel grinned. Mai wanted to know the joke, but didn't want to risk appearing
interested.

Suki continued, "And while we plan, the other rebels can assemble the provisions you couldn't get at
the marketplace earlier. Speaking of which, I can personally offer some aikido lessons to anyone in
need of more fighting skills." She looked over at Sokka, who blushed in return.

Mai raised her hand. "I'll take some lessons, too. Sounds like it's going to be a long time without
something to do."

Suki nodded, and turned to one of the men with the unagi facepaint. "Ryoushi, go get some cloaks
for our guests so that we can move in public. Everyone else, time to start leaving. Remember, only
one or two at a time, and wash off your paint first. Nagori, that goes double for you. I don't want a
repeat of the Noodle Stand Incident."

Aang said, "Where are we going?"

Suki smiled. "The birthplace of our legacy, and the start of yours on this island."

At the stroke of midnight, the report came in that Yon Rha's informant had observed the Avatar and was ready to report on any plans made with the rebels.

Zhao was in Yon Rha's personal parlor, having a late night lychee-chili agrave, and happily knocked back the last of the spicy drink at the news. "See? Now all we need to do is set a nice little trap, and the Avatar will be mine."

Yon Rha still sipped at his own glass. "Yours, thanks to all my resources. And once you have the Avatar, I better not have to clean up any mess."

"On the contrary, I'll be more than happy to present the entire Avatar Conspiracy to the Fire Lord." Zhao grinned, and sat up out of his chair to walk over to the parlor's balcony. With the warmth of spring finally reaching the island, its doors were left open, and Zhao could see out over the Navy base to the fishing village sprawling out along the coast. "Of course, your informant's cover will probably be ruined, but I'm sure some compensation for your inconvenience can be arranged." He looked back at Yon Rha, and saw the man give a nod before finishing his own drink.

Then there was a knock on the door, and an aide came in with hurried steps. "Sirs, there is a medical emergency in the prison!"

Zhao looked over at Yon Rha, wondering if he should be concerned, but the other commander didn't even stand up as he said, "Which prisoner?"

"The traitor, Warrant Officer Lee, sir. He used his clothes to- to hang himself."

Zhao couldn't help but give a snicker. "Well, that was quick. Just one afternoon of the full interrogation regime and he cracked completely. It would have been nice if we could have gotten answers from him, first, but he probably knew to take his own life before he got to that point."

Yon Rha shrugged, and looked back at the aide. "Is he dead yet?"

"There is no breathing. The healers are trying to revive him."

"Well, Zhao, I hope your other lead pans out, because it sounds like this one is finished."

"Oh, I'm sure Lee's family will be able to tell us something useful." Zhao looked back out over the open balcony. "And if not, I've already identified and removed the traitor, and the rest of the conspiracy will still be an important prize. Either way, I can make it look good in my final report."

So late it was almost morning, Aang lowered his hands and let his winds fade away, leaving everyone to drop softly to the ground right outside the village's protective wall, not far from where he and his friends had entered earlier that day. While Mai straightened her hair and Sokka summoned Momo with a wave, Suki laughed and said, "That was amazing! I just flew on the winds!"

"If you think that's fun, I'd love to let you ride on Appa some time." Aang glanced over at her and smiled. Everyone was wearing concealing cloaks, and Suki herself looked quite different in a green cape and no facepaints, bright-eyed but plain enough that she would be easy to forget. That was
probably what made her such a good secret rebel warrior. "If you give him an apple to eat, he'll be your friend for life."

"I'd love that. But for now, we need to get going." Suki exhaled, and unclipped a small lamp from her belt that she lit with a pair of sparkrocks. She started the march into the forest, and Aang hopped up to walk right behind her, eager to see what this 'legacy' was that she had mentioned. As they walked under the trees in the night, Suki leaned over and said in a low voice, "Avatar Aang-"

"You can just call me Aang. It's fine."

"-Aang, how sure are you about your companions? Sokka and Mai?"

Aang blinked. What was that supposed to mean? "They're good people. If it wasn't for them, I'd probably still be a prisoner of the Fire Nation in the South Pole."

"I know, I heard Sokka's story. It's just... people aren't always up front about their motivations. Like how do you know that Sokka really has a sister, and isn't looking to use you in some other way?"

Aang couldn't help but recoil at the thought. "No, I met Sokka's Gran-Gran, and you could see the way she talked about it that she was really worried for her granddaughter. It was like the thought of it hurt her. And Sokka likes to pretend he's okay, but he's really torn up, too. We monks can tell these kinds of things."

Suki gave him a side-eyed glance. "And what about Lady Caldera Yu Mai back there? Little Miss Attitude?"

"Hey, that's something I've been wondering," Aang said quickly, not wanting to talk about Mai's latest cranky mood. "What is that title you keep calling her? I know the central district of the Fire Nation's Capital City is called the Caldera, but when you say it like that, it sounds like a clan name."

"You don't know?" Suki stopped, looked around in the light of her lamp, and adjusted her path a few degrees to the left. A little ways behind them, Sokka and Mai continued to follow, chatting about something related to cooked eel. "The Fire Nation did away with their clan loyalties. Now, everyone owes allegiance to their residence and the governors who lord over them, who in turn of course pledge loyalty to the Fire Lord. The most prestigious of all the new 'clans' is the capital city. I've heard that anyone from the Caldera gets treated like royalty in any of the colonies. Your friend Mai is very well connected."

Aang considered that. It wasn't anything he didn't already suspect, given what he saw of Mai's father in the South Pole and their family's position there. And then there was her other title, the 'Weapon of the Fire Nation' thing that Aang was still vague on. "Well, Mai left all of that behind to help me. I don't think she likes what the Fire Nation has been doing. Yeah, she's kind of ignorant about some things, but so am I, and I know I want to fix the world. She does, too. She's pretty great. You should see her with her throwing knives!" Suki looked over at him, and Aang realized he was babbling. "Sorry, you get the idea."

Suki turned her gaze back to the path. "Just be careful. My family has long experience with the Fire Nation, and even the best of them can have odd ideas about honor. Expect her to surprise you, and not in a good way. " She sighed, and when she spoke again, her voice was so soft that Aang could barely hear it. "We have to watch who we trust in our war against the Fire Nation, and that includes my own rebels. We may look like a unified force, but we've had a string of bad luck lately, too much for it to be a coincidence. Even if you weren't staying long, I'd have moved you out of that warehouse tonight anyway. I think I have an informant in my team."
Aang didn't know what to say to that. He looked up at Suki, and found her gazing back at him with hard eyes. "You seem like a nice boy, Av- Aang. But someone in as dangerous a situation as you can't be nice all the time. Please, be careful." She looked forward, and then said louder, "We're here."

Aang looked forward again, pushing all that stuff about trust out of his mind, and couldn't see what Suki was talking about. "These are just more trees."

Suki smirked, and called out, "Sabure, are you here?"

From behind one of the pine trees, the Earthbender rebel girl stepped out and waved. Without her facepaint, Aang wouldn't have recognized her at all if Suki hadn't said her name. Sabure straightened her body, and then took a wide horse-stance. She stuck her arms out and formed tight fists with her hands, and then swung her arms together diagonally up into the air. Aang made sure to memorize the movements, since he'd have to learning Earthbending someday, and looked around eagerly for the results.

The ground shook, and a stone that had been barely peeking out of the ground rose up. It turned out to be big, as tall as Appa and almost as wide, and Aang was impressed by the display of Bending power until he realized that the rock was sliding on an existing track. Peering past the rock in the waning light, he saw a ramp leading underground.

Suki marched right down the ramp without hesitation, and the rest followed.

It was just a short walk, but when they reached the bottom, Aang was once again impressed, this time with no take-backsies. It was a full stone cavern, brightly lit by crystal lanterns from the Earth Kingdom, and at the center of the wide space was a building, a real building, with windows and a slanted roof and even a raised foundation to avoid flooding.

"Wow, what's this doing here?"

Suki bowed at the waist. "This, Avatar Aang, is the humble dojo you established in your past life as Kyoshi, the place where your chosen girls trained to protect the people of the island."

Sokka stepped over and scratched his ponytail. "Kyoshi made an underground dojo for girls? Why?"

"It wasn't always here. It used to be closer to the village, but when the last of the Kyoshi Warriors were disbanded, it was abandoned. Eventually the Fire Nation ordered it torn down, but our people disassembled it carefully, and smuggled the pieces to safety. Sabure's mother was an Earthbender, too, and she was part of the group that put it back together down here. Only the descendants of the Kyoshi Warriors know its location, even among the other rebels, so you'll definitely be safe here." She grinned in the lamplight. "And we've stocked it up with all the Kyoshi Warrior relics we could get our hands on, so it's a real functioning dojo. If you want to learn aikido, you're going to have to get used to eating those mats inside."

Sokka gulped, and Aang laughed.

Thus their stay on Kyoshi Island took an annoying permanent status, and Mai was depressed to find that it didn't even come with access to a civilized bathroom. A bucket was left next to the weird underground dojo for emergencies during the night while the fake boulder-entrance was closed, and when the morning came, the Earthbender girl Sabure would come along to open up access to the surface and the bathroom-bushes.

Of course, that didn't distract Mai from the way the situation mirrored being held prisoner. Suki,
Sabure, or Longshot were always around to watch over them when they weren’t locked in the dojo. Sure, in theory, they could leave at any time, but it was convenient how no one but Mai wanted to.

There were some perks, though. On the third day of their stay, Sabure brought Mai some soap that smelled of milk and honey. As she gave an approving sniff to the new bar, Mai said, "So, what are the chances of getting a bath here in the dojo? Heated? I can pay." She hadn't been able to wash since landing on the island.

Sabure blinked. "Wow, they heat baths in the Fire Nation?"

Mai sighed. "So cold water it is. Is there a tub I can use?"

"Um, not that I know of." Sabure tapped her chin. "Yeah, arranging for one to be carried out of town would take a while. It's easier for me to just walk you over to one of the southern bays."

It was a sad reflection of Mai's existence that she was getting used to washing in wild water. She had even learned to use a handful of sand as a makeshift scrubber. "Why the south? That's a long walk."

"Well, the unagi swims in the northern waters." Sabure leaned forward. "See, legends say that Avatar Kyoshi created the island when she broke off her village's peninsula from the Earth Kingdom mainland in order to save it from Chin the Conqueror!"

Mai had heard of Chin the Conqueror- he was some kind of warlord a few centuries ago who had tried to unite the chaotic Earth Kingdom and was murdered by an Avatar for his trouble- but didn't quite see the connection. "So she put the unagi in the ocean as a guard pet or something?"

"Kind of!" Sabure's grin grew. "Chin refused to retreat when his army did, so when the island broke off, he fell into the ocean and died. But the Avatar can take control of the reincarnation cycle, so Kyoshi made sure he would be reborn as an eel on the north side of the island. His arrogance and anger made him grow until he became a giant sea monster, the unagi. So, yeah, we use the beaches on the south side. Come on, it's not that long a walk, and I think the water might be a little warm today with all the sun we’ve been getting!"

Mai sighed again. Some 'perks' were perkier than others.

One of the better ones came from Longshot. While Sokka wrestled with Suki and Aang played with facepaints, the sniper took Mai out into the forest and showed her how to shoot with a longbow. He brought her to a little valley hidden within the trees, at the end of which a stuffed scare-lizard-crow stood watch, made in the shape of an armored Firebender soldier with a finger-painting of the skull-like faceplate on the head. Longshot didn't speak (Mai would have said this was ideal behavior in a man, but it proved to be a very frustrating quirk in a teacher) but simply demonstrated the form and function of his craft. He would then hand Mai the longbow and guide her in duplicating his actions.

The first time, she missed.

That was all the impetuous she needed to obsess on the matter.

After a week of practice and only marginal improvement, Mai finally began to wonder what a sniper of Longshot's caliber was doing on Kyoshi Island. She broached the matter to Sabure during one of their daily bathing trips to the southern coast.

"Oh, Longshot was born here," Sabure said as they walked, "but he didn't come back until after the war ended."

"You're telling me he left as child, and he came back as a mute emotionally-stunted death machine
on legs? I've read picture stories like that."

Sabure stopped and stared. "We try to phrase it nicer than that." She shook her head and resumed walking. "And he does talk, sometimes. Rarely. Over time, we got the story. His family left the island to get away from the Fire Nation, did it all legal even with papers and stuff. But then the war... did what the war does, and Longshot was on his own. Once there was no more fighting to be done over on the mainland, he came back here, to do what he could."

"And he conveyed all that with a word here and there, and some significant eye contact?"

Sabure sighed, and Mai hid a smile. Stick her out in the middle of the boring woods with no heated baths, will they?

"Wow! I can see the whole island from up here!"

Aang looked back over his shoulder, and saw Suki leaning out over Appa's saddle so far she was at risk of tipping right over. He didn't stop her, though, because he liked that kind of enthusiasm, and if she actually fell, he could always direct Appa to swoop down and catch her. (That was how Aang had learned how far was too far in these saddles.) "Be sure to tell Appa how much you're enjoying yourself!"

Suki laughed and reached a hand down to pat the bison's furry bulk. "Thanks, boy! I'm really glad your kind is back in the world." Appa roared a friendly response, but Aang had to turn away then, because he didn't want to risk Suki seeing the expression on his face. They flew around for a little while after that, but eventually, Suki let out a heavy breath. "Okay, I guess we should get to our observations. Hold Appa steady and I'll grab the telescope."

Aang complied, tugging the reins to convey the request, and Appa's motion slowed to a stop. Just like when Aang had first come to Kyoshi Island, he was hovering over it with an ally spying for the greater good. While Suki observed, Aang left his position on Appa's head and walked back to the saddle. He retrieved a brush and paper from the supply storage, spread it out beside Suki, and waited. Once she was finished with her observations, she put the telescope down and took the brush to begin drawing. As Aang watched, a sketch of the Fire Navy's base- a detailed layout of its walls and buildings- took shape.

"It's strange," Suki said as she sketched, "that this is the first time I've seen the inside of that base. It's been there my whole life, and I've looked at the outside more times than I can remember, but this is a whole new perspective."

"Well, you've never been this high up before. It puts a new perspective on everything."

Suki looked up and gave him a brief smile before turning back to her work. The sketch was a necessary part of their planning for breaking into that base. Sokka said that if they knew where they were going, knew how the soldiers moved around in the base, they would have a better chance of getting in and out safely, and would be prepared in case something went wrong. Sokka was really taking the whole thing seriously, and Aang didn't have to wonder why; this could be Sokka's only chance to really find out what happened to his sister.

As Suki worked, Aang briefly wondered about the purchase Sokka had made back in the marketplace on that fire day on Kyoshi Island, before Momo had ruined things. Sokka was keeping it wrapped in the bag, and said it was something personal he'd need for bringing his sister back home. Aang couldn't help but be curious, but resolved to respect Sokka's privacy.
Of course, there were other curiosities he could satisfy. "So, Suki, where in the village do you live?"

She didn't even look up. "Oh, I don't have a home. I just stay here and there, depending on what needs my attention."

"What about your family?"

Suki paused in her sketching, and finally met Aang's eyes. "They're no worry. My grandmother was a Kyoshi Warrior who couldn't stand to see the Fire Nation ruling her home. My parents had an accident because a drunk shipwright ripped them off on repairs to their fishing boat. And my big sister left the island a while ago." She gave a small smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I appreciate your showing an interest, but I'd like to finish the sketch." She looked back down.

Aang stayed quiet for a while, watching her draw a hexagonal security wall around the base layout, but finally felt compelled to say, "I'm sorry I wasn't here to make a better world."

Suki looked back up, and reached her free hand out pat his shoulder. "You're here now. Let's focus on that."

Yon Rha had provided Zhao an office to make his own for as long as he was on Kyoshi Island, and it was from there that he coordinated his search for the Avatar. Ships from both Zhao's command and the base here on Kyoshi Island were sailing to the various Southern Islands- Whale Tail, Kangaroo, Nunya, the Kuril Cluster, and all the others- searching for signs or sightings of the Avatar's sky bison. Zhao was confident that the boy was either still on Kyoshi Island or planning to come back soon, but it was better to play it safe.

Besides, all those ships brought with them the flag of Zhao's personal command, so everyone in the entire region would be associating his name with the search for the Avatar. That was just as important as actually catching the boy.

Besides the reports resulting from those investigations, there was also the regular day-to-day business for which a commander of Zhao's standing was responsible. Reports of matters in the South Pole came twice daily by telegraph, detailing the results of the increased pace of mining and the worsening effects of the Everstorm.

One day, a report came in that a ship carrying platinum back to the Homeland had been attacked by pirates, and the cargo taken. The pirates had let the surviving crew go once the theft was complete, and left the engine damaged but functional. The ship had limped to a dock on Whale Tail and immediately reported.

Zhao frowned as he read the details of the incident. It was very rare for pirates to attack military vessels like that, and the cargo of platinum would be fairly useless to such scum except as something to sell, and most of the world had no idea of the rare metal's special classified properties.

Well, that was a mystery to be resolved after the Avatar was caught. In the meantime, Zhao wrote out an order for all cargo ships carrying platinum to be assigned a destroyer escort. That should keep the pirates away.

Sokka's time on Kyoshi Island might have actually been the happiest time of his life since Katara was taken. Sure, he was living in an underground hideaway and stuck eating whatever could be smuggled out of town, but he was also finally learning how to fight, and the fact that his teacher was a fun and pretty girl wasn't lost on him.
Too bad he spent most of his time with her getting his butt kicked to the North Pole and back.

Suki normally gave her lessons in the hidden Kyoshi Warrior dojo, but today they had taken the lesson outside so that they could play with a pair of old katana swords. Safe from enemy eyes in a deep spot in Kyoshi Island's forest, the two of them were moving through an exercise sequence. Sokka brought his katana down in a quick chop, mimicking Suki's graceful movements, enjoying the weight of the weapon in his hand.

The air smelled of seawater and pine, and the only sounds were the rustling of trees and the swish of the blades through the air.

Suki brought her sword down in one last chop, and then flipped her grip around to sheath the sword in one smooth motion. Sokka tried to do the same thing, but forgot which side he was wearing the scabbard on, and wound up having to quickly shift it over when his first guess was wrong. His sword safely put away, he looked back up and found Suki giving a smile that was half-smirk and made his stomach flip. "Very smooth. A little more practice and you'll be sheathing your blade like a master. Of course, that doesn't leave much time for learning how to actually use the sword..."

Sokka gave a laugh. "Maybe by the time we're ready to break into that base, I'll be good enough that I won't completely embarrass myself." He hid the ambivalence he felt about that statement, which was probably truer than he would have liked, and he was rewarded by Suki's own pleasant laughter. It was weird how she was a great warrior but also so pleasant, unlike the fighter girls from the Fire Nation.

As if sensing Sokka’s thoughts, Mai's voice cut into the fun: "If something goes wrong with this infiltration of yours, embarrassment is going to be the least of our problems. Because we'll be dead or prisoners for life." Sokka turned to where she lounging on a blanket, not far from him and Suki, and gave his best Disapproving Glare. She just met his gaze with that blank face and dead eyes of hers, clearly unimpressed. "By the way, I think I figured out what the big distraction part should be in our plan."

"Great. I'm so looking forward to hearing about it." He turned back to Suki and said, "So, should we run through another set of drills, or go back to the dojo for aikido practice? I do owe you a few flips from yesterday, and I wouldn't mind the chance to slam you down on the mat. Uh, in a strictly professional way, of course."

Suki's jaw dropped in mock-shock, and she fanned herself with her hands while she suppressed some obvious laughter. "Sokka, you flatterer! I-" She tried to say something else, but she interrupted herself with a burst of giggling. "Heh. Now I don't remember what I was going to say. Anyway, you can try, but trust me, the chance to throw me is all you're going to get unless I'm feeling merciful." Sokka just nodded at the obvious truth, and Suki frowned. "I was just teasing."

"Oh, I thought you were having a moment of arrogance. Not that it's a bad thing! A good warrior deserves a moment of arrogance every now and then. It's the manly thing to- I mean, it's the- well, even girl warriors are kind of manly, I guess- not in a bad way! I just-"

"What," Suki broke in, "are you going on about?"

"Um, well, the Water Tribes don't really have women who are warriors. I know the other nations- well, the Fire Nation at least, and now Kyoshi Island- I know others do, but everything I've always learned about warriors is kind of oriented around them being men, and so- so, well, I say stupid thing sometimes and please don't hurt me!"

Suki snorted. "Well, at least you know that you're wrong. That's a point in your favor." She reached
up and patted Sokka's cheek. "You're forgiven. But if you like warriors so much, why didn't you learn to fight before now?"

Sokka suppressed an urge to grimace and maybe walk away and pretend the question had never been asked. "Let's just say there was a lack of opportunity and an overabundance of regret."

Suki eyed him for a moment, and then nodded. "Okay."

"Warrior or not, I hope that my sister is just as strong as you. If she is, then Katara could survive anything the Fire Nation has thrown at her."

Suki stared, blinking, and then turned away. "I really hope your sister is all right. Strength doesn't always have much to do with that, and I- well, I have a sister, too."

Aang had mentioned that, but no other details. When Sokka spoke, it was in a slow and quiet voice, and all of his sympathy was in it. "Did something happen to her?"

Suki gave a laugh. "Kind of. She signed up to be a marine soldier for the Fire Nation as soon as she was of age. If she's still alive, she's somewhere out there wearing their armor and following their orders."

When feeling came back to Sokka's face, he realized that his jaw was hanging open. He pushed it back up with a free hand. "That's- huh, that's not what I was expecting."

"Right? But my point is that whatever strength you see in me, I couldn't do anything about my own sister. So, don't hope that Katara is like me. You've never forgotten her after all this time, and now you're looking for her. Maybe you never learned how to fight, and maybe you need to learn a little more about the ways girls can be strong." She raised her chin, and smiled. "But you're strong, and I have to think that your sister got a little of that, too." She reached out, and poked Sokka in the chest. "And right now you're about to get stronger in aikido. Before we head back to the dojo, let's make sure the swords are properly cleaned and oiled. The fumes from that can get kind of thick in the dojo, even with the surface passage open." She turned and went to get the rags and oils where they were resting safely out of the way of the drills.

As soon as Suki was out of earshot, Sokka inched over to where Mai was examining her fingernails and whispered, "Mai, you're a girl."

"You've found me out, but I'm not providing proof."

"...so, since you're a girl, can you tell if Suki likes me?"

"Well, she's giving stupid speeches about how you're not completely useless, and she hasn't arranged to stab you with a katana in a 'training accident' yet, so I think the odds are fair that she doesn't hate you."

"No, I mean that she likes me in a... a, you know, lovey-dovey way."

"Lovey-dovey?" She finally looked up at him. "What are you, three years old?"

"You know what I mean," Sokka hissed

Mai stared at him, glanced over to Suki's approach, and then met his eyes once again. "Using all my profound wisdom and feminine instincts, let me assure you that I could not possibly care less."
Time had passed, practice had been done, and Mai was improving. She released the bowstring, and
the arrow's flight began and finished in the time it took her to blink. It had landed right on the black
mark that was supposed to be one of the scare-lizard-crow's eyes, exactly where she had been
aiming.

She couldn't stop the smile from reaching out from within her.

Once she got her face back under control, she looked over at Longshot, and he nodded approvingly.
Then she looked back at her target, and saw it for what it represented: A soldier of the Fire Nation,
with an arrow through his eye.

This time, Mai was able to keep her face under control, but she was well-used to concealing disgust.

She let out a small sigh, and turned back to Longshot. "I hit my target, but I'm still very slow to draw
and aim. I need to get better at that."

Longshot nodded again, and held out his hands for the bow. Mai passed it over, and watched as he
demonstrated his graceful drawing style once again. She pushed the whole concept of rebels and
soldiers out of her head, and began analyzing the efficiencies of his movement.

Almost two weeks into their stay, Aang found himself in a moment with Sokka where they could
really bond as men; they were out on one of the cliffs overlooking Kyoshi Island's coast, chatting and
tossing stones into the ocean far below as they waited for the rebels to gather back at the old Kyoshi
Warrior dojo for another planning session. It was the perfect time for some guy-to-guy talk. "Hey, do
you like Suki or something?"

Aang watched as Sokka's body tensed so suddenly that he nearly knocked himself over, which as
close as they were standing to the cliff, was no laughing matter. Sokka caught himself before Aang
had to, though, and straightened quickly into a dignified posture. "Wha- (ahem) What makes you
think I like Suki?"

"Well, you stare at her whenever she comes around, and you obviously respect her fighting skills.
And then there's how you've been talking about how great she is for the last two hours-"

"Okay, I get it." He turned so that he was no longer facing Aang, and threw another stone into the
distance. "I mean, we don't know each other all that well, but it's nice to spend time with her. And
even though she fights well, she's just so... nice and normal. It's... nice to spend time with a girl like
her."

Aang nodded. He knew exactly how it was. Just being around Mai was the best possible thing, even
when she was complaining about stuff. She was so different from everyone else Aang had ever met,
worldly in her concerns, but capable of a calmness that was almost enlightened in its purity and
detachment. And even after all this time together, her beauty was capable of stilling Aang's breath
and taking him to places he had never before dreamed-

"Hey!"

Both boys turned at the sound of Mai's voice, to find her standing at the treeline. She waved
lethargically, and added, "Everyone's ready! Stop wasting time and making me entertain the ugly
face paint people!"

Aang felt a hand on his shoulder. Sokka patted him consoling, and said, "Good luck, kid. You're
going to need it."
Mai identified her plan of attack, clutched her weapon in a sure grip, and struck with delicate strength. She was a master of this tool, knowing exactly how the nuances of her grip would generate precise amounts of torque, and the red that spilled out as a result did so exactly according to her design. Thus her foe was defeated, and she had one more transgression to add to her guilty conscious.

She felt mildly dirty for thinking of painting in such dramatic terms, but she was very good with a brush thanks to the calligraphy lessons her parents forced on her, and there was nothing wrong in taking pride in even unwanted skills.

She blew gently on the red trim she had painted onto the armor chestpiece, making sure that it was dry enough not to run, and put the metal aside. "I just finished my fifth," she told Longshot.

They were at their little archery range, but instead of practicing the art of the bow and arrow, they were preparing the equipment that would be need for Sokka's big plan to break into the Navy base. The plan had been finalized the day before, and the most important part was disguising the infiltrators as Fire Nation soldiers. For that, they needed official armor.

Mai went over to the tarp spread on the forest ground, where a hundred of bits of metal were laid out so that their new red and black paintjobs could dry. Suki's rebels had been building this collection for a while, working with metalsmiths across all of Kyoshi Island to collect pieces of real Fire Nation armor, discarded as broken or rusted or merely scratched beyond beauty. The protection these pieces offered might be compromised, but the important thing was that a fresh coat of black paint would allow them to look like better armor.

Longshot brought over a freshly painted helmet and found it a spot on the tarp. Mai looked over the assembly, and did a quick count. "Looks like that's all of it. Now we just let it dry, and then haul it back to the dojo. Ourselves." She sighed.

Longshot shrugged, and walked over to where his longbow and quiver were leaning against a tree. That was a good idea; they might as well get some practice in while they waited.

Mai was getting faster on the draw, but she still wasn't as quick as she was with her knives. That might be an unreasonable comparison, but sometimes life demanded unreasonable things of people. She was on her own in a difficult mission, working other difficult missions as part of her cover, and at any point, her 'allies' might realize who she really was. She needed to be prepared for anything.

A thought occurred to her as he walked over to Longshot. "Hey, sniper, how is it going to feel to wear that armor and pretend to be Fire Nation?"

Longshot gave a quick grimace.

"Yeah, undercover operations are the worst."

Longshot nodded, and drew an arrow to shoot.

Two weeks after Zhao had sent the initial query, word finally came back on the late Warrant Officer Lee's family. Zhao was in Yon Rha's office, going over some reports, when an aide delivered a telegraph message from back in the Homeland.

Yon Rha took it, and his perpetual frown deepened as he read. Finally, he handed the paper over. "Here, you make sense of it."

Zhao had been eager to see what might have influenced the late communications officer in his
actions, and was disappointed with results: Lee's family could not be found, and interviews with their former neighbors revealed that they had suddenly left weeks ago with no word as to their destination. At least the investigators had looked further into the matter, and uncovered accounts of Lee's father paying off all his local debts in coin before leaving.

"Clearly," Zhao said, "there was a bribe. The family got money they needed, and then left to make a new life. Lee's sabotage was paid for with his family's prosperity, and once he realized there was no chance of joining them, he permanently removed himself from the situation."

Yon Rha's frown deepened. "But who paid? And why?"

"There must be a rebel network with much greater coordination than we had realized. They either found out about the Avatar's return, or he was in the South Pole working for them from the beginning. Their plan to free him involved stealing the emergency supplies, as proven by the Water Tribe rebels' capturing that cargo ship with such precise timing. The power of this group ranges from the South Pole all the way to the Homeland."

"That's... unbelievable. We've had no other clues before now?"

That was a good question. Unless someone in High Command was lying, Zhao himself had personally stumbled across the first signs of this danger, but as he thought about it more- thought about the top secret incidents in the Earth Kingdom that had the Fire Nation desperately digging up platinum wherever it could be found, and the recent pirate activity against the platinum shipments- he realized that the scope of the threat might be larger than even he could imagine.

But then why hadn't any of this been seen before Sozin's Comet? Why wait until after the Earth Kingdom finally fell to begin operations against the Fire Nation?

All Zhao knew was that he was missing something, and he didn't like it.

As unmanly as it would be to admit, Sokka had come to the conclusion that wearing Mai's clothes was a hundred times more comfortable than soldier's armor.

It was two weeks after that first disastrous shopping trip, and Sokka had finally returned to Kyoshi Island's port settlement. He was once again dolled up in the fashion of the Fire Nation, but instead of red robes, now it was a set of the local guard armor. It felt oversized and even stiffer than he had imagined, never mind the way the edges dug into his skin where he could have used more padding. Sokka had no doubt that he would cut a pretty poor figure in full daylight, but the torches of the port village couldn't beat back all of the night's shadows, and so there was a good chance that no one would realize he wasn't a proper soldier until it was too late. (Too late for whom, Sokka didn't want to speculate.)

He and the others had donned their newly painted armor back in the forest, and then marched back to the village walls. Once again, Aang was responsible for getting everyone over them, but with the weight and noise of their armor, they had been forced to go a lot more slowly. Aang himself hadn't been given any armor to wear, since no amount of metal tied to his body would make someone that short look like a soldier, and so he had dressed once again in some of Mai's clothes, all in dark colors to allow him to hide in the shadows (with a black shirt provided by Longshot to replace the one Aang had lost in the marketplace, and this time Momo was staying back with Appa, thank you very much). Once everyone was over the wall, they had broken into the smaller groups, ready to enact their parts in the plan.

Sokka was left with Suki and Longshot to march the streets of the village, pretending to be a trio of
soldiers on patrol.

It turned out that metal was a pretty heavy thing to wear; how Mai walked around with double her weight's worth of knives was completely beyond Sokka. He glanced over at Suki to see if she was as uncomfortable, and caught her eyes already looking back at him. She winked, and then schooled her face into an expression of blankness and stared forward once more.

It was hard not smile.

Sokka had just gotten his Soldier's Grimace back into place when the group turned the corner of an intersection and ran into another group of soldiers, these three very much the real thing. Sokka held up a hand in greeting and was all set to start some companionable griping about villagers and night patrol, but the lead soldier immediately said, "White smoke!"

Sokka's gaze darted around, but he didn't see any smoke. Slush, it was probably the opening to a code exchange. He was hoping to put this off until he could get closer to the soldiers, but there wasn't anything to do now but roll with it and-

Sokka heard movement behind him, and he turned in time to see Longshot springing forward with an arrow clutched in a tight fist. Sokka reflexively started to raise his hands, but then Longshot wrapped an arm around his shoulders and spun him around, then brought an arrow up so that the point of it jammed up against the fleshy bottom of his jaw.

Sokka went very still as Longshot called out, "These are not soldiers, they are rebels!"

Suki spun and took an attack stance. "You traitor!"

Sokka tried to swallow, but the arrowhead was pressed very tightly against his skin.

One of the soldiers raised a small object to his mouth that glinted of metal in the torchlight, and let out a loud whistle. It was a pattern, three short bursts, and when the final one faded into the night air, even more soldiers were streaming into the intersection. Sokka looked back over at Suki, and found her shaking with the coiled tightness of a spring. Longshot remained still as he held Sokka in a grip like a vice.

Then Suki sprang forward, and Longshot shoved the arrow's tip into Sokka's flesh.

TO BE CONTINUED
The Traitors of Kyoshi

Chapter Summary

"Your mission, if you choose to accept it..."

The Traitors of Kyoshi

Aang watched as Longshot murdered Sokka beneath a full moon.

Perched on the rooftop of a tavern a short distance away, Aang could only make out the broader motions, so he didn't see what precisely Longshot did. The sniper had been holding Sokka as a hostage in the middle of the empty streets, holding an arrow like a knife with the head pointed right under Sokka's chin, but then Suki attacked, and everything became a blur. When it was resolved, Suki was struggling on the ground beneath Sokka's still body, viscous red liquid clinging to both of them, while a dozen soldiers closed in around them.

Aang grinned. Everything was going exactly as planned.

The soldiers arrested both Suki (sobbing dramatically) and Longshot (surrendering peacefully), and a pair of them picked up Sokka's body in a careless manner. The original soldiers- the trio of patrollers who had whistled for backup after Longshot's betrayal- watched the proceedings with what Aang thought were bewildered demeanors. One of the new soldiers went over to talk to them, and after a quick conversation, the whole group came together into marching lines and headed off in the direction of the Fire Navy garrison. Aang followed along, hopping across the dark rooftops.

The Navy base resolved itself into view as he paced the soldiers in the streets. Its massive outer walls loomed up even above his own vantage point, lit with torches that gave a false sense of life to the dead metal. Soldiers stood on duty within the pagoda-roofed stations at each of the wall's six corners, and one of the guards stepped out onto the dark ramparts above the main entrance as the group of patrollers approached. He was a pudgy man who even Aang could see was straining against the shape of his armor, and as he stepped out to stand directly over the base’s front doors, he called out, "White smoke!"

The patroller in the lead, the one who had whistled for reinforcements, shouted back, "Black smoke!"

"Wet wood!"

"Coal!"

"What business?"

"Rebels, sir, wearing stolen armor! One dead, two captured. One is claiming to be an informant for the commander, requesting protection in exchange for information about the Avatar!"

Aang had to keep from giggling.

The pudgy guard made a motion back towards the nearest pagoda-station, and the doors to the base swung open with a mechanical groan. The patrollers marched through the portal, shoving Suki and
lugging Sokka's dripping body, and the doors closed behind them.

Aang nodded with satisfaction. Now he had to meet with Appa for the next phase of the plan. He took off across the rooftops once again, heading for the edge of the village closest to the forest, where Appa and Momo would be waiting. Aang avoided the light, but didn't worry about any sounds he might be making; the winds he was summoning weren't just carrying him along on his jumps, they were also intercepting any noises, catching and diffusing them so that he could pass right over someone's head and they would never know.

It similar to the trick he had pulled when Longshot 'killed' Sokka, and the soldier had whistled for reinforcements. That patrolman probably hadn't noticed the way the winds picked up a little bit, and he definitely didn't realize that the sound of his whistle had traveled up into the empty sky, rather than outward to where other patrols would hear it.

And so Aang had been able to ensure that the reinforcements who had come to that patrolman's aid weren't real soldiers of the Fire Nation.

It was the most awkward trip Sokka had ever made, and that included his recent journeys on the back of a Sky Bison. Still, he managed to play dead with the true skills of a thespian (if he did say so himself), even adding little touches like letting his tongue hang lifelessly outside his mouth. He had to ignore the odd smell of the gallons of twice-smashed tomato pulp splattered across his chin, neck, and armor; Suki had supplied the mess from hidden waterskins when she 'crashed' into his body. It looked disgusting enough that the real soldiers hadn't investigated. Of course, Longshot's trick collapsible arrow had also looked quite real (even if it hadn't collapsed fast enough for Sokka's taste, leaving a sore spot under his chin where it had poked him), and the fake soldiers who pronounced Sokka dead had also very much looked real, so it was an understandable series of mistakes.

With his eyes closed, he could only listen as he was dragged through the streets of the village, then into the base, and finally into the building where Suki would be incarcerated and Sokka's body would be examined- the base’s prison, the same building where all permanent prisoners taken in the Southern Seas were transferred for further processing, and where their transfer records were kept. It was in that building where the ruse fell apart, as Sabure- one of the disguised rebels carrying Sokka-stumbled over a loose plate on the floor, and her lurching bounced his head against the metal wall. His, "Ow!" didn't sound very dead, so he added a groan-like burp to make it seem like his corpse was just getting rid of excess breath.

Sokka heard a cries of surprise from the three real soldiers, one prayer calling for the destruction of the undead, and Sabure hissing something like, "Unagi breath!" and then he was dropped to the floor. Sokka’s eyes popped open during the crash, and he got a quick glimpse of Mai throwing off her helmet- for she was also one of the fake soldiers who had been lying in wait for Operation: Fool One of the Patrol Groups Into Bringing Us Into Their Base- and then everything became a big fighting ball of people in black armor.

Sokka could only sit there as the Rebels of Kyoshi struck at the Fire Nation in the heart of its own base. By the time he stood up again, the soldiers were down and the rebels were cleaning clubs and knives. Mai dashed off down the hallway on the right, the one leading to the building’s administration offices according to her knowledge of Fire Nation construction, while Sabure and Longshot were leading the rest of the rebels down the hallways to the left.

According to the plan, the entire first floor of the prison would be cleared in another two minutes.

It would have been fun if it weren't an act of treason.
It was a short dash from the prison's vestibule to the administrative office, and Mai slowed down only a little as she kicked the door in. It produced a sound that jolted all the clerks inside, but even as their heads snapped up from their desks to look at her, she was already throwing some of the blades she had been able to hide in her soldier disguise. She didn't have enough ammunition to pin everyone to the walls, and even the clerks in this building wore some basic body armor, so she had to play it smart. Tendons, veins, and arteries were Mai's targets, and she hit every one.

Screams and splashes of blood heralded her success.

There was no other way to pretend to be on the side of the rebels, on the side of Aang.

Of course, Mai was authorized by Azula to do whatever was needed as part of the ruse, and that included killing loyal servants of the Fire Nation. And, really, Mai didn't care about a bunch of military drones. It's just that she had never killed anyone before, and she hated that Azula had asked it of her. In an instant, the fight for the administrative office was over, and Mai hurried to try to give some aid to her targets before they died for a cause they were never understand.

Sabure led the way down the left-hand hallways, and although she was well aware of the danger of this mission, her responsibility gave her all the courage she needed to complete it.

As an Earthbender in Kyoshi Island’s rebellion- the only known descendent of an Earthbending Kyoshi Warrior to be carrying on that legacy- Sabure had lots of responsibility given to her, from controlling access to the old Warriors’ Dojo to watching over the Avatar and his friends as their guide and guardian. Now, she was responsible for leading the sweep of the prison building’s first floor, for quickly and quietly taking out anyone who could interfere with Aang and Sokka's search for Katara of the Southern Water Tribe.

Sabure rather liked the idea of the last Kyoshi Warrior Earthbender helping to find the last Southern Waterbender.

The first rooms she came across were small holding cells and interrogations closets. She passed those in a run- Suki, Longshot, and the other rebels trailing behind her- coming to a stop only when she glimpsed someone moving in what looked like an infirmary. The man was wearing a plain uniform with no armor over it, so he barely had time to turn and widen his eyes before Sabure landed a pair of heavy chops on his neck. He dropped in an instant, and she nodded with approval. She could have immobilized him with the power of the Earth, of course, but that would have been noisier, and the time hadn't come for that yet. Leaving her friend Yuujin to tie up the unconscious infirmary worker, Sabure went back into her run, but skidded to a halt when she came across another interesting room. It was a bare-bones shower room with all the piping left exposed, and while it was as empty as the holding cells, that wasn't what interested her.

She motioned, and Chijin came over with her backpack of supplies. Sabure opened it up and dug around until she found what she was looking for- the white Yungi rocks. The rebels used these stones to make Longshot's trick smokebomb arrows; the heads of the arrows contained one of these stones small enough to fit neatly into a fist, along with a compartment of water that would break open on impact. When the stones met the water, they dissolved, turning into an almost explosive cloud of chalky dust.

Sabure took the whole supply of the Yungi, dumped them all beneath one of the shower heads, and turned the water on.

The 'smoke' erupted out like a volcano had gone off, but Sabure was already running along, her arms swinging in a basic Earthbending move. Without a proper rooting, such motions wouldn't have been
able to lift even a small rock, but the small chalky particles in the cloud didn't require much power at all. And so the cloud followed Sabure in her run, and when she turned the corner of the hallway, she punched both fists ahead of her, sending the cloud streaming forward to blanket the halls. It was the closest she'd ever come to Airbending.

She heard cries of surprise and alarm from the guards up ahead, and one at a time, she waved a hole in the dust cloud to reveal the soldier who had made the sound, just for a few seconds.

A few seconds was all Longshot needed to aim and fire an arrow.

A few seconds was enough for Suki to sneak up and start spraining joints.

Overall, it took no more than a minute to clear all the hallways and lock the doors leading to the stairways. The first floor of the prison officially belonged to the Rebels of Kyoshi Island, and Sabure had fulfilled her responsibility.

This time.

When the rest of the infiltration group arrived, Mai was in the process of coaching one of her targets in pressing his wound closed. ("Keep your hand there and push down hard, or you'll bleed to death. Press hard.") If her 'allies' didn't take too long to find the location of Sokka's stupid sister, then these soldiers would probably get treatment and be saved; the Fire Nation knew a lot about how fire could close even deep wounds. Mai stood up and nodded to Suki, noting that the other woman’s armor was still covered in Sokka’s fake blood. Reminded of the mess on her own hands, Mai tried to scrape the blood off on her armor, but it stuck to skin much better than metal. It was like mud in that respect, but she had never found the touch of blood to be anywhere near as gross as dirt sludge.

It struck Mai that it was a fairly odd double standard.

The last to arrive in the office was Sokka, still covered in his own mess of fake blood. It was apparently the fashion for the night. "Okay," he said, "are we all set here?"

Suki nodded. "We're right on schedule for Aang's distraction. Longshot, start setting up for our exit. You three, back him up and guard these captives. Everyone else is on the Records Team." She turned to look at Mai. "Still with us?"

Mai ignored the way Sokka was grinning beside her and said, "It will be marginally less boring than standing guard here, so I guess so."

Of course, it wouldn't be boring at all. They would have to locate paperwork from a decade ago without being discovered, and then Mai would have to somehow break away from the rest of the group and sneak off to the building’s telegraph to code a message and send it off to her true master. Katara's location, wherever that might be, would be the rendezvous with Azula and Zuko.

Appa let out an unhappy roar as he sailed through the night sky over the bay, and Aang couldn't disagree. "I know it smells, but we'll get rid of it soon. Just a little longer!" However, the cargo hanging in a massive tarp from Appa's body didn't just smell; it was outright turning Aang's stomach.

He was a lifelong vegetarian, and would never be able to tolerate fresh raw meat.

While Momo tried to bury his nose in Aang’s shirt, the Airbender chose to put all his attention on guiding Appa to the Navy base's shipyards. He picked out one particular vessel- a big metal
battleship that didn't seem to be crewed- and steered for the space above it. Flying at night was usually hard, but the soldiers had hung lanterns on everything, so there was plenty of light to see by.

Plenty of light to target by.

When he was above the ship, Aang directed Appa to slow down, climbed down across the furry head, and yanked the 'trigger rope' that would release the tarp. It flopped open below Appa with unpleasant squishy sounds, and pounds of bloody chum dropped through the sky to land with a massive splat all over the ship. Since Appa hadn't entirely stopped, the chum trailed through the air as he continued to fly over the base itself, creating a handy little line to match the dripping that the cargo had be doing the whole time Appa was flying in over the bay.

After that, it was only a matter of waiting, and Aang was gratified that it didn't take even ten minutes to spot a giant fin cutting through the bay, following the trail of blood in the water to the Navy base.

The alarm bells and gongs in the base were going off even before the notorious Unagi reared up from the waters- an eel as tall as the Dawn Spire at the Eastern Air Temple- and began attacking the chum-ship.

Aang waved and wished the big guy luck.

Yon Rha was just about the have dinner- the steaming plate of grilled eel fillets over rice was being placed in front of him by a servant- when the alarms gongs started going off. He was tempted to ignore them for a moment and at least sample the dish while it was hot, but the gongs sounded like they were having dents pounded into them, so with a sigh he rose and jogged out of his private quarters.

He met an aide before he even made his way out of the parlor, and the man broke protocol by speaking first: "Sir, the Unagi is attacking the Calamitous, and we just completed the repairs from its last-"

"Shut up! What's the status of the catapults?"

"Being loaded, sir! And the watch captain is scrambling everyone we have on base!"

"Good. I don't know what riled the monster up, but we need to convince it that whatever it wants isn't worth the trouble we can cause. I need to get out there and-"

At that moment, Zhao poked his head into the parlor, eyes wide and his characteristic sneer nowhere in sight for a change. "There's a giant eel attacking one of your ships."

"Yes, we noticed."

"Does this happen often?"

Regulations prevented Yon Rha from giving the answer that first occurred to him.

Even Mai was impressed at the size of the administrative building’s archives, but the symbols on the sides of the filing cabinets were the standard military markings. "These are organized by date and will discuss the transfers in and out of the prison," she said as she strolled past one long cabinet. "These three contain complete records for each individual prisoner who has ever been incarcerated here, organized by name as represented in the official Fire Nation orthography, including medical records for the duration of the stay here. And those will be numbered communications, and won't
make any sense without the reference numbers listed in each prisoner's records." When she turned around, at the far end of the room, she found the others staring at her. "What?"

Sokka blinked. "Not that I'm not really, really grateful, but how do you know all this?"

"My uncle runs one of the most secure prisons in the Fire Nation, and he needed someone to bring along on 'Take Your Heir to Your Honorable Occupation' Day. Every year I got a shank confiscated from one of the prisoners" They stared for a moment more, and then Suki clapped and strode forward. "Okay. Sokka, check the ones by date, I'll start on the ones by name, and everyone else can help us out. Mai."

"I'll check out the telegraph room. There's usually some indexes to the communications references, and if Katara was transferred more than once, there may have been some queries directed back here that would have been recorded."

"Okay, sounds good. Let us know if you need any help."

Everyone got to work, and Mai slipped into the side room. It looks just like the Communications office back in her 'home' at the South Pole, with the same long desk, paper supplies, and equipment. Including an encoder device.

Mai slipped her Royal Encoder Cog out from beneath her armor, and slotted it into the machine. She typed 'Avatar Rendezvous is' and left it at that. The rest would be supplied when Sokka found his sister's location.

While she waited, Mai prepared the telegraph. It had been a while since she last used one, but Azula had insisted she learn when she was awarded the Encoder Cog, saying something about the possibility of being stuck alone on a secret mission and needing to communicate without assistance.

As usual, Azula had proved really good at predicting things.

It wasn't that Zhao was afraid to join the efforts against the giant sea monster, but he was a valuable resource with expert knowledge of the hunt for the Avatar, and he didn't know the full capabilities of the Unagi as well as those stationed here on Kyoshi Island, so it made sense to be cautious and remain far back from the main excitement.

And it wasn't like helping would get him anything.

Plus, his position deep in the center of the parade grounds allowed him to inspect the base staff, to make sure that responded according to protocol. He observed as the personnel in each building locked down their premises, and then hung a green lantern over the main entrance when everything was checked out as safe and secure.

He also noticed that the prison's administration building had no one emerge, despite the excitement, and a lantern was never hung outside.

While Yon Rha worked to conquer the mighty sea monster, Zhao decided to investigate this other small matter.

"Found her!"
Sokka crossed the distance between himself and Suki before she even finished speaking, skidding to a stop in the perfect position to look over her shoulder. Sure enough, she was holding a stack of papers for 'Katara Water Tribe' convicted of 'Subversive Bending' and held for two weeks, before a 'Parch Cage' was available to transfer her to specialized facilities at...

"Crescent Island. My sister is on Crescent Island."

At the Encoder Device, Mai typed in the two final words of her message, and then took the encrypted output over to the telegraph.

Zhao didn't like empty hallways. There should always be underlings around.

He had entered the prison building through the rear door, the one secured by a one-point-Firebending lock, as if he was conducting a surprise inspection. Even from behind closed doors, the clamor of the machinery room covered the sound of his entrance, with its engines and gears and massive fans, and the sounds of the equipment's thrumming echoed through the empty rear halls. Zhao found no guards to berate for not following emergency procedures, no clerks carrying records to the archives or equipment to the armory or even a prisoner to the infirmary. There was nothing but a chalky dust coating the floor and much of the walls. What was this mess? Where was everyone? Should he go upstairs to the prisoner cells, or stick to the first floor and head to the administrative offices in the front?

Zhao chose to press forward. He slowed as he moved away from the noise of the machinery room, and thought he detected the echoes of voices ringing through the metal halls. It sounded like there were people in the Archives. Zhao knew that there was a telegraph station adjoining it, with a back door he could use to sneak up on whatever was going on in the larger records room. As he approached it, he steadied his breathing, and prepared the fire within.

Zhao eased the door open, and found Lady Caldera Yu Mai leaning over the telegraph itself, tapping out a message.

He was so surprised to see her there that it took him a moment to make sense of it. His gaze ran over the room, taking in the Encoder machine loaded an encryption key cog- one of the special ones with the red trim. Mai hadn't noticed him yet, focused as she was on her transmission, and Zhao just stood there in his confusion. Why would a traitor to the Fire Nation be sending a coded message out across the network?

Then Zhao remembered Warrant Officer Lee's betrayal, and the ease with which his family escaped justice.

He remembered his theory of a rebel conspiracy that stretched to the Fire Nation itself.

Could the conspiracy extend all the way to the Fire Palace?

Zhao gasped, and the sound brought Mai's surprised gaze over to his position.

The look in Zhao's eyes said it all; he knew that Mai wasn't the defector she was pretending to be. Did he realize Azula's involvement? Zuko's? It didn't matter. He knew something, and that knowledge was dangerous.

Mai would have to kill him.
Her first deliberate murder.

Her hands went for her weapons, the small collection of razors she had packed into the belt of her stolen armor, while her eyes and mind tried to adjust to this new objective. She was used to looking for stray bits of clothing to pin, for unprotected flesh that was an avenue to mere injury, for vulnerabilities that would lead to death only after unreasonable amounts of time. She wasn't used to trying to kill so surely, so quickly. She had to devote actual mental effort to the task.

Zhao got the first blow in when he punched a fireball straight into her.

Mai was in the process of turning, of bringing her razors up for a backhanded throw while she picked her target, and so the concussive flame struck her right side, exploding against the armor over her ribs. She was knocked off her feet, flying backwards. She struck the door to the records room and crashed right through it, landing with a jolt and a clang on the floor. Before she could figure out which way was up, the pain surged out from her side to rack her entire body.

But through the burning, and the sickening way her armor was sticking to her skin, Mai had one comforting thought- her landing had been noisy.

Even as Zhao was rushing at her from out of the telegraph station, she heard the cries and hurried footsteps of her friends.

Before Zhao could Firebend again, Suki was leaping down on him from atop a filing cabinet, landing a blurring palm strike straight into his face. The other rebels- Repai and Kosokoso, Kowagaru and Yuujin, Chijin and Shisuta and Sonkei- closed in, attacking Zhao with clubs and knives, but as Mai watched, he snapped his arms, sending waves of flame out. Everyone retreated except for Suki, who ducked and danced around the fire to get right up close to Zhao to shove him straight back into the telegraph room. He disappeared within, and then a wall of earth burst up through the metal floor to take the place of the door Mai had destroyed.

Mai turned to look behind her and found Sabure at the far end of the Archives, coming out of an Earthbending stance. She called, "The path is clear, let's exfiltrate already!"

Mai let out a heavy breath that made her wince in pain. She needed to kill Zhao, but she could hardly explain that to everyone here and get Sabure to take down the wall. She'd failed Azula again.

But at least she was alive, thanks to the rebel of Kyoshi. That was something.

Then Sokka was leaning over her. "Are you okay? Can you walk? Do you need to be carried?"

Mai tried to get up, but way the motion twisted her torso made her shake with pain again. "A little (ow)- a little help would be (ugh) acceptable."

Sokka got on her good side, Suki grabbed her waist, and together they got Mai standing.

Of course things couldn't go perfectly. They had done well all the way up to finding Katara's location, but now Mai was injured and the whole escape plan would have to be slowed down.

Well, they'd just have to improvise, then.

While Suki helped Mai along, Sokka led the way back to the prison's administration office. As he walked, he untied his chest armor- still sticky and smelly from the fake gore- and dropped it to the floor of the hallway. As soon as he stepped into the office, Longshot tossed him a short oilskin rain cloak that would cover his lack of proper uniform, and he quickly draped and fastened it. That
should withstand most casual scrutiny. He took Suki's place as Mai's living crutch while the rebel leader traded her own messy armor for an oilskin and got everyone into something like a marching formation, and then they all headed straight for the prison's front door.

They burst into the navy base's courtyard to find a battle underway.

Balls of fire were flying through the air to crash into a giant eel monster that was snapping and harrying the base's dockside. Sokka hadn't seen the Unagi before, and found it a terrifying sight with that massive fin and long teeth-filled beak-snout, but fortunately, the plan didn't call for him to have any involvement with the sea monster besides silently wishing it thanks for the great distraction. It was bigger and longer than any single object Sokka had ever seen, including various Fire Nation warships. The overgrown eel had laid waste to several of those warships that had been docked at the base, and was long enough to reach over them to bite at the soldiers trying to lob spears and fire at it. A large flaming tar ball arched from the center of the navy base to smack into the Unagi's glistening skin, but while there was plenty of sizzle, the monster didn't seem too inconvenienced by the blow. It opened its mouth to spray a high-pressure stream of water in the direction of the catapult that had launched the attack, soaking several buildings and even collapsing the roof of one.

All around the base's courtyard, soldiers ran every which way on direct paths, carrying equipment and setting up archery positions and conveying orders to distant points. Sokka was relieved that no one paid any attention to his group as they trotted along like they were in a hurry (which they were) to help with the fighting (which they were not), and he indulged in turning to Mai and giving her a reassuring smile as he they hobbled along in the wake of the rest.

Then a voice called out, "You there! Halt!"

The rebels stopped on their heels, and Sokka killed his smile.

A gray-haired commander with what looked like industrial-strength frowning capabilities jogged over to the group, followed by several aides, and examined at the rebels from beneath a tight brow. "Where are you going? I ordered all guard staff to secure their buildings. What's happening in the prison?"

Sabure bowed. She said, "Sir! We had an equipment malfunction. A- uh-" Her voice faltered.

Sokka stepped forward, and Mai grunted with pain in his arms at the sudden motion, but he had to ignore her as he took over the fabricating. "We took a hit from the monster's water spray that backed up our ventilation. It- uh- must have clogged something critical. Equipment over-hearted and- uh- a pumping unit exploded. We evacuated the first floor and are taking the injured for healing." He jerked his head towards Mai, in case the commander was stupid enough to fail to make the connection.

The man stared, and Sokka couldn't help but think that something about the guy was familiar. Had they met before? At the South Pole? The commander's frown deepened. "What's your name and rank?"

Not so stupid after all, then. By way of reply, Sokka said, "Slush."

That was the signal for the rest of the plan to happen all at once. Most of the rebel group began running away while Longshot whipped his bow off his back and drew an arrow in one smooth motion; as a series of bolts buried themselves in the necks of the commander's aides, Sabure was swinging a fist into the air, and a small gray ball was following the motion to whip high into the sky. It exploded into fireworks as Sokka let go of Mai, reached out to grab the surprised commander's chest armor, and yanked him into a fall. Just like Suki had yanked Sokka to smack face-first into the
training mats in the Kyoshi Dojo so many times over the past weeks, Sokka guided his opponent so that the commander landed on the paved ground with the sound of a shattering nose.

He turned to find Suki holding Mai, smiled at them both, and then ran with them in the opposite direction of the Unagi attack. Longshot followed at a steady walk, stopping to fire an arrow at anyone who called to them, but that merely delayed the pursuit. Eventually, enough of the soldiers would notice to mount an unstoppable attack.

Fortunately, Sokka and company didn't have to wait that long.

A heavy lowing sound filled the air, drawn by Sabure's clay fireworks ball, and Appa stomped to a landing right there in the Navy base. Without even slowing, the other rebels ran straight up the bison's tail and jumped into the saddle. Sokka and Suki took their time getting Mai aboard with a bit more care, while Longshot played rearguard and made harassing shots back at the scattered pursuit.

Sokka settled Mai against the back of the saddle and helped her loop her arms through the hold-holes. "You still doing okay?" He expected a snarky reply, but she just pressed her lips together and gave a shaky nod. Was it Sokka's imagination, or was she looking paler, paler than usual?

Suki settled down beside Mai and took one of her hands. "I'll watch out for her. Get us out of here."

Sokka gave her a quick salute and then shoved his way to the front of the saddle, where he found Aang ready at his usual spot on Appa's head. Aang looked back with raised eyebrows, and Sokka nodded. "Mission accomplished."

A 'yip-yip' later, they were flying through the night sky, leaving the soldiers and sea monster behind them.

Aang didn't find out about Mai's injury until he landed Appa out in Kyoshi Island's forest and all the rebels had disembarked, leaving the small group alone in the saddle. "What happened?"

He watched while Suki probed at the armor over Mai's right side. Mai grunted, and Suki shook her head. "She took a fireball, and the heat did damage straight through her tunic. I don't want to risk taking the armor off in case any skin goes with it. We have healers on Kyoshi Island, but after tonight..." She shrugged.

Aang didn't understand. He turned to Sokka. "We need to get her help as soon as possible! Real help!"

Sokka scratched his chin. "I agree, but Suki has a point; even if we take Mai to the other side of the island, can we be sure that anyone who sees her will keep quiet about a soldier in old armor showing up with a large burn? But we do need to find help fast. Where's the nearest healer not on Kyoshi Island?"

"Chin Village, on the mainland," Suki said. "It's about half a day by boat."

Aang felt his fists clench of their own accord. "Appa can get us there in two hours." He looked to Mai.

She swallowed, and nodded. "The burn will keep that long."

"I'm worried about shock," Suki said, standing up in the saddle. "Longshot, bring a blanket!" She turned back to Aang. "You need to keep her still, warm, and comfortable."
Aang nodded, and let out a heavy breath. "I don't know what we would have done without you. This whole time- you've been-"

Suki put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm happy to help. I was starting to think that this rebellion was pointless, before you came here. You've given a purpose to all our preparations, all the equipment we've been collecting. Thank you for making it all matter."

Aang nodded and gave her a hug, then stepped back and let Sokka have his moment.

It was almost funny, how the older boy suddenly couldn't look anyone in the eye as he said, "I'm-well, I'm really glad I met you. Even aside from the whole finding-my-sister thing. It's been- um, I want to say- well, I hope we get to see each other again. Soon. Or sooner rather than later. But later is better than never, so-"

Aang smiled as Suki stepped forward and cut Sokka off with a hug. She leaned her face towards his, but then slowed, and stepped back. "I hope so, too. But if not, I'm glad I could help you- all of you-move forward."

Then Sabure and Longshot were among them. Sabure had an enthusiastic handshake and wishes of pleasant roads. Longshot, of course, didn't say anything, but Aang could see the warmth in his eyes, and he even gave Mai a nod as he draped the blanket he brought over her. The two rebels leaped down from Appa, and Suki moved to follow them, but as she leaned over the edge of the saddle, she turned back to look at Mai. "Keep an eye on them, Mai. They need you, and I know you'll be back in action soon."

Mai said nothing, but she did wave back.

Suki leaped down, and even before her feet hit the ground, Aang had scampered back over to his place on Appa's head. "Yip-yip! And fast, for Mai!"

And so they left Kyoshi Island behind, flying out over the ocean waves while the moon lit their way.

In a moment of irony that even Zhao could appreciate, he and Yon Rha met the traitor in the navy base's prison building.

It was well past midnight when a group of soldiers dragged the young rebel into the interrogation room, shoved her down into the chair, and yanked the bag off of her head. While she caught her breath, the soldiers filed out and locked the door, leaving her trapped in the room with Zhao and Yon Rha. Zhao stood at the back of the room, waiting for the show to begin, and found himself reaching up to massage his bruised face again. He quickly put his hands down and returned his attention to the others.

"Agent Suki," Yon Rha said in an especially nasal tone, thanks to the broken nose he sustained 'battling' the rebels. "It's a shame we must finally meet under such circumstances."

The girl with the hard eyes and auburn hair maintained her composure, staring back at Yon Rha with a frown smaller than his but no less intense. "You had your soldiers lying in wait for me at the drop-point. You might have blown my cover."

Zhao had to admit he found her strength worthy of respect.

Yon Rha apparently did not agree. "And so what if I did? Your sole purpose in life is to notify me of all rebel activity on this island, especially action against my forces. You were supposed to let me know when and where I could set a trap for the Avatar. Yet a group of your people came strolling in
to my base tonight, right into this very prison, while others incited the Unagi into a rampage. Do you have any idea how much damage that thing did before we drove it away? It wrecked an entire battleship!

Suki's own voice never rose above a perfectly even tone. "I can only tell you what I know. You're aware that I'm just a foot soldier in the rebellion. The Avatar and Lady Caldera Yu Mai kept their full plans between themselves and only one or two others. I showed up at a regular meeting tonight to find out about the mission, and then I couldn't leave to send word to you about it."

"What was their objective?"

"Something in the prison records. I wasn't part of the primary team."

Zhao cleared his throat and spoke up. "And what team were you on? What did you do tonight?"

Suki looked over at him. "Who are you? My deal is with Commander Yon Rha only."

"Commander Zhao is an old friend. Answer his questions or I'll let him burn out your tongue."

Suki finally scowled at that, but faced Zhao and gave a small dip of her head. "I was part of the group infiltrating this building, but my job was to secure and hold the way out. The rest went deeper for reasons I was never told. They might have talked with some of the prisoners on the upper floors."

Zhao found that to be interesting speculation. He had encountered the rebels in the Archives, of course, and by the time he backtracked out of the communications office to chase them down, the whole group had already left the building and was running for the rendezvous with the sky bison. It was possible that this Suki was truly ignorant of what went on in the prison, but he doubted it. Was Yon Rha similarly suspicious? Thinking the situation over, Zhao rubbed his face, right where one of the rebels had delivered a palm strike that felt like it had been made of stone. Idly, he said, "Who was the best warrior amongst those on the primary mission?"

"Best warrior?" Suki's hands tightened into fists. "Hard to say. There's an Earthbender with a pretty good left hook."

"Never mind that," Yon Rha cut in. "I want to know about the leader of your group. During the escape from the prison, a young man with vivid blue eyes tried to trick me into letting the group pass. He was supporting an injured young woman. Something about him was familiar... those eyes..."

"The woman was Lady Mai herself, but I don't know how she got injured. The guy with blue eyes was a Water Tribe companion to the Avatar. I never caught his name."

Yon Rha sighed. "You're being singularly unhelpful tonight. What about the Avatar? Where is he now?"

"He left on his sky bison right after the mission was completed. Given how the rest of this operation was run, do you expect that he announced where he was going?"

Yon Rha actually growled at that. "This is a complete disaster! I lost soldiers, equipment, and an entire warship, with nothing to show for it!" He whirled and jammed a finger into the air aimed right at Zhao. "This is your fault! You had me sitting on my hands doing nothing while my enemies planned to make a fool of me!"

As if Zhao was any happier about the situation. His chance to catch the Avatar and punish Lady Mai were gone, although he had at least gotten a good hit in on the latter. Fortunately, Firebending wasn't the only skill Zhao possessed. He started to smile, but his sore face made it a painful exercise. "Those
orders all came from you, my friend. Of course, officers talk and give each other advice all the time, but none of it is ever recorded. To suggest after your failure that it was someone else's fault..." He saw Yon Rha tensing, and casually moved his hands to rest over his uniform's sash. "Well, I wonder what Admiral Chan will think when I give my report on the lack of initiative and discipline here on Kyoshi Island. You yourself co-signed my report on the rebel infiltrator in your communications office-

Yon Rha actually attacked, punching a stream of flame, but it wasn't entirely unexpected. Zhao brought both of his hands up to form a wedge, using his own Firebending to divide the blaze in half and send the twin gouts of fire flowing to either side of him. Zhao moved forward against the pressure, careful to keep himself properly rooted, and between the light of the flames and the slowness of his movement, his progress remained unnoticed until Yon Rha ceased the attack. The other commander stepped back in surprise at Zhao's proximity, but it was too late.

In a proper Agni Kai, Zhao would have been happy to prove his Firebending skill by defeating Yon Rha with nothing but flame. This, however, was a much more practical affair, and so he instead brought his holdout knife out of his sash and jammed it straight into Yon Rha's throat. Suki gasped and leaped to her feet, but when Zhao saw that she was merely taking a defensive stance, he returned his attention to Yon Rha. The commander of Kyoshi Island had collapsed to the ground, covered in his own blood, but he was still managing a wheezing respiration. To Zhao's surprise, Yon Rha was actually trying to say something. Curious in spite of his himself, he leaned forward to catch the final words.

"Mo-

"moth- er," Yon Rha said. Then his strength deserted him, and the body sagged with one last bubbling sigh.

That was disappointing, but then, what did he expect of a man so lacking in creativity or initiative? Zhao turned to Suki. "You killed him, traitor."

She blinked. "I- but it was you-

"Yon Rha briefed me on you weeks ago. I put through a transfer for one Lieutenant Kirai of Kyoshi Island, an Earthbender serving the Fire Navy. She's now a marine assigned to one of my ships. It is entirely within my power to order her into battle without any weapons or armor, against... oh, say, pirates."

Suki paled, and Zhao knew he had her.

He nodded. "So here's what happened. Yon Rha discovered that you had betrayed him, allying yourself with the Avatar and becoming a triple-agent. When he realized that, you killed him, and I bravely managed to subdue you, albeit too late to save my old friend. I won't have you executed as you deserve, though, because of your knowledge of the Avatar. Instead, I'll have you put in the brig on my command ship, so that I can continue to question you as I conduct my search. You'll be safe enough, and I'll make sure your sister isn't given any unpleasant assignments. Perhaps I can even quietly grant you a position in my service, once I catch the Avatar. It might not be ideal for you, it's a better fate than most traitors earn, and much more than Yon Rha ever intended to give you. Now, with all that in mind, is there any information you might have forgotten to include in your earlier answers?"

Suki stood there for a long moment, and then let out a sigh that deflated her whole body. "Crescent Island," she whispered. "The Avatar's ultimate destination is the Waterbender prison on Crescent
Island."

Zhao smirked again, but this time, the pain of his bruised face couldn't stop it. "Good. Now, it's time
to inform Yon Rha's subordinates of his untimely demise. I'd better get you on my ship quickly, as I
doubt you'll last long here before you suffer an 'accident' of vengeance."

"Whatever you say, Commander Zhao." Her arms tense briefly as Zhao grabbed and twisted them
behind her back, as though he had taken her prisoner, but then she went slack in his grasp. He might
have lost an ally in the Navy, but Yon Rha could do no more good if the Avatar was leaving the
Southern Seas, and now he had a new resource in his path to glory.

Zhao’s smirk threatened to blossom into a full grin, and he had to work to school his face into an
expression of anger and mourning as he opened the door to report the tragic assassination of his old
friend.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Into the Ashland

Chapter Summary

Zuko goes to places that he'd rather just avoid.

Into the Ashland

In some places, fire could be a very difficult thing to find.

Zuko took another breath, focusing on the air's passage through his nostrils and down into the lungs where it became fuel for his Qi. He could feel the Qi within his body, the network of energy that stretched throughout his fibers and touched the edge of spirit. It was stronger now than it had been in years, thanks to his body's restoration over the last month. He actually felt alive once more, yet the flame within still refused to answer his call, no matter how loudly he called, no matter how long he meditated. The absence within tried to push him away, but he would not back down against a mere absence. There were much greater things to fear, like-

"Pack your bags, Zuzu! Mai has finally come through."

Zuko startled from his cross-legged lotus position, nearly disrupting the short table in front of him and the candles arrayed across its surface. The tongues of flame danced at the wind of his movement, their light splaying chaotically across the walls of his oversized room. It was the first time they had moved since he began his meditation.

Teeth reflexively grinding together at that thought, Zuko turned to regard his sister with his good eye. "I told you to knock before coming in here."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Her tone was anything but contrite, and she didn't even try to hide that she was rolling her eyes. "I merely thought that you would be interested in news of the one woman in the world with the poor taste to expend effort on your behalf. Mai has determined the location where you can at last restore your honor.

Zuko waited expectantly, but Azula simply leaned against his bedroom's door frame and stared back at him.

His patience ran out before hers. "Where?"

"I'm so glad you asked. Her message was short, little more than the proper codes and headers to get it to me, but the content was quite informative- Crescent Island. I don't suppose you know where that is?"

This time, it was Zuko who refused to speak.

Azula favored him with a smile before continuing, "It's the last Outer Island shown on most maps, and I took the liberty of requesting some additional information while I was at the outpost. The Fire Sages used to keep a temple there, but they sold the land to the military when the Grand Sage needed to make those reparation payments to Uncle. If the name has any ring of familiarity to you, it's for the Waterbender prison that was built there. I presume the Avatar is looking for a teacher, and considers
breaking one out of the most secure prison on the planet to be preferable to infiltrating the Dragon of the North's territory."

Zuko ignored Azula's attempt to flaunt her information sources and focused on one core fact. "That island is part of the Homeland. I'd have to break my banishment to ambush the Avatar there."

"Ah, so you can think." Azula gave a nod that was almost approving. "Yes, that's an awkward point, but I've already communicated the problem to Father. Between his influence and outright bribery, I'm sure we can shape the story so that the Fire Lord will accept it. After all, it's just a spot of dirt in the ocean boasting nothing but a prison for foreigners, far from the rest of the Homeland, so perhaps some creative reclassification can be done."

Zuko wasn't so sure, but even if it was true, he'd be putting more trust and dependence on Azula. And Father.

He wondered if having the flame within back would make him feel warmer. "What's our timing for the ambush?"

"Mm, Mai was less than helpful in that regard, so our only choice is to hurry to the island and then wait around for as long as it takes. I've already arranged for a ship to take us there, and June shall convey us to the port on her shirshu. It's better to keep our travel accommodations unofficial, for now." Azula straightened, and gave one last parting nod. "We leave at dawn."

Zuko remembered his first ride on the shirshu as being both painful and unpleasant, back when Azula had first found him and was bringing him to be 'cleaned up.' Now, it was no longer a painful experience, but not the least bit more pleasant.

The company was only part of the problem. June was at the front of the saddle, with Azula behind her, and Zuko at the rear.

The mole-like beast loped quickly across the landscape, cutting a path through the colonies. Zuko watched them pass by, finding a kind of unreality in the sights. He knew the colonies well, had slept in the gutters of little towns and massive cities both, had clawed through the waste of the people of Fire and Earth in search of something to eat, had been pushed around by bullies in armor and bullies in farming rags. He knew the smells, the textures, the windings paths of the colonies, and still experienced them in his dreams. To see them passing so quickly, distant images on the horizon that might as well have been mirages, made the dreams seem more alive than the waking world.

It was a silent trip until they stopped for the first night. While the group had dinner around the campfire, Azula gave a monologue about the path she wanted to take to the port (complete with dramatic motions towards her map). Afterward, June spent the whole evening having a conversation in baby-talk with her shirshu. Zuko kept silent, and endured Azula's regular barbs.

They set off again early the next day, but things did not go as smoothly as they had the prior day. The ground grew rockier, like a mountain had died and its bones were left to sink slowly into the ground. Sharp gray cliffs rose up out of nowhere to twist the roads, and there seemed to be a thickness to the air. Zuko didn't understand until midmorning, when June brought her mount to a halt, and pointed ahead. "This is bad. That's an ashland."

He had heard the term, but never seen one. Zuko sat taller in the saddle, and sure enough, he could see a brown smudge on the horizon.

Between the bounty hunter and Zuko, Azula squirmed to try to get a better look over the shoulder of
June snorted. "They're relatively new. When the Fire Nation made that big Comet Offensive, a lot of landscape got scorched. Some of it was so bad, the only thing left were dunes of ash. The Earth Kingdom- sorry, the Colonial Continent- got a lot more little deserts, that day."

Zuko's vision was suddenly eclipsed by Azula's topknot as she craned her neck for her own look. "Interesting. I wouldn't mind seeing such a thing up close."

"Yes, Princess, you would." June shook her head. "When I called them dunes, I wasn't exaggerating. The embers are piled up like sand, except they're lighter and softer, so they gets picked up by the wind much easier. Trying to see or breathe in an ashland isn't fun, not unless some rain is really coming down. We need to go around or wait for more accommodating weather."

"We can't wait." Azula gave a small huff. "Very well. Pick the path you think is best."

June snapped her whip to the right, and the shirshu took off in that direction on a path that would angle around the devastation on the horizon. The creature's pace slowed within the first hour, however, as the road disintegrated into a badlands. The stone cliffs became even sharper and more sudden, and Zuko could see the obvious signs of Earthbending in the structures. For there to be so many, a great battle must have been fought, here.

That would explain the ashland.

The hours slowed. The shirshu was doing more climbing than running, soon, and June had to bring it to a halt regularly to check their course against her compass. Each time, it seemed they had drifted back towards the ashland. Zuko looked up to find the sun at one point in the journey, and discovered that they had passed straight into the late afternoon. With each stop, the shirshu was getting more and more off-course. The air grew harsh with the smell of fresh smoke, and the horizon visible even from the cliff peaks drew shorter and shorter.

It wasn't until Zuko began coughing that they realized what was going on.

"Oh no," June hissed, as he brought the coughing under control. "There's ash in the air."

"I thought we were going around," Azula said.

"We tried, Princess. We're still going to try, but this isn't looking good. They say-"

"Who says?"

"Travelers. Other bounty hunters. Soldiers coming back from long patrols." June turned around in the saddle, and for the first time ever, Zuko saw real emotion on her face.

She was worried.

If Azula saw the same thing, she gave no sign. "And what do these experts say?"

"That the bigger ashlands- the ones where more people died- are haunted."

"And you believe this nonsense?"

"I believe that people say things for a reason, Princess. Sometimes it's because those things are true and sometimes it's because people just want them to be true, but there's always something that inspired the talk. Maybe the ashlands drift more than anyone realizes, and the winds sound like Spirit
voices, but it's still looking like we're going to have a tough time outrunning this one."

"Hmph." Azula slid down off the saddle, and went back to where her luggage was lashed to the shirshu's side. "Then we'd better prepare ourselves to handle the inevitable."

She produced a silk tunic, as black as ash, and tore strips off of it. Those became masks worn over noses and mouths, and the rest of the robe became a muzzle for the shirshu. The creature was lucky in that it didn't have eyes worth worrying about; Zuko and the others would have to simply squint at any trouble. Thus prepared, they set off again.

They didn't get far before the world turned to soot around them.

The winds picked up, and with them came the biting of the cinders. Even through the silk mask, the air took on the taste and smell of a pyre, and Zuko had to exert all his will just not to gag. June leaned forward in her seat, patting the shirshu's head and shouting some encouragements to it, but the words were lost to the wind by the time they reached Zuko's ears. Azula curled up and covered her eyes, and every so often Zuko would feel her shaking with coughs.

At last, Zuko had to close his good eye against the storm of ash.

He wondered if he would die, here, in the howling detritus of the Fire Nation's war of conquest.

They had no eyes, but nevertheless looked down through the ash, seeing the son and daughter of a traitor- the heirs of a kingdom of blood- and felt hunger.

Years, months, days, hours later, Zuko felt a presence looming over him, and risked cracking his good eye open enough to look ahead. The sky was nothing more than a brownish glow behind the storm of soot. It reminded Zuko of a nightmare he had, a year or so ago, when he passed out in a heap of garbage in one of the colonies and dreamed of an endless swarm of flies. The memory made him shudder, but he forced himself to truly see the world around him, not the old nightmare. It seemed like a shadow, darker than the semi-night of the rest of the sky, was rising up ahead. He reached over Azula- she was almost bent double in her seat, the ash piling on top of her- to grab June's shoulder, and forced her to turn in the direction of the shadow. He wasn't sure if the bounty hunter was even conscious at first, but after a long moment, he felt her muscles stiffen in his grip, and she snapped her whip towards the shadow.

The shirshu, head covered by its silk muzzle, moved in that direction.

It proved to be a mountain, perhaps the offspring of the one that had died farther back on the road. Even at its base, it rose steeply into the sky, and by hugging the side, at least some of the wind could be blocked. June guided her mount along the mountain's roots, and Zuko wondered if they would be doomed to circle it forever, but then they encountered a new sound, the snapping of canvas in the gales. The shirshu took on new life, bounding towards the whisper on the wind, and before Zuko even realized what was going on, the whole group had passed beneath some kind of covering into a cave.

He brushed the ash from his hair, from his face, and only when the stinging had settled into dullness did he open his eye to look around. It was indeed a cave, blocked from the outside by a canvas tarp hammered into the stone, but the chamber was larger than he expected. The ceiling was as high as the Fire Palace's Grand Hall, or at least as high as Zuko remembered it, and it stretched back beyond easy sight. Rather than growing darker in the distance, Zuko could see a glow like firelight deeper in the cave.
They all dismounted, Azula finally coming back to life to hurriedly shake off the cinders that clung to her body, and then they all worked together to run their hands through the shirshu's fur and relieve it of the weight of the accumulated ash. When that was done, they turned to regard the light in the distance.

"Doesn't make any sense," June said. "No one could live in the middle of an ashland, whether or not they have a handy little cave."

Azula crossed her arms over her chest. "Some of this continent's communities have advanced forms of fungus farming. If they have a water supply, there could be a settlement trapped in a network of caverns here, living off of mushrooms or somesuch. I say we go raid them for supplies and information."

Zuko looked at the distant light, and the emptiness within howled at the sight. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"Oh, well, if dear Zuzu has a bad feeling, then by all means, let's go back into that wasteland and stumble around until we die. That will be so much better!"

Zuko looked over at June where she was stroking the shirshu's nose, but she shrugged at him. "The princess has a point. Even if it doesn't make sense, we don't have much choice. And there were villages in the great forest that used to be here. I guess the survivors could have taken refuge in here when the Comet came and the armies fought." She stepped over to the saddle and swung herself up into it. "Besides, if there is trouble, we've got the advantage in speed and size."

Zuko shook his head, but Azula ignored him and began walking deeper into the cave, towards the beckoning light. June rode the shirshu behind her, leaving Zuko in the dark.

After a moment, he hurried after them.

It was a shorter walk than he expected, and soon enough the light resolved itself into torches and campfires. Each flame emitted a smoke and stench that implied rancid things about the fire's fuel. Their weak, dancing light spilled out in patches across the cave, battling against the darkness to reveal little snatches of civilization: A thin, ragged person here, a cluster of patched tents there, even one moo-sow lying in an alcove with struggled breathing. Everywhere Zuko looked, there were twisted and decaying reflections of his journey through the colonies.

One little shadow darted away from a nearby campfire and scampered across Zuko's path. He stopped short and the shadow dashed in front of him, but he felt an impact against the toe of his boot and the figure toppled to the ground. There was a cry of a child's pain, and a little face turned back to catch the light of one of the fires. Zuko was instinctively reaching to help the child when he realized he knew that face.

It was the face of his own youth.

Zuko froze, unsure of his sense of reality, trying to see past the illusion to find the true face of the child on the floor in front of him. From behind, a gruff voice called out, "Where are you, boy?! When I catch you I'll shove your filthy hide in the campfire and see how you talk back then!"

The boy gasped and scrambled away into the darkness, while Zuko stood there and tried to make himself believe that it wasn't his face on the child, it was just his single eye fooled by the low light. Eventually, he sighed and turned around to find the owner of the gruff voice stumbling into view. The man might have been heavier once, perhaps even muscular, but now his skin hung just as loosely from thin arms as his ragged clothes. He slowed when he saw Zuko and the others, his gaze...
coming to a stop on the shirshu. "Fire Nation." He spat into the darkness. "Where did you fools come from?"

Azula stepped forward with her shoulders squared, and Zuko expected her to simply kill the man for his impertinence, but she merely said, "We're travelers who became lost in the ashland. We require survival supplies, along with any other assistance which your people can offer."

The man snorted. "Do we looking cracking rich to you? You want to wait out the storm, we aren't going to bother to stop you. And if you see that boy again, you tell him he better run." With that, the man whirled and shuffled back towards one of the tents.

Azula threw a glance at Zuko, but he could only offer a shrug in return. They both looked to June as she slid out of her saddle and found her regular cheeky smirk back in place as she said, "Well, if we're lucky, these losers will have some hooch they can share. Let's go find out!"

To Zuko's relief, the refugees did not have any alcohol of any kind they could share. As soon as June learned that, she had declared that she was done for the day, and went to set up her sleeping bag beside her shirshu, at the edge of the tent town.

Unfortunately, the refugees also didn't seem to have any water, either, which was a bit more distressing.

"You're sure the ash-storm won't last past tomorrow morning." Azula's question sounded more like a statement to Zuko's ears, but the old woman who had consented to share her campfire for the night-Youling- didn't seem to notice.

She scratched at her oily gray hair and answered without ever looking at any of her guests. "Stands to reason. Only so much wind to go around, right?"

Far too familiar with the sight of Azula’s rolling eyes, Zuko turned his attention away from the others and to the campfire itself. It reeked just like all those in this camp, but he was growing used to the smell, to the thickness it gave to the air in the cavern. There was a smothering feeling to the atmosphere that reminded Zuko of the heavy blankets he had as a child, piled up on his little body during the cold months. He had found them oppressive in their weight, pinning him to the bed and discouraging him from movement even in his most restless sleep. Now, he experienced the memory almost like a fond dream, and felt his head growing heavy. Perhaps he would rest his eye for just a moment, close it and think back to his days in the Fire Palace, when things had been better and Azula hadn't discovered cruelty yet and Mother was there and Father-

"Ah!!"

Zuko's eye snapped open at Azula's cry and he turned to find her standing, staring at a group of refugees who were passing by. "What is it?"

Azula ignored him, dashing past the campfire and grabbing at one of the people. She yanked her target’s arm to reveal a woman in a cloak, one Zuko did not recognize. The woman didn't seem to be alarmed by Azula's accosting, her eyes dead and posture drooping. After a moment, Azula released the woman and returned to the campfire. Youling ignored the entire incident.

Zuko shifted so that he was sitting closer to his sister. "Why did you do that?"

Azula gave him a glare, but then sighed and turned to look into the flames. "I thought that woman looked familiar for a moment. It must have been the poor lighting and abysmal air quality in here."
"Familiar? Who did you think she was?"

Azula did not look at him. "It doesn't matter. It wasn't her, and it never will be her. Now be a good big brother and kindly shut up."

It was too strange for Zuko to take any offense; Azula usually had more control than that. Unable to figure it out, he turned his own attention to the campfire, seeking the heart of the flames, the brightest and hottest point within the burning. Perhaps if he meditated, here in this soporific atmosphere, he could find the core of fire within himself. Zuko took a lotus position, tucking his legs together and extending his arms loosely, and began regulating his breathing, sending his conscious within himself.

His concentration was ruined when he heard his mother ask, "Have you seen Zuko?"

Zuko's eye snapped open again, but she was nowhere to be found. Instead, the same woman Azula had accosted was talking to Youling, saying, "My son and husband were fighting again, and when I got home just now, the neighbors told me that little Shugao ran off. I can't find him anywhere."

Somehow, Zuko was absolutely sure that the child he had collided with before was this missing Shugao.

For her part, Youling shrugged. "Haven't seen him. If he's missing, then he probably went into the ashlands and choked to death."

Shugao's mother sighed. "That's a shame. I was hoping we'd die together."

Youling scratched at her hair again. "But choking on ash is better than starving. And this way, he won't get shoved into a campfire by his father again."

Even Azula looked up at that, and the ash-streaked expression she directed at Zuko conveyed her weariness. "Is it just me," she whispered, "or are these people even stranger than the usual oppressed and traumatized peasantry?"

Zuko ignored his sister, and watched as Shugao's mother began limping back the way she came. As she passed away from Youling's campfire, the shadows writhed across her face, and when the light touched her features again, Zuko found himself watching his mother walk away in filthy refugee rags.

He stood up, eliciting a grunt of surprise from Azula, and reached out for the woman. "Wait!"

Shugao's mother turned, and once more wore an unfamiliar face.

"I'll find your son."

Youling said, "Out in the ashland?"

"Yes." He immediately turned and headed off in the direction of June and her shirshu, dodging the tents he found in his path.

Azula came trotting up behind him and hissed, "What do you think you're doing? Risking your life for a peasant?"

"I can't let a child die out in that ash."

"Funny, that's what you've done your entire life." Surrounded by the camps of the displaced and the lowly, Zuko came to a halt and whirled on his sister, but she stared him down. "What? Did you
develop a taste for rescuing children during these last few years? Or do you expect this to prove that you're the Fire Prince Restored, committing acts of charity from out of the old legends?"

The anger flared in Zuko's heart, but he remembered the last time he had tried to turn that against Azula. He reached within and hoped to feel the flame that had been missing for so long, but the familiar absence was the only thing he found, and he knew that could not stand against the cutting edge that was his sister. So rather than pushing up against her, he met her eyes with his one, and said, "That woman reminds me of Mother."

Even in the poor light, with her face covered in the smeared filth of the ashland, he could see Azula pale at that. "Why- why would you mention her?"

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't I?"

Azula shook her head. "She's not here. It doesn't matter what you see, she's not here."

"See?" Zuko found himself grabbing his sister's arms, pulling her closer. "Did you see her, too?"

Instead of an answer, he got a solid knee to the stomach, crumpling him with a sickening pain that radiated out to his whole body. When he looked up again, Azula was gone. He was alone on the floor of the cavern, ignored by people who blurred together in the dim light and went about their lives as if they had already died.

At last, Zuko understood.

Azula didn't understand.

Mother was gone. Azula didn't even like to think about her, so there was no chance of latent psychological issues coming into play. Azula was possessed of flawless mental health; she knew because Father had told her so.

And yet she still saw Mother's face.

Zuko had, too.

There was something wrong here.

Given the evidence, and with the only alternative being that Azula and Zuzu both were suddenly going insane, she was forced to revise her earlier opinion about ashlands being haunted.

The only question, then, was the extent of the threat.

Azula had left Zuko on the floor of the cavern, clutching his stomach. Father had charged her with taking care of her brother, of making sure he caught the Avatar and came home, and given that he had no Firebending with which to protect himself against Spirits, the most direct way for Azula to complete her mission would be to stay by Zuko's side. However, Azula also knew that sticking to defense was no way to win a fight- just ask the Airbenders. She had to confront the threat, go on the offensive, and Zuko would just be a liability in that situation. Besides, this fight might very well transcend physical considerations, so staying near Zuzu might be no different than leaving him behind.

And he kept talking about Mother. Azula didn't like that.

When she got back to Youling's tent, Azula marched right up to where the old woman was sitting
and reached out a hand to seize complete control of the campfire. It shifted into vivid shades of blue and leaned so that the tips of the flames licked at her hand like a loyal hound.

Without moving, Youling said, "That's a neat trick."

"It is the purest expression of Firebending that a human has ever demonstrated. Unless you want to fully understand what that means, you will answer my questions."

"Seems fair."

Azula took a fighting stance, ready to strike as soon as she detected a lie or a deflection. "Are you a Spirit, or are you and the other filthy peasants here merely victims?"

Youling hunched forward, casting her face into shadow. "Can't say I've ever really thought about it."

The lack of answer didn't bother Azula, as it was easy enough to determine by experiment. Human skin would burn at contact with fire, while Spirits would- according to the legends- have their manifested forms reduced. Azula swung a hand covered in flame and aimed for Youling's closest shoulder, something non-vital that could be damaged without threat to life. The blow was about to land when Youling snapped her head up, and looked at Azula with Mother's face.

Azula's flame immediately went out, and it was just a plain fist that smacked into the bony shoulder.

Then something wrapped around Azula's ankles and yanked. She fell to the ground and everything when dark when her forehead struck the stone floor.

Zuko couldn't find his sister, and when he went looking for June, the bounty hunter and the shirshu both were nowhere in the cavern. It was as though they had transformed into refugees, melding into the huddled masses sitting around the various campfires. Zuko wondered whether they would realize if such a thing had happened to them; he wondered if he himself was wearing the face of one of the refugees, and even now his sister was searching fruitlessly for him. Would she search? She said that Father had sent her to bring Zuko back, and Azula always did everything that Father commanded.

Would Father-

Zuko let his doubts fade away. In this situation, they would be a liability. He felt that the only way out would be to save the boy Shugao, and he would have to do it alone.

He scrounged up enough cloth for a hood and protective mask that would protect him from the ash, grabbed a torch from one of the braziers scattered between the tents, and made his way back out of the cavern. The fire revealed a lone set of child-sized footsteps leading to the canvas tarp protecting the cave entrance, and the only thing that surprised Zuko was how unsurprised he really was. There should have been tracks from when he, Azula, and June had walked through the tunnel hours earlier, or failing that, the signs of the shirshu's passages still should have been visible, but Zuko now understood that what he was seeing wasn't necessarily connected to reality.

It was just like those stories Uncle had enjoyed telling, before he left for the North Pole.

When Zuko threw aside the tarp, he found not the ashland, but the battlefield outside Ba Sing Se beneath a red sun.

It was just as he remembered it. The Outer Wall was the most obvious feature, standing tall and solid on the horizon, massive even at this distance. The killing fields stretched out between it and Zuko, muddy and ravaged from the days and weeks and months of fighting. The landscape was just as devastated as the ashland, but at least it wasn't trying to rise up and choke anyone. Zuko lowered his
torch, and pulled back his hood and mask as he wandered forward, gaze swinging back and forth in
the hope of detecting any threats before they found him. He was at least fortunate in that there were
no bodies on the killing fields, so it must have been a while since any fighting had taken place.

He tried to reach inside for his fire but found only fear, and he withdrew from that sensation like a
hand yanked from a flame.

Voices carried out through the dead air, and Zuko followed them away from the Outer Wall. The
mountain with the cave full of refugees was missing, just like the ashland itself. As he walked, he
came to recognize the land around him. This was near where the army had camped during his time in
service. He remembered the shape of the land, the color of the dirt beneath his feet. He picked out a
shape on the horizon that he knew would be the main camp, the collection of tents where the mighty
would-be conquerors of Ba Sing Se rested their heads in anticipation of a glory that would never
come to them. When he had arrived with Father all those years ago, he had been given a collection of
tents that was more like a suite of rooms, decorated with silks and wall-scrolls and weapon racks to
hide the cloth nature of the walls. It was Zuko's first home away from home, the first time he had
slept and lived outside of the Fire Palace with no exact knowledge of when he would be able to
return.

The sounds of voices rose and fell again in the distance with a consistent beat, rising discordant cries
of exultation.

Zuko's blood chilled as he recognized those calls. They were a traditional war chant, something
soldiers used to prepare their hearts and minds for battle even as they strapped armor to their bodies
and stretched their muscles.

He had heard this specific chant for the first time just before the last battle he would ever fight in the
war.

Zuko's stomach clenched and his legs turned to rubber, dumping him in the dirt of the path and
making him drop his torch. He shut his eye against the crimson glare of the sun and tried to push
himself up, willing away the nausea that was threatening to overcome him. None of this was real; it
was an illusion of a past that was dead and gone. Father wanted him back now, had sent Azula to
make it happen. The Avatar was back, and Zuko would catch him.

And Father was nowhere near the fighting that day. He couldn't have been.

Eventually, Zuko's strength came back. He heaved himself to his feet, opened his eye, and found
himself in a forest beneath a sliver of a moon and a sky filled with stars. His torch was gone.

Azula sat in front of the campfire, trying to remember who Azula was. She knew, of course, that she
was Azula. Her name was Azula, and that fact was not in dispute. It was a grand name, a powerful
name, a name that spoke of a superlative history and proud ancestors. It was just that she couldn't
remember any of that history or who those ancestors might be, and she found that worrisome.

It didn't take a tactical genius to know that memory problems were never good.

Azula pulled her dusty green cloak tighter, and looked around at the other people sitting around the
campfire. She couldn't remember any of their names either, although their faces seemed familiar. The
two who most disturbed Azula were the sad, smiling woman and the scowling man with the long
thin chin-beard. She feared to attract their attention, but at the same time, she craved it with a heat
that warmed her skin. It wasn't as bad as with the other people- the old fat bearded man, the young
man with the white skin and blue lips, the sighing girl, the giggling girl, or even the cobweb-covered
corpse that wore a flame crown in its brittle hair- but something about them all nipped at the edges of her lack of memory.

It also felt like someone was missing, but she couldn't imagine who.

Perhaps they were all waiting for him.

Why was she so sure it was a him?

Zuko had no idea what forest he was in, but he could no longer see any signs of the Ba Sing Se landscape, and that was some small comfort.

It was hard going at first, making his way through the forest. With such a small moon, barely any light made its way down through the clusters of little leaves. Zuko stumbled his way from tree to tree, occasionally calling out for Shugao with as much hope of finding the boy as he had that the boy would find him first. But slowly, Zuko realized there was more light to work with than that of the moon and the stars. As his eye adjusted, he could detect a faint luminescence in the trunks of the trees themselves, allowing them to stand out from the darkness around them. It felt like he was wandering for hours, but things became more distinct as time passed, until the entire forest was reflected in dim shades of gray.

With the ability to see came the knowledge that he was being hunted. It was a human, or something shaped like it. The silhouette was shapeless, but the figure was the same general size as a human, taller than it was wide, and it moved like a person, albeit with uncanny grace. Zuko bided his time, letting his eye become more and more attuned to the dim light, letting his ears learn the sounds of the hunter's whispering movements.

When he judged that his perceptions were as good as they were going to get in this forest, and he more or less had an idea of the hunter's position, he bent his path to take him around a copse of tall trees. In that instant when he was lost to the hunter's sight, Zuko turned and took an attack stance, ready to leap on his stalker as soon as the figure stumbled into his trap.

He hadn't expected the hunter to double back around the other side of the copse of trees.

Zuko's only warning was a whistle through the air, and he jumped away just into time to avoid the flying talons made of shadow itself that almost landed in his back. He quickly turned to face his attacker, and in the glow of the nearby tree trunks, he could finally get a good look at her. The woman was young, Zuko's age or perhaps a little younger, with skin so pale it almost glowed in the night. The face was the only part of her that was easily distinctive from her surroundings, as her hair and cloak were both the darkest black. There was something familiar about her, and it wasn't until she moved and threw another set of shadow talons with a snapping motion as fast as lightning that he realized who she was. The throwing style was almost as much of a giveaway as the girlish ox-horn buns style in which she wore her hair. Mai was all grown up, now.

The realization slowed Zuko, and he couldn't dodge this latest set of projectiles. They bit into his clothes but didn't slow, their speed fighting back against his inertia and winning enough to drag and pin him against a tree. Zuko tried to pull away, but his clothing resisted and the talons- no, this close to the glowing bark, he could see that they were shards of volcano glass- refused to relinquish their hold in the tree. Zuko's continued pulling tore at his clothes, but before he could rip free, Mai was standing right in front of him holding a dagger beneath his chin, the blade a sanded and polished work of black volcano glass.

Her eyes met Zuko’s single one, and he felt his face burning in shame. "Wha- what are you doing
She tilted her head and shrugged, pushing her cloak to fall back off her shoulders, revealing the pure white funeral garb she wore beneath. "Isn't it obvious? I'm here to mourn for you, Prince Zuko. You'll fail to find the boy Shugao, and then you will die in fire."

TO BE CONTINUED
Zuko's War

Chapter Summary

Zuko's backstory revealed!

Mostly.

Zuko's War

Aang didn't quite understand, yet, the full nature of being the Avatar. It came with responsibilities and powers that he was only beginning to taste. So it was hard, sometimes, to say when he simply had a bad feeling like everybody else got, or when some perception granted by the Avatar Spirit was detecting a manifestation beyond her normal ken. How much was imagination, and how much was wisdom from beyond his humanity? Nevertheless, Aang had woken up just now, in the middle of the night, with the distinct impression that his Avatar Sense was tingling.

He was sleeping as he usually did, atop Appa's head in the great outdoors, beside the hut where a healer lived and worked near Chin Village. Grass shifted in the soft breeze, and the road in the distance was completely deserted. Aang slid down from Appa and snuck around to the front of the hut. Sokka's tent was pitched nearby, and the older boy was presumably inside, dreaming about killer food or something like that. Aang turned to the hut itself, and leaned his head through the entrance. The only light within came from the glow of the moon and stars through the windows, casting just enough illumination to reveal the pallet where Mai was sleeping, recovering from the burns she had received on Kyoshi Island. She was tossing and turning beneath her blanket, which Aang didn't think was good. The healer had said that Mai needed to avoid moving, so that the skin of her side could heal properly. On the other hand, she also needed her rest, so waking her up in the middle of the night wouldn't be good, either.

Aang compromised by tiptoeing up to her, thinking to perhaps straighten blanket or something soothing, but as he approached, she rolled over again, muttering and breathing laboriously. Was she having a bad dream? Aang leaned over her, unable to help noticing that her normally shining hair was matted with sweat. She spoke again, and this time, Aang caught the word: "Zuko... fire..."

What was a zuko? A Fire Nation term? Something to do with her injury?

Before Aang could decide what to do, he heard a familiar cooing, and Momo flew into the hut through a window to land right on top of Mai's blanket. The lemur turned in a quick circle before settling down as if to sleep, and Mai immediately calmed. Her breathing slowed, and the tenseness in her form faded. Aang waited a little longer to confirm it, but she seemed to be okay now, sleeping peacefully and no longer moving. Satisfied at his luck, he headed back to Appa, looking forward to his own sleep. If Mai was feeling well, they'd have to move on in the morning, in case word of their visit got back to the Fire Nation.

A fight would be the last thing Mai needed.

Pinned to a tree by shards of volcano glass in a glowing forest that couldn't be real, Zuko's mind was racing as he tried to make sense of things. In front of him stood a woman who could only be Mai- the
girl from a place of memory in his heart where even he feared to tread - brandishing a black glass knife and claiming to be here for his death. "How - how can you be here? Where is here?"

"Oh, Prince Zuko. There's so much you don't understand." Mai lowered the knife and stuck her tongue out at him. "Destiny knew what it was doing when it gave your little sister more than the usual share of brains. Too bad you didn't bring her along." She pulled her cloak back over her white funeral garb and pranced over to a copse of trees, coming to lean against one of the trunks and turning sultry eyes back to Zuko. "I'm here to save you, my Prince! My body and heart are yours forever!"

There was no doubt that she was beautiful, surpassing all the fantasies that Zuko had ever conjured of what Mai would be once she left childhood behind, but all he felt from this sight was a coldness that calmed his mind and revealed the answers he had been seeking. "You're not Mai."

"How can you say that? You haven't even tasted me yet."

"There's more to humans than how they look."

"There is?"

"Much more."

"Huh." The Thing That Was Not Mai stood up straight again and raised her hands to touch her face. "You humans give so much weight to how things look, I thought that it was all you care about. Too bad I couldn't borrow her full personality as well, but I like her manner of speaking." She skipped over to Zuko and placed a hand - warm through his clothes, almost burning - on his chest. Their faces were so close that he could feel her sweet breath on his lips as she whispered, "Would it hurt more if I tore out your heart while wearing this face?"

Zuko did what he did best and completely ignored the uncomfortable question. "What is going on? Why are you doing this?"

"Why?" Not-Mai backed away from him again, cocking her head to the side and giving him a confused stare. "Now you're just messing with me. I know humans are experts in revenge. You love it more than you love each other."

"Revenge for what?"

"Oh, why limit it?" Not-Mai smiled and licked her lips. "Your nation has had a hundred years to accumulate guilt for what it's done to the entire world. Let's not devalue that kind of effort by pinning it down in the form of a list."

It was as Zuko suspected. "You were the Spirit of this forest. You want revenge for the ashland."

"A Spirit of the forest, you ignoramus. Do you think all that ash came from a handful of trees? The forest stretched from horizon to horizon. Entire villages of humans lived in its comfort, so far apart that they forgot about each other centuries ago, and did homage to a variety of Spirits. And yet they all contributed to the one army that marched off to save the Land of Earth." Not-Mai giggled. "You probably would have liked that army. It was very, very big, and they all had nice shiny armor. You humans love things that are big and shiny. But then again, your people chased them back to this forest, and then used the power of the Comet to kill every last soldier, so maybe you wouldn't have liked it so much. You're not supposed to burn the things you like." She stepped forward and caressed the scar on Zuko's face. "Right?"

Zuko yanked away, finally ripping his clothes enough to tear away from the shards of volcano glass
that had been pinning him to the tree. He took an attack stance and faced his opponent.

Not-Mai shook her hands free from her cloak and planted them on her hips. "I didn't think scars were so sensitive," she said, winking.

"Are you going to talk me to death, or are you going to get this revenge you want?"

"You're right! The night is old, and if we're going to get this done, we need to do it before your Patron lights up the sky again." Not-Mai raised a hand above her head and a shaft of moonlight broke through the forest's canopy to light her up. She swung her hand out, and Zuko tensed for an attack-

-as she pointed off to her left. "That way."

Zuko blinked, and looked where she was pointing. It was just more of this Spirit Forest. "That way for what?"

"The boy you're looking for. Shugao. He went that way. Off you go! I want to see your cute little butt bouncing along in that direction. Quickly, now!"

Zuko didn't relax out of his stance. "I thought you wanted revenge. You're trying to send me in the wrong direction."

"Wow. I can see why your Mai likes you so much; humans love the chance to nurture and control other humans." Not-Mai pushed her cloak back fully, once again revealing the white mourning robes beneath, undyed and unsullied. They were robes without life, but also robes on which anything could be written, the turning point of the reincarnation cycle. "There is no wrong direction here, Prince Zuko. Either you will fail in your search, and wander the ashland until you choke to death in the foulness of your own people, or you will succeed in your quest to rescue Shugao, and walk into the bright world once more, ruined by the experience. Ask your sister sometime about the strategic importance of no-win situations. I doubt you'll understand, but it should make her happy, at least."

Not-Mai yanked her black cloak off and tossed it at Zuko's face. He grabbed it in midair and pulled it away so that it wouldn't entrap him, removing it from his vision so that he was only left blind for less than a second-

-and the Spirit that had been wearing Mai's face was gone.

Zuko got moving a moment later in the same direction that the Spirit had pointed, leaving the cloak behind, and found a path through the underbrush of the forest, a dirt path on which child-sized footsteps led off into the night.

Zuko walked for years until he came to a fork in the path. It split neatly, with a thick swath of trees down the middle, the two new paths completely invisible to each other. Zuko looked for the tracks, and found them leading clearly down the path on his right. It was so clear that he expected a trick, and scouted the left path for a short distance to make sure that the tracks wouldn't magically switch.

Eventually, he decided to go back and take the right path, and turned around to find his mother walking towards him.

Zuko jolted to a stop and blinked his one good eye, but the vision didn't change. His mother was walking slowly down the path in her old red and gold cloak, her hood up and her head bowed. Beside her was a darker figure, matching her pace, and as the pair approached, Zuko's stomach clenched. He recognized the person walking beside his mother, and realized what Not-Mai had
meant by this experience being ruinous. The person escorting his mother was Piandao, his father's trusted servant. It was exactly like the last time Zuko had ever seen his mother.

He backed away from the approaching figures, one step at a time, and as he walked, the packed dirt of the path hardened, and his boots clacked against the polished marble of the Fire Palace’s courtyard. Zuko whirled, finding a mix of the familiar and the foreign, the palace he had grown up in looming above him even while the glowing trees of the Spirit Forest refused to give way, standing incongruously in the palace courtyard and blocking the longer view with their leaves. Mother and Piandao were close enough that their own footsteps were now clacking on the marble as well, and Zuko turned to face them. He couldn't let this be like all those years ago. "Mother," he called out, and realized with dismay that it had been the same opening he had used back then as well.

Mother looked up at last at the sound of his voice, and she once more wore the same wary expression beneath her hood. She moved towards Zuko, but Piandao stepped to block her path and said, "Prince Zuko, what are you doing out here so late? Getting in some extra Firebending practice?"

That was indeed what he had been doing, the first time, but this was different. He was in this forest to save Shugao, but perhaps he could save Mother as well. "Where are you taking her?"

"This has nothing to do with you, my Prince. Go back inside, go to bed, and everything will be fine."

Piandao was repeating himself like a memory, but this time Zuko would not just stand there in confusion. Even as Mother was nodding, saying, "Don't worry yourself about me. Good night, Zuko. I will always protect you," Zuko was moving forward, advancing on Piandao. He might not have his Firebending, but he was a man now, and he wasn't afraid of Father's thug. He could fight, even without fire, and would save his mother.

Five steps from where Zuko planned to begin his attack, Piandao drew a jian sword from its scabbard and pointed the blade directly at Zuko's face. Strangely, the blade was not metal. Zuko had seen Piandao's sword many times in his youth, during all those court demonstrations of trick swordplay. The sword had a metal blade, no different from any other jian.

This sword had a blade of black volcano glass, twinkling in the light of the moon and the stars and the luminescent trees.

Zuko tried to twist and dash around the blade, but Piandao moved to block him, slicing the sword across his path. Piandao's footwork kept his body between Zuko and Mother, his sword held out in an effective guard position. Zuko feinted to his left, and then tried to circle around the other way, but Piandao tilted the long blade to cut him off, and then let loose a flurry of stabs that made Zuko stumble backwards to avoid having his chest poked full of holes. He stumbled when he found not the flat marble of the courtyard, but a dip in the packed dirt of the forest path, and fell to the ground. Piandao drew his sword back even before Zuko finished his tumble.

When he looked up again, Piandao was once more leading Mother deeper down the path. The Fire Palace was gone.

As they moved away, rain began falling from a completely clear sky.

It started with a drop that smacked down on Zuko's head. As he got to his feet, other drops fell loudly around him. Zuko hurried after his mother, and the rain became denser, wind blowing it with extra strength to lash coldly.
Before he could reach Mother, Zuko realized that the rain was going to wash away Shugao's tracks on the other path.

Mother and Piandao continued on their way, not even looking back, moving briskly in the rain. Zuko was sure he could catch them, but what would he do, then? Could he fight Piandao? Could he convince Mother to flee?

Was any of it even real?

Zuko realized that this was the trick of the Spirit Forest. It was taunting him with failure, trying to sway him from his goal. A little refugee boy would be lost in this nightmare forever, and it would be Zuko's fault.

With one last look at his departing mother, Zuko turned and headed back for the fork in the path, to take the option that would actually let him save someone.

At the end of the path, as the rain trickled to a stop, Zuko found a familiar house and Not-Mai waiting for him. He was ashamed that his eyes fell on Not-Mai first where she was lounging on the forest floor, her black cloak spread beneath her. She looked up at him, her funeral robes in disarray and falling from her bare shoulders, and cooed, "Hello, sailor."

Behind her, a man's tortured scream rang out from the house, and a shudder moved up Zuko's spine.

Not-Mai rolled over to lie on her back and continued, "Oh, but that's right, you're not a sailor. Not anymore. How long did your glorious captaincy last? Three days? Four?" More speech came from the house, worried and urgent, but another scream- the same familiar voice- drowned them out.

Zuko found his hands tightening into fists. "I was captain for almost two weeks. We visited the Western Air Temple, and then sailed for the Earth Kingdom. We visited several ports in the colonies."

"And then they sent you ashore to ask your questions about arrow tattoos and ran for the setting sun, fleeing the sour tongue of their prince." Not-Mai giggled, twisting on her cloak. "I suppose your crew became pirates. Your nation has no love for deserters, even if the captain the left behind was just a boy whining for his mother's bosom."

Zuko reached down, grabbed the cloak spread on the ground, and yanked it from beneath Not-Mai, spinning and spilling her onto the mud. She laughed as Zuko marched past her and dragged the cloak along the ground, ruining both sides of it before casting it in a puddle. He approached this ominous house in his path, and as he really looked at it for the first time, he sucked in a pained breath.

He knew this place. It wasn't just a home; it was a small clinic, a place of healing for its village, though the village itself was nowhere to be seen in this forest. The scream rang out again from within, and Zuko hurried to the door and slid it open.

It was bright inside, thanks to the combination of crystal lamps and flame lanterns that were hung in clusters from the ceiling. The people who worked here needed as much light as possible when surgery was necessary, and it seemed to be necessary now. Two large men were holding a thrashing patient down on the central table, while a woman worked on the man's face, blocking it from Zuko's view. A second woman was mixing something at a table off to the side, furiously grinding herbs and calling, "I'm making more!"

The first woman, her hair close-cropped but her hanbok flaring out as she turned, shouted back, "No! He's had too much already! He's burning it right out of his own blood! He'll have to just ride this
out." The patient thrashed again beneath her, and Zuko finally noticed the man's hands. They were battered, bloody, and filthy, but not yet calloused.

And little tongues of flames danced across them, not yet bursting into sustained fire.

One of the large assistants glanced at the patient's hands, and then back at the first woman. "Song, how much longer?"

"The infection runs deep. I think- I think I'm going to have to take the eye."

She did something that made the patient scream again, and this time, when he flung his hands out, a burst of fire popped into the air.

The assistant said, "Uh, maybe we can take a break first?"

The woman- Song- shook her head and took a deep breath. "If the infection gets to his brain..." She trailed off as she got back to work, and the patient roared.

Zuko was leaning against the wall, not trusting his legs to support him. He knew this clinic. After he had been marooned in the colonies by his traitorous crew, he had continued his quest to find the Avatar on his own, but he had little in the way of supplies, and his money had run out quickly. He hadn't been able to change the bandages on his eye, not with anything clean enough for the job, and soon the fevers had set in, but he didn't let that stop him on his quest, pushing on to the Eastern Air Temple, sure that there would be some clues there as to the Avatar's location.

He had found this clinic when he wandered into a remote peasant village, and it was the last thing he saw before he blacked out.

He couldn't quite remember what happened when he woke up. There had been fire, and he ran from it.

Song gasped and stepped back from the table. "Done! Bandages!" The other woman quickly stepped in, wrapping the patient's face as the assistants held him down, and Zuko watched Song go to a bowl of water and wash the blood off her hands. So far, no one had taken notice of him. He began to doubt that they would, and he no longer felt any need to see this.

Outside, he found Not-Mai waiting. Her funeral robes were stained with mud, no longer pure, but her skin and hair were unsullied. "Why come back out? The path led here, and the rain has washed away the tracks, so the people inside are your best bet for finding poor abused Shugao. I suppose you could always just take your best guess and start walking through the forest, but I think that's entirely missing the spirit of this whole thing. No pun intended, I think. (It's hard to tell with this face I'm wearing.)"

The clinic was quiet now, but Zuko's worry didn't decrease. His fragmentary memory burned in his mind, and the echoes of terrified shrieks rang in his ears. The clinic was quiet now, but he wondered for how long.

Not-Mai grinned at him and hugged herself, caressing her bare shoulders. "That Song seemed very nice. What ever happened to her? She worked so hard to protect that useless brain of yours; I hope you rewarded her properly for her efforts."

Zuko turned and ran back into the clinic.

It was darker than before, with only a single crystal lantern left uncovered. The others must have departed, leaving only Song and the patient. He was lying on a pallet, his head mostly covered with
bandages, while she precisely bathed his fevered brow with a cloth so that the dressings didn't get wet. It didn't look easy, with the patient shifting and muttering, but Song's patience seemed to know no bounds.

Zuko resolved to find a clue to Shugao's whereabouts as fast as possible, before-

Before.

Even in the low light, the muddy child-sized tracks were visible on the floor. They led right to the patient's pallet and stopped, but Zuko felt no need to follow them. He searched the ground in the general area around the tracks, running his hands over the dark floorboards, and was rewarded with the touch of metal against his fingers. Zuko grasped his find and raised it up close to his eye, so that the object would catch the light, and discovered that he was holding a pin made in the shape of the Fire Nation sigil. It was pure gold, making it a decoration that by law was reserved only for officers with noble blood. That it was shaped as a symbol of the Fire Nation itself meant this specific token belonged to someone whose whole person represented the Homeland.

Zuko had worn a token just like this, in Ba Sing Se. It had been a gift from his Uncle.

A pained groan broke Zuko out of his reverie. The patient was stirring on his pallet, and Zuko couldn't stop himself from turning to look.

Song was holding the patient down. "Don't move, sir. You're weak, and if you get up-"

"NOT WEAK!!"

With that roar came a burst of flames, and Song fell screaming to the floor, the damage to her hands obscured by the steam pouring off of them.

Zuko leaped to his feet and positioned himself in front of Song, facing down the patient as the bandaged man pushed up off the pallet. The patient advanced, his single visible eye unfocused, probably not even seeing Zuko.

But Zuko could see him.

Or rather, Zuko could see his own past self.

The other one lunged, fire flaring to life on his hands, but Zuko was quick, grabbing his other self around the wrists and inhaling sharply. He didn't even realize that he was trying to Firebend until the flames went out at his instinctual command, and poisonous warmth flowed into the Qi-lines of his arms. The threat ended, he yanked and threw his past self across the clinic, disgusted at the very sight of the wild, bandaged face. The other's body crashed against the table stacked with herbs and medicines, and he collapsed to the floor. Zuko waited, but the other didn't move again.

Zuko crouched down beside Song, needing to see how badly she was injured. She was sobbing, holding her shaking arms out in front of her as though she couldn't make herself move them, and Zuko forced himself to examine the burned skin. It looked terrible, would at least leave rough red scars all over her hands and arms, and could very well lead to the arms having to be amputated. Song had her tearing eyes shut against the sight, and as she sobbed, Zuko reached out and took her burned hands in his own. Once again, that corrosive heat flowed into his arms, and before his eyes, time passed like the rapids of a rushing river, and Song's injuries became old scars. Her cries stopped and her tears dried, and she opened her eyes to look at Zuko and smile.

"I'm sorry," he said.
She nodded. "I know."

When Zuko stood and made to leave, his past self was gone.

The flame-sigil pin did not tell Zuko what path he needed to take, but he was beginning to understand something about this place. The path itself wasn't real; it was a series of tricks to guide Zuko to these waypoints of his history. The forest itself wasn't even a forest, but rather a labyrinth that was shaping him into the person he needed to be to find the exit. It was less a maze and more a process, with Zuko himself as the result.

Zuko was the result, and he was the path. He needed to know where to go within himself, and then he would find Shugao.

And the pin told him exactly where the boy was waiting.

Zuko strode through the forest with confidence. The glow of the trees no longer mattered, as he could find his way now even with his one eye closed. Instead, he sought for the fear, the confusion, the pain he had felt when he first stumbled out of the refugee cave and into the illusions of the ashland. When he had first left in search of Shugao, in search the boy who ran from the terrors of an abusive father, Zuko had found himself in a world that looked like the battlefield outside Ba Sing Se. Looking for the swirl of emotions that he had felt when he first saw the Outer Wall, the killing fields, the Fire Nation camp, Zuko could find his way back to that illusion.

And so he passed around an especially thick copse of trees and was suddenly walking in the village of tents that made up the Fire Nation's base on the frontlines of the Conquest of Ba Sing Se.

Soldiers were moving around, some of them injured, some of them with the unfocused stare of the battle-fatigued, all of them covered with the dust of landscape. Barked orders rang out and mixed with echoing groans of pain, and there was the metallic taste of defeat in the air. Zuko did not recognize this specific vantage point, but he knew the scene well. Father had finally showed some confidence in Zuko and given him the 41st division to assault the Outer Wall. They had been given catapults, and explosives, and archers, and orders to hold position until sunset, when Father promised that a surprise would be waiting.

Zuko had taken his troops and directed them to concentrate the full might of the Fire Nation against the Outer Wall and its barbarian defenders.

An hour later, they were running in retreat.

Zuko wandered through the camp, wary of whatever twisted surprise the Spirits had in store for him. Even so, it didn't strike him as at all out of the ordinary when one lieutenant came up to him, bowed, and said, "Your Highness, the camp is deserted! We couldn't find either Prince Ozai or any of the commanders!"

Zuko turned an incredulous stare to the soldier. "What? Were they ambushed while we were gone?"

"There- there are no signs of battle, my prince, and all the equipment needed for an attack was taken..."

And Zuko realized what was going on. "We were a distraction."

"You- you didn't know? Your Highness?"

Zuko looked down at his feet. "No. I- I-" What was he doing? He did know. Not at the time he led
the attack, but after wait, he had already realized this years ago. This wasn't happening now. This was another echo of the past. Zuko looked at the lieutenant speaking to him, and saw that the man wasn't wearing armor at all, but rather the green rags of the ashland refugees. There was no sharp Fire Nation beard on the man's chin, but rather gray, uneven stubble. Zuko looked around him; all the 'soldiers' here were refugees, men and woman dying a slow death in a cave in a mountain in an ashland. The sky and land around them might be that of Ba Sing Se, but the people were not the same as that day, years ago.

But where was Shugao?

With a sickening lurch of realization, Zuko knew exactly. No sooner did the truth blossom in his mind than the refugees were once again armored soldiers, and those who could were all running, answering the call to arms sounded by the horns of their commanders. As they fell into ranks, Zuko could see squad leaders waving directions at their subordinates, shouting, "Form up! Back to the wall!" and, "Double-time, march!" and, "Prince Zuko has ordered us to support his father's assault on the wall!"

It was happening again. When Zuko had discovered that his true mission was to be a distraction, he had taken a spyglass and rode with some scouts back to the wall, and sure enough, found another battle going on at the Outer Wall's northeastern side, behind the curve of the wall where Zuko wouldn't have been able to see it while he and the 41st conducted their own assault. He and the scouts had met a group of injured who were retreating, telling of mounting casualties and increased resistance, and Zuko knew that it was his fault, that he hadn't been able to hold position as he was ordered and split the attention of the wall's defenders. So he did the only thing he could do, in the face of his failure.

He had led his troops to reinforce his father.

Now, Zuko ran after the soldiers. He had to find Shugao, and if he had any sense of the way this farce was being conducted, the boy would be exactly where Zuko himself had been years ago, in the saddle of a komodo dragon at the head of the charge.

Somehow, Zuko was able to run faster than the soldiers- no, they were once again refugees, stumbling along on bleeding feet to rescue Father. He outpaced komodo rhinos that became bloated moo-sows, and the dusty landscape whirled around him, becoming ash and forest and mountains and finally mud. He arrived at the foot of the Outer Wall to find the battle fully joined, Fire Nation soldiers wearing the Phoenix badge of his father's personal command fighting alongside ash-streaked refugees against Earth Kingdom soldiers and laughing shadows. Death was all around him, but he had to find Father-

-no, Shugao-

-no, himself.

He arrived at the heart of the fighting, where Father and his squad of guards were clustered in a defensive formation, holding back the spears of the enemy, and Zuko saw a komodo rhino ride into the fray, driven by a little boy with Zuko's old face, dressed in rags with gold flame sigil pins on his collar. The boy was throwing fire from his fists at the enemy, no form or discipline in his attack, just pure desperation to save his father. The spearmen shifted against the surprise assault, and Zuko-

-Shugao-

-Zuko made himself look for Ozai, and instead found Shugao's father, the old shuffling man with loose skin and thin bones, standing in the midst of the Phoenix Guard. The man raised a fist and
summoned a flame, and surely he was going to help his son, to strike at the Earth Kingdom soldiers that were their common enemy. It was a risky move, because aim could be off and shots could miss, but-

-but-

-Father's gaze was fixed on Zuko-

-Shugao-

-a fist was flung forward-

-the fire arced with a perfect, precise curve-

-no, the report said friendly fire from one of the Phoenix Guard-

-Grandfather said it was an accident, and so not serviceable punishment for a coward who disobeyed orders and fled from a battle-

-Azula said that Father wanted him back now-

-the fireball slammed into Shugao's face and knocked him right out of the rhino's saddle.

Zuko screamed and fell to his knees, and the battle froze around him. Not-Mai's laughter rang out over the newly quiet battlefield, and she sauntered into view with her funeral robes on full display, once more straightened and in place, perfectly white and glowing with cleanliness amidst the dusty and bloody warriors.

"Well," she said when she was finished chuckling. "That was informative! And here I thought you were going to run away, or at least close that eye of yours, but no, you took in the whole view and never thought about denying it. You've won a modicum of my respect, Prince Zuko." She came to a stop in front of Zuko and laid her muddy cloak over his shoulders, soiling him with the filth of the battlefield. Zuko didn't move as she bent down and kissed his brow. Her hands stroked his face, and as Zuko closed his eye against the assault, she whispered, "Take solace in this face, and let me take your pain away."

Zuko rose and wrapped her in his arms, held her close against him, and willed the fire in his heart to come to life.

For the first time since he burned Song, the flame in his heart responded, and Not-Mai screamed as the fire ate at her illusion of flesh.

Her body convulsed and she let go of Zuko. He felt no need to continue holding her up, so he allowed her writhing to twist her out of his grip, and she dropped to the mud. Her funeral robes had burned away, but instead of Mai's pale flesh, scorched, wart-covered green skin was revealed. Zuko waited, holding the flames within.

"You-" Not-Mai eventually looked up. "You could have- just said- you weren't in the mood."

Zuko took an attack stance, a Firebending position that would let him go on the offensive in an instant. "How do I get out of here? I saw your little show, and now I need to be on my way. Do I have to kill you to make the illusion end?"

Not-Mai barked a laugh, but it immediately made her cringe and twist with pain. "Ow. Don't make me giggle. If- if the way out really was to kill me, then do you really think I would tell you? You-
'you've come so- so far tonight. Don't ask- don't ask stupid questions. Hnnng.'

So be it. Zuko drew a fist back, ready to end this Spirit with one clean blow-

"Wait! Don't!"

Shugao ran up out of the forest of frozen soldiers and grabbed Zuko's arm.

Zuko pulled back in surprise. Was the boy real, then? He had started to think that Shugao was just part of the illusion- or was this another trick of the Spirits?

The boy looked up with the same face that Mother had so gently caressed when she was still alive. "The Spirit won't have any power over you when the sun comes up! Just leave it! Take me back to my home."

Zuko blinked, trying to shake the vision of his own face, to see what this boy really looked like. "Your father- I saw what he- what he did! I can't take you back!"

"Then why do you want to go back so badly?"

The flame within Zuko snuffed out in an instant, and a chill breeze licked at his fingers.

The cold spread from his heart all along his Qi-lines, racking his body with shivers. Why did he want to go back? He had seen the truth here, but- but how much of it was real? Zuko's memories had informed all the lies that had been built for his torture, but he didn't actually remember what happened in that battle. He had been fighting, and then he had been struck, and he knew no more until he awoke later. Perhaps it really had been an accident, perhaps Father hadn't even been the one responsible, and that old nightmare of the glimpse he got out of the corner of his eye was just childish fear that the Spirits had given form for their amusement. It might not be true at all. And yet it had felt true, a moment ago.

But Azula said that Father wanted him back.

That Father regretted the banishment that Grandfather had placed as a result of the accusation.

Either way, Zuko could not shrink away from his path. He had wasted the last few years of his life, and couldn't continue to live in fear and failure forever.

One way or another, Zuko would embrace his Father, and take his rightful place as a Prince of the Fire Nation.

The warmth of that thought flooded Zuko's body, and it was a simple matter to punch, exhale, and set Not-Mai on fire.

She burned as though made of wood, completely engulfed in an instant as she screamed and hissed and smoked. The flames spread to the ground around her- mud turned to dried leaves and dead branches- and soon a bonfire was roaring in front of Zuko. He backed away, knowing he had to assert control over the flames, but his heart was beating and the heat was boiling his blood and now the soldiers were all trees and the Outer Wall was the canopy of leaves above his head and the fire was spreading and the forest was burning and-

-Shugao screamed as he burned, too.

The world became flame, and Zuko succumbed to the heat.
He awoke in complete darkness, and before he could think about it, he raised a hand and summoned a flame to light the way.

Zuko was in the cave, the heart of the mountain in the heart of the ashland, and it was a place of death. No torches fouled the air, and no people gave dying life to the place. The remnants of a camp were strewn all over the place, but they were covered in dust and mold and hardened wolfbat droppings, well on their way to nothingness. Here and there were bones as well, and Zuko looked carefully to make sure there were no signs of burning on them. However long ago this camp had lived, its remnants were undisturbed.

He found Azula, June, and the shirshu at the center of what had been the camp, all of them huddled together in sleep. He awoke June first, since she would be needed to keep her animal companion calm, and when she looked up at Zuko, she said, "Forsaken ashland. Is it over?"

Zuko nodded in the light of his flame.

"Good." June then got up and began seeing to the shirshu, while Zuko went on to his sister. She was cringing in her sleep, her body was tense, and it was with great care that he woke her, calling her name and being sure not to touch her. Her eyes snapped open and her hands formed fists, but when she saw Zuko, she relaxed. Marginally.

Azula got her feet and dusted herself off before she spoke. "So. Was it truly caused by Spirits?"

Zuko nodded. "I don't know if I chased them off or destroyed them, but they seem to be gone now. We should get out of here while the sun is up. I think it will help protect us from whatever might still be here."

June cracked her whip. "Don't have to tell me twice, Prince Zuko. Let's saddle up!"

The ashland they found outside was without power. A rain must have fallen during the night, for when the shirshu bounded out of the cave, it was into a shining sun and onto a muddy terrain that was content to stay where it was and not attempt to ride the breeze. If the shirshu was having trouble with the slippery, gritty ground, it gave no sign, and made great time as it loped as fast as it could.

While they rode, Azula turned to look at Zuko in the saddle and said, "I couldn't help but notice that you were Firebending back there. I assume that you resolved your problem while dealing with- well, whatever you were dealing with?"

Zuko took deep breath, focusing on the air's passage through his nostrils and down into the lungs where it became fuel for his Qi. He could feel the Qi within his body, the network of energy that stretched throughout his fibers and touched the edge of spirit. It was stronger now than it had been in years, thanks to his body's restoration over the last month, and the flame within answered his call and flared out along the paths of energy. Zuko exhaled a thin stream of smoke, and looked at his sister. "I'm once again who I should be."

"Excellent. Well, it's as Grandfather always says, that which doesn't kill you just makes you stronger. I suppose that goes for Spirits, as well."

Zuko thought back to his quest, and how Shugao-

No, how he himself had burned.

"I suppose it does."
And he would have to be strong, if he was going to defeat the Avatar.

TO BE CONTINUED
Aang listens to the voices in his head.

"More?" The old man lifts a teapot.

Aang nods and holds out his cup. "Please! This is really good."

"It is a longjing green tea." The old man pours, tipping his rotund body so that he leans over the little table resting on the grass between him and Aang. "It was served at my parents' wedding, and I drank it for the first time after my mother's funeral."

The sadness of that thought spears Aang's heart, and the sky above him darkens sympathetically. The grass beneath him grows stiff and lifeless. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. But I didn't mean to make this conversation about me and my family. Please, catch me up on what you have been doing." The old man's eyebrows rise. "How has your lady friend been?"

Aang covers his smile with a sip of his tea, and the sun breaks out into a comforting shine. "Mai's doing much better. She says the burn is all healed, and she's been exercising to make sure she's not stiff. I watched her yesterday, and she was looking really good! Uh, I meant that her moves were really good. She still never misses with her knives."

The old man chuckles. "Well, what do you expect of a Weapon of the Fire Nation?"

"Hey, that's something I've been wondering. What does it mean, being a Weapon?"

"Ah." The old man takes a long sip of his tea, and then sets the cup down. "Yes, you would have been sleeping for that. It began about- oh, thirty years ago, now. We always revered Firebenders and the glory of combat, but as the Fire Nation took more and more of the War into its spirit, the more value Warriors of all kinds had to our people. The greatest- the ones who can do what no one else can, the ones with the skill of an entire army- were declared by the Fire Lord to be destined tools of their Homeland. And so a select few are chosen for their skill, awarded the title of 'Weapon of the Fire Nation,' and drafted into the Royal Family's lifelong service. They become property, their entire lives devoted to the cause, but in return they are given power and prestige. Piandao Clanless was the first, and your friend Mai is one of a new, growing generation of Weapons."

Aang looks down at the dregs of his tea, thinking about that. Mountains rise up on the horizon, blocking his view of the sea, and the air grows still. "No wonder she betrayed the Fire Nation. She was pretty much a slave, even if she did get rewards. Just like Sokka."

"Is that your Water Tribe ally?"

"Yeah, he's my friend. He came up with the big plan to free me at the South Pole, and now I'm helping him find his sister." Aang leans over the table and whispers, "She's a Waterbender, and we found out that the Fire Nation is keeping her somewhere called Crescent Island. (Mai says that it's
shaped like a crescent moon, which makes sense.) We're actually on a mission to rescue her right now."

"Oh, Crescent Island?" The old man finishes his tea and sets his cup down. His gaze loses focus, and his next words come out slowly. "Even with a Sky Bison, Crescent Island will be difficult to visit. As you would expect from a Waterbender prison surrounded by the ocean, security is very high. A small fleet patrols the island at all times, and it is very watchful. If you simply fly in, you will be seen, and the prison will be locked down."

"Uh oh." The grass turns to sand beneath Aang, and the sun becomes a dull, frigid light in the sky. Somewhere in the distance, a howl echoes across the desert planes. "What are we going to do now?"

The old man strokes his chin, tugging on his beard. "I have some associates who may be able to help, and will want to. They are based in the far East of the Earth Kingdom, and have access to certain resources... yes, I think that will do nicely. They are in need of a real purpose, and the Avatar shall give them one. Then, once you've freed your friend's sister, perhaps I can help give you a purpose. A favor for a favor."

Aang hops to his feet. It isn't as smooth as he usually manages, since he can't Airbend here, but the sands beneath him change to a nice thick moss that cradles his feet and shifts to balance him. "That's great! Thanks so much! How do I find these friends of yours?"

"First, you need to go to the Yijia province, near the city of Taidi. From there, the bones of the earth will show The Way. Ever falling, ever frothing, the land is sobbing and eyes are watching. Reverse the running, walk the wall, and know the stranger in the sandstone.

"And then when the Waterbender is freed, I would like you to return the favor by seeking-"

"Wake up!"

Aang's eyes snapped open, and he sat up on Appa's tail. He thought he had heard someone shouting at him, but there was no one in sight in the early dawn light. Sokka's tent was still closed up and echoing with heavy snores, while Mai's tent was as silent as one of the Earth Tombs of Gojoseon. Even Appa was still asleep. Actually, the only active creature in the entire forest glade was Momo, perched at Aang's feet and looking up with interested lemur eyes. Of course, Momo couldn't talk, so he couldn't have been the one shouting. Aang decided that he must have dreamed it.

Dreamed.

He remembered some of his dream. There had been tea, and... someone... something about the Yijia province?

Aang yawned, and decided that it wasn't important enough to stay awake. He plopped back down and let himself drift back into a slumber.

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Even stretched out, the skin never lost its rough quality. The fingers that brushed over the pale mottling found a smoothness that was unexpected, given its appearance, but not the clean, continuous flow of silky skin that had once been there. That skin had been hidden from the world for years at a time, revealed only during brief forays to Ember Island, and even then, it had been carefully shielded from direct sunlight. It had been skin worthy of pride, skin worth money, skin that recalled the dead surface of a reflecting pool.

Now, it was puckered like the sea, irregular and wavy.
What was once silk now had texture.

Water splashed against the expanse of skin, and the remaining drops worked their way down in accordance with the call of gravity. The skin's new roughness wasn't enough to push the droplets off course, but it battered at the surface tension of each one, drawing water off each bead the way a battle drew blood from a dying warrior. By the time the drops reached bare hip, they were reduced to almost nothing.

Mai sighed. Her failure had resulted in a permanent scar. That was annoying.

She bathed daily (the river of choice today was something like almost warm enough), and so couldn't go more than twenty-four hours without being reminded of Kyoshi Island. Zhao had stumbled upon Mai just as she was finishing her telegraph message to Azula betraying Aang's destination of Crescent Island, and he had looked like he knew, like he had figured out that her true loyalties. Her only choice was to kill him, but that hadn't worked out. Instead, Mai had been set on fire.

And then the people she had just betrayed came and rescued her.

The scar was an irregular circular patch centered on Mai's right side, over the lower half of her rib cage. Mother would have a fit if she saw, scandalized that her daughter's precious skin had been marked, but Mai wasn't so bothered. Yes, it didn't look great, but it was in a spot that would usually be covered. Anything that bared her stomach would reveal the scar, but it wasn't exactly ugly, and anyone who had a problem with how it looked could just choke on the fact that it was earned in honorable service to the ascendant faction of the Royal Family. They could also choke on the fact that Mai had been lit on fire and survived to stab again. How many people could say that?

As Mai finished her bath and made her way back to where her clothes waited on the bank, she wondered if Zuko's scar was worse than hers. It was on his face, but discoloration and roughness weren't all that bad. It would be an easy thing to get used to, she was sure.

And if not, she would get used to it anyway. Scars didn't change who people really were.

Mai was still a traitor, and possibly a failure.

Once she was dressed, she made her way back to the camp she shared with the boys. She could brush out her wet hair once they were all flying on Appa; according to their maps, there was a fairly large village not far away, sure to have a nice market, and they needed plenty of supplies to get safely them to Crescent Island.

Sokka stood in the village of Gouwu, in the middle of the main thoroughfare, and looked out at a glorious spread of merchants and goods, harvested from across the Earth Kingdom and representing the finest ways of commerce. "All right. How much do we have to spend?"

On Sokka's left, Mai sighed and held up a single bag, no bigger than a fist and disturbingly saggy. "The whole sum of our spendable assets amount to one silverish coin and three coppers."

On Sokka's right, Aang adjusted the black head-scarf he was still borrowing from Mai to cover his arrows. "That's not going to take us very far. Maybe we can earn some extra? I'm a pretty good dancer, so if I set up where people can watch me, I can do a jig and let them throw coins at me. Maybe Momo can get in on that?" He looked to the lemur, who looked up from licking his own armpit and trilled questioningly.

"As much fun as that sounds," Mai said, "there are quicker ways to get more money. I'm fast with both a knife and my hands. I can just make my way through the crowd there and cut purse-strings as
I go. You two can tail me and be ready to assist in case I get caught."

Sokka had to admit that it sounded a lot more efficient than Aang's suggestion, but the Airbender gave voice to the little niggling voice in the back of Sokka's mind when he said, "You want to steal from those people?"

Mai shrugged. "Sure. We need money. So we'll take it."

"But these people didn't do anything to deserve getting robbed!"

"So what? We need the money. I'm not really sure why this is hard to understand."

Aang was taking a breath for what was no doubt an even louder and less productive counter-argument, so Sokka held up his hands to cut off both sides of the debate, feeling lucky that he happened to be standing in the middle of the two and so was perfectly placed to arbitrate. "As much as I enjoy a robust debate about the weight of ethics versus a purely objective-based way of life, it's a little beside the point here. Mai, in case you do mess up, Aang and I might be able to help you get away, but then how are we going to get the supplies we need? We'll have to fly somewhere else, and that will take us further out of our way. There's too much risk. Why don't we start by identifying what we need here, and how much it will cost. Maybe we can bargain a day of work for what we need, or something else equally convenient, and then we don't have to worry about what they do to thieves in this village." He lowered his hands and smiled. "Sound good?"

Aang smiled back and gave a nod. Mai rolled her eyes and gestured her surrender.

Sokka had come to quite like shopping. It was fun looking at all the neat things that merchants had up for sale, from weapons to clothes to all kinds of foods. Sokka couldn't even recognize a third of all the fruits that were gathered in baskets in this market, and the smells of various varieties of meat sizzling on grills tantalized his nose with the mysteries of possum-chicken and armadillo-bear and pig-deer and others that Sokka couldn't even begin to imagine. The only thing ruining the whole experience was the prices.

"That high?" Sokka had asked at one point, about a bushel of apples that would keep Appa going for a whole two hours.

The merchant woman's face grew hard. "Can't go any lower. The taxes the Fire Nation just levied..."

Sokka had nodded and moved on.

He met up with Mai a little while later, and they compared totals. It was depressing enough Sokka actually considered taking her up on her purse-snatching skills. After all, though these people were Earth Kingdom, but it's not like they had it as bad as the Water Tribe or prisoners like Katara. Then Aang found them, holding Momo and was grinning that grin that seemed to be a prelude to either trouble or a discussion about the value of a vegetable-rich diet. Either way, Sokka inched over so that Mai was standing between him and the Airbender before he said, "What did you find?"

Aang shifted his lemur from one arm to the other. "Well, I was introducing myself to these really friendly ostrich-horses at the stables down the road, and I met the guy who owns them, and I got him to give us all a job! For money!"

Huh, that wasn't so bad. Sokka stepped out from behind Mai. "How much?"

Aang named an amount, and Sokka's heart warmed even further. That would take care of a good chunk of the supplies they wanted, and definitely everything they merely needed. "So what's the work?"
"Well, the guy's stables haven't been cleaned out in a while, and he thought that between the three of us."

"Oh," Mai interrupted, "don't tell me we're mucking out the stalls."

"Okay," was Aang's reply. Then he turned back to Sokka and said, "We're mucking out the stalls."

Sokka raised his eyebrows at Mai. "He didn't tell you, so you're not allowed to stab him."

They dropped Momo off back with Appa and Mai changed into clothes she wouldn't mind burning later, and then they met up with their employer.

Aang felt a little bad for joking with Mai, but as soon as they were alone, he broke out the Airbending and used some quick swipes of his staff to whip the hay out of the first stall along with all the mess it contained, and landed it in a nice pile off to the side. "Now we just need to use that rake get the last of the shavings at the bottom!" While Sokka did so, Aang turned to Mai. "As soon as he's done, you can bring a bale of hay and fresh shavings over, I'll hurricane it all into place, and this one will be done. That's how they used to do it at the Eastern Air Temple. We'll be finished in no time. And we're getting paid for the job, not how much time we spend, so..."

She gave a slow nod. "I have to admit, this isn't so bad. You don't have a problem with getting a day's pay for quick work?"

"Well, I'm using my Airbending, and that's a rare skill, so I'm only charging a fair price for it, right?" He grinned at her to make sure she was in on the joke and wouldn't consider him a stick-in-the-mud, and then she smiled back, so as far as Aang was concerned, this was now officially the best day ever.

They worked steadily after that, and Aang took it as a sign of Mai's good mood that she didn't complain once. In fact, she even initiated some conversation with, "So where are we heading after we're done in this village?"

As Sokka raked the next stall clean, he said, "Might as well keep moving east, and we should figure out what point on the coast we're launching from to get to Crescent Island. Do we want to take off from the furthest tip of the Earth Kingdom?"

Aang swiped his staff again, calling forth a burst of wind that caught the soiled hay of another stall and sent it flying into the garbage pile on the other side of the stable. "A short flight over the ocean would be better for Appa, but I think he'd rather fly for a little longer than have to dodge fireballs and catapults right at the beginning. Mai, do you know what part of the coast is safest?" Something about his own question tickled at Aang's memory, like he already knew how to find the answer to his own question, but he couldn't guess what it might be. This was his first visit to the Earth Kingdom in a hundred years, after all, and Mai was their only expert on the details of the current state of the world.

Unfortunately, Mai shrugged. "The Fire Nation has bases up the entire coast. The eastern slice was the earliest part of the Continent to be colonized, so there's a strong presence there. I guess some areas are safer than others, but that's not really knowledge I have."

"Well, so much for our Fire Nation expert," Sokka said. "If you weren't such effective muscle, I'd dock your pay."

"First we'd have to dock your pay, since your attempts at humor are actively impeding this heroic quest."

"Oh, that's right, we also keep you around to keep my ego in check. It must be nice to be multi-
Aang frowned. Purpose? Why did that sound familiar? As he thought about it, the pieces slowly came together in his thoughts, and he found himself saying, "Actually, I think I dreamed how to figure this out."

Sokka and Mai both stopped to look at him.

Aang shrugged back at them. "It's weird, but... it's like there's directions in my head, and I think I had a conversation about how they'll get me to people who can help us. People who need a purpose."

Sokka glanced over at Mai briefly before looking back at Aang and saying slowly, "We've all been thinking hard about this, but dreams- dreams aren't real, so maybe if we get back on track-"

"No, I know how crazy it sounds, but this isn't like a real dream. In my head, there's... look, I know that first we need to go to Yijia province, near Taidi City, but I've never even heard of any place called Taidi."

Mai put down the hay she was carrying and walked slowly over to Aang. "Taidi City is one of the first ten colonies. It was nothing more than an Earth Kingdom outpost until the Fire Nation turned it into a major waypoint on the supply chain to the front, during the war. Are you sure you didn't just see that name on one of our maps?"

Aang shook his head. He had been letting Sokka handle the maps, since he didn't like to see drawings of the Earth Kingdom filled in with red colors.

"Do you think this could be-" Mai reached up to smooth one of her hair-tails, leaving some bits of hay sticking to it. "Could this be from your Avatar Spirit?"

Aang considered that. "I'm not sure. The Avatar Spirit is supposed to be the combined power of my past lives, and how would any of them know about Taidi? But I'm not really sure how all that works." Aang watched his friends' reactions; Mai's eyes were narrowed, and she brought her sleeves together to hide her hands. Sokka leaned on his rake, rubbing his chin. They were both obviously trying to find an explanation for this, because that's the way they were; they liked to understand everything, even rationalizing their own likes and dislikes.

Aang, though, understood that the winds had a will of their own, and that letting them carry you was sometimes the best way to get to your destination. "We were just saying that we'd be moving towards the coast anyway, right? We can fly to Taidi and see if we can spot anything. And if we do, we can make a decision. Sound good?"

Mai was the first to surrender: she sighed, brought her hands out of her sleeves, and said, "Whatever."

Sokka took a moment longer. "All right, that's reasonable enough. But seriously, if we're letting dreams make our decisions for us now, then we are doing a lot worse than we thought."

It was becoming Mai's routine to do her hair during Appa's early morning take-off. She might be consorting with enemy insurgents, accumulating permanent scars, and peacefully tolerating a winged lemur imitating her routine by stroking its own long ears for minutes at a time, but she'd die before she stopped brushing her hair into a smooth and shining state.

She had no idea why, since Mother wasn't around to bug her about looking nice, but it wasn't like she had anything better to do on these long flights.
Around mid-morning, they were soaring above high above Taidi City. The settlement sprawled across the top of a tableland, with a complex system of ramps and rope lifts connecting the plateau to the ground below. The landscape around it was dull green with cranky-looking shrub growth, but the plant-life failed to hide the rocky nature of the ground. Mai could only imagine that this area fell to the Fire Nation either through a surge of overwhelming military force, or a sharp lack of local Earthbender warriors.

Mai looked over at Sokka, who was also gazing down over the edge of the saddle. "Hey, camping boy, do you see any spot down there where we can set down out of sight? I see plenty of little rivers, but not enough cover for a sky bison."

Sokka shook his head. "Nothing anywhere close to Taidi. We'd have quite a walk if we need to go to the city itself."

"Oh, lovely. Walking. My favorite mode of transportation."

Sokka smirked at her. "You've gotten pretty used to flying, huh?"

"No." Mai turned to look down at the landscape again. "I just appreciate its efficiency."

"Too bad more people in the Fire Nation aren't like you. My dad told me, back when I was really little and we were still living outside the mining settlement, that hunting things to extinction was the most disrespectful act a hunter could do. To kill all the sky bison along with Aang's people is just... well, you know."

Mai said nothing to that. Sokka was always blaming the Fire Nation for things, but why not Aang for not being around, or the Air Nomads for being such pushovers? Mai felt the same kind of frustration when she thought of the Sky Bison or the Air Nomads as she used to when she saw Azula pushing Zuko around. Why couldn't he just be strong enough not to be victim?

Whatever. Mai was tired of flying, now. She turned to where Aang had sitting on Appa's head (with Momo in turn perched on Aang's bald head) to see if he had any opinions about where to land.

She found Aang standing, pointing away from Taidi city to where the ground became divided by shorter plateaus into a complex of ravines. Momo had already vacated Aang's cranium, and was quickly scampering over to Sokka with what seemed like disturbed surprise, just like it did whenever Mai startled it by suddenly pulling a blade out of her sleeve.

"What," she said, "are pointing at?"

"The Way." He blinked, shook his head, and lowered his arm. "Hey, I have more answers in my head!"

Sokka scooted to the front of the saddle, Momo sheltered in his arms. "That's not usually something that happens automatically. What are your weird non-memories telling you now?"

"To look at that!" Aang pointed again, and Mai followed his finger to a specific ravine. She couldn't tell why it was different from the others all around it, but then she noticed the long plateau that formed one of its walls, and realized that it was shaped like an arrow. "And that one, too!" Aang shifted his pointing, and sure enough, there was another plateau in the same shape, too precise to be natural. But if it had been carved, what was the point? The only reason Mai could see it now was because she was flying above the scenery; from the ground, the shape wouldn't be visible at all. Before she could voice those questions, though, Aang added, "The bones of the earth will show The Way."
Sokka shook his head. "Okay, this is seriously getting freaky. That sounds like a quote, complete with inappropriate capitalization, but Way to What? And are We sure we should be Following This and not Running Away as Fast as We Can?"

"Well," Mai said, "my curiosity is aroused. I want to see what's at the end of all the arrows. If we find something bad, we can always just run away or stab it, whichever is easier."

And so they flew on, guided by a path only they could see.

Sometimes, Sokka despaired for the state of modern curiosity. Curiosity about how things worked-like weather and steam engines and the Langchao Effect- was fine. That kind of curiosity was what led to science and improvements in technology and an easier way of life for everyone. But curiosity about mysterious arrows leading into the wilderness? Nothing good could come of that. And yet, outvoted by Master Curious the Airbender and Lady Gloomy the Chronically Bored, Sokka was on his way to having that specific curiosity satisfied whether he wanted it or not.

Aang brought Appa lower once they were further away from Taidi City, and they flew on for several leagues more before they ran out of weird plateau arrows. The terrain was mountainous here, and Sokka couldn't make out any shapes in the landscape, aside from one ridge that kind of looked like Gran-Gran when she scowled. "So, what now? Does your brain have anything more to say?"

Aang looked back at Sokka, but there was no focus to his eyes, and his voice was flat. "Ever falling, ever frothing, the land is sobbing and eyes are watching." The recitation done, Aang continued to stare.

Mai said, "Was that a riddle?"

Oh, great. Now Aang was making up riddles. Riddles! "I swear, if we finish out this day by having to defend ourselves from undead monsters again, I'm quitting the team and getting a new crew."

Momo escaped his grip, and jumped out of the saddle to fly in pace with Appa. Now what was up with that lemur? Was he as freaked out by all this as Sokka?

Mai twirled one of her blades around a finger as she thought. "What is 'ever falling?' When things fall, they eventually stop. That's the typical objection to falling."

Aang blinked, and seemed to come out of his trance. "I don't like the sound of the land sobbing. That's ominous."

"But kind of poetic." Sokka sat up straighter and looked out over the edge of the saddle again. Now, if he was someone with a poetic soul who hid thoughts in the head of an unsuspecting monk boy, what would he pick out of the landscape as a waypoint? Ah, there it was. "Can you bring us lower right about there?"

Aang looked where Sokka was pointing, and pulled the reins to communicate his intent to Appa. The sky bison spiraled down, and it wasn't long before Sokka could confirm that he had indeed seen what he thought he had seen. "There you go: one always-falling sobbing-land."

It was a waterfall, a big one, spraying off of one of the mountains and filling the ravine below with a rushing river.

"Yeah, that's it!" Aang was standing up on Appa's head again, and the sky bison gave a groan of celebration. "And the next step is to reverse the running! We should follow the water back up the mountain."
Aang guided Appa to swoop over the rapids, chasing them up and around the mountain, while Sokka watched for monsters or ghosts or whatever else might come with mysterious Avatar riddles. Momo followed in flight, swooping down to touch the water every so often. At one point, their path brought them past a tall, sheer cliff that loomed over them, and Aang pulled on the reins to signal Appa to slow down.

Sokka looked up at the cliff. "Let me guess, the next step in our riddle?"

Aang nodded slowly. "Walk the wall. That's all I know."

Mai snorted. "So much for poetry. I don't have the slightest idea what that means."

Walk the wall? Sokka thought about it, but there were no magic answers bursting forward from his mind right now. Where was Aang getting all this? And how did a bunch of plateaus get shaped like arrows? And then Sokka's mind finally found the connection, all on its own, no magic riddles required. "Earthbenders!"

The other two turned to look at him. Mai said, "What?"

"We're on some kind of Earthbender trail! Who else could have made those arrows? Who else would know those arrows are arrows without a sky bison to fly over? Earthbenders can sense the shape of the arrows, and I bet they'd be able to feel the rapids and waterfall before they even see any water. And who else could walk a wall? Earthbenders can literally just crawl their way up without footholds or equipment, according to the stories I heard when I was a kid. I bet we're supposed to go up."

Mai looked at Aang, who shrugged. "Sounds possible to me. Appa, yip yip!"

Appa roared and ascended with heavy flaps of his tail. Momo rejoined the group in the saddle, apparently unable to match a sky bison's ability to gain altitude, and when they all passed the top of the cliff, even more rocky terrain was spread out before them. Sokka, starting to get into this whole riddle-solving thing, said, "Okay, what next?"

"Know the stranger in the sandstone."

"Ha! See what I'm talking about? More Earthbender talk! Stranger in the sandstone. Now what could that-"

"We're looking for something that isn't made of the local sandstone," Mai interrupted. "Obviously. Now how are we going to do that without an Earthbender?" She looked over at Aang, but it was a long moment before she spoke again. "Could you- with your Avatar Spirit-"

"No," Aang said quickly. "I don't think I can." His eyes shifted away from the girl he usually couldn't stop eyeing.

Well, okay then. Sokka sat up and looked at the other two. "We know we're roughly in the right spot, and a different kind of stone will probably be differently colored, so let's fly around and see what we see. Whoever made that crazy riddle probably wasn't counting on our rather unique point of view, up here."

Aang immediately perked up. "Worth a try! Come on, Appa, a little higher!" He snapped the reins, and a corresponding snap of Appa's tail gave them even more altitude. Sokka moved to one side of the saddle while Mai moved to the other, and they all began their surveillance.

It was Aang who eventually spotted the ruined temple with the large onyx statue on its roof.
Aang liked the temple. It obviously didn't belong to the Air Nomads, but it had the same sense of pious grandeur and natural peacefulness as the temples where he had grown up. Standing within the crumbling structure of the main hall, he could see that everything - the thick walls and solid statues and high domed ceiling and massive columns and complex relief sculptures - were all connected, one single piece that rose right out of the ground. It could only be the work of Earthbenders, and even if Aang couldn't guess that much, he would have recognized the symbols in the decorations from his visits to Omashu. Badgermoles appeared as frequently as sky bison did in the Air Temples, along with the classical iconography of hardy vines for the life that could survive on even the rockiest terrain, and the imposing figures of the old Kings and Queens of the First Kingdom.

This was a Temple of the Earth, perhaps visited once upon a time by a past Avatar. For all the dust, for all the emptiness and crumbling walls and faded paint, there was a wholesome air to the place completely unlike the taint that had been on the Southern Air Temple.

"So it turns out that the treasure at the end of the mystery path is an old building full of dust," Mai said. "Meh."

Aang bit back the cry of disappointment he wanted to release. Couldn't she see what a treasure this place was? Even abandoned, even in its current state of disrepair, this place was a physical expression of centuries of Earth Kingdom belief, of the culture that defined them as a people.

Then Aang remembered that Mai was Fire Nation, and even if she was a good person who betrayed her people, she probably still saw things a little oddly.

"Well, I like it." Sokka was peering at one of the relief carvings, a scene of Earthbenders raising a city out the sands of a desert. "But I had jerky for lunch and got to solve a riddle, so I might just be in a really good mood. Still, I'm not seeing why it's so important that we come here. Unless there are any more mysterious directions that will guide us to an ancient Avatar weapon or something?"

Aang chuckled. "The voices have stopped telling me what to do for now. Maybe this is just a good place to meditate and make peace with the universe before we set off on the final phase of our quest to save Katara."

Sokka said, "Whaaaaa."

Mai said, "Ugh."

Then the ground rose up and trapped Aang in a column of stone.

Mai blinked as the stone slats rose up to seal Aang in a standing position, and before he could even cry out, he was locked immobile in the newest addition to the temple's decor. Before she could blink a second time, she ran through a series of quick thoughts:

Enemies.

Earthbenders.

Knives.

Cut people.

As soon as a figure dropped down from somewhere on the domed ceiling, Mai had a pair of razor disks in the air, but there was a flash of metal and a clanking sound that she would never enjoy.
hearing, signifying a successful defense against her blades. Her eyes focused to find a mop-haired man—no, a teenager—brandishing a pair of hooked swords and glaring at her. He hissed, "Fire Nation," and dashed at her, raising the swords for chopping attacks.

As Mai drew a pair of her longer knives and brought them up to catch and redirect the boy's attack, she gave a quick glance around the rest of the main hall and saw Sokka dancing away from a series of earthen slats that were rising up out of the ground and trying to trap him just like Aang. The Airbender himself was still stuck, but he was watching Mai, and as her gaze landed on him, their eyes met, and Aang's eyebrows twitched.

Ah. He had a plan. Mai carefully kept her face blank.

Her attacker came at her again with his swords, alternating his slashes to try to control the rhythm of the fight, but it was a pattern she had drilled against time and time again, so she knew exactly how defend herself without putting too much stress on her knives, and when to move to disrupt the rain of blows again her. Mai began circling her opponent as though trying to get around his guard, but he sidestepped in the opposite direction to keep himself facing her. They continued that way, orbiting each other, her attacker probing at her defenses when he could while Mai hovered at the edge of his range, until she finally stopped and lunged forward as if to make a stabbing attack.

The boy crossed his swords and caught her knives on the spiked guards of his weapons, and grinned as he pressed back at her. The long blades of his sword swung down so that they were on either side of her head, the hooks hovering at the back of her neck, and he grunted as he pulled away so that he could slide his swords together to meet at her neck—

—and then a gust of wind no softer than a brick wall slammed into the guy and knocked him clean across hall.

Mai turned to where Aang was still trapped, but perfectly positioned to blow an air attack at the exact space that she had tricked the swordsman into occupying. When Aang noticed her looking, he smiled, completely pleased with himself, and she gave him an appreciative salute with both of her knives.

Then a new voice rang out with, "Hey, you're an Airbender! Does that mean you're the Avatar?"

The stone that had been pinning Aang crumbled to pebbles, and he shook himself free of the dust. When he looked up again, he found another teenager—this one long-haired, with a thin mustache and a tuft of beard on his chin—stepping through the doorway of one the temple hall's side rooms.

Aang nodded. "I'm Avatar Aang! And you're an Earthbender?"

"Yes, my name is Haru. I heard the news about what you did on Kyoshi—transforming in a sea monster and running the Fire Nation off the whole island! That's the most amazing thing I ever heard!"

What? That's what people were saying about him?! Aang was still trying to figure out how to reply when Sokka's laugh echoed through the temple: "Ha! And did you hear about how he can transform into a sky bison and carry people all over the world?"

Haru's eyes went even wider. "You can?"

Aang could hear Mai give a snort behind him, but he ignored her and said, "You shouldn't believe everything you hear. I just made friends with a sea monster, and that was only part of an attack on the Fire Nation there, not liberating a whole island."
"Oh." Haru's smile didn't go away. "Well, that's still a great story, and I'd love to hear it. But first we should check on Jet. Sorry we attacked you, but this place is supposed to be a secret."

"Jet?" Aang turned to where the crazy guy with the hook swords was finally easing himself to his feet. "Sorry about that- and, uh, for the confusion- but I couldn't let you hurt my friend Mai."

"Your friend is a filthy Fire Nation fri-"

"Hey," Mai interrupted, pointing her knives at the boy, "you finish saying that word and I'll stick stiletto in your ears."

Jet looked like he was going to consider it, but then his eyes went to the knives in Mai's hands and he swallowed his initial reply. "You're still Fire Nation! Did you forget to tell your buddy about how your people killed all of his?"

Aang didn't even realize he was moving until he had stepped between the two. "Mai is my friend. What the Fire Nation did has nothing to do with her."

Jet held Aang's gaze for a long moment, and then smiled and took a step back. "Oh, a defector, eh? Well, I can't argue with the Avatar himself. And who's the Water Tribe guy?"

Sokka kept all expression from his face as he said, "Name's Sokka. Southern Tribe. Nice swords."

"Yeah, I like them."

Silence reigned until Haru finally stepped up to break it. "So, Avatar Aang, what brings you to our village?"

"Oh, you can just call me Aang." Wait, what village? "Wait, what village?"

One of the columns in the Earth Temple's main halls didn't quite connect with the ceiling. The cause of the breakage was lost to time, but there was a chunk of the column that was missing from the very top, leaving a gap just large enough to accommodate someone in a crouch.

An observer sat there now, watching the meeting between the Avatar's companions and the temple's defenders.

The spy's gaze rested for a long time on the Avatar himself, taking in the boy's youth and his contrasting poise. Then it moved to Sokka, but the Water Tribe savage radiated nothing but distrust and inadequacy. Finally, the observer's focus moved to Mai.

She was Fire Nation to the bone, decked out in red and black and wearing one of that culture's traditional hairstyles, displaying a self-control that silenced all other possible tells. Her face was the crafted blankness of the mistrustful, and her economy of motion was a testament to her readiness to jump back into battle at a moment's notice. Oblivious to being watched, Mai flicked her hands and somehow returned her knives to some hidden access points in her robes, and there was no doubt the weapons could be retrieved again with equal ease and quickness.

There was no doubt that this one was dangerous.

From beneath a grinning, leering mask of a spirit- a mask rendered in paints of blue and white- the observer started making plans for this Mai of the Fire Nation.
Sokka had to admit that what Haru was describing was maybe worth the side-tripping and riddle-solving.

"A village of fugitives and refugees, hidden in a ravine below this temple." Haru motioned for the group to follow him deeper into the temple. Sokka made sure to bring up the rear, keeping an eye on everyone, especially Jet. Haru, leading the way down halls and through empty rooms, continued, "The Fire Nation doesn't tolerate Earthbenders. In all the full colonies, anyone caught Earthbending, for any reason, is arrested and taken away to one of the special prisons. Some Earthbenders hide what they are, but it can be hard." As they all walked, the path grew darker, as they moved away from the windows and crumbling gaps in the ceiling that let in the sunlight. "Once Bending has been awakened in someone, there's a need. For most of the people who try to hide it, it's just a matter of time before it comes out, one way or another."

Sokka noticed that the hall they were taking was sloping downwards; doing some quick calculations about the angle of descent and the distance the group had walked so far, he concluded that they had passed underground, into the mountains he had been scanning from the sky during the riddle-hunt. He hoped that Appa and Momo would be okay outside the temple for a while with no trees for cover.

The path grew darker, but there were regular square holes in the walls, just beneath the ceiling, through which shafts of sunlight came down, providing enough light to see by, at least.

Haru continued talking: "The land around Taidi has always favored Earthbenders, though, and this temple was maintained by an order of shamans for ages. When the Fire Nation invaded, over a hundred years ago, the shamans fled, but only so that their temple would not be found. They kept the memory of it alive amongst themselves and an order of philosophers with which they had maintained friendly relations. And so when Earthbenders needed a place to hide from the Fire Nation, a riddle was quietly passed along that would allow them to find this place."

Aang nodded. "The bones of the earth will show The Way from Taidi. Ever falling, ever frothing, the land is sobbing and eyes are watching. Reverse the running, walk the wall, and know the stranger in the sandstone."

"That's the one," Jet said. "Where did you hear about it?"

Sokka rolled his eyes. "Would you believe it popped into his head like some kind of dream?"

Jet turned to look at Sokka, as though expecting a joke. "No, I'm not sure I would."

"Then join the club. We have membership cards."

"Well," Aang said, "I am a monk. Maybe the temple was calling to me."

Haru gave a laugh. "However you found this place, we're happy to have you. It's an honor to host the Avatar."

Sokka could see a light approaching. The hall-tunnel-thing they were in was curving now, and it seemed like the sun was shining in from just around the bend. "So 'this place' is a village of refugees, living in the basement of a temple? Doesn't sound like very nice accommodations."

Haru looked back with a smile. "You'd be surprised. And who said anything about a basement? The temple is our doorstep. This is our village!" He led them out of the tunnel and into the light.

Sokka found himself gasping as his eyes adjusted and he saw a wide ravine sprawling out below him. The tunnel had let out to a platform near the top of the ravine, just below a long slanting
extension that probably blocked the view of this ravine to anyone who wasn’t standing right on the edge. A twisting set of crudely-shaped stairs led down from the platform to a real village. It had buildings of one and two and three stories, with lanes running between them and people moving around and ostrich-horses pulling carts and all the noise of life rising up. Sokka’s eyes rose back up as well, taking in the far side of the ravine, and noticed that the stone wall had been carved with ridges running up its whole length, and on those artificial paths people tended vibrant green plant growth.

Sokka realized he was looking at a vertical farm, providing food for the village. He whistled, impressed by the engineering as he spotted the irrigation pipes, and the system of ropes and lifts that allowed equipment to be moved around. Earthbenders raised and lowered massive boulders that were serving as counter-weights on the lift systems, but as Sokka examined things closely, he realized that there were more ropes and platforms than seemed to be in service. Actually, now that he looked, he noticed that a fairly complex system of ropes and bridges and perches and ladders extended right out over the village itself, setting up what seemed like an air-born system of roads.

Sokka pointed. "What are those?"

Jet smirked as the group started moving down the stairs. "It's not all Earthbenders around here. People like me don't necessarily enjoy spending their whole lives on the ground, and even barefoot Earthbenders sometimes need to take a break from being able to sense everything around them."

"It's not a big deal for people like me," Haru said. "I'm just a novice, so I can't sense anything through the ground unless I really concentrate, and even that doesn't tell me much. But the kinds of Earthbenders who are capable of finding the temple are much better at that type of thing, and this ground resonates very well, so it can be a little overpowering until they get used to it."

As amazing as it all was, Sokka's feet were plenty tired by the time the group left the stone staircase behind them and reached the floor of the ravine. The sun was fading quickly, the slanting tops of the walls no doubt limiting the duration of the day, and torches began coming to life in the village. Sokka had to admit, it was an even slicker operation than the Kyoshi rebels were running. He hoped it worked out even half as well as his visit to the island had.

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Mai was getting really tired of all these Earth rebel operations. She wasn't normally claustrophobic, but having tons of solid rock or earth or dirt or whatever looming over her was reaching Azula-class levels of intimidating.

Haru and Jet had brought the group to the leaders of the village in a town hall of some sorts, which just so happened to be run by Haru's daddy. Speaking of intimidating, the man had a voice that was deeper than the Abyss of Jodhpur and a build like a tank that decided to get up and walk, but this Tyro nevertheless had the graceful step of a Bender and an easy smile on his gray-bearded face as he greeted the group. 'Avatar Aang, welcome to our little hideaway. It raised our spirits when we first heard the rumors of your return, and having you in our midst is a greater gift than ever hoped for. Let us show our appreciation for the Avatar!'

The village council, and the audience that had gathered in the hall, all cheered. Aang waved back, the biggest and dumbest grin on his face. Mai stood off to the side with Sokka, and inched closer to him so that he blocked easy view of her. She didn’t like the glances her red clothes were getting.

The council then called for a festival, and people rushed off to prepare food and instruments while Haru and Sokka went back up to the temple to bring Appa and Momo down into the ravine. Aang remained to tell Tyro and the council the story of his thawing and questing, so Mai decided to make
herself scarce. Haru's talk earlier of Earthbenders being able to sense everything around them through the ground had her feeling watched, and she decided to see what this stupid village looked like from the rope-bridge system above.

She walked the streets, shunning the torches that brought light to the early dusk, and eventually found a ladder with no one around it. She climbed up until she reached the perch above. It was simple a platform made from slats of wood with minimalist railings to prevent missteps, but it was all solid enough and offered a decent view, so Mai gave it a cautious approval. Two rope bridges extended off from the platform into the darkness, and she decided to go exploring.

In the dark, high above everyone else, invisible to all senses, Mai allowed herself a smile as she went running across the rope bridges. The wooden slats swayed under her light steps, but they offered support enough for one of her training. Ty Lee probably would have been able to run across the ropes themselves without a problem, and Mai allowed herself a moment to miss her friend. No one else really understood the joy of this kind of freedom.

Mai didn't see her stalker until it was almost too late.

The figure was standing at the end of the rope bridge she was traversing, a person made of shadows, except for the single broadsword that reflected the light of the torches below. When Mai saw it, she drew to a stop and pulled a pair of razor disks, not sure if a fight was being offered but definitely not liking a naked blade being brandished in front of her.

The figure took a step forward, and some of the torchlight from the village spilled up to reveal the face.

Or rather, the mask. It was a classic opera mask, painted blue and white, of a character known to Mai. The Blue Spirit was famous amongst everyone in the Fire Nation and the Colonies with even a little culture, a trickster figure in all kinds of stories and plays who always challenged those with power.

The Blue Spirit raised its blade to point at Mai, and stepped forward.

Beneath her feet, the rope bridge swayed.

TO BE CONTINUED
Mai gets her own personal demon.

The Blue Spirit

It was night in the Ravine of the Hidden Village, but life had not gone away with the sunlight. The whole village had turned out for an impromptu festival, bringing food and music and dancing and chatter and happy whispers about a boy with arrow tattoos.

Aang himself was standing beneath one of the torch-poles that was shedding light over the proceedings, gesturing wildly as he finished saying, "...and then the riddles in my dream brought us here, and we got into a little fight with Haru and Jet, but no one got hurt. We still aren't sure why I got riddles in my head, though. Your village is really nice and all, but it doesn't seem to have much to do with Waterbender prisons."

Tyro chuckled, and the deepness of his voice made it seem like the Earth itself was rumbling with amusement. It struck Aang was perfectly appropriate that this man would be the head of a hidden Earthbender village's ruling council. "That's quite a tale, Avatar Aang. And yet still more believable than the rumors my son brings home from his scouting trips to the city." Aang laughed, along with the son in question, Haru. Tyro continued, "I'm afraid I don't know why you would have been led here, but we are honored that your Avatar Spirit sought us out as allies, and will do our best to help you. But for tonight, relax and enjoy yourself, so that your mind will be ready for the coming battles."

That sounded good to Aang! The music shifted to a jaunty tune that he didn't recognize, but he bobbed his head in time with it and grabbed a couple of spiced broccoli twists from a passing tray. This was the only vegetarian party he had ever been to in the Earth Kingdom, since the people in this village were pretty much reliant on what they could grow and raise on their vertical farms. Shelves had been carved into the walls of the massive ravine, and rows of green growth provided various melons and vegetables.

Sokka slipped his way through the partying villagers and hopped over to Aang, snagging a broccoli twist on the way. "Appa's all settled by the local stable with some hay, and Momo flew off to explore." He bit into the broccoli, and made a face. "Hm, not very satisfying. Anyway, where's Mai?"

Aang blinked. That's right; he hadn't seen Mai for a while. He had gotten so caught up in the welcoming that he had lost track of her. "Um, not sure. Do you think we should go looking?" He imagined her with a twisted ankle somewhere, sobbing and calling out for him to come rescue her and bring her to the dance floor. How she was going to dance with a twisted ankle didn't even worry Aang; they'd figure it out after she was safe again.

Sokka shrugged. "Eh, she's not particularly social. Let her hide if she wants."

"But what if she's in trouble?"
"Well, she's carrying enough weapons to arm this whole village, and we're in a hidden base of allies in the middle of nowhere. She's probably the safest she's been since she joined up with us. With you, I mean."

Aang wasn't so sure about that, but then Haru stepped over with his usual elegant awkwardness, carrying a pair of cups that smelled like what the monks had used to clean bison snot off walls. "Hey... uh, Sokka, right? Want to try some of our baijui? We distill it from the sorghum we grow."

Aang frowned. "You're supposed to drink that stuff?"

"All the men around here do. Knock it back in one go. Want to try?" Aang shook his head quickly, so Haru proceeded to ‘knock back’ one cup, and afterward gave a sound like a groan. "Woo, that's the stuff. Here, show me how the Water Tribe takes it."

Cautiously, Sokka accepted the other cup. "All the men?" Haru nodded, and Sokka raised the cup to his mouth. "Wow, I've worked with metal-eating solvents that don't smell this nasty. I'm curious if it will kill me." Before Aang could ask if Sokka was joking, the older boy swallowed the contents of the cup in one big gulp.

Sokka immediately burst out with an exhalation so hoarse that Aang checked the ground to make sure no internal organs had been hacked up. Sokka fell to his knees in a coughing fit, and Aang hurried over to pat his back until he got enough control of himself to squeak, "Tastes like those solvents, too. So, for- (graaaaaaagh) for experimental purposes, am I actually alive? I'd say-(krkrkr) I'd say yes, but now I think I'm seeing ghosts flying in the sky over there. (krok)"

Aang looked where Sokka was pointing, and was surprised to indeed see some arcs of orange light looping over one of the crop-ledges up on the ravine wall.

"Hey," Haru said, "those are the chongzi lamps! We put them up there because the light keeps bugs away from the crops. Someone must be- must be throwing them around or something."

Aang flicked his staff and used a small burst of Airbending to deploy the glider wings. He had a bad feeling about this.

Mai's fighting style was optimized for distance, and very much dependent on the amount of bladed ammunition she had within reach. This suited her just fine, because she liked to keep her distance from other people, and she rarely needed more than one or two good throws to win.

Thus she was mildly annoyed to find herself fighting for her life on a ledge covered in vines and under-ripe melons, reduced to wielding a cheap metal pole she had yanked out of the ground with an orange paper lantern hanging from one end.

The attacker in the Blue Spirit mask came in again for another assault, stepping easily through the undergrowth and swinging a dao saber even as he (Mai was pretty confident it was a he) danced around her position. She swung her makeshift fighting staff to deflect the blade, sending the lantern tied to it swinging and jerking with its odd light, but the force of the impact rattled her whole body, and she was slow to bring the long weapon in line again as the Blue Spirit continued to circle. The blade gleamed in the orange light of the lamp as it came in at Mai, and only the reflexes she had honed in bloody spars with Princess Azula saved her as she dived out of the way. She landed in a roll and tumbled across the melon farm, the loose soil scraping against her face and clothes and hands as she concentrated on keeping a grip on her staff and positioning it so that it wouldn't brake her roll. When she came back up, dizzy and filthy, the Blue Spirit was already rushing at her again, and Mai swung the staff in a desperate attack that wasn't intended so much to actually hit her opponent as
simply buy a moment to catch her breath.

The fight had started on the network of rope bridges and platform towers that ran over the village at the bottom of the ravine, and when the masked fighter had first appeared, Mai had not lacked in confidence. She started with a pair of razor disks, but the Blue Spirit had dodged those easily, running across a rope bridge as though it were solid ground. The man behind the mask was fast, almost as fast as Ty Lee had been, and he hadn't found a need to use his saber in any defensive capacity. He had simply stepped or twisted out of the way of all of Mai's attacks, and soon she began to worry about running out of weapons before this fight was over. She had been trying to conserve her supply of blades throughout her whole journey with Aang and Sokka, but she couldn't always recover the knives and bolts she used, and a rope network in the night sky was hardly going to allow her to reclaim anything she used now.

So Mai had been forced to keep a long pair of knives in hand, dueling with the Blue Spirit, but even the acrobatic tricks that Ty Lee had taught her years ago weren't enough to overcome this attacker. The Blue Spirit fought with not just his saber, but also hands and feet and kicks and punches and shoves and twists and jumps and it was all Mai could do to keep from being overpowered. By the time she was outright running from her attacker across the rope bridges, she was bruised and sweaty and thinking more about surviving this fight than winning it.

Upon reaching one platform, she had turned to cut the bridge behind her, but even that hadn't gotten rid of the Blue Spirit. He had jumped even as the bridge was starting to fall beneath his feet, and though the leap wasn't enough to take him all the way to Mai's platform, he had grabbed onto the structure of the tower beneath her without even letting go of his saber, and then began crawling up like a spider-fly after prey.

Mai had been forced to retreat to the vertical farms carved into the ravine walls- running and swinging and even jumping across the bridges and lifts, shooting bolts from her launchers as she went- just to give herself the morale boost of having solid ground beneath her boots again.

She didn't know why the orange lanterns had been hung on the poles scattered throughout the rows of vegetation, given how deserted the area was at night, but she wasn't going to argue against being able to see the twisting vines and grasses all over the ground. Mai had taken one of the poles as a weapon almost by accident; she had tried to parry a blow from the Blue Spirit's dao saber with her knives, but the enemy's blade had been too heavy to withstand, and she wound up both losing the knives and getting a slash across the backs of her hands for her troubles. She had also been knocked back, only staying upright by catching herself on one of the poles, and it had been a simple matter to yank it out of the ground when the next attack had come in and she needed to parry again.

She was nevertheless certain she was going to survive this fight. Sure, she suffering from some major disadvantages, but that would only last until she came up with some sufficiently clever tactic that would let her break away. Any second now.

Mai brushed her loose hair- at some point it had escaped from its ties- out of her face and took up her pole in a two-handed grip. The orange lantern still hung from the left end. The Blue Spirit came in again, the color of its mask resisting the sickly light, and Mai twisted and jabbed with the end of the pole with the lantern, then withdrew and swung the other end in at her opponent's side, sending the lantern swinging up behind her head like a rising sun. The first jab didn't strike home, but it did stop the Blue Spirit short, and the next blow was supposed to come in with rib-cracking force, but he leaned into the hit, taking it at an angle against his arm with a sound that sadly didn't include the snap of bone, and then he stabbed forward with his saber. Mai swung her staff up with both hands to catch the blade and deflect it backwards, bouncing the lantern high into the sky, but the move left her completely open, and the Blue Spirit was already hopping and snapping a foot into her unguarded
middle. The boot slammed into her stomach, and while Mai's leaning crouch kept her upright against the blow, that just meant she took the full force of it and a sickly pain exploded in her gut.

Mai dropped her staff and dropped to her knees, coughing and wheezing.

She could still barely breathe when the dao blade came swinging down at her head, but she managed to roll to the side through the vines and melons, coming to a haphazard stop right by the edge of the cliff. She gave one last shuddering cough, the sickness in her stomach still radiating through her whole body. She tried to stand, but her muscles wouldn’t tighten against the pain.

The Blue Spirit turned without hurry. Whoever he was, he knew the fight was over.

Mai glanced behind her at the open ravine, seeing the village and its torches so far below.

Then she spotted something else, and finally came up with a clever way to survive.

Mai turned to face the Blue Spirit. Her attacker tensed but didn't raise his blade to a guard position, no doubt confident that even if she threw a knife, it would be easy to dodge. The Blue Spirit was right about that, at least.

So she shifted her crouch to into a spring-loaded squat, and leaped out into the open ravine.

She barely had enough time to reconsider the intelligence of the plan when Aang swooped right into her path on his glider and she wrapped her arms desperately around his little body.

The falling sensation didn't go away, but then Mai felt a gust of wind hit her like a hurricane, and her stomach flipped and cramped in protest of this treatment so soon after being kicked. She and Aang were rising now, the wind cradling his glider. They swooped over the cliff-farm that she had just vacated, and Aang let go of his glider to drop to the vine-covered ground. He set Mai down with more than enough time to catch his looping glider again, shift into a combat crouch, collapse the glider's wings, and angle the staff into a guard position.

Unfortunately, the Blue Spirit wasn't around to see the show.

Mai threw glances back and forth, trying to find where the next attack would be coming from, but the enemy was nowhere to be seen. Just like in the stories, the Blue Spirit had vanished into thin air. Not that she thought there was anything supernatural about her masked attacker, but she had to give up her search when her stomach flipped again and a burst of vomit pushed its way up her throat. She threw up on the ground and gagged.

"Mai?"

"Grab my hair," she hissed as her stomach gave another clench, but Aang was able to pull her mane out of the way before she threw up again.

What a night.

Aang was still holding Mai's hair when the others arrived. Tyro and Haru led the way, with Sokka and a group of the other villagers following and looking ready for a fight.

There didn't seem to be any fight to be had, though. The vines and melons in the area were all trampled, and a few of the lamps were knocked over. Mai was clearly the worse for wear, even though she had stopped puking, and she wouldn't have jumped off the cliff just for the fun of it. Yet all was quiet here.
The others gathered around, and Aang crouched at Mai's side. "Are you ready to tell us what happened?"

She swallowed. "I was attacked. A swordsman in a Blue Spirit mask." She slowly recounted how she had been exploring the sky-paths above the village when she was ambushed, and how the fight had carried over to the vertical farm.

Jet stepped out of the crowd of villagers. "Did you have to bring the fight up here? Look at this place." He kicked the remnants of a smashed melon. "We depend on this food to survive. Because the Fire Nation took our homes."

Mai turned an acidic glare on him. "Next time I'm fighting for my life, I'll be more careful."

"That's enough," Tyro said. He spoke with a clear sound of authority, but there was no shout or harshness to it. "We need to focus on the more immediate danger. It seems that the Avatar and his friends aren't our only guests, and our location might be compromised."

Aang stood up. "Um, respectfully, sir, that's not the only possibility. When we arrived, we were flying pretty high up. Only another sky bison could follow us, and we didn't see anyone down on the ground anywhere near here. This Blue Spirit guy might be someone who already lives here."

"No way," Haru said. "Why would anyone want to attack-" He looked at Mai, in her red clothes that were like blood in the light of the orange lanterns, and abruptly stopped talking. "Um, yeah, maybe it's possible."

Tyro bowed to Aang. "Avatar, as much as we would enjoy having you as our guest for however long you would like to stay, your group is obviously in danger, one way or another. I think it would be best if you leave tomorrow."

Aang held back a sigh. He would have loved to stay a while, but he knew Tyro was right, and besides, the longer they waited, the longer it would be before Sokka could finally free his sister. "I understand. Thank you for what you've been able to share with us, and we're sorry for any trouble."

"Now, hold on." Tyro smiled. "We're not just kicking you out. You told me that getting to this Crescent Island is going to be tough, and just because you can't stay for now doesn't mean we can't help. We're not entirely self-sufficient here. We still have to do some trading to get necessary supplies, and adding a little variety to our food helps ease the isolation."

Sokka scratched at his hair. "But the closest city is Taidi, and that's- wait."

"He held up a finger, and a smirk grew up on his face. "You can't go to Taidi because people might become curious where your traders are coming from! So you need some other way of buying and selling!"

Tyro nodded, and turned to Jet. "It was your idea. Tell them."

Aang swung his gaze over to the mop-headed teenager. He was the one who came up with this plan? Aang had gotten the feeling that Jet didn't really like them- or, more specifically, Mai and anyone who claimed to be her friend- and wouldn't have expected him to be the source of any plans.

Jet, for his part, gave a lazy smile. "We're going to get you to Crescent Island by special delivery."

He glanced at Mai. "Provided that there are no complications."

They set off the next day. Sokka had to drag himself out of bed at sunrise, which was extra tragic this time because he had been sleeping in an actual bed, rather than just a bag on the ground, even if he was bunking in a stranger's house. As he got himself ready for the journey ahead, he worked on a
number of grouchy but no doubt amusing complaints that he would deliver to his friends about the inconvenience of the situation. He arrived at the gathering point at the edge of the village ready to let loose with his first gripe, but then he laid eyes on Mai and his words died on his lips.

She was, of course, blank-faced and perfectly groomed, but there was a weariness to her eyes that made Sokka feel wide awake in comparison. Aang came over, and judging from the expression on his face, he was seeing the same thing as Sokka. A quick trade of glances was all that was required to reach the consensus that Sokka would speak first: "Uh, Mai, are you okay?"

She sighed. "I'm still pretty sore, and I slept lightly. Turns out there's no real way to lock the doors around here."

Sokka considered that. "You think this Blue Spirit is the real deal?"

"Not in the sense of being a Spirit, no. I heard him grunting as we fought, just like any other man. But someone who can fight that well is definitely the real deal in my book."

Aang glanced around to make sure that no one else was listening to them, and Sokka confirmed that Haru and Jet were briefing the crew they'd be taking along, while Tyro and the other villagers seeing them off were too far away to hear soft words. Aang said, "And you're a Weapon of the Fire Nation. What does that make this guy?"

Sokka had never been quite clear on this 'Weapon' business, except that it meant Mai was a big deal to some people, but she and Aang seemed to share an understanding since she replied, "He's smart, strategic, and good enough to be scary. He can keep this stupid village if he likes it so much, with my compliments."

"All right, we're set!" Haru stepped over with a bright smile beneath his mustache. "Good morning, everyone. Are you ready to go?"

It finally struck Sokka that within twenty-four hours, he might finally be seeing his sister for the first time in forever. Of course, he might also be dead within twenty-four hours, which was the more likely possibility, so he couldn't get too happy. "Ready to go and ready to fly. Aang?"

"Appa's ready! Let's get aboard." Aang did one of his Airbending-powered jumps that landed him right on the sky bison's head, while everyone else climbed up the tail.

It was tight in the saddle with everyone- a pair of big men named Chong and Wong with arms as thick as Sokka's whole body, a boy called Smellerbee carrying three short swords, a woman named Duizhang who had been scowling ever since she laid eyes on Appa, and some other villagers a little older than Sokka who were excited and chatty- and there was a bit of maneuvering as each person found a spot to their liking. As they were all settling into their places in the saddle, Sokka noticed Jet and Mai near each other. Jet gave her a pat on the top of her hair and said, "You're looking beautiful today, my lady."

She yanked her head away. "Don't."

Jet smirked, and Mai maneuvered over to sit near Sokka.

He lowered his overall opinion of Jet, but then wondered about all the times he had teased Mai about camping, bathrooms, shiny hair, and her habit of snorting when unimpressed. But she hadn't actually said, "Don't," to him at any point, so he figured she knew that he didn't really mean any harm.

Then came Aang's call of, "Appa, yip yip," and they were all suddenly airborne.
The flight took an hour. Mai curled up and went to sleep almost right away, and Momo settled in beside her to share her nap, so Sokka chatted quietly with Haru and some of the younger guys for a while, asking questions about the tools and processes the hidden village used to maximize its resources, and was even able to offer a few mechanical tips for keeping their lift-system in good repair. They claimed to have no access to liquid blubber as a lubricant, but promised to look into it.

Appa flew over mountains and hills, rocks and sands, forests and brambles. Eventually the earth on the horizon gave way to the blue stretch of the ocean, and soon after, Haru was directing Aang to bring Appa down towards a bay on the coast formed by a ring of hills, capped by a small stretch of sand at the far end with a small stockhouse standing on it. Beached near that was a long boat built like a brick. As Appa came in for a landing, Sokka could see that the ship had a paddlewheel on the side and a metal smokestack at the stern, so it wasn’t dependent on the sails, but it had two masts regardless.

"There she is," Haru announced. "Our smuggling ship. It takes about a day of travel to bring our stuff here, and then we sail around to some port or another to sell and trade. It's a slow process, but it keeps the Fire Nation from tracking us."

Sokka looked over the long tub of a ship. "And that thing can get us to Crescent Island?"

Haru nodded. "We'll be passing through the Crucible Sea." He reached into his backpack and produced a map. He pointed to the tail end of the Fire Nation islands, and then to a tangential circle of ocean formed by the curve of the Earth Kingdom continent. "The Crucible is the sea between the closest points of the Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom. That one spot of ocean is actually where most of the naval battles of the last hundred years took place, since it's so heavily traveled. We'd have a hard time sailing from the Southern Islands to the Fire Nation, for example, since there's a wide open ocean between them, but this ship can get us across the Crucible. Provided there are no storms, of course."

"Of course." Sokka and Haru hopped down to the sandy ground. "And I'm sure the weather will be nice, pirates will leave us alone, and the Fire Navy won't just decide to sink us for the sheer hilarity of human suffering, but before we can enjoy any of those lucky breaks, we need to make sure Appa will fit into that tub's smuggling compartment."

"Hey, how'd you know we call her The Tub?"

"...I know everything. Come on, let's get to work."

It took everyone to get the ship ready to set sail. A good portion of the main deck was actually a long pair of doors that could be opened to expose the main cargo bay, and since they wouldn't need for much in the way of supplies for this mission, aside from coal for the engine which would be in another compartment, it was decided that Appa could 'bunk' down there. Once the ship was ready to go, the whole crew- plus Appa and even Momo- assembled on the beach to push the ship out into deep water.

Soon after, they were sailing The Tub on the ocean waves.

As the ship passed out of the bay, Sokka stood out at the prow of the ship, looking at the ocean sparkling in the sunlight, and grinned. They were on the last leg of their journey to Katara, trusting in the waters to carry them, and while he knew that sailing could be dangerous business, he couldn't help but feel that it was appropriate that the mission to save the Last Waterbender was beginning with a sea voyage.

And it was all thanks to Aang. Sokka couldn't have started on this path without the Last Airbender,
and only the Avatar could have commanded the support that had allowed them to come to this point. People wanted to help the Avatar just because he was the Avatar. That he was a good friend like Aang just meant that the universe wasn't completely awful.

And when Sokka took Katara back to find Gran-Gran, Aang would be okay on his own. Mai would probably even stick around to watch over him, so there wouldn't be any need for more than the usual amounts of worry.

When Mai had agreed to this plan, she had forgotten her unfortunate tendency to become seasick when actually on the sea. All that discomfort with flying had completely pushed it out of her mind.

The seasickness hadn't started right away. The Tub had sailed on through most of the afternoon, and Mai ascribed her mild discomfort to the beating she had taken the previous night. It wasn't until the sun was dipping low that she realized she was feeling even worse than before, and the nausea hit her not long after that.

The one positive thing was that no one on the crew wanted to deal with a groaning, sweating, nauseous Fire Nation native, so Mai was left alone to clutch the bulwark and wallow in her misery as the sun set. She wasn't quite at the point yet where she was throwing up over the side, but that rosy future seemed inevitable, and her only consolation was that she would be able to do it in solitary peace. That relative bliss came to an end when Aang ambled over and said, "Are you okay?"

Mai turned to look at him. "Am I green?"

"Kind of, yeah."

"Question answered, then."

"Oh, sorry." Aang didn't seem to take the hint, leaning against the bulwark and obviously choking on his inability to come up with something intelligent to say. Momo scurried over across the railing, but Aang shooed him away. "Not now, Momo. Mai's not feeling well." The lemur gave a trill and flapped away to bother someone else.

Mai swallowed with some difficulty. She was reminded unpleasantly of the previous night, when she was dependent on Aang to help her deal with her own vomiting. He hadn't made a big deal out of it, hadn't so much as mentioned it since then, but the thought of being that helpless and dependent on the kid made Mai want to commit ritual suicide. If all went to plan, Zuko would be waiting on Crescent Island right now, and then it would all be over. "Look.

"Hey, um, Haru said they're going to be turning on the boiler for the paddle soon," he interrupted, "and I was thinking that maybe if you went below deck and hung out near the engine, the noise and vibration might be like one of the metal Fire Nation ships and make you feel better." He clasped his hands behind his back, and poked the deck with the toe of his boot. "It's just something I thought. I don't know if it makes any sense."

Mai blinked. "Actually, it does. The running of the engine always helped during the trip to the South Pole." She pushed herself off the bulwark, and had to fight for a moment to maintain her balance. "Consider your existence justified for the day."

"Do you need any help?"

Mai waved him off, and slowly made her way inside to her cabin. The closets that passed as living quarters on The Tub were all grouped at the ship's aft, since the cargo bays took up the whole front of the ship, minus all those weird places like bilges that Mai didn't want to know about. She had to
take a flight of stairs down, which was no fun in her current state. She went directly to her own quarters, deep enough that she should feel the engine's thrumming as soon as it got going, and opened the door to the small space to find the Blue Spirit hunched over her case of knives.

Wait, what?

It was the same leering, grinning, blue mask from the night before. The Blue Spirit looked up at Mai's entrance, and she saw that he had something in his hands. It glinted like metal, which wasn't surprising considering that her luggage was full of throwing blades, but she caught a gold twinkle to the shine, and suddenly it was very hard to breathe. It was her encryption cog, the little gear issued by Azula and used to sell Aang out back in the South Pole, over a month ago. Only the most loyal servants of the Royal Fire Family had such cogs. And the Blue Spirit was holding Mai's right now.

Her hands were going for her weapons even as the masked figure was dashing forward. He shoved past her with stiff-arm to her shoulder that rocked her back into the passageway. The ship lurched before she got her balance, and she found herself twisting to the floor, while the Blue Spirit ran away and up the staircase. Mai tried to push herself back up, but the nausea welled up within her again, and it was all she could do to lie on the floor and keep from making a mess all over herself.

The floor seemed to shudder beneath Mai, and at first she didn't realize that it was the coal engine at work.

The grim expressions that Aang found facing him immediately ruined his good mood. He had been in the cargo bay with Appa, soothing his friend about having to stay below decks. "Sorry, buddy," he had said, "but Haru warned that patrols might see us before we see them, and if they see you... well, we don't want them to see you, so you have to stay hidden, okay? It's better than being seasick like Mai, right?" Appa's answering groan hadn't been too annoyed, but that might have to do with the apples Aang was giving him.

When he turned around to get more apples from the sack, he found Sokka, Haru, Jet, and the swordswoman Smellerbee approaching. They came in through the door at the far end leading to the crew quarters and engine room, clustered together like they were expecting an attack, and their faces spoke of a major problem.

"What's going on, guys?"

Jet turned to the swordswoman, Smellerbee, and she handed him something that gleamed gold in the light of the lamps. "This was rolled into the engine room while we were shoveling coal." He held it up, and Aang recognized it as some kind of mechanical part. "We haven't told the rest of the crew yet, since I wanted your permission to deal with it."

"It's a... gear?"

Haru crossed his arms over his chest. "It's an encryption cog. The Fire Nation military uses them to translate their messages into unreadable code."

Aang frowned. He wasn't quite sure how that worked, but he understood that the Fire Nation origins were the important part. "Are you sure?"

Sokka nodded. "I used to see them at the South Pole. The lab had its own set it would use to transmit news, sometimes. But those were all standard steel. I've never seen one made of gold before. And yes, that's real gold."

Jet stepped forward, and thrust the cog right into Aang's face. "The Fire Nation only lets its nobles
use gold. And the only people allowed to put the flame sigil itself into gold are the family of the Fire Lord himself." He flipped the cog, revealing an etching of the triple-pronged symbol that Aang had quickly come to dread.

A chill brushed his heart at the sight, but that didn't mean he understood. "So, why do we have it? Where did it come from?"

Sokka looked away.

Jet, on the other hand, took another step forward, putting him uncomfortably close to Aang. "It wasn't on the ship before today. We've taken The Tub on supply runs plenty of times. But this is the first time we've sailed with a Fire Nation fritter aboard."

The wording was confusing enough that it took Aang a moment to figure out who Jet was talking about. "Wait, you think this is Mai's? I guess... no, that's not right. I met her family, and they're not Royal, just the usual nobility. You must be wrong about the etching."

"He's not, Aang." Sokka still refused to look up. "I never actually saw anything like that, but I heard the same thing Jet did. Gold is for nobility, but the flame sigil can't be on it. One of the tests we had for identifying gold was developed a thousand years ago or something to prove a traitor had been putting the flames on his gold ornaments." His feet shuffled loudly on the cargo bay floor. "They made me learn stuff like that."

Aang sighed. "All right, but so what? Mai was given this title, a Weapon of the Fire Nation. That means she's a warrior who's so good that the Royal Family makes them their servant. She probably got this as part of that."

Sokka finally looked up. "I've been wondering about that. She's mentioned the title a few times, but not what it means. Where did you hear about it?"

Aang opened his mouth to answer, but found himself with nothing to say. How did he learn that? He had been wondering just like Sokka, ever since her quick explanation of how she broke him out the South Pole prison, but now all of a sudden he just knew the full history. "I- I'm not sure."

Haru brightened. "Maybe your Avatar powers plucked the information from Mai's mind!"

Aang resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Yeah, if I could read her mind, I wouldn't be looking for what the whole Weapon thing was about." He suddenly realized how that might sound, and quickly added, amidst an embarrassing heating of his cheeks, "It's just really hard to know what she's thinking is what I mean and that's all."

Jet finally stepped away, meeting everyone else's eyes. "I want to know why she was still carrying this thing around, if she's a defector, and why she didn't even tell the Avatar about it! Is she using it to communicate with her secret masters?"

"No!" Now Aang was the one stepping right in Jet's face, and he didn't even remember making the decision to so. Smellerbee put a hand on his chest to make him back up, but Aang shook her grip off. "Instead of standing around and accusing her of awful things, maybe we should actually go ask her ourselves and treat her with respect!"

"I like that option."

Everyone turned around to find Mai leaning in the doorway leading to the crew quarters. She didn't look quite as green as before, but her normally immaculate hair was pulled from its buns in places, and her robes were covered in more dust than she ever tolerated.
Jet marched right over to her, but Aang was right at his heels and ready to act if the older boy got too pushy or touchy or jerky. Jet thrust the cog out in what was becoming a practiced manner and said, "Explain this! Who were you communicating with?"

Mai sighed. "No one."

"Then why do you have it?"

"That was equipment I was given when my family was sent to the South Pole. You've obviously figured out what it is. I thought it might be useful one day, and since it's so small, I brought it along."

Aang nodded, completely satisfied, as he had expected to be. Mai was really smart like that, planning ahead for unforeseen trouble.

Jet, however, was no friendlier even as he lowered the cog. "And how do you explain it being a symbol of the Royal Family?"

"Well, Aang's explanation is actually the right one, but I'll go one better." A hint of a smirk touched Mai's sweat-streaked face, but it looked forced to Aang's eyes. "I was betrothed to the third in line for the throne, the Fire Lord's grandson."

Jet blinked.

Sokka said, "Huh."

Smellerbee hands went to handles of her swords.

Haru's eyes went wide.

Aang felt like the entire world had been shattered into little pieces of glass, and then quickly glued back together in a horrid attempt to recreate what had once been whole. Mai was betrothed?! To a guy who would someday be the Fire Lord?!

Betrothed?!

Sokka's snort broke the silence. "So when's the wedding?"

Mai rolled her eyes, but then gave a little groan and clutched the doorway. "There's no wedding. I was betrothed. I mean I used to be betrothed. It was broken off years ago. Finding out that I wouldn't be forced at flamepoint to marry someone twice my age was the happiest moment of my life."

All at once, Aang could breathe again. "So there's nothing to worry about."

Jet frowned, and tossed the golden cog up like a ball, catching it again and tucking it into his belt. "Maybe, but I'm going to hold onto this for a while. Just to be sure."

Oh, right, _that_ matter. Well, there was nothing to worry about there, too.

After a greenish glare, Mai stumbled off back to her cabin, and the crowd broke up. Sokka stayed for a moment and watched Mai depart down the hall, but Aang gently grabbed the older boy's shoulder. "She doesn't like people seeing her when she's sick. We just have to let her be by herself."

"Yeah," Sokka mumbled, still staring. "Okay."

By lunchtime the next day, Mai hadn't made another appearance, but Sokka had dropped by her
cabin at one point in the morning, and she had groaned miserably in the answer to his knocking, so he figured she was more or less alive.

It wasn't that Sokka really believed that stuff Jet was saying, but something about her never even mentioning the cog didn't sit well with him. He didn't want to fight with her about it, not in front of Jet or someone like Smellerbee who would report everything, but he couldn't help but think that an official Fire Nation encryption cog would have been of some use back on Kyoshi Island. They had found a plan that had worked without it, but those weeks spent coming up with the raid on the prison records would logically have been where its existence would have been revealed, and the cog's use debated and possibly ruled out. Unless the cog's encryption scheme had narrow use, or it was unique enough that everyone would know any messages coded by it had been sent by Mai, but if that was the case, why bring the thing at all?

Sokka didn't like questions he wasn't allowed to ask, and the fact that he was the one not allowing himself to ask them just made the whole situation more uncomfortable.

Good thing he had dangerous Fire Navy patrols to take his mind off of things.

(Not really.)

Haru had spotted the smoke of the first patrol ship that morning with a spyglass, and had steered The Tub away without being spotted in turn. They had turned off the engine after that, letting the sails and the wind carry the ship along for more stealth. They had evaded a second ship much the same way, but then as they pressed onward to Crescent Island, they came across a black line on the horizon that proved a full blockade. Sailing around it had quickly proved not to be an option as the afternoon whileed away, and then they must have been spotted, as one of the ships fired a yellow signal flare into the sky that was an order to stop for inspection.

Standing next to Haru at the wheel, Sokka asked, "Is this the part where we put the engine on maximum boil and have a thrilling chase?"

Haru sighed. "No, this is the part where we try to talk them out of searching the ship when they come aboard."

"Oh. I hate thrilling chases, but I don't think bluffing Navy captains is actually any better."

"It isn't, but at least it's quicker."

"True. I'll go tell all the Fire Nation defectors and arrow-heads to get out of sight, then?"

Haru nodded. "And I'll give stern lectures to the crazy crewmembers about making trouble while we have Fire Nation soldiers aboard."

"Good idea." Sokka went over to the first of the masts, took the hammer that was hanging from a nail by a string, and started hitting the heavy metal bowl that had been bolted to the timber. It was a poor-sounding gong, but it was loud, and it could be heard everywhere but the engine room.

After some banging, Sokka went to spread the word more directly.

Mai was lying on the shelf that was supposed to be her cot when she heard the clanging of the warning 'gong.' Great, in addition to sea-sickness, now she had to deal with infiltrators or boarders or whatever they were called.

She groaned, pushed herself up, and reached for her luggage.
When Aang heard the gong, he immediately went to look for Momo. He couldn't fly, not with the Fire Nation ship bearing down on The Tub, but a little Airbending imparted some extra speed and balanced him as he ran along the rail of the ship to dive head-first straight down the stairway. He passed by Mai's cabin, and then quickly reversed and poked his head into the little room. Mai was latching her knife case closed, but stopped and groaned and clutched her head.

Aang said, "Do you want help? I need to find Momo and get to Appa in the cargo hold, but-"

Mai gave a little shake of her head. "Get going. I'll be along."

Aang hesitated a moment, and then ran off.

Mai wasn't sure how long it took her to finish packing up, but Aang was nowhere in sight when she emerged from her cabin. She wanted to hurry down the passage to the cargo bay, but without the engines running, her nausea was difficult to fight, and sudden movements weren't advisable if she didn't want Fire Navy soldiers asking who had been throwing up below decks.

She still hadn't made it far when she heard the distinct sound of Fire Navy engines rumbling through The Tub's hull.

They were here.

Commander Zhao couldn't say he thought much of the ramshackle tub of a ship, and when he boarded for the inspection, he found that he didn't think much of the crew, either. Green was the most common color in their clothes, but most of them seemed to be wearing cast-offs that had been sewn into something wearable.

Zhao didn't much like the self-professed Captain Haru's mustache, either.

"Where are you bound for?"

Captain Haru bobbed his head. "Shu Jing, Commander. We've been contracted to go there to pick up a cargo of manufactured goods, to bring back to the Colonies."

"And what are you currently carrying?"

"Nothing, Commander. Just supplies."

"Nothing?" Zhao turned and looked out over the deck. It was a ramshackle tub, certainly, but something like this could certainly be carrying the Avatar. After all, humble disguises were always the most effective, and the traitor Suki was certain that the Avatar was trying to get to Crescent Island. "How does a cargo ship come to be sailing empty all the way across the Crucible? Surely you could have bought something to sell at a profit at Shu Jing?"

Captain Haru licked his lips. "We were in a hurry, sir, and funds were low. We couldn't put together a cargo in time if we're going to make our rendezvous. And speaking of, we're already running fairly late, so-"

"So you'd appreciate it if you were allowed to go on your way?" Zhao made a show of shaking his head. He had already decided on searching the whole ship, but said, "For your impertinence, I think a full inspection is in order. Have your crew unlock everything, and then assemble them all on the main deck. My soldiers will search as quickly as they can, but they do have to be thorough, yes?"
Captain Haru swallowed loudly.

Zhao had to find his entertainment, after all, when on boring blockade duties.

Mai was almost to the cargo bay. She heard the heavy steps of Fire Nation boots on the deck above, and tried to make herself hurry, but the ship was bobbing in the water with extra unpleasantness now that it wasn't moving, and sometimes the walls were almost like they were spinning, and sometimes they grinned at her with a fangs and sickly blue coloration.

Mai thought she was hallucinating when she bumped into a solid male chest, but then she realized the Blue Spirit was standing right in front of her, blocking her way.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
The Crucible

Chapter Summary

The last leg of the journey to Crescent Island.

The Crucible

It turned out that there were few things as uncomfortable as having a 12-year-old Airbender pressed against one's side, a flying lemur wrapped around one's neck, and an agitated ten-ton sky bison taking up all the free space in the same cargo bay where one happened to be hiding from evil Fire Nation hunters.

And yet Sokka felt a certain dread, as he listened to the echoes of soldier boots marching across The Tub’s main deck, that he would soon be discovering just how much more uncomfortable life could be.

It was just as well that Mai wasn't here. She hated touching animals and other people. Of course, if she hadn't found a hiding spot yet, that could be its own set of problems.

Mai hated a lot of things, but she was starting to find a special place of complete and utter loathing in her heart for the masked troublemaker in the Blue Spirit mask.

He was standing in the hallway of The Tub's lower decks as if he owned the ship, tall and solid and carrying his dao broadsword, blocking Mai's path to the cargo bay. If the Blue Spirit was looking for a fight, that was bad enough, because Mai didn't think she could beat him even under the best of circumstances, never mind when she was tired and sore and seasick, but now he had chosen to confront her while The Tub was being boarded by the Fire Navy. Even if she survived the fight, she had no doubts that the Fire Nation's soldiers would recognize her and arrest her for treason against the Homeland.

She hadn't even really committed treason.

Yes, it was safe to say that Mai really hated her current situation.

The Blue Spirit raised his sword, and all Mai could do in response was groan nauseously and sink to the floor.

Commander Zhao, designated hunter of the Avatar, scion of his family, and rising star in the Fire Navy, stood on the deck of an Earth Kingdom scow and hoped that there was nothing aboard that would mess his polished armor. "You five," he said to one line of the soldiers he had brought over from his command ship, "shall search the crew quarters and engine room. The rest of us," he turned to face the other eight soldiers, "shall accompany Captain Haru to the cargo bay to verify that he did indeed set sail without any worthwhile cargo." With that, he turned on his heel and faced the youthful captain with the desperate mustache. "After you, of course."

Captain Haru led the way down the stairs from the deck to the ship's interior. At the first fork in the
path, Zhao let the smaller group of soldiers proceed to the engine room, and then continued on to the cargo bay. He couldn't help but notice that this Haru was walking fairly slowly, almost hesitantly.

Well, that was interesting. Zhao wondered, with some eagerness, what he would find in the cargo bay.

Mai might not have had the strength or balance to fight the Blue Spirit, but her seasickness hadn't yet taken away her will to live, so as the blade of the dao saber reached its highest point before the plunge that would take it to her flesh, she leaned forward, pulled a single blade out of her sleeve, and stabbed it down at her attacker's foot.

Even here, in this cramped corridor on a rundown cargo ship out to sea, the Blue Spirit was fast. He yanked his foot back as soon as Mai moved, but she was close enough that her own diminished speed was no real impediment, and so while he avoided having a sliver of sharp metal jammed into his flesh, he wasn't quite able to move his entire boot out of the way. Mai's blade sank into the heavy material, through the empty space in the toe of the boot, and on into the sole, lodging solidly into the floorboards.

Then Mai threw herself backwards and began crawling away as fast as she could.

She didn't turn around to look. She heard the Blue Spirit move, heard the whistle of his sword through the air, heard a grunt of surprise and the sound of a body striking the floor and the clatter of a metal blade dropped haphazardly against wood. And that was why people shouldn't leap at their victims while their shoes were nailed to the floor. Mai's stomach roiled at all the stress and motion of her escape, but she was able to smile through it; it was as true today as it was the day Azula first whispered the advice into her ear: "If you can't kill your opponent, the next best thing is to trip him."

Mai stopped briefly to throw up, and then continued crawling her way to the engine room.

Captain Haru reached to open the door to the cargo bay, but Zhao blocked him. "Not yet. Soldiers, get into attack position. We're going to storm this compartment, and anyone inside is to be considered a deadly enemy."

All eight soldiers efficiently arranged themselves into a staggered line; the hallway was too small for them to stand side-by-side, but by lining up shoulder to shoulder rather than in a straight line, each soldier would be able to more quickly pass through the doorway and clear the line of fire for the person behind him. The skull-like faceplates covered the soldiers' expressions, and Zhao wondered briefly if any of them were hiding nervous looks. After all, it might be the Avatar ready and waiting for them in the cargo bay.

Zhao kicked open the door and shoved Captain Haru through it first.

Lieutenant Xi was given orders directly by Commander Zhao to investigate any oddities on the Earth Kingdom ship, which naturally would have included any suspicious cargo or people.

The problem was that he had no idea what to do with an empty boot that had been nailed to the floor with a small fighting blade, a short distance from a puddle of stomach fluids.

While his subordinates waited, Xi prodded the boot with the tip of his sword. It didn't explode, or wiggle, or do anything unexpected of a nailed-down boot. While Xi was grateful that he hadn't stumbled on the world's oddest-looking bomb, he was also a bit vexed that the only thing suspicious about the whole affair was the presence of the boot itself.
"Obviously," he said to other three soldiers under his command, "it's some kind of prank by one of the crew members. Let's move on to the engine room."

No one objected, and Xi was quite grateful. He wasn't really cut out for solving puzzles like that. Something in which he felt more confident about his ability to handle was the sound of a person moving in one of the crew quarters. Xi kicked in the door to find a mop-headed young man, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, lying in a hammock in nothing but a pair of shorts. The young man said, "Wha?"

"On your feet!" Xi raised his sword. "Why didn't you assemble on the main deck with the rest of the crew?"

"Wha?" The young man pushed himself out of the hammock and blinked in slow repetition. "When did you guys get here?" He yawned.

Xi snarled and grabbed the possibly hung-over crew member's arm. "Get up to the main deck. This is an official Fire Navy inspection, and I won't tolerate any interference." To his credit, the young man rubbed the sleep from his eyes and ran off back toward the stairs.

Now, on to the engine room.

As Zhao watched, Captain Haru tumbled into the empty cargo bay to land flat on his face.

Zhao had spent years of his life aboard ships of varying kinds, and so when he heard the thump echo through the compartment, he knew right away that it was empty; a full bay wouldn't have reflected the sound like that. He peeked his head through the doorway, and confirmed that cargo bay was nothing but a wide open space with some small supply cases lashed against one wall. Old hay was scattered all over the floor. No Avatar, no cargo.

Zhao waved the rest of his soldiers into the compartment. "Check those cases and make sure there's nothing suspicious." He sniffed the air, and turned to where Captain Haru was picking himself off the floor. "Why does it smell like animal in here?"

"Our last cargo was a herd of ostrich horses," Haru said, brushing himself off. "Didn't have time to give it a full scrubbing, so it still stinks a little."

"Hmph." Zhao watched his soldiers poke around the mostly empty compartment, obviously trying to look busy in spite of not actually having much to investigate, and privately conceded that the ship and its crew were probably exactly what they appeared to be.

Unless something was found in the engine room.

Below the cargo bay, in the second cargo compartment, Sokka held his breath and listened to the sounds of heavy soldier boots coming through the ceiling above him.

Behind him, Appa shifted slightly, but before he could move around much more or actually produce a sound, Aang was petting the sky bison's head and whispering something that sounded like it could be soothing. It must have been soothing enough, because Appa stilled.

The sounds of the boots receded; the soldiers must have been leaving.

Sokka exhaled- not too loudly- in relief. If they had moved the hay on the floor, they might have seen
the cracks in the trapdoor that led to the smuggling compartment. If they had ripped down the cases with the crew's supply of food in them, they might have seen the switch and mechanisms that opened the floor-doors.

Sokka hated it when scenarios started with 'if.' Hopefully, this one would be over soon.

Engine rooms had lots of hiding places, but Mai had found that a limited number of them were accessible to someone with a cramping stomach who couldn't stand up straight or jump worth a candle. That number, it turned out, was exactly one. And so it was that she had been forced to dig her way into the big coal hopper and cover herself with sooty, filthy, black lumps of rock. The one consolation was that the earthy smell of the coal, a dead scent that reminded her of Fire Nation warships and even the factories of the Homeland, seemed to be helping her seasickness a little.

Or else that was just sheer terror that at any moment, a Firebender or Blue Spirit or someone would grab her by the hair and kill her.

She clutched a knife, and was making a vow that she would take her attacker down with her- even as the first soldier was saying, "All clear."

Zhao sighed. He had only been able to stretch the inspection out to an hour, on a ramshackle ship this size, and so his entertainment had come to an end for now. "Very well," he said to Captain Haru, up on the deck of the cargo ship. "I see no reason to hold you any further." He held out a hand, and a lieutenant deposited a set of stamped papers into it. Zhao looked them over to confirm that they were properly completed, and then gave them to Haru. "These will confirm the inspection. Proceed to Shu Jing, and avoid the waters around Crescent Island. The Navy is performing some maneuvers there, and any civilian ships that blunder into things risk being sunk or seized with no compensation."

He didn't even look at Captain Haru's bow before stomping off to the plank that would take him back to his own ship.

Sooner or later the Avatar would come. Zhao would just have to remain vigilant, and keep in mind the rewards he stood to gain.

The first thing Aang did was go hunting for Mai.

He had been worried out of his mind for her during the whole inspection, but Appa had also needed him to stay calm in a dark and cramped space, so he had been forced to wait to go on his frantic search. After Haru came down to open the smuggling compartment and confirm that the Fire Navy had gone, Aang had left Sokka to help get Appa back into view of the sky, and sped through the ship shouting for Mai, even using his Airbending to enhance the echoes.

Then, at last, Aang had called out, "Mai! It's safe!" in the engine room, and a single hand pushed its way up through the pile of coal near the boiler.

Aang had dragged out a filthy figure that was human in shape only, and the sole confirmation of Mai's identity was the gravelly voice that said, "I need a bath, and something to wash the puke out of my mouth. Immediately."

And so it was that an hour later, Aang and Sokka met a freshly scrubbed Mai in her small cabin. She had wrapped herself in several layers of robes, but her hair was left free and hanging, a shadow dogging her movements. Momo immediately squirmed out of Sokka's arms and jumped over to perch on Mai's head, and her only response was to give a sigh that smelled faintly of cheap wine.
Aang sat down on the plank that was serving as the bed, across from Mai. "How are you feeling?"

She gave a snort. "The seawater I had to bathe in was freezing, the wine tasted rancid, I have a headache, I think there will be coal dust up my nose for the rest of my life, and I still don't want to acknowledge the existence of food." She lowered her eyes, and then added, "But Haru turned the engine back on now that we've passed inspection, and that's helped with my seasickness. Thanks for asking."

"No problem." Aang wished he had known how hard this whole voyage was going to be on her. He wasn't sure what else they could have done to get safely to Crescent Island, but surely they could have gotten some herbs or something to help her feel better. But then, that wasn't her only problem. "So you said the Blue Spirit attacked you again."

She nodded. "Right out in the hallway. I'm assuming that the Fire Nation inspectors didn't find and arrest anyone in an ugly opera mask?"

Sokka leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. "Nope. Once again, the mysterious Blue Spirit came and went without anyone but you seeing him."

Mai nodded again. "You know it's Jet, right?"

Aang blinked in surprise, and turned to Sokka, who simply shrugged. Aang turned back to Mai. "I don't like him much, either, but why do you think it's him?"

"Well, there's how crazy he is about me being from the Fire Nation. That's a pretty big clue by itself. Why else would someone be harassing me like this? He's also a swordfighter, and the Blue Spirit uses a dao blade. And then there was that whole thing with my encryption cog."

"But I was with Jet in the engine room at the time," Sokka said. "I was with him when it rolled into view."

"So he found some way to arrange it. Come on, I'm sure you could come up with a dozen ways to make that happen."

"Well, seven off the top of my head." Sokka stroked his chin. "Ooh, now eight. Okay, maybe I can get to twelve if I had more time to think."

Aang rang a hand over his bald head, and Momo jumped over to perch right on the arrow, his little paws warm on the bare scalp. "But what are we going to do about this? We don't have any proof, but this is a real danger to you. The Blue Spirit is trying to kill you, or get you in trouble so that someone else kills you."

Mai pulled a small blade with a ring on the base from somewhere in her robes, and began spinning it around a finger. "Simple self-defense. We throw Jet overboard, or get Haru to lock him up or something. Ooh, maybe Haru will tie rocks to his feet and then throw him overboard."

Aang felt sick at the thought. "We can't just kill him! That will only cause more problems with the rest of the crew, and we don't even know for sure that it's Jet. I don't even want to hear about throwing people overboard."

"So then he'll kill me before we get to Crescent Island." Mai stared back at Aang, a solid, uncompromising stare that sent Momo leaping over to the top of Sokka's head.

Sokka was so busy thinking that he didn't even seem to notice. "So we need proof of some kind before we can do anything more. That actually shouldn't be very hard. We're stuck on a boat with
limited hiding places and a set of suspects who can't escape. It's just a matter of searching and producing a mask. Even if we can't tie it to Jet or whoever, the Blue Spirit isn't going to be able to attack again without his disguise. So he has to lay low, or reveal himself." His eyes focused on Aang. "And we have to do it before we get to Crescent Island tomorrow night."

Aang frowned. "Why before then? I thought we're supposed to come back to the boat once we free your sister."

Sokka turned to Aang and started to speak, but then realized that Momo was sitting on top of his head and shooed the lemur away before working to fix his ponytail. Momo perched on Aang’s shoulder when Sokka finally got around to making his point: "If we can't escape cleanly and you have to fly away from Crescent Island in a hurry, are you going to come back here, not knowing who's going to be ready and waiting? Or are you and Mai going to fly off by yourselves because it's too risky to come back to a boat with a Blue Spirit waiting on it?"

Aang blinked. "Wait, what about you? And Katara?"

"Hey, we don't know what will happen on Crescent Island. I'm just making the point that if we haven't solved anything by the time we take off for the Waterbender prison, Mai’s still going to be in danger once we're done there."

Mai caught the blade she had been spinning in a reverse grip and stabbed it into the wall behind her without turning. "When we're done? Yeah, I guess that will still be a problem." A ghost of her old smirk flickered across her face. "But by then I'll be in a position to fight back, with allies and no seasickness. I don't think we have to worry about that contingency much, at least not right now."

Aang thought that was a good point, but said, "Still, Sokka's right that it will be easier to get it done now. Let's start looking, and I think you should stay near one of us until we find the proof we need."

Mai sighed. "I hate throwing up for an audience."

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The Fire Nation's proximity to the Earth Kingdom was as much bane as it was boon. It was relatively easy to transport soldiers and supplies to the war front, just a matter of crossing what eventually became known as the Crucible Sea and landing at one of the colony ports. None of the Earth Kingdom's monarchs had ever maintained much of a navy before Sozin launched what he had called The Glorious War, but the seas did not remain uncontested for long. In the initial phase of what would eventually be called the Hundred Years War, the Fire Navy had been forced to deal with pirates-turned-privateers who attacked supply ships, but when it came to a fight between disciplined sailors on metal destroyers and thieves on old wooden junks, the result was largely academic. After almost a decade, the Earth Kingdom had finally built and crewed enough ships to make a real fight of it and earn the Crucible its name, and the various privateers were ready to earn their commissions in less crowded venues.

And so the pirates had turned to the Fire Nation itself.

They began raiding the ports of the Outer Islands, stealing all they could carry and burning everything else. Soon enough, the Earth Kingdom picked up on the tactic, although those crews were more interested in destruction and harassment than theft. Various task forces were created to deal with the threats, but hunting on water was not as easy as hunting on land. The only way to solve the problem had been to keep all enemies out of Fire Nation waters entirely, pushing the fighting back onto the open seas where armor, firepower, and provisions were all that mattered. Thus, the first blockade was enacted, a massive deployment of enough Fire Navy ships to keep the entire western boundary of the Crucible Sea within the sight of one vessel or another— and within catapult range.
By the time Zhao had joined the Navy, the blockade had become a simple fact of life, like weather and buoyancy. It was so successful that Admiral Iroh had stolen the idea outright to slowly draw a noose around the Northern Water Tribe.

When the war came to a close with the return of Sozin's Comet, there had been talk of finally dismantling the blockade. Zhao had no opinion one way or another, as blockade duty was no path to advancement and he was already in command of the primary Navy base of the United South Pole Colonies, but it was the subject of quite a bit of debate within High Command. It was eventually decided that the blockade could be reduced to a mere patrol circle, albeit one that was heavily sailed by a small navy of ships, to see if any threats might probe the more porous boundary.

Then Zhao had discovered that the Avatar himself was heading for Crescent Island, at an unknown time from an unknown direction. Not only was the blockade restored with impressive speed, but now Zhao himself was a part of it.

It made him almost regret ever twisting the truth out that Suki girl.

Zhao was lounging in his cabin, pretending to be reading reports but really wishing for a drink. He had to admit that the restored blockade made tactical sense, as the Avatar would have to cross it to get to his destination, and any fighting on Crescent Island itself could destabilize what had always been a situation with potential for disaster. The facilities there were uniquely suited to manage Waterbenders, but it was impossible to forget that an entire ocean waited just beyond the prison's walls. After what he had seen in the storms of the South Pole, Zhao had no doubt that the Avatar could very well create quite disaster, indeed.

Still, it didn't mean he had to like the blockade, and the reduced odds of capturing the Avatar himself. Zhao was actively grumbling over that notion when there was a knock on his cabin door. "Come in."

His aide led in Lieutenant Xi, one of the soldiers under his direct command who had been on duty earlier when that Earth scow had come across the blockade. "What is it, Lieutenant? As you can see, I'm very busy right now."

Xi bowed with a stiffness that immediately caught Zhao's interest. "Commander, sir. I felt it my duty to report an oversight I believe I have committed."

Zhao was immediately on his feet. "Tell me."

"Sir, I reported that there was nothing unusual found during my inspection. The only thing I came across seemed to be the result of a prank between members of the cargo ship's crew, a- a boot pinned to the floor with a blade. I was in the mess talking about it when I realized something- the blade was a Fire Nation weapon."

Zhao stepped closer to the man, fists clenching at his sides. "How do you know? Tell me details."

"Sir! It was a small blade, a holdout weapon, and the quality of the metal was easily military grade. It gleamed with a whiteness that only the finest steel has, and the flat of the blade was painted crimson. I've seen such weapons before, of course, but it only just occurred to me to question why it would be on a dirt vessel, and--"

"Idiot!" Zhao immediately ran out of his cabin, to where his aide was waiting. "Have the ship sailing immediately! We're leaving the blockade and heading for Crescent Island. Tell the captain to burn the engines out if he has to, we need to get there now." The aide bowed and ran off to carry out the orders.
That just left Xi. Zhao returned to his cabin to find the lieutenant standing at attention, trying desperately to keep his face under control. As well he should.

Zhao walked right up to him and struck the man across the face. "You're hereby demoted; get down to the engine room and start shoveling."

Xi started to bow, but then stopped himself. "Sir, I contest."

"On what grounds?"

"None, sir. But I would not be a good Son of Fire if I did not ask for trial by combat."

Zhao snorted. "Very well. We'll have an Agni Kai after I capture the Avatar. Providing you don't get thrown overboard, first. Now get out of my cabin!"

So much for the blockade.

It was almost anti-climactic when Sokka found the Blue Spirit mask so easily in Jet's cabin.

No, actually, it was entirely anti-climactic. And far too easy. Aang and Mai were up on deck in the last minutes of daylight, the former playing with Momo and the latter cursing whoever invented oceans, both of them being conspicuously conspicuous for any murderous stalker warrior types. Sokka was charged with the first phase of the investigation: sneaking into everyone's cabins and rummaging around for carelessly hidden Blue Spirit evidence. But it wasn't actually supposed to work!

Nevertheless, the Blue Spirit mask in was Sokka's hand, pulled right out of Jet's knapsack. It was made of heavy wood, and very nicely painted; Sokka bet that it would almost look alive in the right lighting. Without letting go of the mask (certainly not because of an irrational worry that it would disappear as soon he put it down and create even more confusion) he pinched himself and confirmed that he was indeed awake and capable of feeling pain. Okay, so this was all real. Nothing to do then but bring the mask up to the main deck and make dramatic accusations.

Sokka stood up, turned around, and found Jet standing in the doorway.

Sokka said, "Gaah!"

Jet said, "You're a little high strung." His gaze went to the mask in Sokka's hands, and he gave a small smile. "Figured it out, huh?"

Sokka held the mask up in front of his chest like a shield, just in case. "I know you're the Blue Spirit. You've been trying to kill Mai."

Jet nodded. "You must have lots of questions. Sit down, and we'll talk."

"Wait, what? Talk? You just want to trap me in here so that you can- so that you can-"

Jet snorted. "Strangle you to protect my identity? Thump your head against the wall until you've forgotten your own name? That would be pretty counter-productive, don't you think?" He pushed past Sokka and sat down on the plank serving as the bed.

Sokka remained standing. "Okay, so that doesn't make any sense. But hating Mai just because she's Fire Nation doesn't make sense, either. Believe me, I hate the Fire Nation, too. Like, a burning, festering hate that makes my stomach hurt and keeps me awake at night sometimes. But Mai's on our
side. Killing her is the opposite of being helpful."

"Oh, I wasn't trying to kill her because she was born in the Fire Nation. I'm doing it because she's probably still working for them." Jet blinked. "But for the record, I wasn't trying to kill her all those times. Getting her caught would have been enough."

Sokka lowered the mask. "What do you mean, probably still working for them? You just admitted that they want to arrest her!"

"I have a source. I do favors from time to time, and in exchange I get some good information about how the Fire Nation operates and how I can hurt it. Just before you and the Avatar arrived in my village, I learned all about the politics of the Royal Family. How Prince Ozai has been gunning for years to replace his older brother as the Crown Heir. How his daughter, Princess Azula, is a liar and a manipulator, and probably the third cruelest person alive."

"Third?"

"Well, she's younger than us, so she probably hasn't had the same opportunities as her father and grandfather." Jet smirked. "I also learned about the Princess had a childhood friend who taught herself how to throw knives better than anyone else in the world."

Sokka shook his head. Jet just so happened to get this information from an unnamed source, and that was supposed to make it okay to kill someone who had actively saved Aang's life. "So what? It's not news to me that Mai is a big deal back home. She even admitted that she was betrothed to one of those royals. She got sick of it all and defected."

"Yeah, I know the story. And if I'm wrong, then I'm sorry I tried to help the Avatar by killing Mai. Really. But I want you to answer something for me. I want your true, honest opinion. I want you to think about it as long as you need. I will accept whatever answer you give me, so long as you really believe it."

"Enough build-up, already. I've had enough anti-climaxes for today."

Jet nodded. "All right. I want to know if Mai really acts like someone who hates the Fire Nation and wants to help bring it down."

It was a good thing the Blue Spirit mask was thick and solid; Sokka didn't realize he was gripping it so tightly until pain started shooting through his fingers. "Why are you asking me?"

"Because I think you're a good guy. You're Water Tribe, so I know you've suffered under the Fire Nation. I know you're honest because you're too cranky to be anything else. (No offense.) And you're probably the only person who can protect the Avatar now that I don't have-" Jet nodded at the mask- "that."

Sokka looked down at it, turned it around in his hands. It truly was an ugly mask, all dead eyes and snarls. "Why the Blue Spirit?"

"That's not my story to tell. But it includes the usual reasons why people hide their faces."

"Well, I don't have an answer for you. Not yet." And certainly not while Jet was withholding important information. Sokka was just sneaky enough to realize that someone- Jet or Mai or both- were far sneakier than him and he probably had no idea what was really going on. But he would be doing his best starting now to figure it out.

"That's fair. Just keep thinking about it, and don't let your guard down. Oh, and you should have
this." Jet reached into one of the pouches on his belt and produced the golden encryption cog. He tossed it to Sokka in a slow underhand. "It's not going to do me any good, and you might find a use for it."

Sokka caught it in his right hand, leaving the mask in his left. They were the two sides of a war that was already over: the visage of a masked avenger, and a component in one of the most technologically sophisticated systems of the imperial oppressor.

If there was anything he hated more than anti-climaxes, it was heavy-handed metaphors.

"All right," Sokka finally said. "I'll be going. Thanks for not- you know- making a big deal out of this and trying to kill to protect your identity. Haru will probably down shortly to throw you overboard or something."

"Glad to help."

Beneath a glowing moon, Aang watched as Haru threw the Blue Spirit mask over the side of the ship, and couldn't help but feel sorry for the Earthbender. None of this was supposed to be part of helping with the Crescent Island mission, but somehow it had all become so complicated.

Although wooden, the mask sank quickly into the inky waters of the night.

Haru turned back to where Jet was standing, wrists tied together. The whole crew had been assembled on deck for this, everyone who had come from the hidden village where Jet had lived and worked. The burly brothers Chong and Wong stood on either side of Jet, on guard, while the girl Smellerbee, the woman Duizhang, and all the rest watched in a cluster. Mai and Sokka were below decks, staying safe and away from all the tension.

Haru sighed and said to Jet, "I can't pass any formal judgement on you. My father is on the village council, not me, and it's the council's mission to help the Avatar that you endangered. They will have to decide what to do about you." He drew himself up to stand taller, and for once, Aang could see the maturity in the young man. "But I'm captain of this ship, and responsible for getting everyone back alive. I can't risk you doing any more damage. You'll be imprisoned in the smuggling hold, hands tied for as long as the Avatar and his friends are aboard."

Jet nodded. "I understand. Sorry for the trouble."

Haru shook his head. "No, I don't think you are." He motioned, and Chong and Wong dragged Jet to the stairs leading into the ship.

With that, the rest of the crew dispersed to get back to work. Aang could see that most were as closed-faced as Mai usually was, and fervently hoped that some kind of mutiny wasn't in the making. He had never sailed much before, and had always found pleasure and excitement in the stories about pirate adventurers, stories about daring raids on the greedy rich to liberate antiques for the open market. There had been mutinies in those stories, of course, but Aang had never before realized how scary they were. For an Airbender, leaving ahead of trouble was usually a simple matter of hopping on a Sky Bison and saying, "Yip, yip," but now that he was trapped on a ship in the middle of an ocean with a bunch of people he couldn't really trust, he found that a mutiny could be just as much of a disaster as a summer storm.

Aang walked over to Haru and said, "Thank you for dealing with that."

"No, Avatar, I'm sorry it was necessary." Haru ran a hand through his long hair. "Jet and Smellerbee have been part of our village for less than a year, but they've been so helpful, we thought we could
trust them with something like this. Our judgement was wrong, and that's endangered you and your friends. We've never really had to deal with criminals in our village before, but I'm sure my dad will figure out a way to make it work. He's a great leader." Haru drew in a deep breath, and let it out in a burst. "For now, I have to get you where you need to go." He began striding towards The Tub's control wheel.

Aang trotted after him. "Are we still on track?"

"Yes. It will be slow going, because we have to turn the engine off in the morning and rely on the sails. We'll just be creeping along towards Crescent Island, and once the sun goes down, we'll dim all our lights and pull up as close as we can get." Haru stepped up to the wheel, untied the ropes that had been holding it steady, and took it firmly in his hands.

Aang looked out over the bow of the ship, at the black ocean that stretched to meet the stars. Somewhere ahead was the island prison where Sokka's sister was hopefully still living.

Worries on top of worries.

Mai spent the last leg of the journey leaning over the aft railing, once again miserable with full seasickness. The engine had been her only cure the awful, awful bobbing sensation, and so staying in her cabin would just lock her in a closed space with whatever unfortunate-smelling things came up out of her stomach.

She tried to tell herself that it wouldn't be long now, just one more day, and then her mission would finally be over.

It didn't really make her feel better.

Even aside from the nausea, questions plagued her mind. Had Zuko and Azula even received her transmission, or had Zhao interfered somehow? Had she given them enough time to get to Crescent Island? What would happen when Aang got there? An island was a fairly big place, so how could Zuko know precisely how to ambush his prize? And, most importantly, if everything went according to Azula's plan and Zuko got his ticket back to the Homeland, what would happen after that?

It was starting to bother Mai. Everyone knew the condition Fire Lord Azulon had put on Zuko's return, and the Avatar was an enemy of the Fire Nation for obvious reasons, but what would the old man who banished his grandson for cowardice do to a twelve-year-old Airbender? It made sense to lock him up in relative comfort, so that he wouldn't be reborn as a Waterbender. But Mai knew a lot about the fate of the Water Tribes, now. The Southern Water Tribe was broken up, and the portion still under Fire Nation control was probably buried under snow by now. Prince Iroh's control of the Northern Tribe was as absolute as it was mysterious. If the Avatar was reborn to one of the Tribes, he or she would either not be a threat at all, or actually under the Fire Nation's direct control. They could identify the Avatar young and raise him or her as a loyal servant.

Of course, Aang would be an obstacle to that whole plan.

But Zuko was a good person. Mai knew that. She had watched him as they both grew up, and had seen firsthand his sense of honor, his rare kindness. Zuko deserved to go home, deserved to have his branch of the family usurp Azulon's favor. Mai had let herself be scarred for that cause.

Her stomach roiled, and she groaned as she leaned over the rail to be sick.

One more day to go.
The moment Aang saw the sun dip below the rippling horizon, the tricky part began.

As the day had ended, Crescent Island had at last appeared in the distance. It was easy enough to spot, what with it being an active volcano; the lava that ran down the sides glowed vividly in the waning daylight, illuminating even the airspace above the island, and a constant stream of black smoke rose into the sky. The Fire Navy ships patrolling the surrounding waters were similarly given away by the spotlights on their bows and the spouts of steam that followed their slow travel around the island, so it was easy enough to stop The Tub well short any danger.

The danger was saved for when night fell. The whole crew- minus Jet- had assembled on the main deck and taken spotter positions all along the rails. (Mai was still at the aft, nominally a spotter but mostly just being sick.)

Aang stood alone at the center of the ship, just behind the first mast. The second mast's sails had been taken down, so that there was just one lone sail to catch the wind. The ship would move slower that way, but it was exactly as they wanted. The last part of the journey would be about precision, not speed.

At Haru's nod, Aang spread out his arms wide, and then gently swung them together as though trying to catch a falling sparrowkeet chick. The air responded, moving steadily but softly into the sail to fill it, and The Tub moved along at the wind's pace.

As Aang kept the wind streaming steadily, Haru worked the wheel. The first spotter to speak was Duizhang, who noted a Fire Navy ship far off the starboard bow. Haru steered to go around it and Aang lessened the wind, allowing The Tub to pivot rather drastically and follow a shallow curve that bypassed the enemy hunter and its arcing spotlight completely. Sokka spoke up a little while later, pointing out another patrol, and once again a fine adjustment of wind and steering were enough to sneak past it. It continued on like that, a meandering journey through the sea, and except for those moments, the crew was silent, so that it seemed to Aang that the creaking of the ship and the lapping of the water against the hull were like shouts in his ear.

Still, with just those sounds, and no lanterns to give them away in the night, The Tub was able to put down anchor within sight of Crescent Island's sheer shores. Haru and the crew worked together to open the wide doors in the deck to reveal Appa waiting in the cargo bay, and then it was time to leave.

Aang hopped down to land right on Appa's head, and gave his sky bison buddy a happy pat before looking back up to Haru. "Thanks for everything! I know how big a deal this has been for you, and we're all really grateful."

Sokka helped Mai up into Appa's saddle, and then gave a wave. "Yeah, seriously, I'll owe you and your village a huge one for this."

Haru just shook his head. "Any help we can provide the Avatar is a gift we're happy to be able to give. No one owes anything to anyone."

But Sokka snorted. "You can say that, but it doesn't change the honor of the Southern Water Tribe. Trust me, you've earned yourself some extra family that's very fond of wearing blue, and family helps family."

Aang looked back with some approval at Sokka. The older boy could be grumpy, cynical, and a bit too concerned with everything making sense, but he really was a good person. Then Aang noticed Mai crouching at Sokka's feet, looking even greener than usual, and realized that they were wasting time. "Appa, yip, yip!"
Appa let out a sigh of happiness with the same volume of a steam engine, and gave a flap of his tail that floated him straight up out of the cargo bay. Aang tugged the reins as soon as Appa's feet were above the ship's rails, and directed the sky bison forward and down again. Appa obediently glided out over the ocean and sank back down, settling to float on the surface of the water, bobbing with the waves. Aang heard Mai gagging, but focused on the reins, steering Appa to swim for Crescent Island. This close, there was less worry about the patrol ship, but they were still careful to not leave a wake in the water.

It was hard to tell how long it took, going so slowly in the dark, but the night was not yet old when Appa pulled out of the water to step onto the beach.

Crescent Island was like a solitary mountain that had been uprooted out of its range and had its edges folded to keep it standing upright. The only beach, the one where Aang and his friends were now disembarking, was a flat rocky shelter amidst the rising cliffs just to the left of the bleeding volcano, where small bare trees and sickly stringy grasses clung to life. In the glow of the lava, Aang could see that the Fire Nation had built some structures right onto the side of the main mountain- walkways held up by arches that withstood the heat of the lava even as the glowing liquid rock flowed underneath them, connecting several towering buildings that perched on cliffs as though trying to catch a cool breeze.

There were people moving on those walkways, and the armor of Fire Nation soldiers glowed dully in the light cast by the flowing lava.

One of the towers, Aang noticed, was more ornate than the rest. The others were military in their plainness, but this one had the sloping roofs and pointed architecture of a civilian Fire Nation structure, and in the lava's light, Aang could make out decorative motifs- blackened but unharmed- that were the exclusive province of a Fire Temple. The other towers had lights shining within, but the temple alone was completely dark.

Aang turned to his friends. Appa was shaking seawater out of his fur, while Momo dodged the spray. Mai was patting her robes in what Aang knew to be a check of her hidden weapons, and Sokka was adjusting the straps of a backpack he had just put on.

Aang got Sokka and Mai's attention with a wave, and pointed to the temple. "I think I found us a good starting point!"

In the dark of the smuggling bay, Jet had only his sense of hearing to tell him about what was going on around him. He heard Haru and the Avatar's goodbye, as well as the sounds of the sky bison taking off. He heard the cargo bay doors close again, and the footsteps of the rest of the crew as they got into their new positions to watch for danger as they waited for the Avatar's return.

He heard one particular set of boots walk into the main cargo bay, and so he was ready with a smile that was equally grateful and confident when the hidden door opened to let the light of a lantern into the smuggling compartment.

Smellerbee the lantern on the floor as she drew a knife and leaned into cut Jet's bonds. "The others think I'm getting the engine ready for a quick getaway if we need it. I can stay out of sight for as long as I need to."

Jet nodded, and climbed out of the smuggling bay. He did a few stretches, and blinked his eyes rapidly to get them used to the lantern light after spending a day in complete darkness. "Before you suit up, go back up and ask Chong and Wong to help you with something. They're the best fighters in the crew- besides us- and once we take them out of the fight, it's just a bunch of Earthbenders in
the middle of the ocean against two Blue Spirit warriors."

Smellerbee nodded, and picked up a bundle from the floor to toss to Jet. As expected, it was a black tunic, a broadsword, and a Blue Spirit mask, the uniform of their cause. Smellerbee had a similar bundle beside her. While Jet unfolded the tunic, she said, "Couldn't we try to get everyone else on our side? It'd be a shame if we wound up having to kill someone from the village for this mission."

Jet held up the mask. "And how would we explain this? Our order has too many secrets. It's a shame, but that's why we were selected. We can do the hard jobs, the ones that the Fire Nation has made necessary. And right now, our mission is to get a supporter of the Ozai faction away from the Avatar, by whatever means necessary."

Smellerbee sighed, and gave a nod. "All right. I'll go get Chong and Wong. Meet us in the engine room." She left, and Jet began changing into his uniform. There was little point to the disguise, now, but disguise wasn't the only reason to wear a mask. It joined Jet to the rest of the order, and proclaimed that he was acting for more than his own sake.

The mask said that even if he failed tonight, the Blue Spirit would never die.

TO BE CONTINUED
Mai fulfills her destiny as a traitor.

A traitor climbed up the face of a volcano. As hard-going as it was, Mai relished her return to solid ground, after her adventures crossing the Crucible Sea. Only the Fire Nation smelled like this, an odd mix of sulfur and seawater, and the air tasted of the ash that drifted on its winds. In other lands, the earth was a dead thing, cold and unmoving, but with a volcano so close, Crescent Island rumbled with the power of the planet's molten heart. The greatest minds of the Fire Nation said that the rumbling was caused by underground pressure, by shifting secret continents, but Mai was reminded of the explanation she had preferred a child, the old story from before the Enlightened Era. The legends said that the Great Dragons slept beneath the surface of the Fire Nation, and it was their snores that shook the earth and made volcanos rise and spew flame. The dragons would sleep until the return of the Agni Warrior, when they would fly and fight in the final war.

It was good to be home.

So why did Mai's stomach still hurt?

It must have been the climb. The slopes of Crescent Island's volcano were fairly steep, and Mai hadn't been sleeping well, lately. Aang was leading the way; the lava was casting enough light in the night that he couldn't simply fly his way up while there were guards about, but his Airbending was obviously still helping him scamper from cliff to cliff. Mai traile behind him, forced to clutch at rocks in her war against gravity. Behind her, Sokka's climbing knocked loose some stones, sending them tumbling down the slope until they bounced into one of the curving lava flows below. She froze at the noise, listening carefully for the cries of any guards, and when silence continued to reign, she turned to shoot Sokka a glare before continuing her climb.

Aang had pulled quite a bit ahead by now, and was waiting perched at the tip of a small cliff, clutching his staff. Mai met his eyes briefly before looking down again, forcing herself to pay attention to her climb. She had to think about herself right now. An unfocused mind could be deadly, especially when climbing the side of an active volcano.

Then the ground shook, either the rumbling of a sleeping dragon or the strength of volcanic pressure, and Sokka let out a cry. Mai turned to tell him to shut up, but before she could start chastising, she realized that the solid ground beneath him had become a river of pebbles carrying him down to the creeping lava flows.

Mai reached for Sokka, but he was already beyond her grasp, his eyes pleading and his cry dying in his throat as he slid and Mai's stomach clenched again and she wished that she was Ty Lee so that she could leap down and help-

-and then Sokka pulled his knives from his belt and jammed both of them into the loose ground.
They must have struck something solid beneath the loose skin of the mountain, because they remained anchored as Sokka's slide stopped with a jolt.

Mai let out a heavy breath. He was safe.

Now how were they going to get him up?

A burst of wind splashed Mai’s face, and she turned to find Aang right in front of her, balanced in a crouch on top of the rock she was using for her own anchor. He held his staff out beside her, holding it at one tip so that its full length stretched down, and nodded at her.

Oh.

Mai transferred one hand from her rock to the staff, and then the second. Now, Aang's strength was the only thing keeping her from her own slide down to death. Slowly, one hand a time, she lowered herself until she was hanging from the other end of the staff, laying on the ground with her arms stretched above her head to make herself as long as possible. She couldn't even look to see if it was enough, and only got her answer when one of Sokka's hands grabbed her boots. For the next few minutes, Mai did her best impression of a ladder as Sokka climbed over her. His boots were filthy with volcano ash, and Mai was briefly glad that she had kept the outfit ruined in The Tub's coal bin and chose to wear it for this mission. No need to stain two sets of robes with ash that was darker than the night.

And if things didn’t go according to Mai’s plan, she would need all the clothes- all the resources- she could get.

Finally, Sokka reached Aang, and together the two began a more mundane climb up the slope. Mai brought up the rear, and tried to get back to thinking about herself.

It was with a certain sense of relief that Aang finally reached the dark Fire Temple. He knew this whole enterprise would be dangerous, but he hadn't expected things to start off so intensely. What was ahead, if it was already this tough?

Sokka and Mai pulled themselves up onto the temple's cliff as well, and Aang finally had a chance to examine the building itself. Up close, it was even more obviously a focus for spiritual energy. He could feel the heartbeat of the volcano being channeled up into the temple, and his own blood pumped in time with it. The air was warm and oppressive and stank of sulfur, but there was a life to it that made it more than tolerable.

Yet, for some reason, the temple had been abandoned.

There was no question about it. As Aang led his friends into the shelter of the building, he could see that it had been out of use for a while. Volcano ash had accumulated in piles that looked like waves of night lapping at the temple's walls. The statues of sages and dragons were virtually indistinguishable, thanks to the years of accumulated oil and soot. Only the faintest sheen of gold still poked through omnipresent black stains, and the expected red paint was nowhere to be found.

Aang led his friends up the front steps, but Sokka motioned for them to stop just as they reached the front door. He slid his backpack off and rummaged through it, soon producing a set of three small crystal lanterns that Haru had provided. Aang took one, and raised the shutter as he pushed in through the temple's door.

What he saw nearly broke his heart. The main hall of the temple was strewn with all kinds of garbage, a new kind of monument to the spirit of disrespect itself. As Aang entered, shards of broken
clay jugs crunched loudly under his feet, and he held his lantern high to see the full extent of the littering. Over there, stained rags were piled up; here, a single broken sandal accumulated dust. Half-burned candles were scattered with no pattern, but in the center of the densest cluster, the remnants of a small hand-made shrine appeared to have been kicked over.

Gazing around, he said, "What happened to this place?"

He turned to Mai, and she shrugged. "It was before my time. All I know is that Prince Iroh- the Fire Lord's older son- had some kind of political clash with the Fire Sages, and as a result, they wound up having to make some reparation payments. They needed gold for it, and so they sold some of their property to the military. It looks like this was one of those sales, and the military was more interested in the island than the temple itself. Off-duty guards probably come up here to party."

"Why reparations for a political fight?"

Mai quirked an eyebrow. "What worthwhile political fight doesn't result in the ruin of entire families and cities?"

While Aang tried to wrap his head around that, Sokka stepped over to the ruined shrine and said, "What are these temples built for, anyway? Human sacrifice?"

"Well, as you can probably guess, the Fire Nation really likes fire. The Fire Sages adhere to something called the Way of the Flame. It's kind of- the Way is basically instructions for communing with fire and taking inspiration for how to live a better life, whatever that even means." She crossed her arms shook her hair off her shoulders. "It's old news, now. Sure, in the poorer villages, they still respect the Way and try to live by one interpretation or another, but that's pretty much because they have nothing else in their lives."

Aang frowned. "I visited the Fire Nation before- you know, a century ago, and the temples and Fire Sages were really venerated."

Mai groaned and massaged her forehead. "If I knew I'd be representing my culture like this, I'd have paid more attention to my history lessons. From what I can remember, the Fire Sages weren't really embraced by the whole nation until the office of the High Sage was turned into the Fire Lord, and it was the Fire Lords who were responsible for making the Way a part of regular life. It was a stopgap against the chaos of the Dark Centuries, or something, but Fire Lord Sozin made a better version by getting rid of all the old-fashioned superstition in it and giving the Fire Nation a real purpose."

Sokka snorted. "That purpose being conquering the whole rest of the world."

"Well, yeah."

"So what's the Fire Nation's purpose now?"

"I don't know. My purpose was to win power and prestige serving the Royal Family, or so I was told. I mostly didn't care."

And that right there was, in Aang's opinion, everything that was wrong with the Fire Nation today. "That's something the Air Nomads recorded through all of history. Every culture would drift away from their old teachings at some point and lose its balance, and someone- either the wise among them, or sometimes the Avatar- would have to help bring the culture back on the right path. It's like the Avatar cycle, never stopping."

Sokka whistled. "Well, buddy, you got your work cut out for you on that one."
“Yeah, I figured that.” Aang took a deep breath, and put all that crushing responsibility out of his mind for now. “So, what next? We need to find out more about the prison.”

“Well,” Mai said as she absently brushed her robes, “the main installation must be underground. The towers we saw outside aren’t big enough to serve as a full prison or military base. Not one as isolated as this.”

Aang thought about that. Here in the temple, he could feel the power of the volcano resonating through the floor and the walls and the very air, could feel how the building itself had been constructed to channel and distill the volcano's living energy. It was like how the Air Temples used to be, or what the Earth Temple above Haru's village had been a faint echo of. This Fire Temple, although abandoned, was not so old or broken that it had lost its own fire. And no such structure would simply have been built near a volcano.

“There must be part of this temple that goes underground, too. Volcanos usually have natural passageways running underneath them, and I bet the Fire Sages who built this place would have incorporated them. Why else build their temple exactly here?”

Sokka looked skeptical, but Mai was nodding slowly. “It makes sense. The capital Caldera has lots of underground passages, and the High Temple is sitting on a massive network of them. You could even say that most of the Temple itself is actually underground.”

Aang planted his staff on the ground and took a stance. “Then let's look for some secret passages, and find a way to save Katara.”

As Sokka searched the temple, following the long hallways deep into the building, he worked through various plans for getting away with Katara. The ideal scenario, of course, was finding and freeing her without alerting any of the guards, then slipping out quietly to where Appa and Momo were waiting on the beach, before finally meeting up with Haru again on The Tub for a leisurely voyage back to the Earth Kingdom. It would also be possible to just fly away on Appa, if things were rushed. Of course, the tricky part would be freeing Katara from whatever kind of prison she was in without alerting anyone, and Sokka briefly wished that he had brought some of the heavy-duty acids from the research center at the South Pole for any troublesome locks.

That was what Mai had done, when freeing Aang, and it had worked out pretty well.

As Sokka continued his lamp-lit search of the temple, he considered that last point. Mai had shown him a list, back in the research center, of the specific acids she wanted. He had figured at the time that she was a saboteur of some kind, given instructions by a knowledgeable sponsor, but then he had forgotten all about that when he realized she was looking to free Aang. Where had she gotten that list? Her own research? Sokka had grown less and less sure about Mai since the Blue Spirit- Jet-had started a one-man campaign to get rid of her, and yet she hadn't hesitated to save his life back outside the temple. What truth was behind it all?

Jet was on track with one thing: Mai didn't seem like the type to throw in against her nation. That talk in the main hall about the Fire Nation's Way of Flame or whatever was a good case study in the contradiction- Mai hadn't said anything particularly appreciative of the modern Fire Nation, but at the same time, she didn't seem to care about anything she was describing. She wasn't an adherent to the old Way of the Flame, joining the Avatar to restore balance and proper temple maintenance to her country. She had never talked about seeing something that had tarnished her view of her people, no Come To The Water moment where she realized that the system she was serving was bad. That didn't mean she had no such moment in her past, of course; it was possible that she simply she hadn't revealed yet what changed her mind.
But wouldn't someone outraged enough to betray her nation to join the Avatar probably want to talk about it once or twice?

Sokka wasn't sure if that even made sense. People were weird, and Mai especially hated talking about anything worthwhile. Didn't actions speak louder than words or something? And she had saved Sokka's life.

But he couldn't help but feel that it still didn't make sense.

He was so distracted by his musings- a little part of him was ashamed at that, because if Katara ever needed his focused attention, it was now- that he let a monster sneak up on him, grab him, and throw him into the wall on his left. Sokka was still in the process of crashing against said wall when the wall itself reached out and smacked him, and by the time he his blinked his vision back into focus, he was alone in a cave.

All Sokka knew was that his attacker had the living face of a monster.

Aang heard a crash, Sokka's standard surprised cry, and then a sound like scraping stone. His first thought was that the older boy had been attacked by an Earthbender, but that made no sense. The only Earthbenders around were Haru and the crew of The Tub, and they were back on the ship, not here in the temple.

Aang trotted out of the room he had been exploring back to the hallway where he had last seen Sokka, but the only person he found was Mai, poking her head and lantern out of a room across the hall. Aang said, "Did you just hear Sokka?"

"Yeah, it was the same squealing noise he made when he was falling down the volcano earlier."

"That's what I heard, too. It came from this hallway, right?"

"I think so." Mai frowned in the dull green light. "You don't suppose he found one of the passages going underground?"

Aang shrugged, looking up and down the hallway. It was a fairly plain passageway, for a temple, with empty walls broken up only by old unlit lamps. If there was a secret passage somewhere around here, it was well-hidden. "Come on, let's keep looking."

Mai was following Aang, wondering what had happened to Sokka, when a monster poked its head out of one of the shadows and hissed her name.

Before the thought had even fully formed in her mind that the Blue Spirit was back to hurt her again, she had a knife in her formerly free hand and was using the other to angle her lantern to illuminate her target. It was then that she realized that this was no monster, or even a monstrous mask. It was simply a man in an eyepatch, the skin underneath damaged and scarred. Everywhere else, he wore an expression of intense focus.

Something clicked in Mai's mind and she whispered, "Zuko?" He nodded, his single golden eye flashing dully in the light of her lantern. Mai's heart hammered like a volcano that was about to burst. He was here. He had gotten her message. Had he been waiting in the temple for her, or spotted the group climbing outside and followed them in?

It didn't matter. Zuko was here. Aang was up ahead. Mai's stomach clenched.
Zuko whispered, "Take the Avatar to the chamber above the main hall, with the gold statue," and before she could respond, he pulled back into the shadows. She shifted her lantern to keep track of him, but the light revealed nothing more than a segment of the wall sliding shut.

So there were secret passages, and Zuko was haunting them.

Mai tried to feel relieved, if it was even possible to choose to feel such a sensation, and failed utterly. It must have been because of Zuko's startling entrance, and her momentary confusion between his face and the Blue Spirit mask. She had expected the scar on his face, but not the image it would evoke for her.

Trying to swallow with a suddenly dry mouth, Mai trotted to catch up with Aang. "Hey."

Aang turned to her. "Yeah? Did you find something?"

"Um, no." She swallowed again. "I- I just remembered. Back in the High Temple, the entrance to the underground passages is in a chamber above the main hall, with some statues in it. Maybe we'll have better luck checking there, instead of poking around for the smaller access points."

Aang blinked. "To get to the underground passages, people need to go upstairs."

Mai wanted to curse. "Yes. It's a metaphor or something."

"Oh. Okay. Yeah, let's try it." He slowed to let her take the lead.

Mai held her lantern high as she tried to pretend she knew where she was going. She had only ever been on the High Temple grounds a few times in her life, and never beyond the main courtyard. This temple certainly looked nothing like the sprawling High Temple back in Caldera City. It was only by chance that she found a stairway leading up.

The hallways on the second floor were a spectacle all their own. Mai's footsteps echoed up to the high ceilings lost to shadows, the sound bouncing off of the dragon-coil columns that lined the path. With this much open space, the light of the crystal lanterns struggled to preserve a little bubble around Mai and Aang.

It was a surprise when they found the door.

It was made of metal, massive and bisected, boasting some kind of complicated lock formed from gears and dragon-shaped blades. Mai had no idea how such a mechanism would have been triggered, but fortunately there was no need for that expertise; the doors hung open, and the piles of dust around them proved that they had been that way for some time.

Mai plunged through the doors into the dark, and Aang followed.

Trusting her.

Even in the sickly green light of her lantern, the room inside was as grand as its entrance, if just for the statue at the far end. The man was tall and regal, bearded and robed, and he stood in front of layers of flames even taller than him, all of it rendered it what was clearly solid gold. The shape of the flames were close enough to the sigil of the Fire Nation that it struck Mai as almost blasphemous, and she wondered who the statue was of.

Aang stepped forward, raising his own lantern, and breathed the name: "Avatar Roku."

Ah, that would explain it.
Mai and Aang both were still taking in the sight when they heard the sound of boots on the hard floor behind them, and they spun to find Zuko standing in the open doorway.

This was it. Mai fought the urge to be sick all over the floor.

"Avatar," Zuko said in a loud, clear voice. It was the first time she had heard it truly, not like the whispers they had shared a few minutes ago. It was hard and commanding, lacking life.

Aang stepped forward. "Yes?"

And then Zuko punched a plume of flames right at Aang's chest.

The one good thing about the situation was that the monster had let Sokka keep his lantern. With it, he was able to determine that yes, he was indeed in a cave, but also that the wall behind him was that of the temple hallway. Obviously, there was a way to turn the wall into a wall-shaped secret door, but Sokka had no idea how to trigger the passage. There were no levers, no buttons, no written clues, no conspicuous panels to press, or even a statue to lift. It was entirely possible that the passage only opened from one side.

That left Aang and Mai with a monster hunting them in a dark temple devoted to evil fire, and Sokka in a cave with nothing to do but explore. Truly, this was proof that the universe was governed by a malicious intelligence. Normally, Sokka would have been happy to explore a cave like this, especially while on a mission to find secret tunnels into his sister's prison. At the moment, though, he was just frustrated by the situation.

People liked to talk about 'irony,' but as far as Sokka was concerned, that was just a misleading term for 'supernatural enemy action.'

With that thought, he set off deeper into the cave.

Although it had a natural shape, the tunnel had clearly been modified by people. The path was perfectly level, and rather than curving up or down, it would give way suddenly to wide staircases. Sokka tried going up, first, to see if he could get back into the temple proper, but although the winding staircase touched the temple walls at various points, he had no better luck finding a passage to trigger than he had at his starting point. Rather than continue to waste his time on that, he backtracked to the staircases leading down, and followed them below the surface.

It was a pretty hot choice, mostly because of the open lava flows that ran parallel to the path. What started as another spiral staircase soon become something winding and alien, and the channels of lava ran like slow-motion rapids. (The contradiction of that concept did not fail to trouble Sokka.) He was almost inclined to believe that he had passed into the natural foundations of the volcano itself, but every so often he would come across an artificially flat platform in the path, or sometimes even metal guardrails bolted into the stone walls. What was the purpose of these tunnels? Sokka was inclined to believe something involving human sacrifice to savage gods, but then he turned a curve and suddenly the tunnel became a perfect hallway with walls that met the ceiling at ninety degrees, and a floor that was a metal grating over a wide river of lava.

Sokka was panting now, finding the air itself stifling. The lava was cooking everything, and leaching the moisture right off of his tongue. A drink of water would have been worth its weight in gold, right now.

It was that very thought that drove Sokka onward.

The hallway was long but not endless, and opened into a room that was nothing less than an engine
of evil. Giant metal pylons, thicker than Sokka could spread his arms, were sunk through the grated floor to touch the lava itself, and rather than melting, they glowed red as they absorbed the heat and conducted it up their full length. Sokka looked up, following the pylons to where they passed through tight holes in the ceiling. That, too, was made of grating, although finer than the floor, ensuring that the air would flow freely.

Beyond that ceiling, Sokka had no doubt there was a chamber that was dryer than any desert in the world.

He smiled with lips pulled tight against his teeth. "Found you."

Aang had no idea who the scarred man—no, it was an older teenager—was, but the fact that he was a Firebender was information enough. Aang jumped straight up over the flame attack, clipping his lantern to his belt with one hand and calling a wind to carry him all the way to the ceiling with the other. At the apex of his jump, he swung his staff out to whip a crescent of air at his attacker, and then twirled it to deploy the glider.

The young man with the scar dodged the wind attack, leaping to the side, but that was fine with Aang; that left nothing blocking the door, so they could make their escape. As he glided down, he looked over at Mai and said, "Come on!"

She looked back at him, and even though her face was as blank as it ever was, her eyes almost seemed to glisten in the light of her lantern. Then she snapped into motion, flinging her hand open at him, and the air between them was filled with glittering wings of razor-sharp metal.

Aang simply couldn't process it. He continued along the angle of his descent as the blades came at him, as they sliced through his glider, as they ripped through his clothes and bit into his skin and then he was falling and crashing on the marble floor and what was she doing?!

He stared at her in confusion, slick pain radiating from cuts on his chest and arms, until some part of his brain registered that fire was once again flying towards him, and when he moved, his unthinking dodge carried him deeper into the room.

Mai and the scar guy moved in tandem, her retreating to block the door as he dashed at Aang, him punching fireballs as she readied a set of throwing needles in each hand. They were working together.

No.

No, it couldn't be. There was something wrong. Aang danced away from the Firebender, blocking out the pain from his cuts, skipping along on desperate winds, and his attention was on Mai as he said, "He's making you do this!"

It had to be. Maybe it was magic of some kind; this Firebender was the last of the temple's sages, haunting its halls, using arcane hypnotic techniques to ensnare the minds of Fire Nation natives. Or it could be something more mundane, that Mai knew the Firebender and he was some kind of threat to her family or something precious; there was no doubt that she was hoping that Aang would figure it out and realize that she had no choice and find a way to free her from this dilemma.

But her face was blank, and her lantern was lying on the floor at her feet to leave her eyes covered in shadow, while her hands were as still as stone as they held their needles at ready.

Aang faltered in his motion, and the Firebender closed in on him. He had to give his full attention to the fight, ducking under another fireblast to enter into his attackers' reach, but as the Firebender
grabbed for him, Aang brought his own hands up and the smacked insides of his opponent's arms, knocking them away. Defenseless for a moment, the Firebender couldn't stop Aang from hopping and kicking. An Air Nomad boot landed solidly against the scarred face, and the Firebender dropped.

Aang landed, hopped over his opponent, and ran for the room's door. He looked at Mai as he moved, waiting for her to get out of the way.

She didn't.

Aang slowed as he approached her. She tensed, hunched, and curled her arms, ready to throw her weapons.

Aang took a step forward.

She did, too.

"Mai."

"Aang."

It was like he had a rock in his stomach. "How- how long?"

She didn't answer.

There was no need.

She had never been his friend. She had never been a traitor to the Fire Nation. She had never been the person he thought she was.

This was the kind of world he had woken up in, a world poisoned by the Fire Nation and every single one of those monsters was poison and if all them wanted him as an enemy- even amazing and beautiful teenager girls- then he was the Avatar and they would find out just what kind of an enemy he could be.

The world exploded into light, and Aang's blood roared in his veins with the pulse and power of the volcano.

Thoughts and emotions not his own echoed in his head, but the chaos soon found a commonality, and came together to form one thought that resonated across millennia:

The Fire Nation didn't even deserve to exist. The folly of betraying the Avatar would be displayed by removing this whole island from the map.

Throughout the Waterbender prison, all the guards and captives and even one infiltrator felt the ground bounce like nothing they had felt before. It didn't just rumble, it bucked beneath them like rabid rabbaroo, throwing everyone off their feet and shaking their faith in the stability of the world to stay put beneath them.

On the ships that patrolled the waters around Crescent Island, the active crew members who happened to be looking towards land saw the whole thing shake so rapidly that the edges of the volcano blurred. The blurring was just a slight fuzziness at first, almost too fine to notice, but soon there was no denying the motion as the volcano seemed to grow from the optical illusion, and then the ocean responded.
The waves that lapped at the shores of Crescent Island reversed themselves, ripples extending outward to smack the patrol ships and send them bobbing in place to such a degree that their sailors could only hold on to something and ride it out.

The only exception was The Tub, still hiding in the darkness off the shores of the island. Its crew was far too busy to worry about any of this.

Sokka had to admit that a certain part of him was impressed by the Dryness Engine, as he had mentally dubbed it. But mostly he found it horrifying.

After he worked his way out of the room with the lava and the grates and the metal pylons that rose into the ceiling, Sokka had been able to find a stairway leading up and had the opportunity to sneak around to see the full extent of the system. The metal pylons rose up through the floor of a hub chamber and broke up into a web of glowing metal with strands that reached out for every single access point. Sokka guess was that the metal was aluminum, since he knew for a fact that the Fire Nation had only recently begun working with platinum, but there were other materials that might have also served. Whatever the chosen metal, the ‘strands’ of the ‘web’ connected the conducting pylons to the walls and ceiling and ran on through the hallways across the whole facility.

Every path through the base was lined with hot glowing lines. There was no escaping the drying warmth.

But that was only the first level of operation. The central room with the pylons was also the hub of an extensive ventilation system. Massive fans in the walls sucked the air from throughout the whole base to splash against the lava-powered web of metal, so that even the slightest wisp of moisture would sucked up by the air flow and burnt away in the center of the engine.

It was genius. It was devious. It was a feat of engineering that would have taken an army of planners and builders working under dangerous conditions, all for the sole purpose of imprisoning the world's Waterbenders and keeping them in a miserable living death.

Sokka was kind of glad that it boggled his mind. As much as he was a cynic, as much as he was pretty much dead inside, he still couldn't comprehend such evil.

He was still sneaking along the maintenance corridors when the entire world suddenly decided to start shaking. It was a deep kind of rattling, the kind that had nearly killed Sokka outside when he had been climbing up the face of the volcano. But this wasn't just a quick tremor. It dragged on, varying in tempo, like an animal trying everything in its power to get rid of its saddle. Sokka could do nothing but crouch down against a wall and try to ride it out, and even as his senses quickly became overwhelmed by the experience, he was pretty sure he heard a wrenching and grinding of metal echoing from back in the Dryness Engine's hub chamber.

When the shaking was finally over, he cautiously got back to his feet, and thought about that sound. The quake must have done damage to some of the equipment. He checked the red hot metal lines that ran along the wall nearby (on second thought, perhaps crouching near the wall hadn't been the brightest idea), and saw that they weren't diminishing in glow. So these were still connected to the center of the web, for now. Still, Sokka couldn't imagine that the staff wouldn't want to give it a thorough examination, just to be sure.

The world trembled again as he hurried down the hallway, another sustained shake that, while not as bad as the first, didn't strike Sokka as natural volcano activity. Was it getting ready to explode? Was it already exploding? Did he have a limited amount of time to find Katara, find Aang and Mai, and get out of here?
At the end of the hallway, he found the hub of the Dryness Engine exactly where he had left it. Sokka noted that the metal web was bent in some places, although still intact, and one of the fans in the circulation system wasn’t running, which probably accounted for the sound he heard during the quake. Then it was a simple matter of picking a hiding place nearby, behind one of the engines hooked up to a working fan, and waiting.

It wasn't long- just three more ground quakes- before there were the sounds of boots on the floor, and Sokka peeked out to see two men shuffling towards the broken fan.

They wore odd clothing that Sokka had never seen before. Their heads were completely covered in thick hoods and face masks. The masks weren't the Blue Spirit kind, but rather plain and functional things with goggles over the eyes and some kind of extended beak over the nose and mouth. The robes each man wore were heavy and seemed to be made of a thick material that could have been leather. It all looked fairly stifling for duty in the bowels of a volcano, but then Sokka realized that for as much body heat as the outfits kept in, they must have been especially effective at keeping the volcano’s drying heat out, letting the wearer preserve his or her body's moisture.

As the two men investigated the fan, they talked in voices that echoed tonelessly through their masks:

"Only one fan down won't affect the system too badly. We should let the captain know that it can wait until we have the time to repair the scalding network, too."

"He'll want us to do it now."

"Why? If the Waterbenders can't-"

"Forget the Waterbenders. What about that inspector?"

"What about him?"

"It's a her. Kind of young, too."

"So what about her?"

"You think the captain is going to let her poke around in here and see that we left this unrepaired?"

"You think she'll make trouble?"

"Ha! Have you been keeping track of anything? She's been here for two weeks, touring one small part of the base a day, and spends the rest of her time writing long reports to... whoever it is she’s reporting to. I bet a bad fan will get a whole page by itself."

"Who’s she reporting to?"

"They say it's classified. And you notice how she always goes around wearing a cloak."

"It's why I didn't know she's a she."

"Exactly! But you know what I think? I think she's reporting to Prince Admiral Iroh."

"Prince Iroh? Why?"

"Well, no one knows what he's really doing up there at the North Pole. His forces are outside the main command chain. He built himself a little fortress city up there and hasn't left since. I figure he's doing something with all those Waterbenders, and now he's looking to free the ones here. Add them to his collection. He’s probably got them doing their weird rituals to increase his power, or
"What power? His Firebending? How will Waterbender magic help with that?"

"Well, if I disappear mysteriously tonight, you'll know I was right."

"If you disappear mysteriously tonight, I'll be making a thanksgiving sacrifice to the Great Dragons."

By that point, Sokka had snuck up on the two technicians. He stepped forward, shoved both men up against the ventilation machine, pulled his knives, and held the point of each one at the base of a technician's head. "Hey, guys. I need you to lift your hoods and masks off now so that I can knock you out and steal your clothes. Your other option is to have me shove these knives through the hoods into your spines like the bloodthirsty Water Tribe savage I am. What do you say?"

More than anything, Mai wanted to run, but she knew there was nowhere that would offer an escape.

The dead room of the Fire Temple had become a living tempest with Aang floating at its center, suspended in a cyclone of ash and dust, glowing blue with enough power to light up the whole chamber. Avatar Roku's statue glittered behind him, the gold now shining more like platinum in the strange light that poured from Aang's eyes and tattoos. The air in the room had become a storm, the winds battering at Mai's body hard enough to hurt. She held her ground, trying to guard the only exit so that Zuko could do what he needed to do.

That idiot- that worthless, stupid failure who thought it was a good idea to just walk up to Aang and start throwing fire- was at least doing his part, crawling on the floor towards Aang and every so often trying to throw some fire. It was futile, though; the winds smothered Zuko's flames before they could even fully leave his hands, and his every attack left him sliding back along the floor as the gale overcame a single hand's grip.

It was like the Everstorm all over again, but with ash instead of snow.

Even worse, though, was what Aang was doing to the island itself.

When she squinted against the winds, holding her hands up to try to fend off the worst of the driving ash, she could see that Aang was moving in his cyclone. He was clenching his fists, and slowly raising his arms above his head before swinging them back down. It was like watching Tom-Tom have a little tantrum, but while Tom-Tom could do nothing but annoy the adults around him, Aang was having a much greater effect.

Every time his fists came down, the whole island shuddered long and hard.

Sure, it could just be Earthbending.

But this was a volcano island, and still active.

Was a volcano any harder to control than a blizzard at the South Pole?

As much as Mai wanted to run, she was sure that there was nowhere she could run to, because it was only a matter of time before Crescent Island exploded and returned to its original form beneath the waves of the ocean.

Mai and Zuko would die here, victims of their own treachery. Aang, she was sure, would survive. Sokka and his sister, if they even still lived, would be collateral damage in the Avatar's first real strike back against the Fire Nation. All the other people in the prison base would be mere footnotes in
But Mai could do something to stop all that. She had her knives, her razors, her hinged blades, and her needles. She was in the middle of a windstorm, but if she focused all her Qi into a throw, channeled her energy into her blade, she was capable of knocking grown men off their feet and piercing solid stone. This close, she would be able to get one of her projectiles through the winds to Aang’s body. Probably.

If Aang was stopped, Crescent Island might survive.

Aang said that if he died in the Avatar State, his reincarnation cycle would be broken forever. It would be the end of the Avatar, the end of the Fire Nation’s last true enemy.

Mai took five of her needles in hand, squinted against the ash storm, and took aim. She would have to be precise. She blocked out the winds that hammered at her, focusing on her own breathing and the beating of her heart. She let that carry her mind, rode the flow of energy through the paths in her body and jumped out again when she reached the path for her throwing arm.

She flung her needles, and closed her eyes against the result.

A long moment later, the winds began to die.

TO BE CONTINUED
Traitor's Lament

Chapter Summary

Mai reveals her true colors, and Sokka makes a harrowing discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Traitor's Lament

Zhao was fairly certain that abandoned Fire Temples were not supposed to be glowing with unearthly lights.

His ship had arrived in the waters around Crescent Island to find everything seemingly normal; the patrol ships were circling the island in their regular patterns, and the towers of the island base itself were lit with nothing more than the standard signal lamps and the reflected glow of volcano lava. Standing in the bridge and looking through the viewport at the dark of the night, he had seen no sign of Captain Haru's ramshackle cargo ship, and began to wonder if perhaps he had jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Then, much to Zhao's relief, the volcano had shaken with terrifying intensity, generating a wave that had shaken every ship in the area. Even better, when he got back up off the floor and looked through the viewport again, the old Fire Temple on the island’s eastern curve had a vivid blue light sparkling through the windows midway up the tower.

Unfortunately, that meant he was also too late. The Avatar was already here, in a fairly defensible position, and seemingly in control of an active volcano. As much as capturing the Avatar would be a boost to Zhao's prestige, as good as it would feel to cook Lady Mai, posthumous glory would do him no good.

Fortunately, he had resources that he could consult.

Zhao nodded to the captain serving as his second-in-command on the ship. "Hold this position coordinate with the patrollers here, and keep a watch on for Captain Haru's ship or other signs of the Avatar's allies. I'll be back as soon as I finish my consultation."

And with that, he started making his way to the ship's brig.

It didn't matter to Zuko that he had obviously gotten himself in over his head. It didn't matter that Roku's Shrine had become the focal point of a hurricane, containing winds so powerful that the ash they carried rubbed like sandpaper against any exposed skin. It didn't matter that a light the color of pain filled the whole chamber, and even the dullest reflection burned Zuko's remaining eye. It didn't even matter that he required all of his strength just to grip the cracks in the floor, and that even his strongest fire was battered down to mere sparks as soon as it was generated.

Zuko had a mission. He had to capture the Avatar to restore his honor. He had to succeed or die trying.
And so it was that when the storm and light abruptly went away, it was with a certain unquestioning relief that he found himself in the dark with no sense of direction.

Zuko pushed himself to his feet and rapidly blinked his eye, trying to make it adjust to the Avatar's sudden lack of glowing. The first things that resolved in his vision were smaller, fainter lights in the room's corners, sickly green in color - the crystal lanterns that Mai and the Avatar had been carrying! They must have dropped them! Zuko hurried over to the closest one and grabbed it, working the shutters so that the light could be focused and aimed where he had last seen the Avatar.

The boy was indeed still there. He was down on his knees in the center of the room, blinking and dazed, with needles sticking out of his body.

There were five needles in total, four of them poking right through the Avatar's robes just below his shoulders and thighs like acupuncture gone wrong, the cloth around each wound slick with blood that was an oily black in the light of the lantern. The last needle had been planted right in the center of the boy's forehead, at the tip of the arrow tattoo, and a thin stream of blood ran down from it to stain his youthful face.

Qi points. Those needles had struck five focal points in the major meridians in the Avatar's Qi flow.

Mai was better than ever, it seemed.

Zuko began to approach the Avatar, but the boy was already getting back on his feet and taking a fighting stance. Zuko tried to strike first, but even injured, the Avatar was a bit faster, and flung out his fists for a Bending attack. Zuko changed his motion to brace for the pounding of another strong wind, but nothing came. The air was dead. The Avatar seemed just as surprised, judging by the expression on his bloody face.

Zuko saw victory within his grasp. He dashed forward, certain there was nothing to stop him now, but the Avatar ducked beneath his grabbing arms and sidestepped in a tight circle. Zuko found that the boy had slipped into his blind spot, and tried to turn around, but he could hear the sounds of the Avatar's boots on the floor, and no matter how fast he spun, he found nothing. Zuko reversed his spin, expecting that to surprise the Avatar, but all he saw was a brief flicker of orange cloth at the bottom corner of his vision, and then once again it was like he was alone.

"Fight fair," Zuko growled.

"No," the Avatar said from behind, and then a heavy boot slammed into Zuko's butt and sent him sprawling.

The lantern went tumbling, further carried by another shake from the volcano, eventually coming to a stop with its focused light spilling on an empty patch of floor. Zuko was left with no sign of his enemy but the sound of running. He heard Mai say, "Aang," but there was no answer besides the continued sound of boots on the floor as the echoes passed out of Roku's Shrine and into the unlit hallway.

By the time Zuko recovered the lantern, Mai had retrieved the other one, and then they were running out into the hallway in pursuit of the echoes. As they moved, Mai threw a look over at Zuko and said, "He's going to escape."

Zuko shook his head. "I sealed the exits after you arrived, and melted the windows shut days ago. He's trapped in here with us, especially if he doesn't have his Bending."

They came to the end of the hallway and turned the corner to shine their lanterns ahead, but all they
found was a set of curved stairs leading up. Zuko couldn't even hear the Avatar's footsteps anymore. That kid could run.

Zuko slowed as the volcano shook again. This was no frantic chase, now. It was a hunt, and the winner would be the one to make his strength last the longest. He motioned for Mai to follow, and led the way up the stairs, moving his lantern back and forth to drive away all shadows.

Mai broke the silence by saying, "What do you mean he doesn't have his Bending?"

"You blocked his Qi with your needles. He tried to Airbend at me before and couldn't."

She gave a little shake of her head. "That is- that was Ty Lee's specialty. I just made a guess that hitting some major meridians might disrupt his Avatar Spirit, if I didn't miss and kill him, but I don't think that would take his Bending."

They reached the top of the stairs as the volcano gave another shudder. Zuko was starting to wonder if he should be worrying about that, but then he looked through the doorway at the stairs' end. The chamber beyond was massive, filled with etched columns that rose up beyond the light of the lanterns. It was the perfect place for the Avatar to hide. But there was nothing the Avatar could do to fight back once he was found, so it was only a question of time until he could restore his honor. "It doesn't matter how it happened, we need to take advantage of it. The Avatar must be mine." He started to move forward again, but a hand grabbed at his left shoulder, and Zuko suddenly found himself being shoved against the door.

Mai held him trapped and stepped close enough that he could feel her exhalations on his face. He realized that she was breathing hard, and wondered for a moment if she needed to rest after the running and the stairs, but then he caught a glimpse of the intensity of her eyes in the lantern light, and realized that despite her blank face, she was furious.

Zuko's view of Mai filled his entire world, and all the little details he had missed in the dim lighting were revealed to his single-eyed sight. Her hair was done in one of the traditional styles that her mother had always favored- careful pilings beneath ox-horn buns that ended in twin tails- but it was matted dully with sweat and dirt. Her face and clothes weren't any better, streaked and stained with the ash that dirtied all the air on this island, and there was a mixed odor of machine oil and coal and human stress coming from her.

Her face was that of the Forest Spirit, the one who had led Zuko through the torture of the Ashland, but that false Mai had reveled in its cold beauty, never allowing the mud or filth of the world to touch it. That image had been Zuko's ideal of Mai, but here in front of him was the real thing, looking like she had been dragged through the whole Homeland to get to here. It was hard to believe that this was the same girl who had always been so carefully groomed, who hated getting wet and would actually run in terror from mud. Zuko was almost embarrassed to be seeing her like this, and he wondered if that was how Azula had felt when she found him in that gutter.

The shy whisper of a little girl had given way to the smoky voice of a woman, but there was a growl in it that savaged Zuko's ears as Mai said, "No more stupidity."

"Wha-"

"I've tortured myself to give you this opportunity, and you accept it by walking up to Aang and immediately starting a fight?"

"I had to be sure-"
"My word wasn't enough? But that's the least of your idiocy." She let go of his shoulder, but didn't back away. "Aang didn't know you. You could have- could have invited him to tea and he would have accepted! You could have asked him to come back to the Fire Nation willingly to- to help sort out all our problems. You could have resolved this peacefully, with no one getting hurt, but because you had to make this a stupid Agni Kai, now we have to chase and fight him!" Mai's face briefly flickered into such an expression of disgust that Zuko was brought up short, and then she put her sculpted blank look back into place.

But Zuko could still hear the revulsion in her voice as she said, "Everything your sister ever said about you is right." She finally stepped back, and the volcano shook again.

Zuko stood there for a long moment, feeling the fire within swing chaotically between flares and flickers. So this was the one true ally he had in the world? The woman who had supposedly risked so much to restore him to his proper place? The girl whose betrothal to his cousin made his world so dim? If she had ever been the person he thought- if she had ever been more than a pretty face worn by a vengeful forest spirit- she was apparently just Azula's creature, now, a living weapon that could do nothing but hurt people. Zuko could go back to the Fire Nation with her, could let her stay by his side, could even take her into his home, but would this sharp edge always be waiting to punish him for his failures?

"Guard the door here," he said, and resolved not to think about Mai until the Avatar was his.

Zuko moved into the wide chamber and passed between a pair of pillars. In the lantern's light, he could barely make out the carvings on each of the columns, but he could easily guess their purpose. This was a Lore Room, with each pillar telling a story in pictographs of Fire Nation legend or history. As he circled around one pillar covered in the warring dragons of the Great Schism, Mai slid over to him and whispered, "What's going to happen to Aang when you take him home?"

Zuko wasn't feeling particularly inclined to waste any time or effort satisfying her curiosity. "Whatever the Fire Lord wills."

She held his gaze for a moment, and then gave a shallow bow and moved back to guard the door.

Aang could hear echoes that might have been the whispers of his hunters, but there were no words in them that he could understand. The light of their lanterns was a much better warning; one green glow was staying by the room's entrance, while the other was moving slowly amidst the columns. Aang hid behind one of the pillars, not even wanting to risk showing his head for a quick peek. Right now, stealth was his best weapon, more useful even than his staff.

Aang flitted around the pillar to keep it between him and the moving lantern light, and his motion made his wounds jolt with pain again. He bit back a little moan, riding it out until it settled into the heavy ache that had plagued him since he was forced out of the Avatar State. It took a conscious effort of will to keep from rushing out to punish this one-eyed man who had stolen Mai to the side of evil, had given her reason to betray Aang and raise her weapons against him. She had used Aang all this time, lied to him and laughed at him behind his back while she guided him to this place. She had used Aang all this time, lied to him and laughed at him behind his back while she guided him to this place.

How could he trust anyone, now? Even Sokka could be part of this crazy trap! Maybe Sokka didn't really care about his sister, and was using her as an excuse to get Aang to Crescent Island. Maybe Sokka and Mai were lovers, or maybe Mai was just manipulating Sokka's love like she had manipulated Aang's! Maybe this eyepatch guy was Mai's lover, too, and she had risen to the top of the Fire Nation by using her beauty to turn useful men into her servants!

The pain in Aang's body intensified to the point of outshining his wounds, and he had to fight to
keep standing. He could feel his blood pulsing through his veins, but the blood was thick and almost solid, pushing through his body with the same discomfort that came from trying to swallow a whole lychee nut at once.

The fight against the pain brought a bit of clarity to Aang's mind. Sokka wasn't a traitor; Aang had seen the emotions in the older boy's eyes whenever he said Katara's name. It was the same emptiness Aang felt when he thought about all the evil he had caused by running away and falling asleep for a hundred and one years. Moreover, Sokka had never looked at Mai the way Aang did, and Mai was no flirt.

But she had still betrayed him.

If only he could figure out why he couldn't Airbend. If he could just summon the winds again, he was sure that he could get away, could find Sokka again, and make some good come out of this.

Of course, if he could Airbend, he wouldn't have to run away. He could strike down this one-eyed Firebender, could knock Mai down a flight stairs and watch her-

Aang grimaced against another wave of pain, this time like a sharp stabbing in his chest, pumping discomfort up through his limbs to echo within the needle wounds that still bled. The pain didn't fade as Aang hopped over to the next pillar, staying just ahead of the light of an approaching lantern.

It was only after the shaking finished that he realized that his aching had perfectly coincided with another pulse of the volcano.

The low-security brig on Zhao's ship was a simple affair, just a cramped collection of bars and bunks into which rule-breaking sailors could be thrown to teach a lesson. The more secure cells were full rooms with thick walls and doors held by complicated locks, but those were only needed when the prisoner was expected to try to escape.

Zhao's favorite prisoner was no danger in that regard.

The guard got off her stool and bowed as Zhao stomped into the prison area, but he ignored her and walked straight up to the cell where Suki of Kyoshi Island was imprisoned. The girl was lying face up on her bunk, and didn't even look over.

Zhao buried his annoyance and said, "I need information."

"That's why I'm here." Suki continued to stare up at the ceiling. "But you know that."

"The Avatar succeeded in reaching Crescent Island, but all signs point to it becoming too hot for him very quickly. I need to know how he will react."

"What makes you think I know that?"

"That's a fair question. In fact, I'm not sure you do have the information I need. But I've taken some gambles to get this far, and if things go poorly, I could be demoted. I won't have any authority in the Southern Fleet, and so I won't be able to cancel the current orders to attack a certain pirate stronghold next week. Whoever planned that attack didn't do a very good job, as my recent analysis has determined that the Fire Navy soldiers will be vastly outnumbered, including a certain Lieutenant Kirai."

"Oh, just stop about my sister already." Suki sighed and sat up on her bunk. "Aa- the Avatar is dependent on his sky bison, Appa, for travel, but the beast is too big and willful to take into battle
without a plan. Appa's trained to stay where he's left, though, so he's probably someplace safe on the island, and the Avatar will eventually come back for him.”

Zhao considered that. If he could find the sky bison- could get onto Crescent Island before the Avatar retreated- he could set up an ambush. The island wasn't very big, and the number of hiding places it could offer was severely limited. Yes, it was doable.

Zhao threw one last grin at his prisoner. "That will suffice. But I won't be issuing the orders to cancel the attack on the pirates until I'm back from my hunt. If anything else occurs to you, let the guard know, and my soldiers will try to pass it along to me, if it isn't too late."

Then he turned on his heels and left the prisoner to rot in her cage.

Zuko tracked the Avatar by the traces of blood he found on the Lore Pillars: a black smear over an account of the Agni Warrior here, the imprints of fingers scattered amongst the fireworks of a solstice celebration there. The boy was circling through the center of the cavernous chamber, trying to keep away from the room's walls. It was a smart tactic, but it was still a pattern Zuko could discern; it was the same basic principle that the Avatar had used to stay in Zuko's blind spot during their earlier fight.

And once Zuko saw the pattern, it was a simple matter to deduce the next steps. He listened very closely, and when he heard a sound that might have been a quiet moan of pain from a sudden movement, he dashed to the right and peeked through the rows of pillars to find- there!

Zuko punched a fireball that brought an echo of daylight to the room, revealing the Avatar leaning against a pillar in his yellow and orange robes. The boy sidestepped the fireball, ducking behind his pillar, but Zuko was already tracking the movement, kicking a stream of flame along the floor to flow where the Avatar was heading. It cut the boy off, forcing him to circle back towards Zuko.

And so it ended.

Zuko didn't even need to use his Firebending. With the Avatar within reach and unable to Airbend, it was just a matter of grappling, and June's training had prepared Zuko for such a fight. There was a twisting of limbs and a collision of bodies that went so fast it was outside of time, and when it ended, the Avatar was pinned to the floor.

The boy struggled, his thin form fighting against Zuko's weight, but it was futile. The Avatar's strength left him and he gave up the struggle, giving a pained groan, and Zuko began to worry. He needed the Avatar alive, and nothing he had done should have hurt the boy this much. He rolled the Avatar on the ground, making sure to keep the boy's limbs pinned, but there were no real injuries that he could see, besides the wounds from Mai's needles, but those shouldn't have been that painful. Was the Avatar not used to being hurt?

Then Zuko looked at the Avatar's face, and saw the sweat running down his tattooed head, mixing with the blood. It was like the boy was fevered.

The volcano shook again, but this time it didn't stop, and the whole temple creaked in chorus.

It was hard to tell, beneath the layers of insulating padding, but Sokka was getting the distinct impression that the prison facility was getting hotter.

As he moved through the shaking hallways, the staff of the base moved around in what seemed like a massive panic. Most of them were dressed like him in the heavy robes and breath-masks that
seemed to be the local uniform for technicians. Many of them were now frantically checking pressure gauges built right into the walls of the hallways, while other bustled in and out of equipment rooms and pipe junctions and plumbing hubs. A small army of technicians were doing patrols of the Dryness Engine's glowing red veins, calling out for an emergency repair squad wherever breaks were found, and soldiers bustled about moving all kinds of equipment to safe places and even doing some preliminary evacuations of non-essential staff. Above the din of all that, the loudspeaker constantly sounded with technical updates from throughout the underground prison facilities, broken up only by more mundane calls for non-essential personnel to assemble on the eastern docks.

Sokka just moved through it all, following the directions he had been given by the technicians he ambushed and interrogated, and tried to walk with the confidence of someone who belonged here in the middle of an unfolding disaster.

He just had two more hallways to go when a short figure in a hooded cloak stepped into his path and motioned for him to stop. Sokka considered just shoving this interloper out of the way, but then manicured hands pulled the hood back to reveal what appeared to be an emotionless sculptor's impression of a teenage girl. But though her face was sharp and cold, her piercing golden eyes stopped him in his tracks.

This must be the feared inspector he had heard about.

With a voice like thorns covered in honey, she said, "Where are you going?"

Sokka stood up straight and tried to put a little more maturity into his voice. "To the Waterbender prisons. My captain ordered me to monitor those facilities."

The tilt of her head was so slight that it didn’t even shift her hood. "No one was dispatched there before now?"

Slush. Sokka reached into the tool belt that was part of his disguise and pulled out the first thing he couldn't recognize. "They were, milady, but those are just Technicians of the Third Class, and don't have the expertise or the equipment to monitor for barometric quasi-throngs in the atmosphere. I just finished recalibrating the anti-dampener for the volcano activity, and now I need to make sure it's having the desired effect on the prisons."

Quasi-throngs? What the slush were quasi-throngs? Why would he make up something as stupid sounding as a quasi-throng?

The inspector glared at him for a long moment, never having blinked during the whole conversation, and then stepped aside. "Very well. You may proceed, Technician."

Sokka gave a low bow, and hurried on his way. No point in tempting Fate, Luck, the Universe, or any other interested parties.

The Waterbenders- and Katara- were just ahead.

When the shaking started up again and didn't stop, Mai decided that it was time for her to get involved. To ash with Zuko's stupid mission; she couldn't play backup anymore.

It was an easy matter to just follow the light of Zuko's lantern through the rows of Lore Pillars, and when she found him, he was crouched over Aang, pinning the younger boy to the floor, the scarred and blinded side of his face all that was visible from her position. "Zuko!"

His head snapped to face her, and he outright scowled when he saw her. "What?"
"What are you doing to him?"

"Nothing! He's feverish, or something. Are your needles poisoned?"

Feverish? Mai hurried over, and sure enough, Aang was twisting and groaning and sweating beneath Zuko's grip. "Get off of him."

"But-"

"Now, Zuko."

He glared at her with one eye, and his jaw clenched with stubbornness in an expression that he had carried up all the way from childhood. Mai had seen it whenever he tried take a stand against his sister, and couldn't believe he was doing it now, over this. "The Avatar is my prisoner. We can get him a healer once I've gotten him onto a ship and into a cage."

"Zuko-"

"I will not fail in my mission!"

So, that was how it was going to be? "Lick ash." Then she shoved Zuko with both hands and all of her strength, following it up by firing a series of bolts from her wrist launchers. Even with the ground constantly shaking, her aim was true, and before Zuko could react, he was neatly pinned against one of the pillars by his shirt and pants.

Mai ignored his shouts and went over to Aang. She pressed a hand against his forehead, finding it sticky with sweat and blood. His eyes were closed, but she pried open the lids and gazed deep within by the dim illumination of her lantern.

Aang said, "Mai?" with a strained voice, and though his eyes weren't glowing, tears of pure blue light ran down his face.

So she hadn't shut down his Avatar State completely, after all. "Aang, you need to calm down. The volcano is about to erupt, and we're practically on top of it."

"Mai."

"Aang, please, you're danger. We all are."

"Mai, why-"

"I'm not a Sage, I don't know how this all works."

"Why- why did you lie to me?"

She couldn't stop her teeth from grinding together. He wanted to do this now? But his face was pinched in the same way it had been when they had been cleaning out the remains of his people from the Southern Air Temple, and she realized that she had done this. Both her needles and her betrayal were the architects of the situation.

Forcing her jaw to relax, she said, "Zuko is- was- we grew up together. He was banished until he could find the Avatar. I wanted- I thought I could save him. With you. So I lied. Over and over again. I- I'm sorry."

"No."
"I am." She swallowed heavily. The shaking was getting worse, and the swirling of her stomach was back, like the worst of her seasickness. "I'm sorry. I know you can't forgive me- I wouldn't forgive this if I had been betrayed- but you need to let it go and save yourself."

Aang shut his eyes again, but the glowing tears kept coming, and the entire temple gave another whine of stressed structural integrity.

"Aang," Mai called, to no response. "Aang!" She wanted to shake him, but didn't dare risk doing him any further injury. She put her hands on his forehead again, covering the wound she had inflicted on him, trying to cool him with her own lack of warmth.

She never heard Zuko rip free from her bolts, and only knew of his escape when she shoved her away to tumble up against a pillar. "Zuko!"

He reached down and grabbed Aang by the robes. "The Avatar is coming with me. You'd better follow, and if you don't want Azula to hear about this, you will not try to stop me again."

Mai got to her feet, said, "Azula can lick ash, too," and grabbed for Aang.

Zuko tried to pull away, but her hand brushed against Aang's arm and she took hold, clinging with all her strength, and the shaking got worse and one of the pillars across the chamber toppled with a noise like the heavens sundering and Zuko tried to shove at her again but he had no leverage and Mai wrapped her other arm around Aang and pulled him close to her and then Aang opened his eyes and the whole world exploded in light.

Then the whole world exploded for real.

Aang couldn't be sure if he was dreaming or dying, or maybe neither. Mai was speaking to him, revealing the molten core of her true character, but whether it was real or a comforting hallucination was beyond his ability to discern, if there was even a difference between the two. At times like this, reality itself seemed to be a kind of hallucination, a way of dressing up a whole other world in the trappings of the elements.

The one thing that Aang knew for sure was real was the volcano. It pounded like a heart straining to keep an exhausted body going, hammering with a ferocity that could quickly become self-destructive. Unlike a heart, though, the volcano knew this, was aware of it on a level beyond what most people would think of as true intelligence, and strived towards this destiny. The volcano wanted to die, that it might be reborn.

Aang knew the feeling. He had died and been reborn many times.

The volcano was of a resonance with Aang's spirit. The two strengthened each other, fed off each other, filled each other. The two were one, or perhaps the one was two.

The temple was the link. Aang could feel the way it served as an avenue of the volcano's power, channeled that energy from deep within the molten earth and stripped it of its elemental trappings so that only the spirit remained. The temple focused that spirit, conducted it up and down the man-made tower like an aqueduct bringing clean water to a thirsty populace. The Fire Sages had once drunk from that source, but now Aang was the only one left to feel the volcano's energy, to touch it and know it and share himself with it.

The only buffer between Aang and the volcano had been the pain, the wounds Mai had inflicted, wounds both in his body and his spirit. The disconnect had been destroying him, leaving him to be force-fed the volcano's spirit without the power of his own spirit- of the spirits of all the past Avatars-
to let him withstand it.

But Mai's words, or the words of the hallucination, had eroded the blockage. Aang could feel the energy flowing through him once more, riding the tides of his blood all through his body, drowning out the voices of anger and hate.

Aang didn't hate Mai. He didn't want to hurt her. That had been his anger talking, the anger that weighed his Airbending down with shackles of hate, anger that found echoes in all the past Avatars who had suffered betrayals of their own.

With the voices of anger lost in the din of life, the voice of the volcano was all that was left.

There was a part of Aang- a puny, mortal part made of a mix of the elements- that didn't want to die with the volcano. It wanted to live. It wanted his friends to live. It even wanted his enemies to live.

But the point of return had been passed. The volcano had seduced Aang. He could no longer stop himself from joining with it, and in fact the blockage of the pain had only made the explosion all the more inevitable. Aang cried out, perhaps only in his mind, and was one with the volcano when it erupted and made its mark on the elemental world.

Zhao had left his ship anchored a safe distance from Crescent Island and elected to take a motorized assault boat over to the shores of the prison. It was a smaller and quicker craft, giving him the ability to flit in and out of a complicated situation and snatch up his prisoners. And it was still large enough to carry a full strike force of Zhao's best Firebenders, so that he wouldn't need to dirty his own hands unless he really, really wanted to.

The boat was skipping across the waves, on its way to way to glory, when the volcano finally exploded.

Zhao had grown up in the Homeland, and so was familiar with the nature of volcanos, of the smell of sulfur, of the unmatched heat, of the life they gave to the dead ground. Volcanos linked the life-flow of the Fire Nation, and it was from volcanos that the islands of the Homeland themselves had been born. He had seen lava vents, and magma fountains, even the eruptions of some smaller volcanos.

And so he was completely unprepared when the Crescent Island volcano exploded with more force than 25 million lightning bolts going off at once.

There was a clap of sound that wiped away all other sounds, that wiped away all other senses, that struck Zhao like something solid and knocked him off his feet even as the ocean itself jumped and the boat leaped and gravity itself just went away for a while. When he blinked his way back to reality, he was gratified to find that despite all the water that had relocated onto the boat, the ship itself was still upright and floating. Zhao heaved himself to his feet, confirmed that the pilot was still alive, pointed for his lieutenant to check on the troops, and looked out the viewport at Crescent Island.

The good news was that the island was still there, and the patrol ships’ earlier reorientation had allowed them to crest the wave that must have just passed by.

Yet all the stars in the sky were completely gone.

Previously, the sky above Crescent Island was tarnished only by a streak of smoke that curled up to fondle the moon. Now, the entire sky was black, blacker than the night, blacker than a cave, blacker than any shadow. It was like the sky itself had gone away, and all that was left was a void that consumed even light itself.
And yet there was more light on Crescent Island than before. Though the moon and the stars were lost, maybe forever, the volcano's top was now covered in lava that ran down its slopes, meandering insanely across the terrain, giving a red glow to all the night that reminded Zhao of the return of Sozin's Comet a year ago.

It was like the island was on fire.

Zhao suddenly had second thoughts about this whole operation.

And yet when the pilot said, "Sir, do we continue?" Zhao made himself nod.

For he had used his spyglass to examine the island, and he saw that even though the Fire Temple was literally a fragment of its former self, its foundations were still there, and the prison towers still stood.

There was still something worth pursuing on that island, and if worse came to worse, Zhao had picked out a very fast assault boat.

Sokka had gotten the sense that he had to hurry even before reality went away for a minute.

He had been rushing down the final shaking corridor to the Waterbender prison cells, this one lined with so many of the heated metal rails that the whole hallway glowed red behind the shimmering air that filled it. He tried to ignore the feeling that he was marching through the reaction chamber for a combustion engine and waved around the unidentified instrument he had pulled from his belt, pretending to find the whirry bit at the top very interesting (which it kind of was, but only as a novelty). He eyed the technicians and soldiers he passed as best he could through the holes of his protective mask, but there weren't many to keep track of here. The whole evil red glow was fairly obvious proof that everything was working here.

At last, he came to the end of the corridor, and the final door between him and Katara, if she was still alive. The glowing metal lines fed right into the wall and no doubt went on to heat and dry the prison beyond.

There was no guard. Either it was a stroke of luck, or an omen of doom. Sokka knew which one he considered more likely; he pulled his knives out of his tool belt and prepared for a fight.

Then he grabbed the lever on the door, twisted it with a screech of dry metal, and shoved it open.

That's when the whole world rocked with the sound of an explosion that was loud even through the walls and floors and stone that it must have passed, and Sokka was thrown off his feet so hard that things went dark for an indeterminable amount of time.

When he awoke, he found himself rolling right towards a red hot metal wall.

He only survived by slamming one of his knives into the grated floor and yanking himself to a firm halt just short of the deadly touch of metal heated to glowing by the molten heart of a volcano. This? This was why it was stupid to build massive Dryness Engines out of volcanoes. Seriously, the whole thing was just deranged.

Grumbling, he got back up and stomped into the prison.

Commander Huoshan was still trying to process the fact that the volcano under which her military base existed had just exploded with more force than it ever had in the last hundred years. Why now?
What could have caused this? She looked around her command center, seeking answers, but her subordinates could only stare back with expressions more suited to hunted animals than the command staff of the Fire Nation's highest security prison.

That's when Princess Azula, still wearing that ridiculous hooded cloak, walked into the command center like nothing was happening, and said, "A private word, Commander Huoshan?"

Huoshan massaged her forehead and waved Azula over. The blasted little child had been prancing about the base for the last two weeks, supposedly doing a top-secret inspection on behalf of her father Prince Ozai, spooking the staff and refusing to give any indication of her findings. "How can I be of service, Princess?"

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of taking you away from your work right now," Azula whispered. "I just have a small suggestion for you. With the volcano exploding, I think this whole base has reached the end of its natural life. You should order the full evacuation, and also put the Waterbender section on lockdown."

"What?"

"There's no point in endangering loyal soldiers and staff. And while my grandfather might have preferred to collect Waterbenders and keep them in alive in case of... well, whatever fantasies he had about the Avatar's ability to hide, obviously it would be better to let them die here than escape."

Huoshan considered that. The princess wasn't wrong, and if Huoshan had been thinking clearly, she would have arrived at the same conclusion. "Very well. I'll give the orders."

"Thank you, commander."

Sokka had barely taken a step into the prison area when a loud buzz sounded from the loudspeaker, and a segmented metal barrier with no handle slid down out of the doorway to slam down shut right behind him. Sokka whirled and hammered at it, but it was thick and strong, and just so happened to fully cover the only exit.

Great timing. Just wonderful.

Well, he'd think on the problem while he continued his walk into the land of the shadows.

It was melodramatic, but that's pretty much what the prison was. The cages hung from the ceilings in rows over the grated floor. The ceiling and walls glowed red, and the hot metal lines even ran beneath the grating. Although there was light everywhere, it was a dull, dead kind of light, leaving the figures in the cages as shambling shadows. The shadows resolved themselves as people only when Sokka drew close, people wearing shapeless gray tunics with hair long and knotted, so he moved from cage to cage, his heart leaping up into his throat each time, and then dropping down into his stomach when the person he was looking at proved not to be Katara.

This room is where she should be, if she was alive.

Most of the prisoners were older, and didn't react to him. They seemed half alive, their skin cracked, their eyes bloodshot and glassy. Sokka figured they were suffering from the effects of severe dehydration, and could even be hallucinating. Not all of the prisoners were grayhairs, but none were as young as Katara. Waterbenders had been increasingly rare as the war had raged, and by the time Sokka was born, the power was said to be extinct. Katara had been the last.

Finally, one prisoner did react to Sokka. It was an older woman, as old as Gran-Gran, and her eyes
were sharp as she glared at him. When he stopped in front of her cage, she croaked through a dry throat, "What do you want, monster?"

Sokka pulled off his mask, to let her see his blue eyes and dusky skin. "I'm looking for my sister."

The old woman squinted, and then stepped back. "Your sister?" She moved forward again, and clutched the bars that stood between her and Sokka. "Do you mean Katara?"

Sokka's throat went drier than hers. He tried to make himself speak, to ask if she was still alive, to ask where she was right now, to ask for the burden of asking to be taken away.

He couldn't, so he just nodded.

The old woman nodded back, and pointed a gnarled finger at one of the last cages in the line.

Sokka smiled his thanks, and moved on.

The shadow within resolved itself slowly. The skin came first, with a base that might have been the same shade as Sokka's, but now darker in the red light, rough in its dryness, brittle and scaling. Her hair was even worse, long and unkempt, brittle and dull, almost silver in dullness. It was only when Sokka got close that he could make out her face, and find that the old familiar shape- the cheeks and jawline he remembered on the child that had been his little sister- was different now. Her cheeks were thin and hollow, her jawline more pronounced. A face that had once worn its every emotion proudly was now stiff, almost lifeless. And then there were the eyes.

Sokka and Katara had once shared the blue of their eyes, but now hers were tinged with red. Her eyes were colored like the Fire Nation.

She was his sister, but in every visible way, she also wasn't.

She was his sister, and she was beautiful.

"Katara," Sokka breathed, his voice hitching.

She looked at him, those bloodshoot eyes taking him in. Those eyes remained dull, and her face had no expression. Did she really truly see him?

Then those eyes went wide, and- perhaps it was just Sokka's imagination- the blue stood out a bit more vividly. Her jaw dropped, and she raised shaking hands up to her mouth. "S-" Her voice rasped, as though she hadn't spoken in ages. "S- Sok- ka?"

He nodded, yanked off his gloves, and reached up through the bars.

She sank to her knees, and took his hands in her own.

Her hands felt as rough as they looked, but they were her hands, and they were warm, and they were warm because she was alive.

Sokka was too dry to shed tears, but sobbed nonetheless, and Katara did as well, and his heart nearly burst when she said, "Y- you're alive. You're still alive" She was the one who might have been dead all these years, and she had been worrying about him?

It had been a close thing, but he hadn't let her down. He had fulfilled his responsibility as her big brother. “I'm alive, and you're alive. Now I'm getting you out of here.”

TO BE CONTINUED
For the record, I did the math. Mt St Helens exploded with more energy than that of 26 million lightning bolts. And change.
Traitor's Salvation

Chapter Summary

Our heroes come to the water.

Traitor's Salvation

Zuko followed the path of pain back to consciousness.

For a while, there was no light, no sound, no thoughts. He wasn't even aware of being alive, although the pain throughout his body should have been a clue. He was stuck in this state for an eternity, but after the universe was birthed in flame and died in ice a few dozen times, he was able to achieve something approaching consciousness. He opened his eyes, and found the world lit by a heavy red glow, with a Fire Temple in pieces all around him.

Well, that would explain why he hurt so much.

His thoughts fought through the pain and the sluggishness and the roar of the ocean and the rumble of the volcano, and he remembered how Mai had betrayed him. He sat up, worsening his aches. He winced his way through it, centering his mind on Mai. She had tried to keep him away from the Avatar, more concerned about the boy than securing Zuko's honor. She didn't care about helping him. She was just like everyone else, using him for her own ends and then discarding him. They had been fighting over the Avatar, but then the volcano's rumbling had increased, and a pillar had fallen, and there was a light. The Avatar's light.

Zuko forced himself to look around, beyond the wreckage of the temple. It was still the dark of night, but everything was lit up with the distinctive glow of lava, and he realized that the ocean was right next to him. But the temple was situated halfway up the volcano-

He looked up, and saw most of the temple still on its cliff far above.

He looked straight ahead, and found that he- and the wreckage of the temple's upper floors- were on the beach at the base of the volcano.

It seemed that, when the volcano had exploded, the temple collapsed and its top half plummeted all the way down the slope of the mountain, taking him with it. That explained why he hurt so badly. A straight fall would have killed him, but the half-tumble he seemed to have ridden had merely battered him unconscious. All the evidence pointed to either extraordinary luck, or that his head was in fact harder than Fire Temple construction.

Then he realized that his hunt for the Avatar was finished, at least temporarily. He was in no condition to fight, if the Avatar- if Mai- was even still alive. He felt another pain, this one not entirely physical. He had failed. After all that work, all the effort of infiltrating Crescent Island, all the waiting and planning, he had failed. If the Avatar escaped, he would have no idea how to find the boy. He would be back at the beginning, in the same state as when his crew had marooned him in the Fire Colonies. He would have nothing left to do but crawl back into the gutter-

No.
He wouldn't do that again.

He had to go home. He had to see Father. He had to know about Ba Sing Se-

And he couldn't do that if he died here. He climbed to his feet, ignoring his pain. He scanned around- there! That wooden crossbeam would float. He worked his way over to it, hoisted it up on protesting shoulders, and lugged it to where the ocean met the black sands of the island.

Just as he was about to plunge into the water, he heard a second rumbling, more harmonic than that of the volcano. He followed the noise with his gaze, looking up and over, and found himself staring into the sky at a giant ball of fur with a face.

What the-

Oh. The Avatar's sky bison.

A maelstrom of plans swirled in Zuko's mind, but his headache made it hard to turn any of them into things of substance, and besides, how was he really going to capture the bison anyway?

He pointed up at the remainder of the temple on the cliff. "Your master is up there. Save him, if he lives. I'll need to meet up with him again soon."

The sky bison gave a heavy, melodic lowing, and then twisted in the air and flew up in the direction Zuko had indicated.

With that done, he heaved his crossbeam to float in the water. He gave one last look at the island, and spotted another bit of wood sticking out of the temple's wreckage, something that might not be immediately useful, but would undoubtedly be a good investment.

The Avatar's glider staff had fallen along with Zuko.

He took it, and used torn strips from his tunic to tie it to his crossbeam float. Then he wrapped his arms around both and surrendered his fate to the waters. The volcano's activity was already fighting against the push of the waves, and some extra kicking got him moving in the directions of the Fire Navy patrol ships that still circled the island.

His next meeting with the Avatar would come, once he got back to June the bounty hunter and her shirshu scent-tracker.

Sokka and Katara held each other in the heart of the volcano. They were both too dry to shed tears, but couldn't bring themselves to let go of each other. He knelt before her suspended cage, arms extended through the bars to clutch her hands, and she gripped back with more strength than he would have expected after so long in this place.

It was the thought of tears that brought him back to reality. "Katara. I brought you a present."

"A- a present?" She looked at him with the same expression of confusion that he remembered. It was amazing to see it on this older, weathered face.

Sokka let go of her hands and stood up to give himself access to the stolen tool belt he was wearing as part of his Evil Fire Engineer disguise. He had been forced to leave behind his backpack when he stole the heavy heat-resistant robes, but the belt had plenty of really large pouches and he had filled them with as many important supplies as he-
Ah, there it was.

Sokka pulled the gifts he had bought back on Kyoshi Island - the gifts he had carried across the Earth Kingdom, across the ocean, all the way to this stupid volcano - and held them up for his sister to see.

They were a pair of waterskins: small, light, and full of springwater from a source near Haru's hidden village.

Katara's smile turned into a savage grin that reminded him of the way their father had looked when he was chasing down a hunt.

Katara took one of them, uncorked it, and sniffed at it. Her smile softened once again. "Thanks. You know, being held here - it's been awful. But one thing - the one good thing - is that I got to meet Master Hama. I could only mimic what I saw her doing in her own cage, but I still learned." Katara stood up and looped both waterskins over her head and shoulders, so that they rested on her back, the straps crossed over her chest. She raised her arms, hands open with fingers spread wide into the air, and moved them slowly as one until they were extended in parallel positions.

Then she whipped both arms in a diagonal slice in front of her, and a stream of water flicked out of a waterskin to curve and slice through her cage's lock.

It split and fell to the ground as Katara stumbled and the water fell to boil on the red hot metal beneath the grated floor. She grabbed the front of the cage, which swung open without its lock to hold it in place, and Sokka caught his sister as she half-fell to her freedom. "Great, now let's find a way out of here."

She turned to blink at him. "Aren't we rescuing Master Hama and the others?"

"Katara, things are really going crazy outside this room, and-"

"Sokka, I'm *not* leaving unless everyone else comes with us." Her jawline hardened, and he was reminded suddenly of all the tantrums she had thrown.

Oh, right. *Those.*

He sighed.

And then he grinned. He really had his sister back. "All right, all right. If I hold you up, can you do the water-slicey thing on all these cages?" She hesitated only a second before giving a steely-eyed nod, and they turned together to regard the cages, and the shadow-people who lived within them.

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Aang followed the path of a lovely voice back to consciousness.

He had been deep in a nothingness, as deep as he had been before the dawn at the Southern Air Temple. It was a darkness of exhaustion that went beyond the mere physical, an exhaustion of thought and emotion and spirit. It was uncomfortably close to being dead, and it was only in those moments that he could even remember what being dead felt like. Each time it happened, he could feel himself coming a little bit closer to that invisible divide, but it was not yet time to cross over.

Mai hissed, "Wake up already," and his eyes snapped open.

Strangely, he found himself looking at a slope of black sand lit by flowing rivers of lava. These things weren't unexpected for his situation, but this particular view was odd in that he seemed to be *above* him. A quick check also revealed that was experiencing gravity in an unusual way, with all
the blood rushing to his head. He looked down-no, up-and saw Mai above him, holding onto his left ankle with a death grip. As his gaze continued to move upward, he saw that she herself was dangling, clutching a knife that was stabbed into what looked like the floor of one of the rooms of the Fire Temple.

Aang craned his head for a wider view, and saw the full situation. The Fire Temple had been partially destroyed in the volcano eruption, half-collapsing against the force of the blast. It seemed that the floor where he and Mai and the one-eyed Firebender had been fighting was the fulcrum, with the floors above them collapsing down. He looked up past Mai and could see the remnants of the room with the columns, but it sloped now, and they were dangling from the last bit of the floor that hadn't fallen down to the coastline. He could see bits of the fallen temple littering the side of the volcano, but from this angle, it would be a straight drop to sea-level ground for him.

He looked up at Mai, and saw her face twisted from the exertion of holding them both up.

Aang said, "Can you climb?"

She shook her hand, sending her loosened hair swaying in the ash-stained wind.

Aang tried to calm his breathing, and moved his arms to call the lifting winds.

They did not respond.

He looked back up to Mai. "I still can't Airbend."

She squeezed her eyes shut for a long moment, and then looked back down at him. "Can you climb?"

Aang tried to spin and curl himself, to reach around to Mai's legs, but that set them both swaying, and her grip faltered for a moment, jolting him and nearly making them both fall.

When he caught his breath, he said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

Mai's wince grew tighter, and her sigh was more of a strangled gasp. "All right. New plan. I swing you over towards the temple and let go. You grab something, catch yourself, and climb down."

He craned his head to assess his chances. That might work, if his strength didn't give out and she managed to swing him near one of the easy-to-grab statues and not a piece of smooth wall. "Then what?"

"Then you're safe."

Aang waited for more, but it never came. He glanced up at Mai, and she was once again pressing her eyes shut. "What about you?"

"I just betrayed a faction of the Royal Family and maybe got a Prince killed. Whether I survive this or not, my family and I are dead."

"Mai-"

"What do you care anyway?"

"I care because I don't want anyone to die!"

"Aang." They hung there, swaying in the filthy, stinging wind. She let out a sound that could have been a small scream of pain, or maybe a sob, and said, "Losing- my grip. You die- with me- or
survive. Your choice."

It was a choice he refused to make.

The wind shifted against his face.

Sokka jogged though the abandoned prison, at the head of an army of exhausted Waterbenders.

The first person he and Katara had freed was Master Hama, the old woman who had given him directions to his sister's cage, and although she moved as weakly as Katara, her eyes had the same hard strength. Sokka had to hold both of them up, one on each arm, as they worked together to water-slice through the locks on the rest of the cages.

There were twenty-seven Waterbenders, most of them elders, and a small bit of life returned to their faces when they saw the flying water. Some had raised their hands to grab for it, but Hama had stopped them with a glare, admonishing, "You can drink when we're safe. You won't be able to swallow in this condition, anyway." They all listened to her.

That just left the mechanical door to deal with. It had slammed shut behind Sokka when he entered the prison room, but he couldn't figure out what had triggered it. There were no buttons or tripwires, not even a latch on the segmented metal of the door itself. His guess was that it had been triggered remotely, but didn't know whether it was to specifically trap him or just a case of bad timing. At least he had been able to identify the mechanism that was keeping him from lifting the door up again.

"There," he had said, pointing up to the metal box that extended from the wall above the doorway.

Master Hama had nodded. "Hold us up, boy. Your sister and I can handle this. Katara, we need to infuse it with water, and then make ice."

"Ice?" Katara had blanched in the red light. "I don't know-"

"We must. It's the only way. Water is changing, but I know you have stubbornness to spare. Just put that into the water, and make it solidify with the strength of your will. Now, follow my motions..." And so Sokka had held them each up as they streamed water from the skins into the air and up to the box. They had pushed, forcing water into the almost invisible seams, and when it was lost from sight, their hands became fists and he could actually hear his sister's teeth grinding together, and then the box gave a little sound of scraping metal.

Sokka had lowered them to rest on the floor for a moment, and bent down to grip the door at its base. He had lifted, and it rolled up with no resistance at all.

Now it was the part of the escape where everyone hurried as fast they could for an exit. The rest of the base seemed to have been evacuated already, so stealth wasn't a worry. Not that most of these Waterbenders were capable of it, barely having the strength to walk at a decent pace. Sokka jogged ahead, scouting the path. Naturally, the Fire Nation wasn't so helpful as to put up signs like, "Convenient exit for escaping prisoners, this way," but they had run those glowing hot lines throughout all the hallways, so Sokka was simply picking the turns that had less of the moisture sappers, where he could feel moving air that didn't make him choke.

He was *almost* beginning to feel optimistic when he turned a corner and saw that the hallway ahead terminated in an open door through which lava-red light was shining. It was the same glow of the Waterbender prison, and his stomach wrenched with the thought that he had just led his charges around in a big circle.

But he checked it out anyway, and so emerged to find a sky of obsidian and a rainfall of ash. Unless
the prison room had been quickly redecorated in the last few minutes, he hadn't traveled in a circle
after all.

Sokka stepped outside and really looked around. He was on a pier of some kind, empty of ships. The
ocean spread before him and the volcano rose up behind him. The volcano was fully erupting,
spewing lava to run down the sides like water from a spring. The flows of molten rock had spared
this particular exit, but Sokka couldn't quite place the location. The Fire Temple wasn't visible, and
the other towers seemed to be in different positions. Plus, the whole island was narrower in some
way, retreating from the ocean rather than trying to encircle it-

And then Sokka realized that he had come out the back door. He was on the outside curve of
Crescent Island.

He brought the Waterbenders out, and every single one of them stood a little taller at the sight of the
ocean. Waving for their attention, he said, "The good news is that we're, like, 98% of the way
through our escape. The bad news is that the last 2% consists of getting on a boat and getting out of
here, and I'm thinking through that problem now." He looked to Katara, but she looked to Master
Hama.

The Master, in turn, looked to the assembled Waterbenders and sighed. "We can try to work together
to make an ice float, but I doubt we can keep it intact for a long voyage."

Sokka brushed the accumulated ash out of his hair. "That won't be a problem. See, I'm here with the
Avatar-"

Katara hissed, "The Avatar?! You're- you're joking."

"No, see, it turned out that he was frozen in ice all this time, and I helped him escape from the Fire
Nation-"

"The Avatar is back and you're friends with him?!"

"I'm trying to explain that, yes, I'm buds with Avatar Aang and he's on this island-"

"Wow," Katara said. "The Avatar. It's like- it's like everything is starting to go right again."

"Katara-"

"All this time, I've been hoping, and-"

"Katara-"

"-and now we're going to be free again-"

"Katara!"

She blinked, and finally came back to the world. Everyone, all the Waterbenders around her, were
staring at her with varying degrees of annoyance and fondness. Katara, for her part, blushed and
returned her attention to Sokka. "Yes?"

"I think I just found our way out of here." Sokka turned and pointed to the ship he had spotted while
his sister had been talking, a ramshackle wooden cargo ship that was bobbing in the waves a distance
from the docks. He had no idea how or why Haru had brought The Tub out over this way, but he
was ready to take advantage of it. He reached into his tool belt and pulled out one of the military
flares he had taken along on this mission. All it took was a simple twist and the hissing red light was
fighting against the glow of the lava. He ran over to the edge of the dock and began waving it above
his head, trying to get Haru to see and come over for a pick up.

Behind him, he heard Master Hama say, "Everyone, we need to help him. I know you're all weak,
but feel the water in the air, and take advantage of the strength in the ocean. Help young Sokka
signal that ship over!"

As Sokka jumped and waved, the water around him began moving against the tide, reaching up and
waving in a manner not unlike arms.

Azula had not relaxed her watch when she boarded the last ship off of Crescent Island.

She had waited as long as she could, staying by the base commander's side as Crescent Island's
remaining staff prepared to leave the installation. She was hoping that Zuko would arrive at the last
minute, dragging a child Airbender with Mai in tow, but as usual, her brother had let her down.
When the last ship was ready to leave, Azula boarded with Commander Huoshan and left Zuko to
make his own way to safety. If he was still alive.

Even so, she remained out on the main deck as the ship pulled away from the island, looking back
and watching to see if her stupid, one-eyed brother made a last-second appearance. It was on that
watch she saw the flare, a bright red light in the midst of the duller red glow of the lava. Azula raised
her small spyglass and looked for the signal. It was definitely a military flare, and a short man was
holding it, waving and jumping on one of the base's rear piers. She couldn't make out who it was, but
she was fairly certain that Zuko wouldn't be jumping so frantically, so clumsily. Then she spotted the
way the water around the docks was moving- the unnatural, profane movement- and realized that she
was seeing enemy action.

But who was the flare meant to be signaling?

A quick scan revealed a run-down civilian ship making its way over to the dock.

Well.

It was possible that rather than catching the Avatar, Zuko might have been captured himself. And if
the Avatar's allies were trying to leave the island, that would be her best opportunity. Of course, that
would mean going back to Crescent Island while its volcano was erupting so that she could confront
a numerically superior force under the command of the Fire Nation's single most dangerous enemy.

But Father had said to protect Zuko, and guide her brother back to the Fire Nation. Azula always did
everything that her father commanded.

And so she left to find Commander Huoshan and request the use of a fast landing craft.

Mai hung from a knife, channeling all her strength into holding onto Aang, and tried to make peace
with dying. The only problem was that she wasn't quite sure how to do something like that.

All she knew was that she hated the whole situation.

If she had only stopped to think, at any single point in the last few months, she might have prevented
this. She could have considered what it really would be like, living and fighting with enemies of the
Fire Nation, seeing them for more than the villains in a history book. She could have wondered about
the sympathy she’d find in rebels and fugitives. She could have sought answers to what would come
after her oh-so-important mission, to what ‘capturing the Avatar’ really meant. She could have
pondered what Zuko would turn into, given all the years and experiences she hadn’t witnessed. And she could have stopped at any point tonight and decided what she wanted to do, what she wanted to achieve, and how to make that happen without betraying anyone.

But she hadn’t. She became a Weapon of the Fire Nation, an unthinking bit of metal that let others direct it and slowly wore away until it broke.

At least she was dying as she lived- being a good, stupid little servant.

Gritting her teeth, Mai began swinging Aang back and forth in the empty air.

She just needed-
- enough momentum-
- to get him to-
- the Temple's wall-
- a little more-
- can't drop him-
- go fix the Fire Nation-
- her knife was slick with sweat-
- little more-
- Tom-Tom-
- more-
- Mom-
- almost-
- Dad-
- now-
- bye-

She let go of Aang and finished her part.

He curved through space, and time seemed to slow for Mai. She watched him float lazily towards the wall even as the fingers she had wrapped around the knife went numb. Aang twisted in midair, looping so that his feet were aimed at the wall instead of his head. She sank as her fingers relaxed out of their curve. Aang's boots struck the temple wall, and his legs bent to absorb the impact as he raised his arms to grab the feet of the statue just above him-

-no, he wasn't grabbing, he was twirling his arms and kicking off from the wall and the ash in the air began circling around Mai as her fingers gave out and she fell and the ash circled faster and the air seemed to almost solidify in both sight and feel to cradle her in the heart of a cyclone and Aang sailed towards her defying gravity and what was he doing and they collided in midair and clutched each other and the dark sky was eclipsed by a massive bundle of white fur and the cyclone around
them contracted and Mai felt herself rising to meet Appa's saddle and she closed her eyes and there was a jolt-

Mai and Aang landed right in the center of the saddle, where they belonged.

She couldn't think, she could only observe the flight back down to the base of the temple. She and Aang clutched each other the whole time, with Momo getting in on it at some point. Aang finally let go when Appa touched down on the shaking ground, but Mai couldn't figure out what she was supposed to do. Aang stood up and walked over to his normal place on Appa's head and said, "We have to find Sokka," and she could only stare at him. He seemed to take that as acceptance, because he sat down beside her and gave his usual, "Appa, yip up," to get them flying again. Mai could only observe as they flew up and around the island, curving in what was probably some kind of search pattern.

She moved her hands to clutch the saddle for stability, and saw that they were shaking.

She couldn't make them stop.

Sokka was almost too late in realizing that The Tub was about to crash into the dock. He turned quickly to Master Hama. "Hey, we need to stop it!"

To her credit, Hama wasted no time. She snapped, "Push," and rallied her strength to stand up and take a Waterbending stance. Katara did likewise, as did some of the other Waterbenders, and with their combined effort, they managed to create a swell of water that slowed The Tub enough to merely bump the dock as it came to a stop.

Sokka caught his sister as she collapsed, but wasn't fast enough to help anyone else. He lowered her to the ground beside them and then went off to see what new disaster had fallen into his lap.

A boarding plank was lowered down from The Tub to the dock, and Sokka let himself groan when Jet stepped down through the floating ash with a sword in each hand and a Blue Spirit mask pushed up to rest on top of his head. "I thought you were supposed to be locked up."

"I was." Jet stopped at the base of the plank, and had the nerve to smirk. "But I couldn't just stand by and let a disaster happen."

"What about Haru and the rest?" Sokka remembered Mai's descriptions of the Blue Spirit's fighting abilities, and the ship's near crash. His stomach sunk. "Are they okay?"

Jet's smirk never left his face. "Most of them are, but I'm sure their limbs are getting sore from being tied up so tightly. Where's the Avatar? And Mai?"

Sokka wanted to dash forward, grab Jet, and throw him into the ocean to drown, but he had a feeling that even with Suki's training, he was more likely to be the one taking a dip. He bit back a sigh and said, "I don't know. We got separated, and I've been busy finding my sister and freeing my tribe's Waterbenders. Let's get them aboard the ship and then we can-"

"No."

"What?"

Jet frowned, and raised his swords. "Nothing against you, Sokka, but my priority is the Avatar. No one gets on this ship until the Avatar is safely located or confirmed dead."
"Oh, come on!" Sokka took a step forward, but then Jet angled the swords so that they were pointed forward. "I have almost thirty Waterbenders of the Southern Water Tribe over there, and if you don't want them to throw the whole ocean at you, you'll get out of our way!"

"Those Waterbenders?" Jet nodded over to where they were waiting, and Sokka turned to find another Blue Spirit- this one shorter, wearing the mask properly- holding swords on guard against them. The Waterbenders themselves were sitting on the dock, obviously still exhausted, but Katara, Master Hama, and a few others at least had enough strength to glare at the Blue Spirit threatening them.

That one must have jumped ashore while Sokka was distracted. He turned back to Jet. "You are the worst ally I've ever had claim to be on my side."

"Sorry, but we all have to do what we have to do."

Sokka tensed, and began analyzing possibilities. Maybe if was sneaky enough, he could surprise Jet with a jump and quickly jam a knife between the vaunted Blue Spirit’s ribs. He might wind up skewered on a sword, but at least then Katar would have a chance to get aboard the ship, if she could deal with the other Blue Spirit (Smellerbee, probably) and Jet was telling the truth about Haru only being captured-

The sound of a motor interrupted Sokka's thoughts. He turned to follow the sound, and found a Fire Navy speedboat approaching the dock from the west. Even while Sokka was squinting to see who was aboard, Jet was lowering his swords and saying, "Change of plans. You get your friends aboard, and I'll deal with this."

"Wait, what?"

"Smellerbee, we're the rearguard!"

Sokka shook his head and ran back to his sister. All these intrigues were either going to kill him or drive him insane, and he couldn't decide which he preferred.

Stealth, unfortunately, was not an option, and so Azula was forced to commit to a frontal assault.

Still, she was very good at frontal assaults.

She gunned the speedboat as fast as it could go towards the dock, and then abandoned the controls and jumped over the windshield to land on the bow. The engine cut out without her hand on the tiller, but it still had plenty of momentum, and hadn't appreciably slowed by the time Azula was making a running leap off the bow's tip with a blast of fire from her feet.

Her cloak fell from her shoulders as she arced through the air towards the pier.

She landed in a roll and was under attack by a swordsman in a blue goblin mask before she had even come to a stop. He swung both his weapons straight at her head, but she transitioned her roll into a crouch and brought her arms up defensively. She angled them very precisely to deflect the blades with the vambraces on her forearms at an angle that wouldn't risk the swords chopping straight through the metal. As the swordsman tried to bring his weapons back in line, she snapped a pair of punches out that launched blue fireballs straight at her enemy, and it was a testament to his speed that he threw himself out of the flame's path in time.

Azula was upright and about to press her advantage when another, shorter attacker in a blue goblin mask- ah, Azula recognized it now as a Blue Spirit opera mask- came in with twin swords swinging.
This attacker was fast, too, fast enough to keep Azula on the defensive- but not fast enough to break through her guard. The edges of the Blue Spirit's sword tasted only air and the bits of armor that Azula used for calculated deflections.

Even the return of the other Blue Spirit was only enough to make Azula reset her analysis of the attack patterns. She danced between her two enemies, splitting her attention not between them, but between her defensive maneuvering and the beginning of an attack plan. Each step, each stab, each slice, and swing and jump and retreat and twirl was another move in the game that was this battle.

Azula had tried Pai Sho years ago, and found it a quaint way for children to learn strategy.

It was much more fun to play for real stakes.

Sokka only got one good look at the armored Firebender attacker- just long enough to recognize the face of the young inspector lady he had run into before- before her battle with the Blue Spirits was joined and she was in constant blurring motion. Jet and Smellerbee were attacking with a fury that Sokka could definitely believe was capable of overcoming even a warrior of Mai's ability, but all it was accomplishing now was keeping the Inspector too busy to actually set anyone on fire. That was fine with him, because it let him focus on getting the Waterbenders out of here. He dragged them two at a time up the plank, dumping each pair on the deck of The Tub with a regretful lack of gentleness before running back for the next duo. Katara and Master Hama had been the first aboard, their latest bout of Bending leaving them too tired to even stand unaided.

He was carrying the last three Waterbenders up the plank when Smellerbee died.

Sokka had been stealing glances over at the battle, and saw that the two Blue Spirits had managed to get the Inspector between them. She was still avoiding their blades, but then Jet and Smellerbee struck in a coordinated attack that they must have practiced, both of them whirling simultaneously with swords extended to precisely deliver alternating chops at the target's head and feet. With both Blue Spirits attacking like that at once, anyone between them should have been cut into pieces.

And yet as Sokka supported the Waterbenders draped over him, he saw the Inspector jump. It wasn't a high jump, or a long jump. Instead, she had put all her momentum into a spin that left her twirling completely horizontally- Smellerbee at her head and Jet at her feet- as the Blue Spirits' swords sliced the air above and below her.

Sokka found himself halting in shock at the sight of it.

Then- even through all the spinning the Inspector was doing- Sokka caught a blur of motion past her head and then the air in around the shorter Blue Spirit exploded into blue flame.

Smellerbee screamed and went down writhing.

Sokka nearly dropped his Waterbenders.

Jet roared and stabbed in at the Inspector as she landed in a wide crouch, but it was like she expecting his exact reaction. She dodged the wild attacks easily.

Sokka missed the next part because he was setting down the three Waterbenders on the deck of The Tub, but when he hurried back to the plank- pulling his knives out as he did so- he saw the Inspector grab Jet's arms near the wrists, twist him so that he dropped his swords, and then somehow lift a leg high enough to kick the Blue Spirit mask right off his face. He went down hard and didn't get back up.
Then she turned and her eyes were looking right at Sokka.

He skidded to a stop, doing some quick math regarding the Inspector's fighting ability versus two swordfighters who could beat Mai up multiplied by the easy win and subtracted from his chances of surviving the next few minutes. Then he did some more math for how quickly he could heat up the ship's boiler, and found that the numbers were indeed not only against him, but wearing red and throwing in completely with the Inspector.

He unhooked the plank and kicked it into the water, and then hurried back over where Katara and Master Hama were resting. "I need you to push the ship out to sea now now now now NOW NOW NOW NOW!!"

To their credit, they didn't ask why. Master Hama tried to stand up, but her legs gave out, and only Sokka's quick intervention saved her from a crash. She mumbled, "Haven't worked this hard since my hair was black."

Sokka looked over to his sister.

Katara stared back with wide eyes. She bit her lip, and tried to stand. Her legs trembled and Sokka reached over to support her, but she didn't stop trying. She forced herself to her feet, and looked over to the prow of the ship.

Blue flames—contrasting icily with the red glow from all the lava light—were licking at the bulwark, steadily turning the treated wood to ash, and the heat that was wafting over from them indicated that Sokka was only seeing a small sample of what the Firebender was doing. Soon enough, the planks would catch fire, and then the whole ship would become a death trap.

Katara raised shaking arms.

It was both amazing and terrifying to be out of the Waterbender prison.

Katara had spent the last ten years in a glowing hot room, trapped in a cage just barely big enough to pace across. It had been ten years of dryness, of discomfort, or dreaming of the death of her parents and the way she was shipped half a world away from her Tribe. Master Hama had been her only source of sanity, guiding and comforting her, advising her to exercise as much as she could in the cramped space, teaching as much Waterbending as could be demonstrated across separate cages and without any actual water. It was Master Hama who had kept Katara's hope alive, that if they remained strong, someday they could strike back at their captors.

And that opportunity had walked into Katara's life today in the form of her brother. He was like nothing she had expected, but she loved him all the more for that. He was no fantasy of a big brother, he was Sokka, no matter how much older or taller, no matter how deep his voice. And now he was asking her for help.

Katara's other fantasies were of the day she could escape, could taste and feel water in the air again, could look up at a sky with a bright shining sun. Yet here she was, escaping in the night, with the sky blotted out by a cloud of ash that stretched across the horizon, a sky that for all its dullness was still intimidating in how big and wide it was. After a decade of being locked in an underground room, the sky itself made Katara nervous.

And her body just wasn't ready to be a warrior. Despite her exercise, it was still weak. Despite the ocean around her, it was still dry. Despite the urgency of the situation, it was still weary. It was all Katara could do to stand up on the deck of Sokka's ship.
But there was one way this escape lived up to all of Katara's fantasies.

There was hope.

She could feel the weight of the ocean even in the glow of the lava. She could feel the pull of the moon even through the sky of ash.

She had come to the water, and it was ready for her.

She raised her shaking arms, and the waves rose with her. She inhaled deeply, and felt the full potential of the ocean gathering in her heart. She brought her hands in front of her, and felt that energy flow along with the motion.

She directed it between the ship and the dock. Then she pushed.

Hard.

The motion was too much for her, rocking her off her weak legs, but the motion was real, and Sokka was shouting about they were getting away, and she had done it, and Katara smiled in relief. In her heart she thanked the Moon and Ocean Spirits, thanked Master Hama, thanked the Avatar, thanked Destiny.

Then she went to sleep.

Whatever Katara had done, the ocean between the ship and the pier exploded with a force that quenched the blue flames and pushed the ship a distance from the docks. The waves took it from there, the same waves generated by the volcano's constant shaking, carrying The Tub away from Crescent Island and into open waters.

Sokka didn't think of himself as a particularly excitable guy, but he help jumping up and down on the deck and letting out a, "YEEEEEAAAAAAAH!!"

When he got control of himself, he looked back at the pier and the Inspector.

She was standing in some kind of wide-legged stance, and was moving her arms in circle motions that seemed to be raising visible glowing electrical energy from the ground.

Bwah?

The Inspector looked up, her gaze meeting his, the swirl of lightning framing her sharp-featured face. Sokka thought quickly. He needed range, and weight that would bridge the distance while building enough momentum to actually do some damage, and he needed them now. He reached into his tool belt, felt around for something meeting those parameters, and pulled out the solid gold encryption cog that the Blue Spirit- Jet- had taken from Mai.

Then he beaned it at the Inspector.

He was no knife-thrower like Mai, no Boomerang-slinger like the Water Tribe warriors of old, but the reason humanity had risen from the days of worshipping spirit monsters was because it was actually pretty good at throwing rocks at things. The cog arced through the air and conked the Inspector right on the head. She fell, and her electric attack-thingy fizzled with a loud pop.

Sokka let out a heavy sigh of relief that nearly deflated him, and leaned away from the bulwark. The Tub was still drifting out to deeper waters, but he needed to get the boiler going if they were going to
get to safety, and for that he needed to see who of the crew was left after Jet's betrayal, and then there was the matter of finding Aang and Mai if they were still alive.

He looked up and spotted a white flying thing contrasting against the black sky. As he used another flare from his tool belt to guide Aang and Appa down to the ship, he thought that maybe he was a little lucky after all.

Then Aang and Mai hopped down from Appa’s saddle, and when he saw the expressions on their faces, he realized that any luck he had was quite limited, indeed.

By the time Azula recovered from her Lightningbending misfire, the rebel ship was gone.

That was annoying.

And yet, it was not entirely a failure. She had determined that Zuko was not present, which was the most important part. Yes, it wasn’t good that the Waterbender prisoners were now back in the wild, but the Fire Nation controlled the whole world, so either they would be dealt with eventually, or they would have to hide for the rest of their lives. The Avatar was already identified, so it didn’t matter whether Waterbenders still existed, and Azula did not share most of her nation's prejudice against other elements. While Fire was undoubtedly superior, any Bender could serve with loyalty and effectiveness.

Azula got to her feet, and looked around. The lava flow from the volcano had increased, and was now eating away at the areas above the prison base. Then there were her opponents, the warriors in the Blue Spirit masks, still lying on the pier. One was dead, while the other was still out from the blow to his head. Azula almost left him to die in the volcano’s final eruptions, but then changed her mind. Even enemies and prisoners could serve the Fire Nation.

Out of the edge of her vision, she caught one last thing, a small glitter on the pier near where she had woken up. It proved to be the golden object that the rebel had thrown at her head, and she was about to kick it in to the water when she realized exactly what it was: an encryption cog. Golden. With the symbol of the Fire Nation carved on it.

She had a sinking feeling that she knew who exactly had issued it, who had lost it. That was disappointing.

She took the cog, dragged the bodies of her living and dead opponents to the motorboat, and left Crescent Island behind forever.

Mai stood off to the side while Sokka introduced Aang to the Waterbenders. To his sister, a thin and haggard thing. She waited by Appa- almost like she was under the sky bison’s guard- as Aang and Sokka then went looking for The Tub's crew. She waited when they came on deck with Haru, and waited while they brought up Chong and Wong’s bodies for a burial at sea. She waited while the rest of the crew got the boiler and engine running, and the Waterbenders were made comfortable in the cargo bay. She waited as Crescent Island disappeared on the horizon.

She waited with her hands hidden in her sleeves for everyone to have the time to deal with her.

To deal with the traitor.

When they gathered around her, their faces were grim. Aang led the way, followed by Sokka and Haru. He had told them, then.
Mai stood with Appa at her back and waited.

Sokka was the first to speak. "I knew it! I knew it, but you gave me those knives and saved me those times and so I- Argh!" He turned away from her and walked in a tight little circle. "Jet was right. Everyone from the Fire Nation is the same."

Haru scowled at the mention of Jet's name, but kept his gaze on Mai. "We can lock her up. Jet escaped because he had help, but no one will let her out of the smuggling compartment."

Sokka stopped and glared at her, and when he spoke, it was with a voice that growled not unlike Zuko’s: "We could just throw her overboard now."

"No," Aang said immediately.

"Well, then, we can- I don't know, maybe maroon her on an island somewhere? Or take her to someone who will lock her up? Haru, does your village have a prison?"

Haru shook his head. "But we do have contacts. I'm sure something can be arranged."

Mai looked over to Aang, and he met her eyes briefly before saying, "Why do we have to lock her up?"

Sokka stomped over so that he could point right in her face, and it took Mai's full self-control not to flinch from his finger. "She knows all about us! She knows about Aang and Appa and me and Katara and- and the Tribe, and Haru and the village, and- and everything!" Aang didn't respond immediately, so Sokka continued, "Look, I know you want to like her, but you said it yourself. She betrayed us so that she could help her one-eyed friend."

Finally, Mai stepped around his pointing finger, still keeping her own hands in her sleeves. "Do I get a say?"

Sokka whipped his head around to glare at her. "No."

"I want to help you. I see what you've been talking about with the Fire Nation having gone wrong."

"Good for you." Sokka finally lowered his finger. "But you used my sister to set a trap for us. They could have killed her before we even got there, because of you."

Mai blinked. That hadn't even occurred to her. Zuko wouldn't- or maybe- "I- I didn't think about that. My- I thought my 'friend' was better than that. And- and he didn't- your sister was okay, right?"

Sokka only laughed.

Aang said, "That's the problem. You didn't think about anything. You just went along with everything you were told to do. And it almost killed us all. You almost made me kill us all."

Behind her, Appa let out a low groan.

Mai could only nod, imagining Zuko’s face twisted in fury, the boy she knew gone. "I know. That's what I want to fix. Me not thinking, and everyone else back home not thinking. I was always taught that the Avatar was our enemy and wanted to destroy us. But what you've been saying- us winning the war wasn't really winning. We've been hurting others, and hurting ourselves. We need to be- to be stopped from winning more." Aang's eyebrows rose, but Haru and Sokka were still glaring. She wanted to say something that would soothe them, but it couldn't be lies; in fact, she needed to find a truth that was true enough to move them. She had to share something of herself.
She hated that.

Nevertheless, she took a breath and said, "My friend died at the end of the war. Her name was Ty Lee. She ran away to join the circus, a circus in the colonies. When Sozin's Comet returned, the Fire Nation made this big offensive against the holdouts in the Earth Kingdom, letting the Firebenders cut loose. I've seen how entire cities are just-" Mai had to stop and take a deep breath. "They're ash now. Forests became desert ashlands, and- and my friend's circus was caught in that. They were part of a huge caravan moving through an unlucky bit of landscape. The three survivors confirmed it. And Ty Lee wasn't one of those survivors." Mai blinked her way through how it felt to say that. "I decided it was her fault for running away. Just like it was everyone else's fault for resisting the Fire Nation. But that's not how it is, is it? It's not Sokka's sister's fault. Or the Air Nomads. It's our fault. My fault. I want to do something about it."

It was quiet, then. Haru had turned away, but Aang and Sokka were looking at each other, communicating silently, although their faces gave nothing away to Mai.

She waited. She had done what she could. There was nothing left to do but wait.

Then a new voice said, "I believe her."

Mai looked up, and saw Sokka's sister approaching across the deck. She was walking slowly, shakily, but with purpose. Her vivid blue eyes- tinged slightly with the red of burst blood vessels- were locked on Mai.

Her name, Mai recalled, was Katara.

Sokka said, "Oh, no. Mai's a liar, and-"

"Sokka, it doesn't matter. She's right. And we don't ever have to be friends with her, but we can't kill everyone in the entire Fire Nation. The only way we can win is if we show them the right way, and we can't do that if we don't believe it's possible. I believe it, and I believe her." She turned to Aang and dipped her head. "Avatar. Do you think she'll betray us? Again?"

Aang took a heavy breath and said, "No. She betrayed the Fire Nation, and tried to die saving me."

Katara turned to Sokka. "Did she really save your life?"

Sokka grumbled, but then he looked at the knives in his belt, the knives Mai had given him back on the trip to the Southern Air Temple, and said, "Kind of."

Katara nodded. "Then that's enough for me." She swayed, and her eyes went up to the sky before she looked down again with something like a flinch. "I'm going below decks again."

Sokka moved to help her, but before they left, he looked over at Mai with one last glare. "I'll be watching you."

Mai said nothing. Being watched might even be a relief.

Haru left shortly after that, and she was alone with Aang. And Appa and Momo.

She kept her face blank, and could only think to say, "Thanks. You don't have to forgive me, but I appreciate this opportunity."

Aang looked back with eyes that were far too steady to be twelve years old. "I forgave you back on the island. That's how I got my Airbending back. But forgiving you doesn't mean we can still be
friends. It just means we can work together to fix things."

He walked away, leaving her with Appa and Momo. Then the sky bison snorted, and shuffled off with the lemur on his back to the other side of the boat.

Mai was left standing alone in the prow, and finally took her hands out of her sleeves. They were still shaking.

There was a tinge of blue at the edge of the horizon when Zuko was finally rescued.

He had been swimming all night, floating on the wooden crossbeam, his focus divided evenly between staying alive and holding onto the Avatar's staff. In the early dawn, the searchlight of an assault boat washed over him, and soon the craft itself settled in front of him. Soldiers of the Homeland pulled him aboard. He sat under guard at the ship's stern, until finally the commanding officer arrived. Zuko looked up at the man, and had to bite back a curse. It was Commander Zhao.

Zhao examined him for a long moment, and then broke out in the smirk that Zuko hated so much. "Prince Zuko! I almost didn't recognize you. The last time I saw you, you had two eyes. But at least you inherited your looks from your father, if nothing else."

Zuko said nothing.

Zhao paced as he continued talking. "How interesting to find you here, in violation of your banishment. Here, where despite my valiant efforts, the Avatar managed to destroy one of the Fire Nation's most important prisons and escape." One of the guards handed him the Avatar's staff, taken from Zuko's float. "How sloppy of you, Prince Zuko, to provide evidence of your meddling. One could conclude that it was your specific interference that caused this whole disaster." He handed the staff back, and then spun to face Zuko directly. "For breaking your banishment, and under suspicion of sabotaging my efforts to apprehend enemies of the Fire Nation, I hereby place you under arrest."

Zuko said nothing. He had no grounds to call for an Agni Kai, and right now he was wet and sore and tired and completely incapable of making any escape attempt.

He would just have to endure.

But he still growled as Zhao's subordinates clasped chains around his wrists.

Aang watched the sun rise.

It was almost possible to believe that everything had worked out. He had survived the Fire Nation's attempts to kill or capture him, had survived even the dangers of his own emotions and Avatar Spirit. Sokka had survived as well, and finally freed his sister; Katara was everything her brother had said, and all the other freed Waterbenders were a happy bonus to the whole endeavor.

Of course, there were losses. Two of Haru's crew had died when Jet escaped, and Jet himself might have lost his life against that Inspector who Sokka had described. Smellerbee was definitely dead, according to the tale. Aang had complicated feelings about that, because it was too hard to tell if the Blue Spirit had truly been an ally. Jet had nearly killed Sokka back on that island, but then saved his life later. Jet had hunted Mai, but she-

Well. That was the other loss. The Mai who Aang had known had never truly existed.

In her place was a girl who had nevertheless saved Aang's life.
Before his sleep in the ice, the world hadn't been like this. Had the world changed, then, or had Aang merely been made to see it in new ways? And if he was having this much trouble with one girl, how could he fix the world, even with her help? All he knew was that he had to try, and that he had a long journey ahead of him.

But as the ship left behind the clouds of ash, the sun was rising ahead.

That was something.

**END OF ACT 1: Come to the Water**

**TO BE CONTINUED**
"Act 2: Fallen to Earth" begins as everyone faces a new dawn, and strange events call our heroes back into action.

In Aang's dreams, he was called by a voice from far away, and couldn't respond.

Waking up from those dreams was always difficult. The moment of transition was too quick, a disorienting twist from the biting smell of frozen seawater to the musky scent of the stable where he and Appa had been spending their nights. As always, Aang returned to consciousness on the sky bison's tail to find Momo still sleeping on his chest, and today the sun was shining brightly in through the stable's windows. He could have moved into a hut, just like Sokka and Katara- and Mai- but he preferred to stay with Appa. Besides, couldn't stay here for very long, and as an Air Nomad, he knew how to live without a home.

Aang sat up, prompting Momo to shake himself awake and bound off to go hunt some for breakfast. With the lemur gone, he jumped to his feet and summoned a wind to carry him out of Appa’s pen and over to the stable door. As always, Aang didn't bother thinking much on the dreams because they were probably, as Sokka had said, "psychological manifestations of how messed up our lives are," and Aang didn’t like to spend time worrying about it.

Besides, he had an early Waterbending lesson this morning, and Master Hama got cranky when he was late.

He exited the stable into the beautiful morning sun, thanks to the massive metal reflectors mounted high up on the ravine's walls. The Earthbender fugitives who had established this village had been careful to hide deep in the mountains, away from any other settlements, with the only entrance to the ravine being a secret passage in an old abandoned Earth Temple where even the most thorough hunters would never find it without knowing where to look. The Earthbenders' cleverness hadn't been limited to hiding places, either, as they had outfitted their home for both comfort and something close to self-sufficiency. The metal reflectors brought sunlight down to nourish the vertical farms etched into the ravine's walls. Even now, people were working those farms, tending and watering the various vegetables and melons, but they weren't the only people greeting the dawn, here. Everyone in the village worked hard to keep the community alive- some farmed, others practiced trades, and a few even worked as guards and scouts to make sure the village stayed safe and hidden.

Aang frowned at that thought. Jet had been one of those guards, but based on what Sokka had said happened at Crescent Island, Jet's fate and true allegiances were still a mystery.

As Aang walked the lanes of packed earth, he also saw the newer arrivals starting their own jobs. The men and women freed from the Fire Nation's prison on Crescent Island were moving slowly throughout the whole village, some in the lanes and others on the suspended walkways above. Most of them had hair that was completely given over to whites and grays, but all of them were moving in Waterbending forms, flowing gestures that raised the dew off of various surfaces and into the air for collection. While the Earthbenders of the village had brought water to their home by way of various
engineering solutions, dew would be purer than what came through the makeshift aqueducts, requiring no purification, and the work was good exercise for Waterbenders who had spent decades unable to commune with their element.

Earthbenders and Waterbenders were both fugitives from the Fire Nation, and now worked together to create a happy new life. Aang wished that he could restore their proper homes to them, but until he found a way, seeing this kind of cooperation lightened his heart.

Aang found Master Hama and Katara waiting for him at the eastern edge of the village, where a sparring circle was maintained by the villagers. Katara was doing some warm-up stretches and, as usual, was wearing a wide rice hat. Aang ran over and began his own warm-up without prompting, earning an approving nod from Master Hama. She cleared her throat and said, "I wanted to try something new today, something that will require us all to work together. I got the idea while back..." Her wrinkled face grew tight. "...back when I first arrived at that prison. When I saw how hard the Fire Nation was working to burn all the moisture out of the air, I wondered what they were afraid of, and so they taught me about a weapon I never knew I had before." She was silent for a moment after that, and then with a deep exhalation, she relaxed her body into a Waterbending stance. "Moisture in the air should be just as real to a Waterbender as the ocean, but it's scattered so that we can't even see it. We need to feel it, and draw the tiny parts together. Come, move through your drills, but focus on feeling the water in the air around you."

Aang traded glances with Katara, and then they both began their drills. Aang had only begun learning the art since he had brought the freed Waterbenders- all of them originally from the Southern Water Tribe before they were taken by the Fire Nation- to the Earthbender village. Even Katara, the strongest among them, had needed time to heal and build up strength before true lessons could begin, but Master Hama was dedicated to her craft, and even before she could provide any worthwhile demonstrations, she had been able to talk Aang through the basics. She was practiced at it, after all, having talked Katara through the same lessons back in the prison without even the benefit of water itself.

And so Aang and Katara's movements were equally fluid as they followed their Sifu's instructions.

Aang liked Waterbending, and found it similar to Airbending. Both arts were based on continuous motion, with forms that circled. There were differences, of course- Waterbending was more focused on building power from momentum- but Aang found that even the divergences had a sense of familiarity to them. Feeling the Water was different than feeling the Air, but only as much as the differences between talking to two different friends. He sensed the water in the air as he moved, so light as to be almost invisible.

"Together now," Master Hama whispered, changing the pattern of her motions so that her hands pushed out towards her students.

Aang closed his eyes and copied her movements, but angled his pushing hands out back towards her. Beside him, Katara did the same, so that they were all pushing towards a common center. The water- more of a mist of such lightness that it was almost a dream- did not so much resist their efforts as fail to find purchase on them, but the three continued their motions, and Aang kept his mental and emotional reach extended towards the skittish element, the same as he had done as a child learning to make the air dance to his will.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw a small globe of the clearest water hovering lightly at the center of their circle. He gave a little laugh at the sight, and he heard Katara gasp beside him.

"That's right, children." Hama's voice was warm, and Aang turned to see her smiling the brightest she ever had. "Water is life, and life is everywhere. Maybe someday we'll each be able to do this
entirely on our own."

Aang was amazed at the thought, be he had no desire to hurry to that goal. He liked working with his friends. He liked needing people.

*Usually.*

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Mai held up the last coins of her personal fortune. "How many will this get me?" The silverish metal, worth much less than true silver, gleamed dully in the sunlight.

The blacksmith motioned to the knives laid out on the blanket in front of him. "Three of the small ones, or one big one and one small one. If you don't like any of these, I have more in my workshop."

Mai glanced at the forge behind the man, and then to the knives on display in front of her. She didn't like any of the weapons, but she doubted there were any Lui Shui blades hiding nearby. "These are fine, but maybe you've spent so long working with steel that you've forgotten what silver looks like. I could outfit myself with a full set of throwing knives for this much. I could buy enough of these whittlers to pile them up and sleep on them," she exaggerated.

"Whittlers?" The blacksmith held a hand to his chest where Mai must have stabbed him without noticing, given the extreme expression on his face. "Whittlers? How dare you? These are sturdy, solid blades. You can stake your life on them! You could stab over a hundred filthy Fire Nation dogs with one, and the blade would be as sharp as the day it was made. You could throw one a thousand times at the heads of debased Fire Nation conquerors, and it wouldn't even be rattling in the handle. You could dash them against any stone in the Earth, and the stone would weep and beg for mercy! That's why they call me Weepy Lee."

Mai quirked her favorite eyebrow at Weepy Lee. "I'd need a thousand tries to hit anything with these," she lied. "They're not weighted for throwing. Since we both know that, let's try again: how many did you say these coins could get me?"

Lee shook his head. "Fine, straight talk? Your coins are worth coppers, here. We're a hidden village in mountains that only Earthbenders can navigate, and no one comes here with more than the clothes on their back. What am I going to do with silver coins? If you had something I repurpose, then we'd be in a position to bargain."

"Save the coins and take them with you on a shopping run to one of the cities in the region. I know your people do that. Haru told me."

"We don't go that often, and it's not like we can take a full caravan in and out of our secret village, up and down the mountains. It will take me years to spend the value of those coins. If you had something I repurpose, then we'd be in a position to bargain."

"Save the coins and take them with you on a shopping run to one of the cities in the region. I know your people do that."

"It will take me years to believe that load of ash, unless you're buying one child's top per trip." Mai hoped she was doing this 'haggling' thing right. Back in the Fire Nation, her shopping experience consisted of taking whatever she wanted and then letting her father or Azula pay. Money had been one of those things that constantly renewed itself, like leaves on trees. Now, she was spending the last coins to her name; she was down to more or less two complete sets of throwing weapons, and at the rate she was going through them, she was actually considering parting with her funds if this moron would let her have six of his small unbalanced knives. The thought crossed her mind that Aang or Sokka might be able to haggle a better deal with Weepy Lee, but she just as quickly dismissed the possibility. Maybe they would have helped her before, but now she could hardly imagine them putting any effort into increasing her odds of survival. "Double the offer, and use these
coins to buy yourself a bottle of Salang wine on the next shopping trip."

Weepy Lee scratched his bearded chin. "Tempting, but I can't fully double the offer, as there's a Crimson tax on all my goods."

"Crimson tax?"

"Yes. The amount added to all prices when I sell to anyone wearing red." He motioned at Mai, waving in particular towards her long, concealing sleeves. They were, of course, as vividly red as Mai could get them without servants to do the washing for her. "Nothing personal. Certainly, if it were the Avatar purchasing these weapons for someone, I wouldn't worry unduly about whether the giftee in question wears red, but the trauma of having to see the color myself, you see..."

Mai said nothing for a long moment. Lee's eyebrows rose as he waited to see if she would play the game. Finally, she held her coins up again. "Three coins for a sword. Double-edged, straight blade."

"A sword?"

"Surely you have one. The people here don't just whittle with their blades."

"We're mostly Earthbenders, but I like to keep my skills sharp, so to speak. I couldn't give you one of my best, but for a molded blade..."

Mai nodded. "Three coins for a sword." Then, on impulse, she added, "And a clean green robe." The hand she was using to hold up the coins started to shake, but she focused hard, and was able to make it stop.

Lee didn't seem to have noticed. "Do I look like a tailor?"

"No, you look like a blacksmith who can double as a purchasing agent in a pinch. And this way, you'd be saving the Avatar himself from the trauma of having to see my red clothes." Mai quirked her favorite eyebrow again, and flipped one of the coins into the air to catch it with her other hand right at the apex. "Deal?"

Weepy Lee looked at her, and then looked at the coins.

There was no sense of time in Zuko's cell.

There were no windows, no way to tell the position of the sun above Zhao's ship. The brig door was always bolted, and food was delivered through a slit that could be unlocked at the bottom of the otherwise solid door. Even bathroom needs were handled by a faucet and drain in the corner. No guards came into his cell, and he couldn't even tell if his meals were delivered regularly. At first, he had been able get a vague impression of time from the motion of the waves, but after a while, he had grown too used to that, and it almost disappeared into his perceptions.

The only solid unit of measurement he had was the beating of his heart.

It was his heart that he focused on, that he made the center of his meditations. It was his heart that fed his Qi, his Inner Fire- his heart that reminded him that he was alive, and his heart that held the reason for enduring.

So he had no idea how much time had passed from when Zhao had first captured him on Crescent Island when one day the door slammed open, startling him out of his meditation, and a trio of soldiers dragged him out of the brig. They shoved and marched him down the halls of Zhao's ship, setting the
chains on his arms clanking. Zuko was surprised when he realized that his path was leading up to the ship's main deck, and he barely had time to squint his sole remaining eye before it was seared by the brightness of the daylight. After so long away from the sun, it was punishing him for his absence, as was only proper.

Zuko blinked until he could make out his surroundings. Through the tears, it looked like the ship was docked at one of the outposts scattered throughout the Outer Islands of the Homeland, where prisoners could be dropped off from high seas adventures and supplies replaced. He saw no other settlements besides the navy base on the small atoll, so he couldn't even guess his exact location.

Zhao was waiting for him amidships. "Well, Prince Zuko, I trust you've enjoyed your accommodations here, but it's time for you to stop living like a rat in my hold."

The heat in Zuko's heart flared, but the chains slowed him as he tried to move forward, and the guards grabbed him before he could do what Zhao so righteously deserved. "You won't get away with this, Zhao! I am a Prince of the Fire Nation!"

"An exiled prince who broke the terms of his banishment to chase the Avatar, and failed. The son of a father who couldn't win the Fire Lord's favor, even with Admiral Iroh practically in active rebellion," Zhao sneered. "You're nothing but a pawn, Prince Zuko, and with the Avatar nowhere to be found, I intend to become a proper player." He waved and started walking towards the gangplank, while Zuko's guards forced him to follow.

What did Zhao mean by 'a proper player?' What were his intentions now?

Another set of guards with a shackled prisoner fell in behind Zuko's group as they moved down the gangplank. He still couldn't get a good look through the glare of the sunlight, but he thought he caught a glimpse of a girl about Azula's age before the view was cut off by her guards.

A woman bearing the command markings of a base administrator met Zhao at the bottom of the gangplank. "Just two prisoners, sir?"

"Yes. Keep them away from the main population. I'll wire when I need them." The administrator bowed, and Zhao gave a simple nod before turning and heading back up the gangplank.

Zuko, however, was shoved along towards the outpost's prison building. It seemed that he would be staying for a while. It was with that thought that a bag was yanked over his head.

Zuko stumbled and thought to fight back, but a shove at his back forced him to focus on keeping his balance, and he quickly realized that both breathing and seeing weren't really a problem. The bag was thin burlap, and the sunlight easily passed through the material. So the intent was not so much to blind Zuko as to hide his face, then.

He and the other prisoner were marched into the prison, past bar-lined halls where pirates and seafaring rebels were grouped in large cells together. The prisoners jeered and hollered as Zuko's group moved past them, but it didn't seem that any of them were getting violent. The guards and the administrator ignored the clamor completely.

Finally, Zuko was led into a section that was much quieter and darker. He moved his head back and forth, trying to tease out details of his surroundings through the burlap as his chains were unlocked, but before he could make anything out, he was shoved hard and sent tumbling until he smacked shoulder-first into a wall. There was a clang of bars behind him, and by the time Zuko reached up and ripped the burlap off his head, he was secured in his cell.
At least this time, he wasn't completely cut off from the world. The wall he had smacked into had a barred window that let in the day and the smell of the sea, while the wall behind him was missing completely, replaced by a line of thick metal bars. As the guards and administrator moved away, Zuko could also see that he was not alone. There was another cell opposite him, also secured by an open collection of bars, and the other prisoner was crouched inside.

He had been right. It was a teenage girl, auburn-haired, and she was staring back with blue eyes. Once they were alone, cut off from the rest of the prison by the closing of a metal door, she said, "Prince Zuko, huh? Looks like we're both in trouble with Zhao."

"Who are you?"

"Suki. Suki of Kyoshi Island." She got up and walked over to clutch the bars of her cell, and gave a hard smile. "So, Your Highness, how do you feel about the idea that the enemy of your enemy is your friend?"

Zuko stepped forward, stopping just short of the bars that imprisoned him. "That depends on how many enemies are surrounding me."

Katara didn't recognize Mai at first, but the scowl gave it away.

Katara had finished up her Waterbending lesson with Master Hama and Avatar Aang, and as was usual, she finished with her muscles feeling sore and weary. She- all of the Southern Waterbenders, really- had been gaining in health since Sokka and the Avatar had saved them from the Fire Nation, but only Katara was pushing to get herself into fighting shape. It wouldn't have been possible without the healing arts that Old Anibik had learned as a girl before she was sent to Crescent Island, with everyone receiving regular treatments until they built their strength up.

Katara, though, was undertaking a more rigorous regimen. She was learning how to fight from Master Hama, and after every lesson, she was giving herself extra healing treatments using some of Anibik's lessons. She was building up muscle quickly, and growing a strength in her limbs that felt wonderful. Katara would never let herself be taken again, and she would protect her family. Sokka had done his part in finding her, and now she would ensure that he wouldn't suffer the same fate as their parents. She would also protect the Avatar as he saved the world. And she would build herself up until she could look at the sky without flinching.

And so Katara had gone, after her Waterbending lesson, to one of the pools in which the Earthbender village collected water from their aqueducts for easy access. At certain hours of the day, the villagers would gather to talk and bring water back to their homes for washing and cooking, but at this moment, the only person Katara found there was Mai. She wasn't wearing any red, but rather a long-sleeved green robe beneath one of the black smocks she favored, and was posing in front of the pool, looking down at her own reflection. While Katara watched, Mai kicked out, revealing black slacks underneath the green robe, and then huddled into herself and folded her gloved hands in her sleeves, looking for all the world like an Earth Kingdom peasant. Mai sighed and slumped out of the pose, then tugged at her hair, lifting the short tails and holding the ends as though they were pinned above her ears, and tilting her head from side to side as she gazed at her reflection in the pool.

Then Mai noticed Katara standing there, and turned in a swirl of green robes.

Katara smiled. "Hi. That's a new look for you."

"Yes." Mai's face betrayed no expression, and her eyes were steady.
Katara looked away first. "Well, good for you." She moved over to the pool, making sure to give Mai some space, and crouched at the edge of the water. Katara angled her hat to block out that wide, intimidating view of the sky and pushed her sleeves up. As she used her Bending to call the waters of the pool to her hands, she said, "I like it." Katara moved her hands over her own body, and the water that covered them glowed with healing power. "You know, better than your usual colors."

Out of the corner of her eye, Katara saw Mai turn back to look at her reflection in the pool. "That's the idea."

Katara was hesitant to say anything more, at first; she didn't want to antagonize the other girl. "What idea?"

"Huh?"

"The idea. Why wear green now? Because I'd like it?" Finished with the healing, Katara moved the water so that it would splash back into the pool. She turned to fully regard Mai, and offered a teasing smile. "I'm flattered."

The other girl's face didn't move. "There's no point in wearing the clothes of the enemy when we're not in disguise. I'd rather my offenses be more targeted than that."

Katara stood up and shook the looseness out of her limbs. "I don't think anyone doubts what you said when we were leaving Crescent Island. We know you really want to stop and heal the Fire Nation. It's just, you know, uncomfortable."

Mai gave a soft snort. "Whatever."

Katara purposefully avoided looking over at the other girl as she said, "I hope Avatar Aang appreciates it. You not wearing red, I mean."

Katara couldn't see if Mai had finally deigned to show some expression, but the tone of the reply was glacially cool: "Why mention him, specifically?"

Katara bit her lip, wondering if she had gone too far, but finally looked over at Mai. "You've seemed lonely, as long as I've known you. You miss having friends, don't you?"

"I've betrayed every friend I've ever had. Maybe if I pledge loyalty to causes instead of people, I'll finally have some semblance of honor." With that, Mai turned and walked away.

Katara considered going after the other girl. She had wanted to be reassuring, but it obviously didn't work. Maybe there was something else she could say that would fix things, but she had no idea what. How could she fix things when she couldn't fix herself?

Katara turned to go her own way. Then Haru came running up and skidded to a halt beside the pool. "Where's the Avatar? The Fire Nation is at our doorstep!"

Sokka was not happy.

While this summed up the majority of his life quite succinctly, it was actually an unusual state of affairs for him lately. He had his sister back safe and more or less sound (even if she always felt cold
and insisted on wearing a wide hat all the time, which—compared to Aang's not eating any meat whatsoever—wasn't all that bad, right?), and he had given the Fire Nation a black eye by freeing all the captive Waterbenders from the Crescent Island prison. That was pretty good for a night's work. And since then, Sokka and Katara had been able to relax in the hidden Earthbender village, healing from their adventures and getting to know each other for the first time in a decade. And they had Aang with them, which was nice, because Sokka had grown fond of the kid, and together maybe they could destroy the Fire Nation forever and free Sokka's whole tribe from oppression.

Yes, Sokka had been happy before this moment. Mai's continued existence was not bothering him at all.

And now the Fire Nation was looking to intrude on that perfection. Of course.

Sokka paced back and forth in front of the village's town hall while everyone else trickled in to hear the news: various villagers, Haru, Katara, Momo, Aang, and even Appa. Oh, and Mai, wearing green for some no-doubt-stupid reason— and was that a sword hanging at her waist?! Sokka came to a halt and was going to start a full inquisition, but Chief Tyro, who had been waiting with Sokka, stepped forward and began addressing the crowd. "Thank you all for coming. As you've heard, there's a potential danger to the village. Our scouts were on patrol when they tracked a Fire Nation squad riding across the Dawn Slope. We don't think they've found the ravine or the temple above us, but we need to take precautions. I need my fellow villagers to spread the word to keep the noise down, avoid any substantial Earthbending, and extinguish any fires that might give off smoke. Quickly!"

Various villagers ran off to pass on the message, and when Sokka saw Aang about to run off with them, he quickly motioned. "Not us, we have a different job."

Tyro nodded. "Yes. Avatar Aang, I'd like to request your help in keeping any eye on the squad with your sky bison."

Aang blinked. "You just want us to watch them?"

"It's all we can do for now," Sokka interjected, resuming his pacing. A good pacing was helpful for focusing the mind. "If we run out there and beat them up, they'll know there's something worth protecting here, someplace the Avatar himself has apparently been hiding. Our best bet is to spy like spies do, and only dive down and kick their butts if they actually find the Earth Temple or some other passage down here."

Mai folded her hands in her sleeves. "And if they do find something, we kill them before they can report their findings. A missing patrol is much less suspicious than a full report with accurate directions."

Aang glanced over at her, eyebrows raised, but Sokka didn't feel the need to add anything. She was technically right, and it was such practical wisdom that they wanted from a good Evil Fire Nation Consultant. He wasn't sure if she had ever before suggested taking Fire Nation lives, but he very much did not care if it bothered her.

"All right," Katara said into the silence. "Let's get Appa and get up into the sky!"

Sokka didn't move right away. "You have your waterskin?"

"Yes, Sokka."

"And you filled it up?"
"Yes, Sokka."

"You're not feeling tired again, are you? I don't want-"

"I'm feeling fine, Sokka." She put her hands on her hips and glared at him from under her rice hat.
"Are we going to have a problem with me being part of these kinds of things?"

Sokka opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn't think of what exactly to say. Sure, he wanted his sister to stay safe, especially after spending a decade in an evil Fire Nation prison made of lava, but she had also proved herself to be a powerful and capable Waterbender by playing a crucial part in escaping said evil prison despite said decade, so it not only made sense for her to join the group, but it was also something Sokka wanted. He just also wanted to make sure she was ready, and to be-

Mai interrupted him to say, "It all comes down to whether you trust your sister to let you know if there's a problem. Do you? And Katara, do you accept responsibility for telling him?"

Sokka wanted to tell her to mind her own business, but they didn't have the time to get into it again. "I trust my sister." He looked over to Katara.

Her gaze dropped to the ground. "Thank you. I'm- I'm going with you."

"Okay, then," Aang said quickly. "Let's go get Appa!"

Katara was the last to get up on the massive sky bison.

She had simply been standing off to the side while Sokka and Mai made one last check of their weapons, looking at the beast and trying to prepare herself for being up in that massive sky. Sailing on the ocean was one thing, but being up in the sky- with nothing below, nothing above, everything extending into infinity on all sides- felt more oppressive to Katara than being locked in a cage.

She told herself that she could handle it.

She could handle it, and prove that she wasn't broken, and that she was worthy of someday going back home.

Katara pulled her hat down low over her eyes and made herself walk towards the sky bison.

Master Hama approached before Katara could step up onto the giant furry tail, and as usual, she could see right through Katara. "You should know that you're under no obligation. In the Southern Tribes, all Waterbenders had the choice of becoming a warrior, and each person decided based on their own calling."

Katara looked to make sure that the others weren't listening. "They need me. Sokka needs me. I'm of age, and I've spent too long being helpless. I have to do this."

Master Hama was silent for a moment, and then nodded. "Perhaps you have to try, but anyone who can't become a warrior isn't helpless. We all have our parts, and you're young enough that you have many parts left to play. There are more ways to avenge ourselves on the Fire Nation than fighting their soldiers." She bowed low. "Good luck, Tudi Katara."

"Thank you, Sifu Hama." Katara bowed back, and then ran up Appa's tail to the saddle.

Behind the bars of her cell, the so-called Suki of Kyoshi Island finished her story. "...and between
my new accommodations here and the fact that Zhao hasn't come asking for more Avatar-catching
advice in a while, I can only assume that I've outlived my usefulness as an informant."

Zuko shut his eye against the sight of her while he processed her story. A double-agent inserted into
the rebels of Kyoshi Island? Framed for a murder Zhao committed? This was the side of politics he
had never cared for. But if she knew something about the Avatar, it might just be worth the
headache. "Why did you go along with all of it? Why did you put yourself in Zhao's power?"

Suki's gave him a heavy-lidded stare. "I only explain myself to my friends. And you, Prince Zuko,
haven't made friends with me yet."

Zuko was not the cleverest Firebender out there. He could admit that without shame. There were
people- like his sister- who could entertain themselves by coming up with frauds on top of
deceptions, twisting labyrinths of lies that would lead their targets to the exact path that the liar
desired. The whole thing was beyond Zuko, both in practice and appeal, but he had been the target
of such machinations enough times to recognize it.

"You need something from me," he said.

Suki shrugged. "I want allies who hate Zhao. Is that so hard to understand?"

"I suppose not." He turned and went back to the cot in the back of his cell to lie down. "But how do
I know that you're telling the truth?"

Out of the corner of his good eye, he saw Suki go back to her own cot as she said, "I guess you
don't. But if you decide that you want a friend, I'm not going anywhere."

Aang missed his friend.

He was seated on Appa's head as the sky bison carried the whole group high above the mountainous
terrain. Everyone else was in the saddle on Appa's back, and Mai had taken a position at the front,
immediately behind Aang. She was peering over his shoulder at the landscape below, while Sokka
and Katara looked down together from the saddle's right side. No one said anything, but to Aang's
ears, Mai was saying nothing the loudest.

She was wearing green today, for some reason, and Aang hadn't missed the sword that was now
hanging behind her from a rope tied around her waist. He wanted to ask about it- not necessarily in a
disapproving way, of course- but he wasn't sure how. If he and Mai were still friends, it would have
been simple: he would have said hello, then asked about the sword, and then she would have told
him, and then the wind would have tugged lightly at her hair tails and she would have looked
beautiful. Now, it was hard. Would asking be showing too much interest? If he asked, would she
give him an answer?

That was the best part of being friends: you just knew this kind of stuff, and if you messed up
somehow, you apologized for it. Simple. Sure, being profoundly in love with your friend was
sometimes a little harder, but-

"There." Mai pointed right past Aang's head, and he turned to look down at the ground.

Yeah, that was a Fire Nation squad, all right. Five rhino-riders, spread out in a military formation.
The one in the front seemed to be their tracker, while the rest were on guard around him and
watching all the possible angles of approach. Well, all the possible angles of approach on the ground,
which Aang thought was funny.
He heard some jostling behind him, and turned to find that Sokka and Katara had joined Mai up at the front of the saddle. Sokka peered down with his telescope, and said, "Okay, these guys are pretty weird. One is covered from head to toe in heavy plate and padding. One is shirtless except for a pauldron. Two are wearing something closer to Army armor, but one decided to go sleeveless and neither one is bothering with a helmet. The guy in front is dressed like some kind of scout, and I can make out a bow and full quiver on his back. So, what are we thinking? Maybe bandit deserters?"

Katara looked over at Mai. "What do you think?" Aang was glad she was the one to ask.

Mai sat back from the saddle's edge. "If we were near a road, then sure, it could be, but what would bandits be tracking out here? Some of the special Ranger patrols, though, are allowed to get pretty eccentric with their look and attitude, so these five could definitely be Fire Army, especially with well-fed komodo rhinos. And they could either be looking for hidden rebels, or pursuing some other mission."

Sokka lowered his telescope. "But how would the Army know to look for the village out here? Are you saying there's a traitor who sold us out? Again?"

Aang cringed, expecting Mai to whip out a knife or a rude gesture, but she just folded her hands in her sleeves and lowered her eyes. "I'm sure I wouldn't know. The military does all kinds of logistical analysis to find rebels, and yes, sometimes spies provide information."

"Let's not worry about it," Aang said quickly. "Tyro might be able to help figure it out later. Right now, we need to keep an eye on those guys down there and be ready to keep them away from the village."

"Um, did I get turned around when we took off, or are those guys not heading for the temple or the village?" Katara's question made everyone look down, and Aang saw that she was right; the rhino-riders were making their way in a different direction.

They weren't following any visible path, and from what Aang could see of the terrain, there was nothing that would bring them back around. What were they tracking?

Sokka raised his telescope and aimed it into the distance. "Well, we know where these jerks are if we need to find them again. Let's fly ahead of them and see what they think they're chasing."

Aang nodded and flicked Appa's reins. The big guy gave a roar of acknowledgement and took on a burst of speed, soaring on the same path as the rhino-riders. Wispy clouds whipped past them, and a giggle broke out from the saddle. Aang turned around to find Katara moving her hands in front of her, playing with a captured bit of cloud, her face alight with delight. "They're water! Clouds are made of water!" She laughed again as the wind tore the last of her cloud away, and looked at everyone else to see if they shared her pleasure.

Aang couldn't help but smile back, and Sokka had a sappy look on his face that Aang had never seen before.

Mai just looked bored.

Aang turned around again to watch the ground below.

Mai hadn't expected to meet Appa's evil counterpart when she woke up that morning.

They spotted the monster from the sky, of course. Mai first saw it as a dark grayish blob on the stone landscape, hidden from what would have been ground-based view behind an especially large
outcropping. Aang brought them down for a closer look, and as Appa descended through the air, the blob resolved itself into something moving—something alive. The resemblance to Appa started when Mai realized that the creature was covered in fur, of the same coloration as the sky bison's arrow markings. This creature, though, had no such patterns on it. Then it looked up, its eyes meeting Mai's, and for a moment she forgot to breathe.

It was looking at her with the face of a dragon, and according to the Fire Sages, dragons hated nothing more than traitors.

Yet, as Appa's feet hit the ground and Mai got a better look at the creature, she realized that any danger she was in had nothing to do with fire lizards or honor. This was no dragon. Yes, the face definitely had all the traditional hallmarks—from the snout full of sharp teeth to the piercing eyes to the single holy antler on top of its head—but the rest of the creature was all wrong. Even aside from the gray fur (which Mai was embarrassed to admit should have ruled the dragon possibility out from the start) the body was more cat-like than anything, although the bulging stomach made it a tough comparison. Wings sprung off from just above the creature's shoulders, but they were feathered and structured like a hawk's, not leathery like bats. And dragons most certainly didn't have legs that folded like those of a deer and ended in cloven hooves.

Nevertheless, it met Mai's scrutiny with a sharp intelligence in its eyes that she had always imagined for the long-extinct dragons. It took a step forward while holding her gaze, and emitted a hoarse yelp in what was clearly a threat display.

Mai stood up slowly in Appa's saddle, and moved her hands slowly to where she kept her platinum knife hidden in her belt.

The knife had rendered an undead corpse monster to dust back in the Southern Air Temple, and Mai was willing to bet it would have a similarly disproportionate effect on giant dragon-monsters as well.

Then the air was filled with a droning melody, the unmistakable product of a deep-toned flute. The monster started swaying in time to the music, each movement eliciting a metallic jingle like the rattle of a bag of coins. The monster exhaled loudly and slowly, and took a step back again.

Appa huffed as well, and settled down into a relaxed posture. Mai looked to Aang to see if he was alarmed, but he was staring into space with unfocused eyes. It took him a moment to notice Mai's questioning gaze, but when he did, he seemed to come out of his trance and said, "That's the sound of a shehnai. I haven't heard one of those since the last Yangchen's Festival."

Mai and the others looked around, but she was the first to spot the flutist. An old, old man, all thin limbs and wiry white beard and dusty ancient skin, was ambling towards the monster, playing a carved flute with a small flared bell at the end. He swayed the flute back and forth in time to the music, the same swaying that the monster was doing, and as the melody came to an end, the monster folded its legs and laid its massive bulk down on the ground like a komodo rhino at rest, once again making a jingling sound. Was it wearing bells somewhere?

Mai turned to aim at the old man and shifted her hands so that they were closer to her more mundane knives.

The old man lowered his shehnai, met her eyes, and smiled. Then he shifted his gaze to take in Aang, Sokka, and Katara as well and said, "Hello. I am Guru Pathik. If I am not mistaken, you would be the Avatar and his company, correct?"

It was Sokka who found his voice first. "Forget who you are, what's that?" He swung his arm and pointed at the monster with such force that he nearly smacked his sister right in the face.
The old man- Guru Pathik- nodded. "That is a friend I made on the road, a pixiu that seems to have run into some trouble with the Fire Army. I'm going to need your help to save its life, I think."

The pixiu let out another honking yelp, and Appa lowed in what could have been a response.

Pixiu. That sounded familiar. Weren’t there stories about them, and carvings in money-lenders? That’s right, the creatures supposedly ate coins to bring back to their masters. But they weren’t supposed to be real. Yet here one was, jingling and staring at her and hiding from a squad of rhino-riders.

Mai sighed, and relaxed her arms away from her weapons. "This is going to be an altogether terrible experience, isn't it?"

TO BE CONTINUED
Beyond the Elements

Chapter Summary

The Guru reveals more about the world than the gAang ever imagined, and the Fire Nation prepares to put that understanding to the test.

Beyond the Elements

Colonel Karakorum Yu Mongke of the 'Rough Rhinos' Special Forces squadron couldn't really say that he liked his job, anymore.

During the war, it was different. Fighting, conquering, forcibly bringing civilization to the backwards degenerates of the Earth Kingdom at spear point— that was all the kind of stuff that made Mongke glad to be alive. But then the Fire Nation actually went and won the war, which had always been the goal, of course, but once it happened, everything changed. There was no more showing up in a village, setting some buildings on fire, and then stringing up the 'dethroned' leader's corpse to establish the power of Fire Nation rule. It became a matter of escorting one of the officers who was better at talking than fighting as he went around, got a pledge of fealty from the locals, and explained the new tax system.

What use was a forward-running sabotage squad when there was no longer a warfront to be forward of? Sure, there were still some rebels, but burning Ba Sing Se, Omashu, Baolei, and all the other holdout cities in the fires of Sozin's Comet had really taken the fight out of them. The rebels were indistinguishable from bandits, and the Rough Rhinos were too much soldier for the problem. For a while, it had been starting to seem like Mongke and his squad might be decommissioned.

Then the Troubles had started, reports of things from out of the old legends. And once High Command had stopped insisting that spirits were a remnant of a world that had died in fire, they were forced to admit that they didn't know how to deal with it.

Well, until someone figured out the platinum thing.

Mongke couldn't explain how it worked, but now he had a job hunting things that shouldn't exist in the remote mountains of the Earth Kingdom. It was something that kept the Rough Rhinos needed, at least, but it wasn't like the old days.

His fellow jobbers- Kahchi, Ogodei, and Yeh-Lu- rode alongside him on their komodo rhino mounts. Up ahead (literally, for the terrain was the mountainous kind more suitable for a 'Rough Ostrich-Horses' squad), the cloud of dust that represented their scout, Vachir, was growing on the horizon. He must have turned back from his tracking, which meant that he had a report to make.

Time to go to work.

When Vachir arrived, Mongke brought his rhino mount to a halt and motioned for the others to do the same. "Well, what'd you find?"

Vachir pointed, indicating a clear vector along the trail they had been following. "There. Behind an outcropping. Very defensible."
Mongke nodded. "All right, time to finish this. Everyone, get the prissy weapons ready. We're going to have to be precise with this one, so that we don't cause a rockslide under our feet. Yeh-Lu, those are a general collection of words that really mean you light fuses only on my command, to the letter of my command." He looked over at his compatriot in the full-body armor, and got a nod in return. "Good. The rest of you, follow me in. I'll lead and attract attention like I do, Ogodei will follow and wrap the thing's legs so it can't escape, and then Vachir and Kahchi come in and plant your platinum in that thing's carcass as often as you can. Typical wheeling should keep it guessing, and we'll just keep hitting it until it's down. Got it?"

Everyone nodded, and proceeded to get their platinum weapons ready. Vachir attached platinum heads to some of his arrows, Kahchi pulled his guan dao bladed staff with the platinum cutting edge out from its holster on his saddle. Ogodei's new bolas had every other link made of a platinum alloy. Mongke got his own sword out of storage and attached it to his belt, although he had no intention of using the thing. He was a Firebender, and his element should have been enough, but the coal bricks in charge had insisted that he accept a platinum weapon when the Rough Rhinos were detailed to these 'special' operations, even if it was a sword he hadn't been trained to use. He had learned to use a saber back in training, but platinum was too weak to even just coat the cutting edge of a proper broadsword. A jian two-edged stabbing sword, though, could supposedly be constructed with a steel inner core, a platinum outer core to form the cutting edges, and then two more strong but flexible plates pressed around the cores like a sandwich to form the supportive flat sides.

So Mongke got the sword ready, in case he wound up needing it, but resolved to let his Fire guide him to the death of the pixiu.

With that, he spurred his rhino into a run, and the rest of the Roughs fell in behind him.

The mission was to eliminate the monster- a pixiu, they called it, like the statues in all the money-changing houses- that had been raiding Taidi City and actually eating from the personal coin hoards of various rich and loyal city-masters. A simple search-and-destroy against a creature out of legend, using strange weapons made from soft metal, to save the personal fortunes of a bunch of whining merchants.

The whole thing was burned out.

But it was a job.

They approached a large rock outcropping, and Vachir gave an arm motion aimed right at it, so Mongke led his soldiers in that direction. He'd do his job, or die trying.

"You see," Guru Pathik explained, as Momo settled happily onto his shoulders, "I had a vision of helping the Avatar, and so I came to find the Earth Temple that I saw. It was a Temple that led to a hidden village, if you can believe that! Quite interesting."

Aang looked around at the others. They all stood as far away from the weird winged dragon-lion creature- a pixiu, the Guru had called it- as they could get in the little nook formed between the jagged ground of the mountain and an especially large outcropping of rock, but they were giving Pathik their full attention. Sokka squinted in that skeptical Sokka way, while Katara was staring with wide invested eyes. Appa seemed to be happily interested in everything that was going on, particularly the strange pixiu creature, a major contrast to Mai's usual blank face. No one was giving him any cues, so he turned his attention back to the Guru. "You can me to help me? With what?"

The old man smiled beneath his wiry white beard. "With whatever I can. I was a spiritual brother of your people, and a personal friend of Monk Gyatso." Momo added a trill at the sound of the familiar
name.

Gyatso?!

But that would make Pathik over a hundred of years old!

Aang didn't even have to look at the others to know their reactions. Sokka wouldn't believe it, Katara wouldn't know who Monk Gyatso even was, and Mai wouldn't reveal her thoughts in any way.

For Aang's part, he bowed low and long. He was in the presence of a very spiritual elder, someone who embodied the ways of his people to a degree that few of their own heroes had ever managed. No lord or king could ever command Aang's respect on the same level.

This was the best thing to happen since Mai had said-

-since Mai-

-in a while.

When he rose again, he found the Guru bowing back. "It's good to meet you as well, Avatar Aang. It has been a very long time since the light of your people was in the world, and it has been very lonely waiting for you. But you understand."

Aang didn't even feel the need to nod at that. Pathik understood that he understood.

The pixiu creature made one of its sharp honking sounds, and in response the Guru turned to it. "I'm sorry, my large friend, but we don't have time for more music." He lifted his shehnai flute and threw a glance at Aang. "I do not know if the pixiu just likes the sound of the music, or if he is responding to the instrument's sanctifying quality, but I found that it has soothed the sour mood caused by his injury." He shook his head. "I was traveling these mountains when I came across this poor creature fleeing from the Fire Nation. His wing seems to be injured, and he has eaten too many coins to get into much of a run." The Guru chuckled a bit at that, and Aang looked over at the pixiu to see it almost sheepishly curl up on itself, setting off a jingling sound from its stomach.

Aang had heard of pixiu in old stories, and figured that they had either lived at one point in the far past or been inspired by something real, like most legends. But this was an actual animal that met all the classic details right here and now. It looked back with the face of a dragon, but the rest of it was a mix of body parts that reminded Aang mostly of a furry gray cat-deer with wings. Could its return be a result of Spirit World bleeding into the physical world, like Avatar Roku had described? "We'll help! We won't let the Fire Nation get it, right guys?"

Katara was immediately standing next to him. "That's right! Maybe I can use my Waterbending to heal its wing. Then it can fly away and leave those rhino-riders far behind."

"That's a great idea!" Aang bounded over to the pixiu and reached up to rub the gray fur of its neck. It gave a contented honk and leaned into the rubbing with the sound of more jingling gold, and Aang smiled and turned to wave Katara over.

As she approached, Sokka said, "Are we sure about this? How do we know that the thing isn't going to eat us once it's feeling better?"

Mai, still standing close to Appa and keeping her hands out of sight, added, "Good question. According to the stories, these things eat treasures and accumulate wealth for their masters." She blinked. "Maybe I'll just take off some of my fancier knives." She turned, but before she could do anything, Appa growled and swung towards the large rock outcropping that was shielding them all.
At first, Aang thought that Appa might be attacking Mai and his heart began hammering, but then she moved away from the sky bison, and Aang could see that Appa's attention was on something else. "Hey, I think those Fire Army guys are getting close."

Sokka scratched his chin. "I don't suppose I can convince the rest of you to abandon the big dragon thingy while we get to safety?"

"Sokka..." Katara crossed her arms over her chest.

"Fine, fine. Okay, so Fugu Pathik can stay here with the monster, and we'll go out and risk our necks fighting. Why not?"

By way of answer, Aang summoned a wind that he rode up to Appa's head. He grabbed the reins and looked to everyone else.

For Sokka, today was all about the little victories. No one wanted to listen to his questions about fighting to save money-monsters, but they had paid attention when he outlined his plan for dealing with that group of rhino riders.

"We surprise them by flying up over the rocks and dropping down on them to attack, angling ourselves so that we're fighting downhill on the mountain," he had said, and sure enough, as Appa rose over the outcropping that was protecting Pathik and the pixiu, everyone jumped out of the saddle to land amidst the armed rhino riders.

Aang was flinging one of his air attacks even before his feet touched the ground, knocking the lead rider with the feathers stuck in his topknot out of his saddle. As Sokka had suggested, Aang went on to shout, "To hurt a spirit is to summon the wrath of the Avatar! I will fly across the world to protect them!" The delivery was a little stiff, but it should do the job of explaining how they happened to be here without giving away the hidden village nearby.

While Aang gave his little speech, Mai landed without ever actually stopping her motion, coming out of a roll in a twist of limbs that shot sharpened bolts from her wrist and ankle launchers in something like a dozen directions at once, striking the shirtless guy with the sparkly bola and the bearded guy with the gleaming guan dao. Katara's movements were simpler, but she whipped a flying stream of water at the archer's rhino, efficiently inciting the beast into a directionless stampede that carried its rider along for a bumpy ride.

So far, so good. With the initial salvo completed, Sokka came in with the heavy weapon: a ten-ton flying bison. Appa had his head down and the hardest part of his skull ready as Sokka steered the big guy at each of the komodo rhinos, and every impact was a simple matter of greater mass beating smaller mass.

It was all going so well, it was a shame when the explosions started.

Sokka wasn't sure where they came from, but all of a sudden the air cracked and battered at him. Appa roared as he was thrown off course, but his instincts were true enough, as he rose into the air to get away from the new attack. Sokka shook his head clear of the ringing and looked down to see the rhino rider in the suit of armor throwing a set of what looked like firecracker balls while the rest of the Fire Army guys retreated. Sokka didn't have time to make sure all his friends (and Mai) were okay before those balls exploded midair with much less color than firecrackers, and he was assaulted by sound and solid air again. Appa went to ground this time to avoid the danger, which Sokka
appreciated because looping through the sky was not a good way to reorient oneself.

He took a quick look around, and through the remaining black wisps of smoke, he found everyone accounted for—Aang, Katara, and Mai.

Good.

Then there was a new sound, which Sokka at first thought was another explosion, but it went on too long, and it was too deep, like something coming up from—

Uh oh.

Gravity gave a lurch, but it wasn't because Appa was flying.

It was because the ground was crumbling.

Sokka screamed, "Rockslide!" as Appa bellowed what must have been agreement and pushed into the air again.

The smoke of the explosions (Stupid Fire Nation! Who used explosives on a mountainside?) couldn't quite obscure the way a large section of the jagged mountainside just fell away and began tumbling down the undulating landscape. (Why was there never a convenient secret village of Earthbenders when you needed one?) Sokka followed the vector of the rockslide and traced its end to a cluster of jagged, rocky protrusions downslope, and didn't even have time to contemplate what those would do any human bodies that came into contact with them at excessive speeds. He yanked Appa's reins to follow the rockslide.

The dust of the chaos obscured most of everything, but Sokka peered through it all as Appa flew along, looking for the blue vest Katara was wearing over her gray clothes. He caught a glimpse of the color of the Water Tribes amidst everything, and steered Appa straight for it. The sky bison understood the situation, matching his speed to Katara's slide. Sokka was still working out how he would actually rescue his sister now that he had found her when Appa opened his mouth and somehow used his giant blunt teeth to nip Katara's tunic and flip her into the air. Air resistance quickly overcame momentum and Sokka scrambled to catch her as Appa carried him towards her, but only succeeded in cushioning her crash fall with his poor broken body before they both tumbled back into Appa's saddle.

They shared a hug before Sokka remembered that others needed saving.

It wasn't until the ground fell out from under him that Aang realized just how badly he had procrastinated in replacing his glider staff. It would have been easy to flick it open and use a gust of Airbending to lift himself out of the rockslide and then swoop down again to do some rescuing for the others.

Good thing he had a lot more tricks than that.

It took Aang a moment to stabilize his mind while tumbling down a mountain, but it was no harder than trying to meditate while Sokka was telling stories about his 'adventures' growing up in the Water Tribe. As soon Aang found his center, he made it the center of a big ball of air that pushed the tumbling rocks and dust away from his sliding body and lifted him off the ground. Then all he had to do was hop out of the airball and start riding it.

Aang zoomed along with the rockslide, dodging the larger stones that his airscooter wouldn't deflect and looking around for his friends. He quickly spotted Sokka and Appa working together to save
Katara, and so focused on finding Mai. He started looking for flashes of red before he remembered her wardrobe change to green. (Why had she done that?) It wasn't as easy a search, but he spotted her with plenty of time to zip over and snatch her up before she reached the spires of sharp rocks below.

It was odd, having Mai perched on his back as he angled his air scooter towards Appa. Before Crescent Island, he would have found it overwhelming to have her feminine weight pressed against him, but now it was the history that was more overwhelming.

Appa met him halfway, and Aang dismissed his air scooter just as he reached the saddle. He set Mai down gently before hopping over to take the reins, felt guilty for not even asking if she was okay, and then felt guilty for feeling guilty. By way of compromise, he said, "Is everyone all right?"

Mai nodded along with the Water Tribe siblings, but Sokka pointed back up the mountainside. "Looks like our playmates survived, too."

Aang looked, expecting to see the rhino riders racing down on the tail of the rockslide, ready to attack, but instead Sokka was pointing to the sky. The smudge of smoke against the stretch of blue was what actually caught Aang's eye first, but then he noticed the sputtering remains of the flying flare. "What is that?"

Sokka snorted. "My guess is a call for reinforcements. Our 'friends' have friends who are very likely not going to be our friends."

"Then we need to get back to Guru Pathik! Appa, yip yip!"

Shortly after midday, lunch was brought to Zuko and Suki.

Zuko had been startled out of a doze by the screech of the door to this little section of the prison being opened, and he sat up and opened his eye in time to see a bored guard walk between the cells with a pair of bowls in her hands. She slid one between the bars of Zuko's cell, and then the other into Suki's cell before leaving without ever having so much as glanced at either prisoner.

Zuko stayed on his cot, eying the bowl of rice and rhino jerky. It was probably safe, but-

Suki trotted right over to her own bowl and immediately scooped a small handful into her mouth. "Mm, that's better than what Zhao was giving me." After swallowing, she looked over at Zuko. "Doesn't seem to be poisoned."

He clenched his jaw at the way she casually guessed his thoughts. "It could be a slow-acting poison. Then Zhao could pass our deaths off to a sickness we caught here, instead of anything he was involved in."

Suki shrugged and kept eating. "That's true, but if we don't eat or drink anything, we'd die before the poison would have gotten us. So we should eat to keep up our strength."

Zuko didn't like it, but he didn't have the energy to get into an argument. He moved to get his own bowl and began eating on his cot. Suki was right about the food not being bad, although even the poorest fare was better than picking rotten fruit out of trash heaps-

"So," Suki interrupted his thoughts, "how does a prince end up captured by a blowhard like Zhao?"

Zuko froze mid-bite. He looked at Suki, expecting to see either an expression like Azula in a predatory mood or else a careful blankness, but she seemed more occupied by picking off the grains
It was only after he didn't answer for a while that Suki looked back over to him. "Sorry, I guess you don't want to talk about it. I just figured it would be interesting."

Zuko grunted as he swallowed a bite of rhino jerky.

"Well, I like to talk while I eat. Have you ever been to Kyoshi Island?"

Zuko continued to say nothing.

Suki rolled her eyes. "It's in the Southern Islands. We have pretty much everything, there. The Water Tribe had a colony at one point, and then of course the Fire Nation put a base there. The original folk were refugees from the Earth Kingdom. Once ships started bringing the mined metals up from the South Pole, all kinds of lanes opened up for us. If you don't get into trouble with the Fire Nation, it's not a bad place to live."

Something about the way she said that caught Zuko's attention. "But you did find trouble."

Suki grinned. "Trouble finds me. I just try to get along with it when it drops by."

"But your sister-" Zuko realized he had been drawn into the conversation in spite of himself, but didn't want to look like a fool, so he said, "Sisters can be trouble."

Suki's eyebrows rose. "You have a gift for understatement, Prince Zuko! I like that in royalty. She put her empty bowl down and stood up to lean against the bars of her cell. "My sister thinks she has the world figured out, and so she can keep trouble away just by trying hard enough. Just keep away from people who make trouble. Just stick with the Fire Nation. Just go where she can't Earthbend." Suki pressed her forehead against one of the bars. "It sounds like a lot of work, but it's not like I've been taking it easy."

Zuko closed his eye. Suki's sister sounded like Azula, but the difference was that Azula would never let herself come under anyone else's power. Except Father. Azula really could control everything, and make it look easy.

So where was she now, while he was here in this prison? Had Father given up on him? Or had they really lost control of the whole situation?

Zuko opened his eye again and looked at Suki. "I'm always ready for trouble, too."

Suki grinned. "I knew I liked you. So how are you preparing for trouble against Zhao?"

"What?"

"Are you going to just sit in your cell and let Zhao do whatever it is he has planned?"

Zuko tossed his bowl so that it bounced and rolled over to the bars of his cell. "Weren't you just saying that we're powerless to keep trouble away?"

"No." Suki stood up straight again and crossed her arms over her chest. "I didn't say anything about being powerless. Trouble is always going to find us, Prince Zuko, but if we know it's coming, we can get ourselves ready for it. Maybe it won't be enough, and maybe Zhao is planning something that will completely destroy us, but we're only powerless if we give up."

There was something to that. Azula's wisdom, as successful as it usually was, was about being the
best; Zuko clearly didn't have a chance at that. But Suki's wisdom, of recognizing failure but refusing to back down from the possibility, was akin to Zuko's own decision on Crescent Island to never give up again. Like Suki, he could choose to be ready for whatever was coming.

Or, at least, he could try.

He had his Firebending, he had one eye, he had an empty rice bowl, and he had a fellow prisoner who he might be able to trust.

But then, maybe he shouldn't trust Suki quite so quickly.

Colonel Mongke finally brought his rhino out of a full bore charge and into a steady trot. He glanced up at the flare arrow that Vachir had shot in the sky, and confirmed that it should be visible for a good distance. But then, Vachir knew his business.

On that thought, Mongke turned to look at the other Rough Rhinos riding around him. He let his gaze fall on the fully armored form of Yeh-Lu, and let loose with his worst glare. "What did I say about only lighting fuses on my command?"

The helmet shifted in what might have been a bowing of a head. "Sorry, sir," came the echoing voice from within.

"What are you doing apologizing for saving our lives from the Avatar? You disobeyed a command, but I don't have any use for soldiers who don't know when to make a call like that. You want to be challenged to an Agni Kai for a smart decision, transfer to the Navy."

"Thank you, sir."

"Shut up, I need to plan." The situation wasn't good. Chasing an injured animal, spirit or not, was one thing, but dealing with the Avatar? The kid had turned into a dragon and thrown a comet at Crescent Island! Or so the rumors went. Mongke noticed that there had been no such transformations in this last clash, and the biggest booms had come from Yeh-Lu's stash, not death falling out of the sky. Still, the Avatar was highly dangerous, and if he knew the Rough Rhinos were coming for him, there would be no beating him.

Well, that's why the Agni Warrior had invented reinforcements.

Mongke could see dust in the distance, climbing up the mountainous terrain. Their support crew had indeed seen Vachir’s flare, and was answering the call. And with that kind of backup, perhaps the Rough Rhinos could get in a lucky shot at the Avatar, after all. Or, at least, complete their search-and-destroy mission under the Avatar's nose.

That was one good thing about being assigned to hunting the various monsters, spirits, and supernatural phenomena popping up all over the Earth Kingdom. It may not be as fun as burning farms and chasing Dirts until they dropped from exhaustion, but the Army didn't stint on applying resources for their monster troubles.

Aang led Appa to land back behind the same rock outcropping as before, and once again found the Guru lulling the pixiu into a peaceful state with the shehnai. At their landing, Pathik looked up ended his tune with a smile. "Ah, back safe and sound, although rather dusty. Have you chased away our troublemakers?" Momo leaped of his shoulders to greet their return.

"Kind of." Aang caught Momo's landing, and then put the lemur down next to him on Appa's head.
"They're gone, but we think they've summoned reinforcements. We need to heal the pixiu and get everyone out of here."

Katara was already hopping down from Appa. "My Waterbending can heal physical injuries. I just need to see the wing..." She used arm motions to stream some of the water out of her water skin, and then drew the liquid to bunch up around her hands.

The Guru walked over to the pixiu, and patted its leg while saying, "Show the Waterbender your wing, my friend. It will be okay. I can play the shehnai for you while she works." The creature responded with a low honk, and unfurled its wings. Aang was impressed by the power that was evident in them; large muscles bulged on the creature's furry back as they moved, tight with an easy tension that would snap the wings with the same force that only a Master Airbender could summon. Appa flew by Airbending directly, but the pixiu's wings would just shove the air hard enough to challenge gravity. As Katara approached the creature, Aang couldn't help but realize that the wings could shove a human with just as much power, and that kind of power could easily break bone.

But the pixiu remained calm as Katara walked within striking range, as the Guru played the droning music of his shehnai flute. One of the wings didn't extend out as far as the other, and Aang could now see the wound, a swath of missing feathers and the gash in the middle, a gash unlike any other that Aang had seen. It was not bloody, did not reveal extra layers of flesh or bone. Rather, a swirl of white luminosity was behind the wound, and liquid light dripped from that void out to fall against the Earth. The stone ground drank in the liquid like cloth absorbed spills, leaving no trace.

Katara's water-coated hands began glowing with their own light, not unlike that of the wound but neither was it quite the same color, much duller in intensity than that held back by the pixiu's body. She ran her hands over the wing, right over the wound, and the water surged forward to cover it. Everything was still for three heartbeats, and then Katara stepped away. The water fell from her hands to splash on the ground, but Aang's eyes were drawn back to the unchanged wound.

Katara's fists balled and she let out a heavy breath. "I failed."

Aang hopped down from Appa for a closer look. "Are you sure?"

Pathik stopped his playing and said, "I was afraid of this." He lowered the flute and turned to directly face Katara. "It is not your fault, child. The pixiu is a different kind of being, and its substance does not respond in the same way to your Waterbending."

Katara's fists were still hard, but she didn't raise them. "All life has Qi in it, and Waterbending healing works by flaring it to help the flesh heal itself. There's no reason it shouldn't have worked."

"No reason of which you are aware, you mean. We will have to do this the hard way, I think." He shifted his gaze to Aang. "And by 'we,' I mean you, Avatar Aang."

"Me?" Aang wasn't aware of any special healing techniques for Airbenders.

The Guru nodded. "Much lore has been forgotten, even by the monks and shamans. It is said by all that the Avatar can bend the four elements- water, earth, fire, and air. But tell me, Aang, do you know how the pixiu became injured?"

"The rhino riders, right?"

"Indeed. But when you fought them, did you happen to see their weapons?"

Aang frowned. He had seen the weapons, sure, but there was nothing that really stood out to Aang-
"Platinum," Mai and Sokka hissed at the same time, up in Appa's saddle. They looked at each other, frowned, and then Mai leaned back and bowed her head as Sokka continued, "The blades were reflecting oddly in the sunlight, too bright even for polished steel. They were at least partially platinum! Argh, I should have recognized that."

Mai reached to her belt and pulled out the platinum knife that Zhao had given her, all the way back at the South Pole. Even in the shade provided by the big rock outcropping, it glinted with a brightness that reminded Aang of polished silver. Mai climbed down from Appa so that the Guru could get a better look. "I used this against an undead creature at the Southern Air Temple, and the monster turned to dust, even though all the other weapons we had were barely inconveniencing them."

The Guru nodded. "That makes sense. It is made from a metal that has been purified of all traces of the four elements. It is something that exists outside our understanding of the world, something that has no Benders to control it." He gave a chuckle. "I don't have much experience with this, myself, aside from what I saw of the attack on the pixiu, but it illustrates a point I need to make: that there is more to the world than merely the four elements. The spirits and the metal are both devoid of the elements, and yet they are not the same. Spirits are still animated by energy, just as the elements have an energy that allows Benders to commune with them. The metal lacks any energy, and so it is death to that which does. To heal the pixiu, the Avatar needs to Bend the substance- the energy- of its being."

Aang blinked. "So, wait, the pixiu is a Spirit? It feels like an animal when I touch it."

Pathik walked over to the pixiu and carefully stroked its splayed wing. "Very true. But then, so do I, and so do you, and so do all people. Yet our perceptions are limited by what is presented to them, and there is something inside of us that gives us life. Waterbending healing works on Qi, on the energy that flows through our bodies, but I tell you that there is more to us than even that." He looked over at Aang again with eyes that were deep and warm and old. "What the great sages know of Qi does not explain how we can become so connected to each other that our energies can mix, that the mixing can bind us across any distance. Love is a part of that, and an expression of that, but I tell you, Avatar Aang, that it goes so much deeper. "The Guru shook his head. "I just wish I had time to teach you how to sense those depths. Ah, but I could show you, at least. Come here, please, young Waterbender."

Katara approached him without fear, and tilted her hat back slightly. "Yes, sir?"

"I can sense the connections that you seek. May I trace them for you?"

Aang heard Sokka stumbling down from Appa's saddle, upsetting Momo, but the other boy didn't say anything as Katara nodded and Pathik placed the fingers of his left hand on her forehead. They both closed their eyes as one, and went completely still. Silence reigned for several long moments, and then Katara slowly opened her eyes again, freeing tears to flow down her cheeks.

The Guru opened his own eyes, and stepped back from her. "Your family and tribe can be found at Full Moon Bay, near where Ba Sing Se used to be. They are patiently waiting for you to come home."

Sokka snorted, and then muttered, "We'll see about that." Aang turned to say something to the older boy, but Sokka was already stepping around to the other side of Appa. Katara moved as if to follow him, but then bowed to the Guru and stayed put.

Aang could only shake his head. He trusted that Pathik was right, and the thought was amazing, touching on beliefs that the Air Nomads held dear about the ways that spirit could affect both people and the world around them. But trying to accept the full impact of what the Guru was describing was
beyond him. "This sounds amazing."

"Oh, it is, Aang. Fortunately, you don't have to master the whole concept right now." Aang looked up sharply at what seemed like a mind-reading trick, but Pathik laughed and shook his head. "I would not be a guru if I could not read the faces of the young. But enough of that for now. The energy which we will be discussing now is the energy of Línhún. It is the energy of our pixiu friend, energy that lives in all things. When a forest grows big enough, the energy of the trees combines to make a guardian spirit. The same happens with rock energy and mountain spirits. And when a city grows up in the midst of a war, on a world out of balance, and that city takes on the exchange of money as its lifeblood- well, then you might just get a pixiu that comes and eats all the coins being hoarded by the people."

The pixiu gave an enthusiastic hoot, and Aang laughed.

"So what I will teach you, Avatar, is how to sense the energy in the pixiu, and achieve a cleanness of mind such that your Avatar Spirit should be able to touch the energy of Spirit and repair the wound on the wing."

"Well, you better do it fast," Sokka's voice broke in. Aang turned to find that Sokka was coming back from around Appa, holding up his telescope. "It looks like we have some nasty visitors coming."

Aang hopped up and summoned a wind that carried him to Sokka's side. He took the offered telescope and turned to aim it around the outcropping. He saw that there was a long line of dust clouds lower on the mountain, clouds that were actually climbing upward over the difficult ground. Aang adjusted the telescope to focus on the front of the clouds, and was able to make out the shape that was producing it. The machine reminded Aang of a metal arrowhead, pointed in shape to both split the air and pierce flesh, but this arrowhead must have been massive. It dwarfed the komodo rhinos that were running escort beside it. Aang could make out wheels that were spun by mechanical pumps with such force that they tore the ground and pushed past it. He also could easily spot the spikes that jutted out from the front of the vehicle.

Spikes that glinted too brightly in the sun.

Platinum tips.

And moving fast.

Aang handed Sokka the telescope. "We can't stay here. I'll have to learn this- this Energybending while we're moving."

Sokka nodded. "It's going to be a chase."

"But the pixiu can't run very fast," Katara said, "and it still can't fly."

Mai sighed. "Then it's going to be a fighting chase." She moved to where her supply of knives was stored behind Appa's saddle, and Aang spotted her adjusting the sword that hung from the back of her waist.

Sokka ran a hand over his Warrior's Wolftail. "Okay, Aang and the Fugu go on the pixiu's back. The thing can do what retreating it can while you try to heal it. The rest of us get on Appa and run interference for you. You can't stop or those things will catch up and circle you. But if you keep moving, we can harass them and keep them from cutting you off. It's not going to be easy."

Katara stepped over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "But it's the right thing to do. Good plan,
Sokka."

"It's getting less good every second." Mai said as she reloaded her wrist launchers. "Hurry it up."

Aang looked over to the Guru and shrugged. "Looks like we're going to have our lesson on the back of a running pixiu while the Fire Nation's metal carriages chase us with platinum weapons."

"Oh, my. I was hoping for a more sedate environment."

"Yeah, but trust me, you get used to all the noise quickly."

TO BE CONTINUED
Everything is Connected

Chapter Summary

Aang tries to connect to what he can't see, while the rest of the gAang fight a running battle against the worst the Fire Nation can throw at them.

Everything is Connected

Mai's eyes sought out her enemies as Appa carried her into the air.

The large rock outcropping that been serving as their hiding space fell away, revealing the attacking forces. Mai nodded as she spotted and identified the vehicles in the lead: it was a trio of tank-trains, mechanized transports constructed by essentially taking a train engine car, piling armor and spikes all over it, and then wrapping the wheels in tank treads. They had mainly been used to carry equipment and passengers through contested areas during the war, due to their ability to withstand all kinds of punishment and crash right through even the biggest Earthbending obstacles, but these three trailed just one fully enclosed cargo car each, probably for their coal supplies. With nothing extraneous weighing them down, the tank-trains were really tearing up the ground and making good time. She had no doubt about the results of one of them plowing into the pixiu with platinum-tipped spikes.

Mai leaned over the side of Appa's saddle to look at the ground below, and spotted the stupid pixiu loping along with Aang and the Guru guy on its back. The monster was moving at a speed that was only slightly faster than Mai's best sprint.

The tank-trains would be on the pixiu in moments.

Mai looked to where Sokka was steering the sky bison with Momo wrapped around his neck, and he was already turning to look back at her. Their eyes met, and Sokka stared at her without hostility, without any guardedness; the bitterness he had been displaying since Crescent Island had been put aside in favor of just getting things done, it seemed.

She said, "That armor's too thick for personal weapons, and they can run for as long as they have coal. We need a power attack."

Sokka nodded and guided Appa to face and dive at the tank-trains.

Mai moved to one side of the saddle and got her weapons ready, while Katara moved to the other and uncorked her waterskin. Aang had said that the rhino riders were acting as a vanguard for the-

An arrow whistled through the air right past Mai's face.

Ah, there they were.

She extended her arms and stretched a certain wrist muscle in each to activate the bolt-launchers she wore just below her fists. Small arrows of her own shot back at the rhino-riding archer. She was getting quite practiced at plotting vectors from Appa's saddle, but her bolts were only true enough that the archer had to throw himself sideways to dodge, successfully staying in his saddle. At least he couldn't get off another shot before Appa was sailing past him.
Now for the tank-trains. Mai's hair tails snapped in the wind as Sokka let Appa fly between two of the mechanized vehicles and then pulled the reins to turn the sky bison back around and accelerate. Appa inched up to fly right alongside the leftmost tank-train, and Mai grabbed onto the saddle's edge and looped her arms through the hold-holes as the cargo car loomed beside her. She thought she heard Katara make some kind of squeak from the other side of the saddle, but it was hard to tell over the rushing wind.

Then Appa sideswiped the cargo car.

A ten-ton sky bison slammed into a big metal box on tank treads, and the metal box won. Appa bounced off and the cargo car did nothing more than rattle. It didn't even tip. It must have been full of coal.

Sokka shouted, "Going again!"

Mai held on tighter and clenched her jaw.

This time Appa kicked out with his three legs as he slammed into the cargo car. This time the tank-train's treads lifted slightly before crashing back down again. This time Appa bounced off even harder and spun in the air, leaving Mai dangling for a moment before gravity returned to its proper vector.

Well, so much for that.

Katara scooted over, holding onto her hat. "What do we do now?"

Mai considered. "Ask that one guy from the last fight to lend us some explosives?" She ignored Katara's disbelieving grunt and looked ahead. One of the other tank-trains was pulling ahead, paced by the rhino riders. She crawled to the front of the saddle and pointed past Sokka's head. "Get in front of them! I have an idea."

It was true, Mai did have an idea. It was a terrible idea, an idea that not only had a low chance of working, but even its success would be a thoroughly unpleasant experience. But then, her life was one long unpleasant experience, so why not?

Sokka snapped the reins and Appa zoomed up and forward in response. "Archer on the right," he called back.

Katara stood up in the saddle, and Mai grabbed the other girl's ankles to make sure there was no unplanned disembarking. Katara rolled her arms outward and a stream of water threaded out of her waterskin to float in the air. Then Katara snapped a hand to the side in a kind of wave, spreading the water out to flow down and cover Appa's whole side. It solidified into ice just before a series of arrows struck it, and then Mai was grabbing Katara's waist and aiming her along the vector the arrows had traveled. Katara couldn't have even had enough time to focus on her eyes on her target before she was shoving forward with both arms, and the ice turned to water again to burst forward and crash into the archer. He barely had enough chance to cry out before he was knocked out of his saddle.

Mai's view of the bouncing archer was eclipsed as Katara plopped back down into the saddle and gave her a completely inappropriate hug. "We got him!"

"Great." It was like extracting herself from one of Ty Lee's embraces. "Please let go so that I can leave now."

"Huh?"
"Hold it steady, Sokka," Mai called as she began climbing over the saddle's side.

He turned around and said, "Huh?"

Then Mai jumped.

To be more precise, she leaped in a perfect butterfly kick that flared her legs out to spin her body in midair. It lacked Ty Lee's grace- the acrobat would have somersaulted in midair and stuck the landing- but it carried her to the recently vacated rhino saddle effectively enough. Mai landed hard enough to bruise her butt but was grabbing the reins even before she had finished bouncing into place.

Okay, she had successfully commandeered one of the enemy mounts and could move independently of Appa for multi-prong attacks.

Now what?

Aang had never ridden backwards before.

Of course, the pixiu was moving forward as fast as it could, following the winding terrain of the mountain, loping along over rocks and around outcroppings while it’s giant belly swayed with the motion and set the coins within clinking and jingling. The noise reminded Aang of the bells and cymbals of the Guanyin Celebration Week. The pixiu ruffled its wings every so often, as though fighting the urge to extend them, but kept up a steady run that was far slower than Aang was used to riding on Appa.

Aang himself was perched on the pixiu's back just behind the wings, turned around so that he could look straight at Guru Pathik. The Guru was riding properly, facing forward, and both of them were tied into place with some of Sokka's best rope. Aang merely had to lean a little to the side to see the armored vehicles and the rhino-riders, with Appa flying his friends above them all.

Fortunately, he had the strength of will not to do that.

Mostly.

Without opening his eyes, Guru Pathik said, "Focus, Avatar Aang. Say it with me: Oooommmmm."

Aang repeated the sacred syllable and closed his own eyes, ignoring the noise of the battle. Instead, he focused on the sound of the pixiu's feet stomping the ground, a skipping that mimicked the cockeyed regularity of a heartbeat.

The Guru spoke with the same droning cadence as a shenhai flute. "Breathe in, and breathe out. Let the world fall away from you even as you turn your focus outward. Breathe in and breath out."

Aang knew how to meditate, but this was something different. He wasn't just seeking peace. He wasn't exploring the storm within, or burning with the fury of the volcano. He was calming his mind and trying to pierce the veil of the physical world around him.

"Peace," Guru Pathik intoned. "Too much effort can cloud the mind. Start with one connection, your strongest. It is a connection that has been with you for many years. It is a connection that has followed you from another world, another age. A connection that represents an unbreakable bond. Find it within you, and outside of you as well. Who do you sense at the other end?"

Aang didn't pay too much attention to the words or riddle. He simply let them travel in through his
ears and rattle around in his mind while he achieved the perfect peaceful state of meditation. As he breathed in and out, he felt a presence. Warm. Comforting. Large. Loyal. Beloved. Companion. Sky bison. Appa. Appa. Appa was here with him, even though Aang was riding another mount altogether. He could feel Appa flying through the skies above the mountainside, could feel Appa's fear and exhilaration and worry for everyone else. He could even feel the tugging of the reins on Appa's horns!

It was amazing. It was wonderful. It was beautiful.

And on top of Appa was Sokka! The bond between Sokka and Appa glowed in Aang's mind, glowed almost as bright as the link between Sokka and Aang himself. And Sokka had a bond with his sister, a bond as strong as Aang's with Appa.

There was another bond, a shared bond, one that linked Aang and Sokka and Appa to someone else. On Aang and Sokka's part, it was weak, fluttery, almost painful. But for Appa, the link was strong and healthy. It led down, down to ground, to a cold presence that threatened Aang's peacefulness, threatened to shatter this reality of energies and strings of fate. He breathed in and out, and refocused his attention on Appa again.

"Yes," the Guru almost sang. "You see without seeing. You perceive the world beyond the physical, the people in your life beyond their mere bodies. This is how you must look at the world if you want to touch its energies. This is how you must look at the pixiu below you, if you want to heal it."

Aang breathed in and out.

A komodo rhino was nice, but Mai had decided that what she really wanted was one of the tank-trains.

The one in the center was in the lead, gaining rapidly on the pixiu despite Appa's harassing dives and Katara's icicle missiles. Mai spurred her mount to catch up, not caring if she exhausted the thing to death, and guided it until it was running alongside the cargo car. Then she drew her best long Lui Shui-steel knife and slid the blade into the thin space between two overlapping armor plates. After just an angled tug to ensure that it was wedged in properly, she used it pull herself up onto the side of the tank.

The komodo rhino apparently was not used to this, and decided that it had put up quite enough with Mai's antics. It slowed and veered away and left her hanging over the rushing ground.

Well, ash.

Still, that was why she had picked a Lui Shui knife. It held without twisting or yielding, and Mai was able to use her other hand to grab a spike (in retrospect, the Fire Nation's penchant for putting spikes on everything was perhaps a sign of compromised intentions) and tilt herself so that her boots could find purchase on a ridge of armor. The air back here at the cargo car was foul, a mix of dust ripped up from the ground by the tank treads and the black exhaust streaming out of the engine's smokestack. Mai tried to keep her breathing to a minimum and began climbing her way- one spike and anchored knife at a time- to the coupling between the cargo car and the engine.

The door to the cargo cabin stood unguarded before Mai, and she reached behind her back to draw her new sword for the first time in combat. She grabbed the handwheel, breathed in and out once, and then turned it and kicked the door open. Two engineers in goggles spun to face her, but the cabin wasn't very large, and there was little they could do as she raised her sword. The closer engineer was only able to open his mouth as though to speak when Mai smacked him in the face.
with the flat of her sword like she was swinging a club. He dropped in an instant.

The other engineer raised her hands as though to defend herself, but Mai was up close before anything like a proper guard-stance could be assumed, and had the blade of the sword pressed up against the engineer's throat. She looked past the other woman at the sprawl of controls for the tank-train, a mess of levers and dials and buttons and switches that had no meaning to her.

Well, maybe she didn't want a tank-train after all. "Either you shut this thing down, or I'll destroy it."

"You-" The engineer choked as she tried to avoid swallowing. "-you wouldn't know the first thing about sabotaging a vehicle as complex as this."

Mai brought her face closer to her prisoner's. "A childhood friend once told me that the more complex something is, the easier it is to break." She glanced over at the control panel again, and at the grating concealing the roaring fire of the tank-train's heart. "I think I'd start by pushing all these levers all the way to the front and tightening the steam vents-"

"Okay!" This time, the engineer did swallow, even though it made her throat scrape the sword's cutting edge. "I'll shut it down."

Mai backed off a bit to let the engineer work, and as soon as she felt the tank-train's speed decreasing, she used the butt of her sword’s handle to smack the back of the engineer's head. She thought about killing both engineers before she left, but decided that she didn't have the time right now. She could conclusively prove her new loyalties later.

She left the engine cabin as the tank-train ground to a halt, and stepped back off onto the mountainside to find the platinum blade of a guan dao arcing right towards her face.

Sokka held onto the reins hard with all his strength, Momo screeching in his ear the whole time, as Appa made a sharp climb into the air. The echoes of the armored rhino rider's bomb washed over Sokka as they safely leveled off, and he resolved to see about getting himself a supply of explosives. If he could ever get over the fear of carrying such things on his fragile body, they made for really effective weapons.

After a quick glance confirmed that Katara had held on and was still in the saddle on Appa's back, Sokka took advantage of the sanctuary of the high altitude to check out the scene below. One of the tank-trains had come to a complete stop, and it looked like Mai was fighting two of the rhino riders- the one with the guan dao and the one with the chain bola- right beside it. She could probably take care of herself, and hey, one giant evil machine down.

Sokka looked ahead, and his heart sank. Two evil giant machines to go and one was really starting to get close to the running pixiu. He assumed that the lack of any flying on the pixiu's part meant that Aang hadn't figured out how to heal it yet. Sokka directed Appa in a gentle dive as he looked around for more detail. The armored bomb thrower was guarding the second tank-train, while the Firebender was riding his rhino alongside the first. A plan began forming in Sokka's mind, but that Firebender was a complication. If he got too close to the pixiu- but wait-

Sokka turned to his sister so fast he startled Momo into hopping off of him. "I'm dropping you off on the pixiu. You'll have to defend Aang and the Fugu from the Firebender."

Katara blinked. "Wait, what about you?"

"Appa and I are about to do something that's either going to be spectacular or a complete waste of our time."
"Oh." She corked her waterskin and climbed up to sit beside him on Appa's head. "Well, as long as there's a *chance* of spectacular-

Appa roared as dived down towards the pixiu, and grunted as he slowed in time to hover right above thing. Katara leaped down onto the pixiu's back, and Sokka stayed only long enough to make sure she landed safely before he directed Appa back towards the tank-train. The Firebender shot a flame at them as they passed, but Appa knew his business and dodged around it.

Before, Sokka had tried to get Appa to knock a tank-train over. It hadn't gone well, but maybe the problem wasn't a lack of strength on the sky bison's part. Maybe the Fire Nation had simply designed the tank-trains to be really good at staying upright.

But Sokka had figured out an angle that the Fire Nation might have missed.

So he directed Appa to once again match the speed of the tank-train and pace it as it raced along, but instead of keeping the sky bison alongside the vehicle, he had Appa flying *above* it. "Okay, buddy. Go on and land on the cargo car!"

Appa grunted and did as he was told, but the car wasn't quite wide enough to accommodate the sky bison's full body, and his legs wound up dangling over the sides as he rested on belly down on the armor plating. The tank-train slowed noticeably as the sky bison rested its full weight on it, and the pixiu and the Firebender both pulled ahead.

So far, so good, but merely slowing the thing until the armored bomber caught up wasn't going to accomplish much.

"Appa," Sokka said, "grab on, and *yip-yip!*"

The sky bison snorted as his legs tightened on the cargo car's sides, and his tail hammered up and down. It felt to Sokka like a hurricane had suddenly come calling, but otherwise the only movement he felt was the running of the tank-train. Appa gave a long grunt, and his tail moved faster. Even Momo was flapping with one arm while pulling on Appa's saddle with the other.

And the whole cargo car lifted just a little bit.

"Yeah!" Sokka stood up on Appa's head and clapped as hard and as loud as he could. "You're doing it! A little more! Yip-yip!"

The tank-train was still running, still trying to drag its cargo car. There was just enough play in the coupling to allow these few handspans that Appa had managed to lift-

Appa's grunt turned into a full-on roar and the cargo car lifted even further and *the rear of the tank-train went with it and-

There was a jolt, Appa let go, Momo squawked and fluttered in the air above the saddle, and then Sokka saw the most spectacular wreck of his life.

Any vehicle designed to run on rails needed a 'pilot,' sometimes called a hippo-cowcatcher, to deflect anything that might be lying on the track. It was just a shaped bit of metal like an arrowhead at the front of the engine, right above the ground. The tank-trains, even though they had treads on their wheels, had obviously been modified from the trains that the Fire Nation had started using in the last decade, and so had a pilot at its front.

But the pointed pilot of tank-train was *not* designed to handle the vehicle being lifted by the rear and angled to point directly into the ground.
So the pilot burrowed instantly into the ground and brought the whole tank-train to a halt, but there was still a lot of momentum built up in the massive armored assault vehicle that couldn't go forward, and it had a rather long body, so all the force was applied to a circular motion, and the end result was that the whole tank-train flipped forward with the tip of its pilot as the fulcrum and slammed upside-down into the ground with the full force of its previous motion. Appa had risen just fast enough to not be swatted by a giant armored spider-flyswatter.

And so Sokka was free to grin as the tank-train spun and crashed and tried to both flatten and explode in a single action.

But then he noticed that Appa was dropping again. The sky bison let out an exhausted groan and plopped to the ground. "Hey," Sokka said, snapping the reins. "Yip-yip, we're not done yet!"

Appa sighed and closed his eyes. Momo landed on the sky bison's head and began petting it right on the arrow.

And so Sokka could only watch as the last tank-train sped past them. He could only sit there and be grateful as the armored bomb-throwing rhino-rider raced past them without bothering to toss any explosives.

Sokka, Appa, and Momo were out of the fight.

Through his connections to his friends, Aang felt fear and pain and pressure. Appa and Sokka were a long way back as the chase continued, and Aang's weak link to Katara actually left her more visible to him by the sounds of her exclamations and movements just behind Guru Pathik.

Aang's perception of the world beyond the physical was wavering. He decided that he had to hurry, had to heal the pixiu now or not at all. He pushed with all his willpower, trying to hammer out a link to the pixiu beneath him. At least there was something to work with: his appreciation for spiritual matters, his love of animals, his responsibility as the Avatar to protect what was beautiful in the world, and the promise he had made to Guru Pathik. Aang felt all of that as he reached his mind out towards the pixiu and conjured the energy beyond the creature's physical form.

"Maintain your peace, Aang," the Guru said. "Only at peace can you tap into your greatest power. Feel the connection you have with all living things, not necessarily as friendship, but as the recognition that All are One and that we influence each other with everything we do."

Aang breathed in and out.

Katara was swiftly coming to the conclusion that Sokka was an idiot.

Just defend Aang and the Guru from the Firebender, he said. Sure, that sounded easy. But Katara was rapidly learning that when she blocked a fireball with her Waterbending, she lost some of that water to steam. And she had already tried to attack the Firebender and knock him off his mount like that archer from before, but this one was turning to be really good at dodging, and he didn't have to worry about running out of fire when he used his element to defend himself from Katara's water and ice.

While Aang and the Guru meditated silently behind her, Katara doused another incoming fireball and spun on the pixiu's back to turn her watershield into a reaching tentacle, but the Firebender had already directed his mount to move and slow a bit, putting him out of her reach. She couldn't retract her water before another stream of flame had boiled away some of its substance, but at least the
Firebender was out of attack range for now.

And then there was that last tank-train that was coming up fast.

Katara had seen that second tank-train flip over, but why wasn't Appa flying back? Had Sokka gotten hurt? Had Appa gotten hurt? Were they alive?

The thoughts echoed in her head along with the jingle-jingle sound of the pixiu's coin-filled belly.

Katara was brought back to reality by the roar of a komodo rhino, and she prepared to have more fire thrown at her, but the Firebender was turning away and putting even more distance between himself and the pixiu. Where could-

Then Katara saw another komodo rhino racing up with Mai in the saddle.

Katara gasped with relief. She wasn't alone! She wanted to ask Mai to go check on Sokka, but as much as she hated to admit it, there were more pressing concerns right now. That last tank-train was only getting closer, and the pair of spikes mounted on the front of the engine looked awfully big even compared to the pixiu.

So as Mai pulled her rhino up alongside the pixiu, Katara said, "Defend Aang and the Guru. I have something to do, and then I'm going back to find my brother."

She waited for Mai's nod, and then streamed her water into a long line that she froze into a spike of ice. She ran forward to the edge of the pixiu's backside and then jammed the spike into the ground, using it as a pole to vault into the air. The Firebender raced past her with a look of surprise on his face, and then the tank-train was coming up fast and Katara tucked her legs up and made herself keep her eyes open and why did she try this she was going to die oh mom-

She landed in a crouch on top of the tank-trains engine and fell into a tumble that ended by smacking into the smokestack.

Ow.

But now Katara was on top of an engine that ran on steam, and she was a Waterbender. Using the smokestack to keep herself stable, she stood up and reached out to sense the moisture deep within the massive metal engine, moisture that was more angry and energetic than any she had felt before. Katara hunched in on herself while she pushed her hands down into the air in front of her, taking control of the steam deep in the boiler and compressing without cooling it. She could feel the power within the steam grow, and it just got angrier and more energetic and- oh oh. Maybe this wasn't a good idea!

Katara dodged around the smokestack and ran for her life, holding onto her hat. She hopped the gap to the cargo car just as the front of the engine exploded.

This wasn't even like the bombs that the armored rhino-rider had been throwing. The force of this blast completely picked her up and threw her into the air with even more speed than her pole-vaulting. She was flying with the speed of Appa's steepest dive and things were moving too fast for her to even begin thinking of a plan. The coal car vanished beneath her and her hat flew off her head and the ground came up to fill her vision and this was going to be bad.

First there was reality-shattering pain, and then there was complete and utter nothingness.

Katara had disappeared from Aang's perceptions, leaving him with only one nearby connection that
he could feel: the weak, wispy one, the one that hurt to sense. He knew who was at the other end. He would have to trust her.


Aang put his hands flat on the pixiu's back, right on the spot between him and the Guru Pathik, and breathed in and out. He could feel the energy, the Línghún, of which the pixiu was made. That was what he had to Bend, what he had to reconfigure so that he could heal the pixiu's wing. It was very different from Air, as well as Water. There was substance to those, a substance against which a Bender had to work but with a nature that could guide a Bender who truly listened. With the Línghún, it was the opposite—there was no substance, and so nothing against which he could work, nothing with which he could join.

Aang maintained the connection, and breathed in and out.

The boom of a steam engine exploding and roar of tearing metal let Mai know that Katara had dealt with the last tank-train. Not bad for a little sweetie girl.

Unfortunately, Mai didn't have time to go back and congratulate her.

Colonial Mongke—this close, she had finally recognized him as one of the 'heroes' who helped burn Ba Sing Se to the ground—had been joined in the chase by his armored explosive specialist, and together they were coordinating to keep Mai busy. They were coming at the pixiu on their komodo rhinos from two different directions, dividing her attention. What wouldn't have been a problem for a Weapon-class Feidao dagger specialist on solid ground was a bit different for one riding an unfamiliar mount.

As if sensing her hesitation, both Rough Rhinos put on more speed and came at the pixiu like a pincer. Mongke flexed his arms in preparation for his Firebending while the Armored Annoyance reached towards his belt for more of those little explosives.

Mai analyzed vectors, grabbed some razor discs, cursed her choice, and decided that the guy with the bombs was the bigger threat. She threw at him first, aiming a razor disc at the space where his explosive-laden hand would briefly stop as he reached back in preparation for his throw, and then looked back over at Mongke. She lined up her next razor disc as the first struck the tiny bombs in the Armored Annoyance's hand and pulled them away from him an instant before they exploded. Mai flinched against the blast—and the yelling armored bomber as he and his dead mount bounced past her—and tightened her legs on her saddle as she threw at Mongke's head. The razor disc spun through the air while she prepared some follow-up razors, but squinting against the wind of her riding, she realized that the arc of Mongke's approach against the pixiu had changed since she took her shot. The vectors weren't going to line up.

She had missed.

She was already throwing a trio of razors, but Mongke punched his fists right at the meditating riders atop the pixiu.

Aang tried to maintain his connection to the pixiu, to the Línghún energy, to the world beyond the physical, but he felt adrift in its alien feel; his friends had been left behind, beyond his perceptions, and his connection with Mai was too weak to block out the pain, the feel of the pixiu's body, the whipping of the wind, the sounds of crunching rocks and jingling coins, the grind of his teeth as they pressed against each other.
Aang gasped, and his eyes opened as the world beyond the physical disappeared. He opened his mouth to apologize to Guru Pathik, but he could already see the understanding in the old man's eyes, the sad, consoling smile beneath the fluffy white beard.

Then that image was consumed in fire.

Aang cried out as the fireball exploded against the Guru's body and tried to get up to help or defend his mentor or do something, but he was still tied down to the pixiu. Aang frantically looked around, trying to find the source of the fire, and spotted the rhino rider to the side. It was the Firebender with the feather in his topknot, and he was grinning as he shifted in his saddle into another attack motion and Aang frantically tried to muster a wind defense but he was dizzy and trapped and-

A trio of knives zipped right past the Firebender, one blade slicing through the man's forehead, one cutting a line across his arm, and the last severing a strap on his saddle.

The Firebender flinched, disrupting his attack, and then he and his saddle both tipped and fell right off the running rhino.

Mai brought her stolen rhino to a stop just in front of Mongke. The 'hero of the Fire Nation' had taken a pretty bad fall, not at all helped by the full charge his mount had been running at, and seemed to be in no hurry to get up. Mai took her time sliding out of her own saddle and approaching him. As she walked, she flicked her right arm out so that her sleeve would fall behind the scabbard hanging from the back of her waist, and drew her new sword out to shine in the sunlight.

Mongke groaned and looked up at her.

Mai kicked him in the head, right where her razor had cut him.

Mongke went sprawling, falling on his back, and before he could even open his eyes again, the point of Mai's sword was right at his throat.

"I give up," he croaked.

Mai said nothing.

This piece of human garbage had killed the Guru. An old man who just wanted to help Aang and random money-eating monsters was probably dead now because of this soldier. Mai knew nothing of healing and could do little for the Guru if he was still alive, but she could avenge him.

She could remove the jerk who killed the old man, and in doing so remove someone who served the corrupt goals of the Fire Nation.

Someone who had caused Aang pain.

Mai breathed in and out and made the choice to plunge her sword into Mongke's throat, to properly swear allegiance to the green robes she now wore.

She made the choice, but she didn't move.

Then Aang's voice rang out with, "We need to find Katara."

Mai looked up to find him running up to her. The pixiu was resting some distance ahead, apparently no longer needing to move now that all pursuit had been neutralized. Beside it, a thin human body was lying still on the ground. She shifted her gaze back to Aang. "I lost track of her in the fight." She
turned to look at the path that the chase had taken, but from this position she couldn't even see the tank-train Katara had taken out. "Katara’s somewhere back there."

Aang let out a heavy breath that hitched only once with a sob. "Then there's nothing we can do. The Guru doesn't have long."

Mai looked back down at Mongke. "Sure there is."
"Don't!"
Mai looked up to find Aang’s attention fully on her. "Why?"
"Because there's no reason to."
"Punishment for what he did to the Guru. Prevention against him ever doing something like that again. Attrition on the Fire Nation's forces. A blow to morale for the people who consider him a hero."

Aang shook his head. "But that's not why you're doing it. You're doing it because you're mad."
"I'm not mad."
"You look mad."
Mai blinked. "I look-" How could she look mad? She never showed her feelings. She was in complete control.

Then she realized she was scowling so hard her face hurt.

Mai sheathed her sword. "You better get back to the Guru."

Aang’s gaze lingered on her for a moment, and then he deliberately turned his back on her and ran.

When Aang was halfway to the pixiu, Mai whipped her sword out again and kicked Mongke in the side hard enough to spin him around to sprawl face down on the rock. He started to growl but it transitioned into a screech as Mai whipped her blade in a pair of very quick, very precise slices. The sword passed through the thick material of Mongke's boots to cut the tendons just above his heels, severing both.

Mai sheathed her weapon once again. "If you get that fixed quickly, you might be able to walk again someday. Maybe even ride." As she straightened, she added, "I wonder how long it will take you to get to a healer." She was about to follow Aang when she spotted the jian scabbard hanging from Mongke's belt. She reached down and unhooked it, ignored by the screaming Firebender, and drew the blade.

It gleamed in the sunlight, more than any steel weapon.

Platinum.
"This is mine, now." She ran over to the pixiu.

Aang kneeled beside the Guru, who was lying on his back on the ground and straining to breathe. Mai had to avert her eyes from the burns and wounds on his chest, and the fireball scar on her own side ached in sympathy. Yet there was no expression of pain on the Guru's face. Mai had no idea how that could be; even the damage to his body's ability to feel pain couldn't account for the peaceful face he wore.
The Guru opened his eyes and smiled. "Ah, you are still here. That- That is good." His eyes went to
Aang. "I am sorry I could not stay longer, but- this was part of my vision, too. You-" His voice
faltered for a longer moment, but after taking a breath, he continued, "You know what you need.
Don't give up. The world- it is counting on you, but I believe in you." Then he turned to Mai.
"Please- take my hand."

She blinked, not sure why he was paying her any attention, but she could hardly refuse a dying
request. She took the Guru's dusty left hand in her both of hers.

He closed his eyes, and then a sensation went through Mai that awoke memories she had thought
forgotten. Of coming home after one of her parents’ boring parties to find her Uncle visiting. Of the
first time she saw Tom-Tom, and he spit up on her. Of laughing at Ty Lee's experiments with
dancing. Of getting her first pair of bolt-launchers from Azula. Of Zuko, before he-

She focused again on the Guru, who opened his eyes and gave a stiff nod. "Your family still lives- as
do your old friends. Your actions on the Crescent Island- they did not kill them."

Mai yanked her hands back. How could he know? What proof did they have that his magic junk
could actually find people across the world? And how dare he presume to know what she was
thinking? Zuko had probably died when the volcano exploded, and if he had survived, then he
would have brought word of her treachery back to Azula, and maybe even the Fire Lord, and then
her family-

There was no way they could all be alive.

She didn't deserve that.

She turned away from the Guru and muttered, "Thanks."

Aang blinked away tears as Guru Pathik turned back to him, and said, "Please don't go. I don't want
to be alone again."

The Guru shuddered, but his eyes stayed steady. "You were never alone, Aang. R- Remember,
everything is connected. I missed- the Air Nomads, too, but- there are still so many wonderful things
in the world. Carry your nation in your heart- look to your connections as well. They will aid you-
in- in what you need to you."

Aang knew Guru Pathik was right, but it still didn't help. "Maybe we'll meet again in another life."

"Yes," the Guru sighed. "I'd like that."

Then he stopped breathing.

Aang continued holding onto his hand, and sat there in the dirt of the mountain as his tears fell. He
wasn't sure how long it was before Mai wrapped one of her arms around him, but he did know that
he didn't care whether they were really friends or not right now. He leaned into her, and pretended
that they were.

The light turned to the orange color of the setting sun as Zuko watched Suki's workout.

The self-proclaimed Kyoshi Warrior certainly had considerable skill. Zuko recognized the aikido
style favored by some back in the Fire Nation. Those who could Firebend, of course, studied those
styles, but amongst the nobles who couldn't command the flame, some chose to learn the redirections
and joint locks of aikido as their preferred form of self-defense. Uncle Iroh had spoken of learning the techniques, Zuko recalled, although why a Prince Admiral Firebender would need to was beyond him.

Suki moved from one end of her cell to another, each step heralding at least one attack with her hands, elbows, knees, or feet. She moved smoothly and efficiently, although she lacked the grace of Azula, Ty Lee, or M-

He sat up on his cot. "So what is it you want?"

Suki twisted her arms in what seemed to be the act of throwing an imaginary opponent and then relaxed her posture. "To be your friend, remember?"

Zuko chose to ignore that. "You spoke of surviving troubles. Is your only goal to survive, or do you want more?"

"Oh." Suki crossed her arms over her chest and stared off into space. "I'd like to go home, if I can. Kyoshi Island really is beautiful, and I know all the people there- but I've been gone a while, and no one would have any idea why I disappeared. They might have figured out that I'm a traitor, so I wouldn't be able to go back."

Zuko almost reached up to touch his scar before he stopped himself. "I can understand wanting to go home."

"Yeah." Suki sighed and shrugged. "But it might take me a while. So I have a lot of work ahead of me. And I'll need the help of friends and allies."

"Help." Did Zuko want this girl's help against Zhao, their mutual enemy? Did he want to help her? Would Azula accept this kind of help?

Could there be help without trust?

He hoped so.

When Katara awoke, she found Master Hama leaning over her. What had happened? She remembered the chase, and the tank-trains, and trying to destroy one of them, but-

"Stay put." Master Hama pushed Katara back down so that the water covered her just short of her face. "You took a very bad fall. I have been working on you for several hours, and I will not have you marring your pretty skin with scars when I'm this close to being finished."

Katara did as her sifu commanded, and tried to remember what happened. "I fell off the tank-train?"

"Well, falling is perhaps understating it. From what I can tell, you were pushed off of it fast enough to skid quite a distance, all over rocky ground. The other healers and I have had to work on both bone and flesh these last few hours, but you're almost whole again."

Katara didn't want to think about how she must have looked when she had been found. "I failed again."
"Failed? Again? Child, you destroyed one of those awful machines by yourself, if that Fire Nation fritter's account can be trusted, and all your friends survived, along with the pixiu. The Fire Nation has been run off and your monster is safely quartered here in the village with the sky bison."

Katara decided not to argue with Master Hama, but she couldn't reconcile nearly killing herself with any kind of proper victory. Besides, the others had done most of the work. "So everyone's okay?" Master Hama didn't answer right away, and Katara's throat tightened just like when she looked up into a clear sky. "Who got hurt? Not Sokka-"

"No, Sokka, the Avatar, and even Mai are all okay. But the Air Nomad guru you met, he- well, a Firebender got him."

Katara tried to sit up again, but when she tried to brace herself with her hands, they slipped in the trough and she momentarily dunked her face. "Guru Pathik didn't make it??"

"They're giving him a funeral at midnight at the peak of one of the mountains. If you want to attend-or if you want to avenge him- you'll sit still and let me finish." Master Hama raised her hands to control the water, and a glow filled Katara's vision. "I respect wanting to do as much damage to the Fire Nation as possible, but destroying yourself in the process is too high a price. You're the last Waterbender of the Southern Water Tribe."

Katara sighed and let herself go limp in the water. She ignored Master Hama's work, ignored the glow of the water, ignored the tingling in her muscles and bones, ignored the title she had just been given. She was the one who had ordered Mai to protect the Guru, Aang, and the pixiu while she went off to fight a tank-train. Why did she think she could order more experienced warriors around like that? Why did she think she could be as good as Sokka or Mai?

Why did she think she deserved to go home as a failure?

Mai hadn't expected the Guru to get a funeral pyre; that had always seemed like a uniquely Fire Nation thing.

But Aang had insisted. The spiritual brothers to the Air Nomads had mixed some beliefs from all their nations in their culture, and their funerals consisted of a pyre at the peak of a windy mountain, so that they could be carried on the breezes to rejoin the Earth wherever their particles landed. Most of the Guru's ashes would become part of the mountain range, but others might be carried as far as the sea. No one would ever really know.

Tyro, Haru, and others from the Earthbender sanctuary had arranged it on Aang's instructions. Except for a few guards, most of the village had turned out for the midnight ceremony. Mai stood with Appa and the pixiu at the edge of the gathering, but she could see the others up at the front, gazing into the flames. Sokka and Katara stood together, their arms around each other, stoic in the light of the pyre. Aang was right next to them, clutching Momo in his arms like Mai had seen Mother hold Tom-Tom during stressful moments. He cried silently, but kept his eyes on the fire.

Mai held back a sigh. Tomorrow they would be leaving the Earthbender village. As crazy as the day had been, Aang had decided that they had rested and healed long enough. It was time for him to return to his duties as the Avatar. He was convinced that this Línghún energy of the Guru's was the start of figuring out how to fix the world, somehow. Mai had expected Sokka and Katara to insist on going to Full Moon Bay first, to find their tribe, but it hadn't played out like that. Sokka had brought it up when they were discussing their plans, right before the funeral, but Katara had shaken her head.

"We can't be selfish," she had said. "We need to help the Avatar, and meeting Gran-Gran again isn't
going to get him any further."

Sokka had been visibly confused. "But you-

"I want to stay and help Aang," Katara had said, her eyes intense in a way that reminded Mai of Azula. "I'll let you know when I'm ready to go home." Then she had tugged her new hat down lower, shielding most of her face from view.

Sokka, of course, had only been able to surrender. All boys were apparently suckers for their sisters.

By now, the fires of the Guru's pyre were low. Aang put Momo down, and started moving in an Airbender form that summoned a gentle wind. With each step he took, the force of the wind increased, but it always remained soft. Mai almost thought she could relax into it like a pillow and it would cradle her above the ground.

But, of course, that was just an illusion.

Once all the ashes from the pyre were sent on their journey, the funeral was over. The villagers began shuffling off back to their homes, all of them silent.

Mai stayed put. She could see that Aang and the Water Tribe siblings were doing the same.

Eventually, the group was left alone. She briefly considered leaving after all, of going back on the decision she had made earlier, but when she went to move, she found Appa blocking her path, looking at her with those bovine eyes of his.

She had been caught, it seemed.

Giving in with a sigh, she changed course and walked over to Aang. "Hey."

He didn't look back at her. "Hey."

"I've been thinking about what the Guru said to you."

"Yeah?"

Mai folded her hands together in her sleeves. "He was right."

Finally, Aang turned to look at her. She couldn't see the details of his face in the dark, but his eyes reflected the starlight. "About what?"

"Your connections helping you. I don't know if I believe in all that crazy energy stuff, but he was right about the practical component." She swallowed, and then said, "That's why I chose you."

"Chose me?"

"At Crescent Island. When- when Prince Zuko had captured you. I had served him because he was my friend, and my- we- we had grown up together, and I- I was loyal to the Fire Nation and to Az- but what I saw-" Mai closed her eyes and sighed. "I realized I- I cared too much about you to let you get hurt. Even in the name of all those other loyalties. That's why I betrayed Zuko even after I betrayed you. You're the best person I know."

Aang said nothing.

Mai gave a short bow. "I just wanted to tell you that the Guru was right. You made a connection with me that saved you. And I'll be helping you until you win. So I'll see you in the morning." She
turned to get the lantern she had left shuttered over by Appa. She would need it if she was going to find her way back down the mountain in this-

"Wait!"

It was *Katara's* voice.

Mai turned, hiding her surprise. Katara had stepped away from her brother, and had her fists clenched in front of her in what was either a weak fighting stance or childish excitement.

Katara looked to Aang. "Try to heal the pixiu again."

Aang blinked. "Now?"

"Yes!" She turned to look at Mai. "Stay with us. We'll all stand around Aang while he tries."

Aang was still for a long time, and then he shrugged. "I guess it's worth another try now that no one is trying to kill us."

Sokka grunted. "There's a certain logic to that."

Katara nodded, and started actively herding the boys in the direction of the pixiu. When Mai hesitated, Katara came back and grabbed her hands, pulling her over to the rest of the group. Momo scampered along and climbed up to sit on Aang's head, while Appa even shuffled over close enough that his breathing ruffled everyone's clothes.

The pixiu looked back at all of them with eyes that were shining in the starlight, and its gray fur had a misty quality. Mai could believe it was part dragon, even though she had never actually seen one, but it apparently had no desire to eat a traitor like her.

Aang closed his eyes and reached out to lay his hands on the pixiu's chest. His breathing became slow and loud, and the pixiu let out a long, low honk.

Mai waited, standing close to all the others, and watched.

Aang's breathing continued, and the pixiu spread its wings out and lifted its head to look up at the stars. Then it lit up, chasing away the darkness of the night with a glow that Mai had seen before. It was the same glow of a certain iceberg she had encountered near the South Pole. The glow went on until Mai had to turn away from it, and then it abruptly went out. She blinked and rubbed at her eyes, her night vision ruined, but the pixiu's gray fur stood out enough that she could see the way its wings were now matched. There was no more injury.

Aang had done it.

"I did it!" Even in the darkness, Mai could make out the grin on his face, and she could hear a lightness in his voice that had been missing since the Guru's death. On a whim, she turned to glance back at the remains of the funeral pyre, but there was nothing to see. She didn't know what she had been expecting.

She turned back to the group, and found the pixiu nuzzling a laughing Aang. Then it gave the same nuzzle to Katara (who also laughed), and bumped its nose against Sokka's chest (who accepted it politely but nervously).

Then it turned to Mai.
She stared back at it, and wondered if it was going to eat her now.

The pixiu honked at her instead.

She was going to give it a friendly wave to fulfill social obligations, but then it honked again and coughed up a wad of something on her.

"Uuuggghhhhh!!" She held her hands out from her sides, trying to avoid being sick. She was covered in some kind of slime like the snots that ran out of Tom-Tom's nose. She said again, "Uuuggghhhhh," and tried to flick some of the goo off her hands.

The slime splattered against the stone of the mountain with a metal jingle.

"Hey," Sokka said, and then ran off to find her lantern. When he angled the shutter to shine the light on her, she found herself glistening with both the moisture of the slime and the gleam of polished coins that were scattered throughout the goo.

She glanced at all the others, and found them trying to hold back laughter. Even Sokka. Even Appa!

Katara stepped forward to pluck one of the slimy coins off of Mai's shoulder. "I guess he wanted to give you a gift in return for your help."

Mai swallowed heavily. "I hope there's enough here to cover the cost of a new robe."

Katara stuck the coin back where she found it. "I'll help you clean up."

"Thanks." Maybe Mai would give the Waterbender a tip in exchange for the assistance. After all, the pixiu had barfed the money on her alone, so she should be the one to parcel out the shares, right?

The pixiu flexed its wings, launched itself into the sky, and flew away into the night.

Mai was left alone with the only people willing to tolerate her.

TO BE CONTINUED
Zhao arrives in the dark heart of the Fire Nation, and the servants of Prince Ozai set out to counter his ambitions.

Zhao stepped off the ramp and onto the ground of his Homeland’s Capital for the first time in years. It was a good day, a hot and bright afternoon with the sun not quite touching the horizon, something worthy of the return of the Fire Nation’s greatest hero.

Or, at least, he was sure that history books would eventually be written to describe something along those lines.

Zhao left his ship with a case of important documents while the crew prepared it for a prolonged stay, making his way down the long stone dock, past the other ships sharing this berth. The Capital Harbor was massive, ringing a natural bay that could hold and provision a small armada. The solid stone gate at the far end of the harbor let the seawater in while preventing any ship— even the greatest Earth Kingdom attack vessels— from getting through without an invitation. Today, there were a mix of both military ships and some civilian cargo vessels docked and generating a buzz of productivity. Zhao took it all in, enjoying the energy of the place; he had never before brought a ship under his command into the harbor, but today he had a special invitation. Admiral Chan was eager to talk with him, after his last report.

He had expected some kind of welcoming committee, but not the familiar face waiting for him at the end of the dock. "Father. This is a surprise."

"Hello, Commander." Lord Zhao, former governor of Chung-Ling, nodded. "I'm pleased you escaped Crescent Island unharmed."

Zhao the younger nodded acknowledgement of the professed concern, and together he and Father walked over to a small depot where he could requisition a rickshaw ride to the local settlements. "So what brings you to the Capital? I thought you were enjoying retirement."

"Oh, I am. But I-"

"Zhao!"

Zhao turned at the shout, dimly noticing Father doing the same, to find a gray-haired man in the armor of a Navy officer stalking towards them through the bustle of sailors and dockworkers with a wave. As he watched the approach, Zhao realized that the shouter was weaving a bit, and spotted a jug hanging from the man's hand. So, even in the capital, there were those with so little appreciation for their rank and power that they destroyed themselves with drink.

Then he realized who, exactly, the approaching man was. The thin scar over his eye— legacy of an Earth Kingdom broadsword that had come close to splitting his skull— was unmistakable. "Master?"
Admiral Jeong-Jeong stumbled close and smiled. "Zhao! It is you! Both Zhaos! Well, that's a rare find. We should celebrate." He lifted his jug and tipped it for a long pull.

Zhao could scarcely believe it. "Master?" It had to be some kind of prank. Jeong-Jeong was far too uptight to let himself become like this. His whole philosophy was about self-control and discipline. How could he do anything to excess?

Jeong-Jeong laughed. "What, don't you remember me? I taught you Firebending!"

Zhao looked to Father, who had decided that the view of the bay was more absorbing than anything about this encounter. Coward. Zhao turned back to his old master. "You shouldn't be in public like this."

Jeong-Jeong's face tightened into a scowl, and his cheeks grew even redder. "Why not? Why not?! I'm celebrating! We won the war, Zhao! We burned them all! Glory to the true power of Fire, it will burn the whole world and leave the survivors choking on ash!" He took another long drink from his jug. "Ash goes down better with a good drink."

Zhao couldn't help but shake his head. So this was what victory did to the weak? "Go home, Master. I will not talk to you while you're in such a state."

Jeong-Jeong's eyes went wide, and for a moment he drew up into a tight stance that Zhao recognized as a proper Firebending form, but then he coughed, and deflated into a stump. "Lick ash, Zhao." He turned and began stomping towards the rickshaw depot. "It's all we have to sustain us, now."

Zhao purposefully turned away. "I don't think I've ever been so surprised in my life."

Father, his attention no longer on the bay, nodded. "He won't be long for service. They'll find a way to retire him and make space for new promotions."

The thought cheered Zhao. The need for new Admirals was always a good thing for ambitious Commanders, and it was time for his ambitions to pay off. "You were saying what brought you to the capital?"

"Ah, yes." Father reached into his sleeve and produced a rolled up piece of paper. "It seems that a telegraph message was misrouted to me. Some communications officer found the wrong Zhao in the indexes, most likely. It's encrypted, but I recognized the headers and realized it should have gone to you. It seems that High Command is taking an interest in whatever your current assignment is."

Zhao froze and grabbed for the message. Father was right, it was still encrypted and so indecipherable without a decoder, but anyone who had served the government would recognize the level of security. "This needs to be kept quiet."

"I know. Everyone believes I'm here to visit some friends."

Zhao let out a breath he hadn't realize he'd been holding. "Good." He turned to go order a rickshaw, but Father took a half step to block his path, and Zhao had to bite down on a flash of annoyance. "Was there something else you needed?"

Father stared at him with a face that Zhao truly hated to look at, for it was so much like his own, and he disliked the reminder that old age awaited him. "I'm not going to ask what you're getting yourself into, and I know better than to try to stop you. But pace yourself. Reaching too fast and too hard can be fatal in the Capital, and there are intricacies that can spell the difference between a house in the Caldera and a knife in the back."
Zhao sighed. Between Father and Jeong-Jeong’s more sober ramblings, he had heard more than enough of this kind of thing for a lifetime. "I'll remember that. Now if you'll excuse me."

Father leaned close and whispered, "There are rumors that Prince Zuko was involved in whatever happened at Crescent Island. They haven't spread far, but the people who talk of such things have an intense interest. You wouldn't happen to be getting involved in such a- a nuanced situation, would you?"

Zhao didn't say anything for a long time. So Father had come to deliver two things: the 'misrouted' message, and a warning. This was trouble; he had hoped to at least be able to speak with High Command before earning this level of interest. What had leaked? Who had leaked the information? "I certainly wouldn't place myself in such a situation without an appreciation for the nuance."

"Good." Father nodded, and stepped back. "It was nice to see you, son. Have you kept up with your swordwork?"

Zhao snorted. "I'm a Firebender, Father. I don't need a jian to fight." He pushed past the older man to finally requisition a rickshaw and get going.

"It depends," he heard Father say as he walked away, "on the kind of fighting you have to do."

Piandao had not expected a position as a Royal Aide to be particularly engaging when he had first accepted it, but he wasn't the type to let expectations get in the way of reality. Prince Ozai had, over the years, never been a dull master. Still, Piandao found that he had only started to enjoy his job after Prince Zuko's banishment and Ozai's subsequent change of heart.

He was spending a break with some calligraphy practice in his own little room in Ozai’s suite when one of one of the prince’s private guards brought a missive. "Sir, this was dropped off for you."

Piandao nodded at a clear spot on his desk, and the guard left the letter there. Only after he had finished his line of characters did he finally pick it up to review.

It was coded, of course, but not in any of the mathematical ciphers that the military had developed. No, this letter looked like a rambling letter from an old friend, something that wouldn't have prompted any respectable team of codebreakers to apply their craft. To Piandao's eyes, though, it was an important notification indeed.

Lord Zhao had confirmed that his son knew something about Prince Zuko's disappearance at Crescent Island, and was of the opinion that the 'something' in question was not Zuko's death. The younger Zhao would have been more defensive, more nervous, if it were a matter like that. So Zuko was probably alive, and Commander Zhao probably knew something about it.

Well, that was good news.

Of course, Piandao already knew about Zhao's planned meeting with Admiral Chan and High Command's involvement, but this clarified the picture somewhat. There was a conspiracy in the making, one that would revolve around Ozai's misplaced son. Further details were needed, of course, but Piandao's spy network had never been able to penetrate the top layers of the military. Too many were still loyal to Iroh, even after the older prince's rebelliousness, but they were just taking their cues from the Fire Lord. Old Man Azulon hadn't disinherited his first born yet, so it made sense to stay loyal to Iroh in the expectation that he would someday be Fire Lord.

And Ozai certainly had few enough friends. Most of Piandao's little spy network was actually made of his own old acquaintances who were willing to do him favors in spite of his service to the younger
Well, Piandao certainly hadn't embraced his duties because he thought they would be easy. (Granted, the alternative at the time had been death.)

Perhaps he would pay a visit to Zhao's ship, down in the harbor, and see if he couldn't get a look at the vessel's logbook. Seeing where it had sailed recently might be helpful in locating Prince Zuko. After all, running a spy network for his master was really just a hobby. By profession, he was a Weapon of the Fire Nation, the deadliest single warrior in the entire world, and sneaking onto ship manned by a skeleton crew was so easy than even an amateur could do it.

The sun had set before Zhao finally made his way to his 'meeting' with Admiral Chan.

Although the Fire Palace was officially the headquarters of both the Army and Navy, that was only because it was the home and workplace of the Fire Lord, who held the highest level of command. As a practical matter, the actual functioning of the military administration needed someplace more specialized. The latest Central Command building was in Lower Harbor City.

Harbor City itself existed in two parts. Zhao made a point of never going to Upper Harbor City, which sprawled out from the north end of the Royal Plaza and climbed the base of the Sleeping Volcano that housed Caldera City. It was a dense factory settlement where top secret projects were assembled from materials brought in through the harbor. While that would have seemed a good place for the military headquarters, Upper Harbor City had the unfortunate characteristic of being home to a large labor class and, with it, a sizable criminal element. It would have seemed untenable for such people to thrive in proximity to the Caldera, but Zhao knew the truth was that most of the criminal enterprises in the city were sponsored by nobility. It pleased the people in the Caldera to have assassins, thieves, and thugs available both outside their own city but on available for a meeting on short notice.

(Personally, Zhao preferred to just have any potential criminal partners retrieved from their safely distant hives, even if it involved waiting.)

Of course, the military could be victimized by the less savory side of the nobility just as easily as anyone else, so its Command Center had been constructed in Lower Harbor City, a settlement that was administered together with its counterpart but existing as a physically separate entity. Lower Harbor City branched off from the east side of the Royal Plaza and its security was firmly under the control of the Fire Navy. Although the Army and the Navy maintained their traditional rivalry, there was no question that they could count on each other against non-military influence.

Zhao agreed that if people wanted to influence the greatest military power in all of history, they could join up like he did.

So it was to Lower Harbor City that he went with his ship's logbook locked up in a heavy wooden case, passing through substantial checkpoints until he came to the Central Command building. He was soon ushered to Admiral Chan's office. "Commander Zhao, reporting as ordered, sir."

"Zhao, you made it alive!" The admiral gave the grin that had made him such a darling of the local social scene as he rose from his desk and accepted Zhao's bow.

For his part, Zhao had no idea what to say to that without sounding insubordinate, so he came up with. "You, too, sir."

Chan laughed, and probably thought the remark was actually humorous. "There were times I
wondered if a hit team would be jumping out of the shadows, but there were no incidents." He sobered, and clasped his hands in front of him. "I hope you're still invested in this, because there's no backing down, now. As soon as I got word of your ship entering the harbor, I scheduled a session with as much of High Command as I could scrape together."

Zhao stood straight and proud. "I'm more convinced than ever that I need to go forward, sir. I had no sooner stepped on the harbor grounds than I encountered 'rumors' and manipulations that have me worried."

Admiral Chan's gaze turned into a squint. "I see. Perhaps- perhaps this should be a Closed Room meeting."

Zhao resisted the urge to smile. A 'Closed Room' meant that no aides, no security guards, no extraneous people of any kind would be present. He was being taken seriously. "I think that's a good idea, sir."

Chan bobbed his head in agreement, and motioned to his desk. "Why don't we go over the full details of what you're going to say? We have to make this good."

'We,' eh? Zhao gave a small bow. "Thank you for the opportunity, sir, but I've already settled my presentation. I would hate to deny you the opportunity of taking the lead in asking questions during the session."

Admiral Chan blinked as he processed the implications. Of course, the moron wanted to try and take some of the credit from Zhao by making himself part of the presentation, but if he thought he could look better by showing leadership skills and responding first to Zhao's theories- "Ah, yes, most considerate of you, Commander. Very well. I assigned you an office for as long as you're here. Let's take a quick look before the meeting, and I'll introduce you to the staff."

Zhao smirked. He could learn to play these games. And perhaps soon he would be able to play in the highest league.

"I can only think that my theory was correct," Piandao said that evening in Ozai's parlor, "because I couldn't find the logbook anywhere on Zhao's ship. I made a full search of his cabin, and managed to piece together a very thorough look at the bridge, but I couldn't find anything detailing where the ship has been." He bowed his head and stood awaiting any criticism.

As usual, there was a blaze going in the fireplace, and Prince Ozai sat on the couch basking in its light, gaze unfocused. "Did you have a chance to interrogate the crew?"

"My Prince, everyone on that ship serves regularly under Zhao. My 'borrowed' uniform withstood scrutiny from a distance, but every member of the crew would have sounded an alarm as soon as they spotted a stranger on the ship. I eavesdropped as much as I could, but there were no convenient conversations about your son's location." Piandao quirked a smile as he decided to mention the other plan he had thought up but discarded. "We'd have to stage a kidnapping and full interrogation, and frankly, it would be awkward even for me to drag a body from that ship all the way to Upper Harbor City, even in the dead of the night. And if he's secured his logbook, I'm sure Zhao has made sure his more knowledgeable crew members are relatively safe."

Prince Ozai's eyes finally focused on Piandao. "But Zuko is alive. You believe that."

"I trust my source, your highness, and the source knows Zhao well. I am confident in the analysis."

Prince Ozai let out a heavy breath. "I knew he was alive. I could feel it. Azula will be so relieved she
didn't lose him."

Piandao doubted it, but that matter was, fortunately, outside the scope of his responsibilities. "What would you like me to do? I'm worried about what has brought Zhao all the way to the Capital-"

"Zuko is our only priority right now." Ozai stood up, shoulders squared and with a touch of his old hardness darkening his face. "Your full attention, and that of all your agents, should be on finding him and ensuring his safety."

Piandao gave a short bow, hoping that it looked sincere. "As you say, your highness. I will begin formulating plans immediately." Prince Ozai didn't stop him as he glided out of the room, and the private guards who always stood at the door to the suite stood aside to let him pass. That was one good thing about the new and improved Prince Ozai, as unreasonable as his requests could sometimes get: he trusted his servants to handle their areas of expertise.

Sometimes, Piandao wondered about the changes in Ozai. He had served the prince for years, even getting involved in the mess with Princess Ursa, which he had told himself would be the last straw. Yet events had conspired to compel Piandao to stay in Ozai's employ. Zuko's injury and banishment had seemed to be another monstrous act, but Ozai's change afterward had been so dramatic that Piandao actually thought it plausible that the whole matter really was an accident.

It seemed the connection between a parent and child truly could shake the foundations of the world.

And with that thought, a plan blossomed into Piandao's mind. Inspiration connected to factors as quickly as his own swordwork, and soon he had a fully formed strategy. First, he would have to find the people required for this plan, and hope that he wouldn't be interrupting their dinner. In Piandao's experience, people were friendlier when he wasn't making them run into danger without a proper dinner.

As was traditional for a Closed Room meeting of the Fire Nation's High Command, the lamps were turned low so that shadows dominated the massive conference room. Without any aides, servants, scribes, or guards, the space was left fairly empty. The sounds of boots on the floor echoed as the various Admirals, Generals, and special Ministers found their spaces around the table.

Zhao waited for everyone to settle into their kneeling, and then stepped forward to take the last empty place. He bowed as a sign of his gratitude for being invited, and then knelt across from Admiral Chan.

Chan looked around and began speaking, "Gentlemen, I'm sure you all know Commander Zhao, of what used to be the United South Pole Naval Base. He provided the first reports of the Avatar's return, and has been heavily involved in all the related operations. With my guidance, he has also been investigating some tangential matters that he uncovered, and found some very troubling things. I brought him here to the Capital to give me his final report, but due to security concerns, I felt it best that we all hear it together. Commander, you may proceed."

Zhao bowed his head again. "Thank you, sir. Your guidance has been invaluable." With that formality out of the way, Zhao looked around at his audience. "Gentlemen, let me begin by summarizing my investigations. As most of you are probably aware, even before the Avatar's return, the United South Pole Naval Base was afflicted by improbably frequent storms that were impeding the mining operations. Any doubts about the connection were dispelled when my troops witnessed the Avatar create a storm himself as part of his escape from my facilities. As troubling as that was, there was also the matter of a small uprising of Water Tribals, who seized a supply ship and escaped with the Avatar."
"That ship was only provisioned and ready to sail because I received an order from Kyoshi Island requesting emergency supplies. That order was falsified by a rogue communications tech under Commander Yon Rha, and that tech went on to kill himself while in captivity. His family, we later discovered, had disappeared after receiving enough coin to pay off all their outstanding debts." Zhao looked around the table as his audience, taking note of their interest. "To be clear, one of our own was subverted to assist organized rebels by forces operating in the Homeland."

Admiral Chan leaned forward. He knew this much already, but was playing his part exactly as they had planned "And do you have any leads in this regard?"

"Well, I'm glad you asked that, sir." Zhao shifted his gaze around to meet everyone's eyes. "The key, of course, is the Avatar, who I diligently helped pursue all the way to Crescent Island. As this hunt went on, I couldn't help but notice the various oddities with which we've been dealing. Spirits rising across the Colonial Continent? Mysterious storms affecting the very platinum mine we're depending on to combat the Spirit threat? And then pirates begin striking at our shipments of the platinum. It started while I was investigating Kyoshi Island, but I'm sure you've all seen the reports that there have been further attempts. Someone wants the metal for something, but it's largely useless, except for our own special needs. And, of course, the Avatar eventually appeared at our Crescent Island prison base, but do we know why?"

Admiral Chan nodded. "He wanted to free the Waterbenders. There was a report from the base commander that a Water Tribe man evacuated the prisoners, before- well…" His voice trailed off. No one liked to talk about how the Avatar had destroyed the base there with the power of the volcano, especially given the Caldera's importance to Fire Nation society.

Zhao nodded. "And so we come to the matter that I felt I had to report in person, here in the Capital." Chan didn't react to Zhao's taking full credit for the decision. He- all of the officers here- were fully invested in his narrative. Excellent. "While I was attempting to pursue that Avatar to Crescent Island, the volcano exploded. I think it's widely accepted that the Avatar was responsible, but I stumbled across a new factor."

"I pulled Prince Zuko himself out of the waters around Crescent Island. He was in violation of his banishment, and he was holding the Avatar's ancient Nomad-staff."

There was a collective intake of breath around the table, except for Admiral Chan, who said, "Prince Zuko was pursuing the Avatar?"

"It's possible." Zhao leaned forward. "But it's rather interesting how, if that's the case, Zuko was able to beat everyone else to the island. For that matter, how was the Avatar able to land on the island in the first place? We knew ahead of time and oriented our defenses to look for flying insertions, but no one at the base had any idea he was there until the volcano erupted. And do you all recall who assisted the Avatar's escape from the South Pole? Besides, the Tribal rebels, I mean."

Admiral Chan sat up straight with a jolt. "Caldera Yu Mai. Azula's companion!"

"That's right, sir. I did a little research into her past, and it seems that she was betrothed to Prince Lu Ten for a time, until Prince Iroh broke it off after the conquest of the Northern Tribe. It's not hard to imagine that her loyalty to Prince Ozai's faction must run deep. And I saw her on Kyoshi Island, attempting to transmit something over our telegraph equipment in the Navy base. I tried to kill her, but she was saved by the rebels. So we have Prince Zuko found near the Avatar, his sister's closest ally assisting and accompanying the Avatar, top secret information being disseminated to rebels and pirates, and the military communication system being subverted in service to the Avatar." Zhao paused, and made sure he had everyone's full attention for his conclusion. He hadn't shared this part with Admiral Chan. "I believe that Prince Ozai is running a treasonous conspiracy in cooperation
The following silence filled the room like the ash clouds of an erupting volcano. Zhao looked around and found the various Admirals, Generals, and special Ministers staring with unfocused eyes. Every one of them was weighing the costs and benefits of believing the accusation, as well they should. If it was true- and Zhao thought the odds to be even, at this point- it still made for a dangerous situation. Some at the table would be thinking about what possible reasons Ozai could have for allying with the Avatar. Others would be plotting how Ozai's fall could benefit them. A few were calculating how they could position themselves to take maximum advantage of those who distracted themselves with prosecuting Ozai.

None were carrying it far enough, so Zhao added, "I have Prince Zuko in a safe, secure location. The Air Nomad staff- which I verified with drawings made during the Avatar's captivity in my South Pole base- is with him. If we go to the Fire Lord- and we must, of course, for the good of the Homeland- then it will be a simple matter of producing Prince Zuko and questioning him."

Admiral Chan snorted. "You think Zuko will give up his father so easily?"

Zhao smirked. "Sir, I don't think it matters. Zuko can't do anything gracefully, especially lying."

There was another reign of silence as Zhao's hidden meaning was extracted: no matter whether there was a conspiracy or not, Zuko's legendary surliness would make him appear guilty to the Fire Lord.

When Chan spoke again, his words came slowly. "It would be wise- that is, it's our responsibility- there are other considerations to- to consider. If Prince Ozai is guilty of treason, and- if Prince Ozai is no longer a viable heir- Admiral Iroh is the Crown Prince, but- but he-"

"He has not obeyed orders to return to the Homeland," Zhao finished. "He was supposed to bring back the Northern Water Tribe's royalty, but instead he turned their capital into his fortress and declared himself a Warlord Governor."

"Not that I'm accusing Prince Iroh of treason as well!" Admiral Chan looked around the table, and everyone nodded heavily. "If the Fire Lord has not declared it so, then far it be from me to put undue weight on Prince Iroh's choices. Everyone gave grunts of affirmation. "But- as a loyal son of Fire- naturally the stability of the nation- it's one of my primary concerns. So if Prince Ozai is removed from succession, and Prince Iroh is absent at a time when the Fire Lord cannot exercise his authority in a time of need, then there could be a crisis."

Naturally, Zhao had already considered this manner. "Then it seems to me, sir, that it will fall to this council to take control of the Fire Nation in Prince Iroh's name, and interpret any orders he sends from the North Pole until his return."

There was one last long moment of silence, and Admiral Chan met the gazes of the other officers one by one. Having seen a unanimous vote in their eyes, he nodded and smiled. "Zhao, it strikes me that you're wasted on assignments that keep you away from the Capital. Your political insight reflects well on you."

It should also reflect well that he chose not to speak at this moment, passively waiting for the order to-

"Send word," Chan continued. "Have Zuko brought to the Capital. We have to act quickly, before Ozai destroys us all."

Zhao suppressed a smirk. All those hours practicing in front of a mirror had paid off, after all.
Piandao, despite spending most of his time working as a servant, still strived to act like a Gentleman, and so he brought a gift when he dropped in on the unfortunate parents of Lady Caldera Yu Mai.

Lord Caldera Yu Ukano and Lady Caldera Yu Michi received him in a parlor not unlike Prince Ozai’s, although their fireplace remained cold and empty. Lady Michi was holding onto her young son Tomoshibi, who yawned—no doubt up far past his bedtime—before returning his attention to the wooden Firebender soldier in his hands. Why had they brought a three-year-old to this little get-together?

Piandao spared the child a smile before bowing to the parents. "Thank you for giving me some of your valuable time." He held up the sheathed sword he had brought, angling it so that the jewels in the scabbard would catch the light of lamps. "I forged this weapon myself for Prince Ozai, and offer it to you now with his good will."

The Lord and Lady traded glances. Ukano stepped forward to accept the decorative weapon, but he looked wary behind his beard. "We accept your generous gift, and welcome you to our home. I must confess, I am surprised Prince Ozai would deign to take an interest in us."

Piandao smiled and tried to wave the concern away. "Prince Ozai has great respect for you."

Michi stepped forward at that point, shifting her son in her arms so that she could stare straight at Piandao. "I have heard enough about you to know you prefer straightforward behavior, so I shall say what I am thinking. My daughter is the worst traitor in the history of the Fire Nation, and my poor husband has inherited the blame for the failure of the mining efforts at the South Pole. I expect that as soon as Mai is apprehended or— or she's—she's killed out there on some battlefield, we shall be exiled from the Caldera and lose everything. Frankly, I even considered the possibility that you were sent to kill us as a Weapon of the Fire Nation."

In her arms, Tomoshibi yawned again and rubbed his eyes. Ah, so that was why he was here; the parents were hoping that the child's presence might deter an assassin.

Piandao clasped his hand behind him and hid the surprise he felt. From what he had always heard, Lady Michi was a Proper Woman from a long and respected line who reveled in all the little subtleties of noble life. To speak so plainly was out of character— but then Piandao noticed the way she was clutching her son, and understood. Family could bring out the steel in even the Fire Nation's softest people.

Piandao bowed low. "My lady, I must apologize. To be equally frank, you have been ill-used for a good cause. I have been authorized to explain things to you, and seek your help. You see, Mai is not a traitor. She—very bravely, very capably, and very elegantly—freed the Avatar under orders from Prince Ozai and Princess Azula. It was a plot to resolve Prince Zuko's banishment, and Mai acted as a true Weapon of the Fire Nation should, despite the temporary hurt she had to cause you. But things have gone very, very wrong, and the situation has become distressingly mysterious."

Michi's free hand had risen to her mouth as Piandao had been speaking, and she sank into the couch behind her. Ukano dropped the gifted sword and rushed forward to grab Piandao's arm and say, "Is she okay? Is Mai all right?"

Piandao decided not to mention that Azula believed Mai dead, based on one of the Avatar's Water Tribe allies being in possession of her encryption cog. "That's one of the things we don't know. No one actually saw her during the Crescent Island incident, so it's possible she stayed safely away from the whole episode. But Prince Zuko has gone missing, and right now he's the only person loyal to us who might know where she is."
Michi stood back up with a suddenness that woke up Tomoshibi in her arms. "Then how do we find Prince Zuko?"

Piandao smiled. "That is the reason I was authorized to come and speak with you. You see, Commander Zhao is in town on matters we believe are related to the prince's disappearance, and right now the pair of you might be the only ones who can uncover Zhao's plot."

Michi nodded at her husband, who crossed his arms over his chest. "Whatever my daughter needs me to do for her."

"Excellent! Let's all get comfortable, and I'll describe how you're going to infiltrate Central Command."

After the Closed Room meeting, Zhao retired to his temporary Central Command office with Admiral Chan. "I can leave immediately to retrieve Prince Zuko-"

"No," Chan said, "we can't risk you. Now that Command is fully on board, I need you to write up all the details of your investigations, and assemble all the supporting evidence for the conspiracy. When we go to the Fire Lord, we need there to be no holes in our presentation. He's very keen on making sure all the numbers add up. Your crew can go retrieve the Prince."

Zhao didn't mind the continued chance to impress his superiors and enjoy the comforts of the Capital, but he was not going to get overconfident at this crucial stage. "I've taken steps to ensure the silence of my crew, but I'm wary of trusting them to guarantee Zuko's arrival without proper oversight."

Admiral Chan stroked his goatee as he considered that. "Very well. Assemble a list of names of commanders you trust, and I'll make sure one of them is dispatched tomorrow for the retrieval. I assume Zuko is being guarded by someone in whom you have faith?"

"Commander Kanrisha is a strong ally who owes me much." Zhao nodded. "I trust her to hold Zuko secretly, and she can even brief whoever retrieves him."

"Good! Get me those names tonight, and then get some rest. We're risking enough that we can add the danger of working ourselves to death over the next few days." Admiral Chan laughed, and accepted Zhao's bow before heading back to his own office.

Zhao finally allowed a smirk to fully blossom on his face. He had done it! He was finally being recognized as he deserved, and would use Prince Zuko to rise to the very top of the Fire Nation! Then he could sit back, accept a promotion to Admiral- perhaps even High Admiral- from the Fire Lord himself, and command others to hunt down the Avatar and Mai for him. Prince Ozai would be executed, and probably Princess Azula, too. However, the girl was much smarter than her father, and perhaps would want to make a deal to guarantee her survival. Zhao wasn't going to rule the possibility out, although she would have to offer quite the reward to buy her life. Maybe, if Prince Iroh reemerged over the matter, he could play them both off against each other to see who could come up with the better deal.

Zhao almost felt like whistling as he moved behind his desk to begin creating the list Admiral Chan wanted.

He had gotten two names into it when there was a knock at the door, and one of the staff aides poked her head into the office. "Commander, sir, Lord Ukano is requesting a meeting with you. He says it's urgent. His wife is here with him."

Zhao blinked. Mai's parents? Why would they even be here? Oh, yes, Ukano technically had a
degree of military clearance, given some of the contributions he had made to engineering projects. But why would he want to see Zhao now? Could he have heard the rumors about Prince Zuko? Or was it- ah, yes. The shutdown of the mines at the South Pole. "Show them in."

Despite the later hour, Lord Ukano and Lady Michi were intent as they glided into the office and bowed. "Commander Zhao," Ukano said, "welcome back to Capital Island."

"Yes, thank you." Zhao rose and stepped around his desk. "The hour is late, so perhaps we should get to the point of this visit. I have many things to do, yet."

Ukano nodded. "Very well. You've heard about the South Pole?"

Zhao wondered what it was like to be so transparent. "Of course. The storms have finally made the mining impossible, and so the facilities are being dismantled and the Tribals relocated." He decided to have some fun and added, "I'm sorry you weren't able to find a position as governor somewhere else, but I suppose your engineering skills would have limited application in administration."

Zhao caught Lady Michi starting to scowl before she turned to wander around the office. Ukano, for his part, kept his emotions under control as he said, "We all serve the Fire Nation in accordance with its needs and our abilities. That's actually why I wanted to speak with you, Commander. Your report about Crescent Island has caught the interest of many in the Capital, and your presence here hasn't gone unnoticed. I thought, given our past association and desire to make up for certain- er, shortcomings in our past service, we might share enough motivation to work together on your next project. Does it involve the Avatar?"

Yes, there it was. Ukano was nothing but another chaser of power who was too weak to actually seize it for himself. He simply tried to make himself useful enough that those with actual backbone would give it to him. "I can't speak about the details of ongoing operations. I'm sure that if your expertise is required at any point, Command will call for your service. So, if there's nothing else..."

Ukano's eyes flickered to the side, and Zhao turned to find Michi admiring a set of decorative weapons hung on the wall. Ukano said, "Dear, why don't you wait outside for a moment?"

"Of course, my Lord Husband." She immediately made for the door.

Once they were alone, Ukano took a step closer and spoke in a low voice. "There are rumors, Zhao. They are too varied to make sense of, but you're obviously a man of importance. You're smart, too, so I won't try to hide the trouble my family is in. You've left me to take the blame for the South Pole, but I don't hold that against you. It was the smart thing to do. And this trouble with Mai-" Ukano shook his head. "I need to take drastic action if I'm to save my family's status."

Zhao had to fight the urge to laugh. "And what does this have to do with me? Why should I care?"

Ukano nodded. "Because Prince Ozai is watching you, too, and his thug Piandao sent me in here to find out what's going on. But if you agree to marry Mai and save everyone in my family, I'll keep them both off your back long enough for you to do... whatever it is you're doing."

Zhao realized his jaw had dropped. Marry Mai? Marry a traitor girl who was barely of age and had lived her life as Azula's creature? He was about to throw Ukano out of his office when he realized the possibilities. Lady Michi's family had lived in the Caldera for generations, and was highly respected. It would be an easy way for Zhao to get entry to the noble class in the center of the Sleeping Volcano.

And to have Mai in his power and control after everything she had done to him...
Zhao leaned forward. "Tell me more."

Michi walked smoothly despite the thin wooden box she had hidden in her robes. But then, that was the plan. She caught the eyes of the young lady serving as Zhao's aide tonight and said, "Excuse me, could you direct me to the facilities?"

"I will escort you." The aid led the way though the hallways of the Command Center.

Well, that was disappointing, but then, the military was ever so diligent about everything. That was how they conquered the world and finally brought civilization to the barbarians of the Earth and Water Tribes. Which was fine and good as far as Michi was concerned, but it would mean nothing if her daughter died for other people's ambitions.

Once she was alone in the bathroom, Michi undid her outer robe to reveal the wooden box she had stuffed into her belt. Piandao had described what to look for well enough, and Michi had found it in a drawer of Zhao's desk while Ukano had distracted the blowhard. It was a nice bit of work, filching the box so quietly, but Mai hadn't gotten her precise hands from her father.

Still hands were also a big help when it came to lockpicking, and it was hardly an uncommon skill amongst the nobility. Michi herself had broken into her father's safe as a teenager to review his financial books, and so discovered that their distinguished family was going broke.

Zhao's little lockbox yielded more easily to Michi's tools. It snapped open to reveal a book, just as Piandao had hoped. She flipped to the final pages, found the entry for Zhao's arrival in the Capital Harbor, and traced the entrees back. She hardly knew what all these places represented, but she could remember the names of a hundred party attendees and their recent gossip-worthy history, so a string of islands were hardly beyond her ability to recall. Once she was sure of her memory, she moved to replace the logbook, but then a folded piece of paper slipped out. She caught it in midair and unfolded it for a look. The words on it were simple:

"Gao Mountains, near Taidi - Contact with Special Entity confirmed, contact with Avatar confirmed, Sky Bison sighted, contact with Caldera Yu Mai confirmed. Fire Nation losses significant."

Michi slapped a hand over her mouth to hide her gasp. Mai was still alive. Her daughter was still alive. She was still with the Avatar, but Piandao had said- maybe Mai was still trying to help Prince Zuko.

Still, Michi wasn't entirely sure about these games that Prince Ozai was playing, so she would pass the information of Zhao's travels on and keep the news of Mai to herself and her husband.

She slipped the paper back in the logbook, replaced it in the box, and locked it up again. If she could get it back into Zhao's desk, that would be ideal, but if not, dropping it somewhere close would suffice. Hopefully, Ukano was doing his job and keeping Zhao's attention, but he was such a good man, a good father, and Michi believed in him. That was a wife's duty, after all.

She re-secured the box, fixed her robes, and then emerged from the bathroom and nodded to the aide. "Thank you, dear. Now, where is that office again? I just can't keep track of these bland hallways."

"I'm afraid I can't offer any guarantees," Zhao said, turning away from Ukano. Their haggling had been going on for a while now, and the man's desperation was getting old. "But if I'm not bothered by Piandao or Prince Ozai's other agents, and your daughter can be brought in without difficulty,
then an alliance through marriage might be viable."

Ukano nodded. "Very well. When should I contact you?"

"When you have Lady Mai under control. Now, I really do have work, and we wouldn't want to let your wife get bored out there." Zhao brushed past the other man and opened the door. Lady Michi was indeed waiting there, and as soon as she saw them, she smiled broadly and pushed her way into the room. "Oh, I hope you two were able to reach an accommodation!" She ambled about, apparently waiting for a full explanation of what she had been explicitly excluded from.

Ukano nodded. "I think we have an understanding. Eh, Zhao?"

"Oh, I understand, all right. For now, I bid the both of you good night." He bowed, and Ukano bowed back. When Zhao rose, Michi had walked over and gave her own bow, which Zhao returned before practically shoving them both out of his office.

As he watched the aide lead the couple out, he wondered if this was just a sign of things to come. As he rose in power, people from all levels of Fire Nation society would come to him seeking favors, alliances, and even marriages. It was just as well that he had focused on his career, since it seemed he would soon have his pick of single nobles in the Capital.

Good thing he hadn't actually promised Ukano anything.

As Piandao waited outside the Central Command building, he ran through his favorite Kojiki poems in his head. He liked the perspective offered by such epics, how the interplay of the gods of legend dwarfed the politics of today's age. But enough politics could change the course of the world as effectively as the last stand of a god, just as the legends say humanity united to overthrow the gods. What must have been like to be part of any army storming the line of the First Dragon Masters, rather than waiting beside a rickshaw in an oversized hat in the middle of the night?

Eventually, Lord Ukano and Lady Michi emerged through the gate. In was difficult to tell in the moonlight, but to Piandao's eyes, they looked pleased. "Home, then?"

"Home," Michi confirmed. "And while you pull us, I'll write out the names I saw in the logbook. And Zhao will find it in his drawer exactly where he left it."

Piandao tipped his hat. The Lord and Lady's parts were over, but he would likely have a long night ahead of him. He had to narrow down Zuko's location from the names that Lady Michi would provide, and then get an encrypted wire to Azula. She would probably require a fast transport, so he would have to arrange that, too.

A servant's work was never done, but there could be worse duties when one was a Weapon of the Fire Nation. He hadn't killed an army in a while, after all.

That would soon be Princess Azula's job.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Prisoners of the Fire Nation

Chapter Summary

The Blue Spirit pays a visit to Zuko.

Prisoners of the Fire Nation

Azula had determined that charming a boy was a simple matter of knowing how to destroy him.

She had brought the young man in the Blue Spirit mask to one of Father's secret holdings- an abandoned mansion in Shu Jin- with the idea of extracting some action intelligence about the Avatar. After all, this boy- a swordfighter so good that she had to distract him before she could so much as counterattack- had been defending the escaped Waterbender prisoners on Crescent Island. She was sure that Zuzu was alive, somewhere, and when new came of his location, she wanted to be ready to get back to capturing the prize that would let her brother return home. Father had asked it of her, after all.

A large closet in the mansion became a cell for her prisoner, and a guest bedroom the interrogation room. Some of Father's ex-military private guards had arrived to assist and the interrogations began. She had been so looking forward to learning more about this mysterious young man, to untangling the workings of his mind, to bathing in his passions and bending them to her will.

But the Blue Spirit wouldn't talk. He wouldn't so much as give his name. Once he was brought to the makeshift interrogation room, sitting across the plain table from her, he would stare with undisguised loathing- probably because she had killed his partner. Azula was tempted to set him on fire for such insolence. The Fire Army taught that interrogations involved shouted questions and beatings. Bribes were offered a little later. The last phase involved relentless torture, making the prisoner scream whatever truths he thought might make the pain stop until his heart gave out.

It was, overall, a complete waste of time and energy.

Azula's method was much more simple, but much more taxing. She started with the usual questions: "Who trained you? What are your goals? What operations have you undertaken against the glory of the Fire Nation?" And so on. She let the prisoner think he was frustrating her investigations by responding only with ribald insults, while secretly having the guards slowly decrease his water rations. Then, after a week, she brought a bottle of Lily Wine, sat down at the table, poured herself a small drink, and just talked at the prisoner. She talked about how she was worried for her brother (lie), she missed being home with her Father (truth), the weather was getting unpleasantly hot (lie), Fire Festivals had the best Fire Flakes (truth, amazingly), and other such inane chatter. It was hard to sound like a chatterbox with no filter between her brain and her mouth, but Azula thought of her dearly departed friend Ty Lee for inspiration, and it worked out well enough.

On the third day, she poured some wine for the prisoner. One the fifth day, he actually sipped some of it. And then, after several weeks, the prisoner responded during a pause in her blathering, agreeing with some comment about how nobles from Old Families had no concept about how the world around them really worked. Azula did not grin, did not stand up and crow in triumph, and definitely did not summon a pair of flames in her hands to illuminate her victorious visage. She just pretended to sip some wine and continued with the conversation.
The Unmasked Blue Spirit did not sell out his allies, or reveal any great truths. He just commented on completely innocuous topics. It was long, tedious work, but that's how a proper interrogation was done.

By the time word came of Zuzu's probable location, Azula had drawn the prisoner into a conversation about the merits of various bladed weapons. "A dao saber is all a competent warrior would ever need," she was saying, gesturing with her wine. "One cutting edge is enough if you know your forms, and its strength can overcome the thinner jian."

The prisoner gave a shake of his head, setting his hair—grown so long in captivity—swaying. "Speed is what wins fights, and a jian sword can stab in and out before anyone wielding a broadsword can bring his blade back around again."

"Maybe, but stabbing is such an inefficient way to win a fight. Even with a fatal wound, the warrior with the dao can still win the fight before the blood loss so much as slows her down. That's why knife fighters don't stab; they slice at tendons and arteries."

The prisoner grinned and sipped his wine. "I didn't know you liked to play with knives."

Azula gave a little one-shoulder shrug. "I used to know someone who loved them." Little references like that, bits of truth that came close but didn't actually remind the prisoner of the Fire Nation or dead friends who had died in a conflagration of blue flame, were how Azula kept the game interesting for herself.

The Unmasked Blue Spirit licked his lips and was about to say something else when there was a quick series of knocks on the door, a signal from the servants that Azula had urgent news waiting for her. She put her wine down on the table between her and the prisoner, shook her finger at him to playfully (but not too playfully) warn him off from stealing it, and got up to leave.

Outside in the hall, one of Father's mercenaries motioned at the telegraph station they had set up in one of the mansion's second-floor offices. "Prince Ozai has sent an encrypted transmission. We've set up the decoder for you."

Azula made a buzzard-beeline for the workstation as she pulled her personal decryption cog from her belt, trailed by the guard. She didn't waste a single moment, and in record time had the message translated:

"HUANGYAN ISLET. NAVY PIRATE PRISON. ZUKO BELIEVED CAPTIVE. EQUIPMENT AND INFORMATION READY AT SUKURU ISLAND."

Finally.

Azula’s heart flared. Zuzu was alive, just as Father said! Energized by the chance to do Father’s bidding, she jumped to her feet and faced the mercenary to say, "Have my things packed and ready to go in five minutes. I'll be taking the speedboat to Sukuru Island. Throw the prisoner back in his cell and keep him there until my father or I send word." Azula turned to go, but then realized she had five whole minutes to use as she wished, and decided to finish the job she had started. She grabbed a piece of paper and a brush, and started recording the facts she had gleaned from her latest conversations with the Unmasked Blue Spirit...

...he was extremely familiar with the northwestern Earth Kingdom and so probably operated extensively there, was expertly trained with weapons affordable only to the upper classes such as the jian, was part of an organization to which he maintained a strong emotional attachment, lied for a living, specialized in guerilla tactics, knew enough Fire Nation military secrets to qualify as a spy....
In a proper interrogation, the prisoner didn't know it was an interrogation at all.

As she finished the list, Azula was struck by inspiration, and on her way out of the mansion, she stopped by the supply closet where the prisoner’s Blue Spirit mask and twin dao blades were being stored.

It wouldn't do for anyone to know that Zuzu was being rescued by his little sister, after all.

Piandao met his lord after dark, and together they discussed murder.

"The princess just wired us," Piandao said as he entered Prince Ozai's parlor. "She's on her way to rescue Zuko."

Ozai was taking tea, and immediately put his cup down. "And now we worry after the both of them." He looked up at Piandao. "Don't misunderstand me; I have great confidence in Azula's abilities, but a parent can't help but worry. And accidents do happen in such a dangerous world."

Piandao gave an agreeable nod. "We could send reinforcements, if that would make you feel better? See if we can bribe a ship into swinging by the Huangyan Islet in case Princess Azula needs some help?"

"Azula will have a better chance if we leave her alone." Ozai's eyes narrowed. "I have yet to meet anyone who can match her ability wage war. And yes, that includes you."

Piandao raised his eyebrows. He should take professional offense- he was the first Weapon of the Fire Nation, after all- but the truth was that he really did fear to test himself against Azula. If it was just a matter of killing, either each other or some set of enemies, Piandao had no doubt that he was more capable and professional. But Azula dealt in fear, in cruelty, and that could win certain kinds of war.

So nodded like a good servant. "As you say, your highness."

Ozai raised his tea once again. "While we wait for word of Azula's success, we can turn our attention back to matters here at home. Zhao is responsible for Zuko's disappearance, all for the sake of petty power games. I want him dead, and I want it to be painful." He took a sip of his tea and sighed with pleasure.

Piandao closed his eyes for a moment. "Shall I make it look like an accident?"

Ozai gave a quick shake of his head. "Let there be no proven connection to us, but I want Zhao's corpse to send a message to anyone who dare to think they can touch my children. I want everyone in the Capital to be trading terrified whispers, and fools to be warned by their betters not to risk drawing my wrath."

Piandao bowed. "I shall prepare my sword, and it will be as you say. But it will take time to set up. This kind of demonstration requires a certain- hm, how to phrase it?"

"Practicality?"

"Ah, an excellent suggestion, your highness. Yes, I can hardly just storm the Command Center and cut people down until Zhao is dead." Piandao had learned that the key to not arousing the military's interest was making sure that its people died one at a time and in civilian surroundings. Then it was just their dragons coming home to roost.
Ozai waved a hand and turned back to his tea. "I trust you to see to it."

And so Piandao began his hunt. He went down to Upper Harbor City while the moon was hidden by the clouds, and spread both coin and instructions to follow Zhao and document his movements. At each meeting, Piandao wore his sword openly but did not speak his name. Each hireling asked, "How will I find you?" And Piandao would smile, touch the handle of his sword, and go on to describe how each spy would write his or her findings down and leave them in a dead drop. Ozai was clear about there being no actionable evidence of his involvement, and unlike when Lady Mai’s escape from the South Pole had to be arranged, there was no great rush in this matter.

Days passed, and Piandao collected the spy reports every night at midnight. Zhao was residing in Lower Harbor City and working out of an office in the Command Center, but he was taking the time to enjoy life in the Capital, enjoying dinners, hunts, and conferences with the Caldera’s Important People.

He might as well live up.

In no more than a week, Piandao intended to ambush the overly ambitious commander in an alley and stab him through the heart.

A lighthouse stood shining over the island prison where Zuzu supposedly waited, and although she had expected it after seeing the official layouts for the Navy outpost, Azula found herself pleased by its presence. She liked lighthouses, the way they rose above everything else and shined so brightly. There was an old one on Ember Island, decommissioned and abandoned, and Azula remembered how she had liked to visit it as a very young child, how she would insist to her Mother that-

Azula let that memory go. The visits to Ember Island had stopped before she had even begun her Firebending training, but she never forgot that lighthouse. Before she had learned practicality, she had always said she that once Fire Lord Azulon was dead, she was going to order a lighthouse built on top of the Fire Palace.

One that would shine with a blue light.

She was waiting on the ship Father had had assigned to her after her return from Crescent Island- an old Swordfish-class ocean-crossing speedboat- anchored far enough from base on Huangyan Islet that it wouldn't be spotted. She spent the afternoon meditating out on the deck, left alone in the sunlight amidst the ocean waves while two of Father's servants bundles her equipment for tonight. If she succeeded in her mission, she and Zuzu would go on to the Colonial Continent to continue their hunt for the Avatar. If her intelligence was wrong and Zuzu wasn't here to be rescued, she would allow the servants to return her to the Fire Nation so she could wait for the next opportunity.

There were no other possible outcomes to this mission.

Father wanted Zuko to be free, and Azula always did everything that her father commanded.

Once night had fallen and shadows dominated the landscape around the navy base, she got up and made for the rear of the ship, where a simple wooden canoe was waiting with all her equipment strapped to the sides. She was already wearing a dark tunic that lacked armor yet would allow her to move with maximum stealth and flexibility, but there was one last thing she had to put on.

The mask of the Blue Spirit.

Her face concealed and her identity replaced by that of a monster, Azula paddled her way across the ocean to Huangyan Islet. The waves were calm and the canoe cut through the water with little noise.
Azula was careful to raise and lower her paddle slowly; she had seen maps of the islet and base, but had been given no information on guard patrols, so all noise was a risk. Azula courted risk only when there was adequate payoff, and a mere hour of time was of no use to her compared to failing to rescue Zuzu.

Eventually, Azula brought her canoe just short the stone shore of the island. She slipped into the ocean and dragged her canoe onto land as slowly and quietly as possible, resting it in a small crevice in the rocky ground of the islet's edge. Then it was time to load up. A thin backpack went on first, followed by her stolen twin broadswords. Various special tools and supplies were tucked into her cuffs and boots. Finally, she slung the strap of a small cask over her shoulder, allowing her to carry it like a satchel.

Satisfied with her preparations, Azula crouched on the stone ground, breathing in the form of a warming exercise that would heat the seawater out of her clothing. While she steamed, she watched the islet's landscape. Beyond the rocks of the foundation, a sandy field of stubby dune grass led to the outer walls of the outpost. She saw no patrols on the field itself, but guards walked base's walls and peered out into the distant night. No doubt they were watching for pirate attacks, misguided attempts to free the prisoners hoarded on this island. During the war, Fire Lord Azulon had ordered that captured pirates be imprisoned and offered clemency in exchange for service in the Navy, hence the creation of outposts like this one. The war was over, but policy had been slow to catch up; now, captured pirates were a risk with no gain. It would be better to immediately execute all such criminals, to show strength and discourage opposition.

Still, it was an oversight that was benefitting Azula now, as without a pirate prison to hide him in, it was possible that Zuzu would be dead. That would have made Father sad.

Azula decided that she was satisfied with her observations, and it was time to move. She unstrapped a bundle of bamboo segments from her canoe and started off in a low stride. She would have to carry them across the dune-grass field and assemble them into a ladder that would let her climb over the base's outer wall, but she didn't anticipate any difficulty with that part. The ladder would eventually be discovered, of course, but there was no getting around it; grappling hooks and climbing spikes would be heard against the stone wall, bringing the guards all the sooner. At least by the time the ladder was discovered, Azula would be far away.

Careful planning like this minimized risk and maximized gain.

That was why Azula always won.

Zuko had never liked meditation, but he understood that it was a part of maintaining his Firebending. It had been a mere exercise in frustration back when his Fire had been lost, but in the weeks since Zhao had arrested him, it had been one of the few things keeping him sane.

Not that it was easy. Zuko breathed in and out, concentrating on maintaining the flame floating in his hands, and tried to push all distractions out of his mind: hatred for Zhao, frustration at himself for getting caught in the first place, fury over Mai's betrayal, confusion about Father, and interest in fellow prisoner Suki. He focused on the Flame, on the glow of Qi within his own body.

Yet he wasn't quite able to muster the concentration needed to ignore a sound of metal on metal coming from his cell's barred window. Zuko's eye snapped open, and in the light of his Firebending, he saw the leering grin of a goblin staring in at him.

Zuko gasped and snapped to his feet, ready to launch flame, but the goblin held a hand up in front of the window, giving a wave with blue tongues of flame dancing across the fingers.
Oh. A mask.

So he hadn't been abandoned, after all. Zuko was too exhausted by the thought to take any pleasure in it.

Then Suki's voice rang out from the other cell: "What's going on?"

Zuko turned and held up a hand to silence her. He didn't need her curiosity to ruin this.

When he looked back to the window, he found Azula- still wearing that ridiculous mask- holding a vial of some kind in her hand and tipping it to pour liquid at the top of the window's bars. It sizzled where it dripped and pooled at each bar's base. Once it was done smoking and popping, Zuko stepped forward to grab one of the bars. He yanked with his whole body, and popped it out with a quick scraping sound. He did the same for all the bars, and he barely had the last one out before Azula shoved a keg of something through the open window. Zuko caught it with surprise, and soon after his sister herself was climbing through the open window. She wore swords on her back and posed like she was expecting Zuko to applaud her.

He put the keg down. "Why are you coming in here? Shouldn't we be leaving?"

Azula ignored him behind her mask and moved to the cell's door. She produced another vial of the liquid from her sleeve, and poured its contents on the lock. Soon, the acid had done its work, and she swung the door open with what looked to Zuko like smugness. Even if he couldn't see her face, he had no doubt that this was his sister.

Zuko walked out of his cell to find Suki grasping at the bars of her own and staring at him. She said nothing, and he saw the plea in her eyes, but he thought back to her attempts to win his friendship. Zuko averted his one-eyed gaze. He didn't- He couldn't- Azula would never accept such a questionable ally.

Then Suki said, "You need that staff. The carved one with the hinges."

Zuko immediately looked up. The Avatar's staff was here? "You know about that?"

"You had a bag shoved over your head, but I saw what happened to it. Take me with you, and I'll help retrieve it." She smiled. "I'm a very useful friend."

Zuko turned to Azula, who was standing with visible impatience and her hands on her hips. "We need the staff," he said. "It belonged to the Avatar. It has his scent on it. We can trust Suki this far, at least."

Azula's head tilted and Zuko could tell that she caught the reference to June the bounty hunter's unique capabilities. She heaved a sigh behind her mask, the first sound he had heard her make so far, and held up a hand and made a clear 'stay here' gesture. Then she reached into her sleeve and tossed Zuko another acid vial.

It seemed that if they were going to take Suki with them, he would have to be the one to take action.

While Zuko poured the acid on the lock to Suki's cell, Azula slipped over to the door leading out to the main hallway and opened it with a quiet screech of rust. She passed through it just as the clang of the base's emergency gong started echoing through the window.

Azula smiled as she ran down the dark hall of the prison. The sound of the gong outside meant that
the guards had found her ladder right on schedule. It was time to give them something else to worry about. As she had always told Mai and Ty Lee, fake dangers made for adequate distractions, but the best way to draw your enemy's attention was to actually put them in life-threatening peril.

Hopefully, Zuzu’s new girlfriend wouldn’t be a distraction. At least she was observant.

Behind the bars of their cells, the prisoners were already stirring from their slumber at the sound of the activity outside, but Azula only had eyes for the lone guard patrolling just ahead. His back was to her, but he turned as she closed in on him. Any defense he might have raised was cut off by a jump of fear as he saw her snarling mask coming at him out of the shadow, and Azula was on him before he could collect himself, leaping and grabbing his shoulders as their bodies crashed together. Before they could fall to the floor, she coiled her legs and then kicked out into the open air with her full strength, adding a spin to the fall that slammed the guard into the bars of the closest cell with enough force to ring his armor like a bell. Azula shoved off the man to land on her feet, and watched with pleasure from behind her mask as the prisoners behind the bars grabbed through them to hold the guard in place.

Azula reached out and plucked the keys from the guard's belt, jingling them in the air.

The prisoners, pirates all, stared out at her with a mix of fear and longing.

The guard screamed and more hands reached out to claw at him.

Azula quickly moved to the cell's door and tried keys until the lock yielded. She tossed the set to the first pirate with the courage to step outside the cell. He caught them blinked with surprise, and then grinned. He obviously knew what to do with them. Without waiting for thanks, Azula ran back to her helpless big brother.

As soon as Zuko got Suki's cell open, he said, "So where is the staff?"

Suki pushed past him and wagged a finger in his face. "I'll be happy to show you, but the deal is that I come with you, not just that I get out of my cell. I'll make it easier for you and the masked marvel to honor the bargain by providing information as you need it."

Zuko was already regretting his promise, but before he could say anything, Azula returned and motioned to follow her back into his own cell. She pointed Zuko and Suki to the window, and he caught her doing something with that keg she had brought as he climbed out into the night air. What could that be about?

Whatever it was, Zuko put it out of his mind as he emerged into relative freedom. The base was surrounded by high walls, but above them he could see the stars of the night stretching into infinity. He took a deep breath of the sea air and pressed himself against the wall of the prison building as Suki climbed out of the window. The gong was still being sounded from somewhere, and Zuko could see soldiers emerging from the outpost's various barracks and buildings and streaming towards the prison.

At first, he thought this was all for him, but then he realized that the soldiers were instead moving towards the prison's entrance, around the corner from where Zuko was now. What could-

Azula finally emerged from the window, and Zuko spun to face his masked sister with a snarl. "When you ran off, you were freeing the pirates! You started a riot to cover for us!"

Azula just tilted her head.
Zuko took a step towards her. "People are going to die."

She shrugged.

Zuko ground his teeth together and told himself that this was no place to offer an Agni Kai challenge. Besides, he doubted that he could beat Azula. He forced himself to keep his voice even as he said, "What next?"

Azula tapped Zuko's chest and pointed at the top of the lighthouse that rose up on the other side of the outpost. He was going to tell her to knock off this ridiculous silent routine and speak plainly, but then she slipped a set of compact climbing spikes out of her boots and tossed them to him.

He blinked. "You want me to climb the lighthouse? To the top?"

Azula made an approving gesture and then reached out to grab Suki's forearm.

"Hey!" Suki's eyes went wide. "What's this masked freak doing?"

Zuko sighed. "It's time for you to show her where the Avatar's staff is. I guess you'll be meeting me on top of the lighthouse."

Azula reached out and patted him on the head, and Zuko felt completely justified in slapping her hand away.

While Zuzu got started sneaking his way around the scrambling soldiers, Azula yanked on this 'Suki' again. If the girl tried to delay, the swords would come out.

But that turned out not to be necessary. Suki pointed across the base's grounds at the administration building. "They brought it in there. I didn't see where, but I saw who was holding it. I'll tell you who- once we get over there. A little information at a time."

Azula blinked behind her mask. This girl thought to control a Princess of the Fire Nation? Well, she certainly had confidence in herself. She wasn't the brightest, thinking that such games would keep Azula from burning her face off at the soonest convenience, but few people were as smart as Azula.

With that thought, she pulled Suki into a run. They traveled the perimeter of the outpost, hugging the shadows at the base of the outer wall while all the soldiers were focused on the prison riot. However, they found a pair of guards flanking the administration building's entrance. Azula just let go of Suki and reached for her swords. She waited to draw them until the guards finally noticed her, and by the time the blades cleared the sheath, she was upon her enemies. Their spears were poor weapons at close range, and their light Home Guard armor wasn't meant for full armored content. Azula’s sabers found flesh, and the guards fell quickly, their cries lost in the din of all the other activity around the base.

Azula stood above the bodies of the fallen guards. She had killed before, when she burned the smaller Blue Spirit, but this was the first time she had taken the lives of Fire Nation natives.

It was no harder than killing rebels.

She turned and motioned for Suki to approach. The other girl paid no attention to the bodies as she trotted over and said, "I saw the administrator herself carrying the staff. It's probably in her office."

Azula nodded. She had studied the documentation for outposts like this one, and all the buildings were constructed according to the same plans. She knew exactly where the Commander's suite
would be. She waved for Suki to follow and dashed into the building.

Progressing was a simple matter. The riot had drawn the guards away, and only servants and aides were around to stand in Azula's way. Seeing her mask and swords, they fled, and she left Suki to take on those who were trying to sound an alarm. Azula focused on moving forward as fast as possible, striking only at those who stood in her way, sprinting down the halls so fast that she took the corners by running up along the walls in defiance of gravity. She quickly found the suite that would serve as the Commander's office and living quarters.

The Commander was inside, and Azula barely glanced at the woman before cutting her down.

She spent more timing looking for the Avatar's staff, but that wasn't a challenge, either. It was hanging like a trophy above the shrine in the Commander's office, as if it represented some kind of accomplishment, and not just a favor called in by an opportunist like Zhao.

Azula was taking it down as Suki arrived in the office. Rather redundantly, Zuzu's little girlfriend felt the need to say, "That's it!"

Azula pointed back out the way they came. If they moved quickly, they could be out of the building before word spread to the rest of the base.

Zuko's climb was not easy. Sneaking to the lighthouse itself was no problem; it was just a matter of staying away from the prison building, waiting in the shadows whenever someone wandered nearby, and moving only when there were other sounds to cover his movement. These were all skills Zuko had acquired during his years of wandering, but climbing a sheer stone tower with nothing holding him up but the spikes he wore on his hands and feet was a completely new experience.

All it would take was someone glancing up in his direction, and his choice would be to either fall to his death, or keep going and hope that his enemies would fail to reach him with fire or blades. It wasn't much of a choice, so Zuko pushed all worry out of his mind and focused solely on his climb. Even if one of the soldiers did notice him, there was nothing he could do about it, so he didn't even pay attention to anything but the lighthouse, his spikes, and the strength in his limbs.

He kept moving up towards the light, and eventually reached his spot in the sky.

Zuko climbed over the rail to the gallery around the shining light and prepared for a fight, but he found no one else up here. All he had to do, then, was wait for Azula. Naturally, when he spotted her, it was because she had attracted too much attention.

Looking down from the gallery, Zuko first noticed a group of people approaching the lighthouse, seeming to come from the direction of the base's cluster of residences. Then a pair of shadows peeled off from the outer wall right next to the base of the lighthouse, and Zuko realized he was watching a chase. So Azula was favoring speed over stealth, at this point. He punched a series of fireballs down at the pursuers, striking close enough to scatter them despite his lack of depth perception, and saw the pair of shapes that must have been Azula and Suki disappear against the side of the lighthouse. They had begun their own climb.

The cadence of the clanging gong changed, and the cacophony of the siege of the prison shifted in tone. Zuko turned to see some of the soldiers moving over to the lighthouse, and realized that he had drawn attention with his Firebending.

He had no idea why Azula had wanted them to be at the top of the lighthouse, but now it looked like they were about to become trapped.
Azula was starting to regret the Silent Blue Spirit routine that had kept her from giving Zuko explicit instructions to stay hidden. She would have thought that much obvious, but apparently her big brother needed even the most obvious things spelled out for him. It wasn't so much a miscalculation as a new challenge for her to overcome, but even Azula found some challenges tedious.

She was hanging from the side of the lighthouse only by a set of small spikes. Suki, in turn, was hanging from Azula’s back, legs wrapped around her waist and arms around her shoulders. Azula would have been happy to drop her passenger when the spears and fireballs started rising up towards her, but the Avatar’s staff was tied Suki’s back.

Suki screeched, "Incoming!"

Azula stopped her climb just as a spear flew up to strike the space just above her head, and it took a supreme act of will to not flinch. Suki let go of Azula with her right arm and actually reached out to catch the spear as it rebounded off the lighthouse, and spun it in her grip before throwing it back at their attackers with only a slight shifting of her weight. Azula started to climb again as Suki quickly grabbed on again. It was all so efficient that it might have been choreographed. She was starting to like Zuzu’s little girlfriend.

And Azula wasn't blind to the fact that she was out of trusted, high quality servants. Mai and Ty Lee had both been Weapons of the Fire Nation, but Ty Lee had died on the day of the Comet, and that Water Tribe boy's possession of Mai’s decryption cog indicated that she was dead as well.

Perhaps Suki could fill the void in Azula's life. Suki was obviously foreign-born, but that was no obstacle to usefulness.

All Azula had to do was steal Suki's loyalty from Zuzu.

It was almost worthwhile just for the entertainment value.

Azula continued to climb as fireballs rained down from above to distract her enemies, signaling Zuko's return to the battle.

Zuko couldn't be sure, with the stress of the battle, but he had the feeling that Azula had completed her climb to the top of the lighthouse faster than it taken him, and with Suki hanging from her back.

So long as they all got out of here safely, Zuko decided he could live with that.

As soon as the girls were over the railing and standing on the gallery, Suki in possession of the Avatar's staff, Zuko said, "Now what? We're trapped up here!"

Azula, still wearing that mask, shook a finger at him. She took off the sheathed swords hanging from her back to reveal a flat knapsack. She tossed the swords to Zuko as she went on to take the backpack off as well, and opened it to reveal what looked like a set of voluminous bedsheets with a leather harness tied to each of them.

"Gliding sheets," Suki hissed. "We can float down!"

Azula nodded. She tossed one bundle to Zuko, and took the other for herself and started putting the
harness on. He copied her, not quite sure how this was supposed to work. Were these sheets really enough to slow their fall to safe speeds?

As he tightened his straps, Azula tied Suki to herself so that they would be holding each other face-to-face (or face to unsettling mask, in this case), and then affixed what looked like a standard military flare to her sleeve. Azula handed one to Zuko as well, and he was momentarily at a loss trying to find a space for it where it couldn’t set his clothes on fire. Finally, he ripped the sleeve of his prison tunic into a dangling strip and wrapped that around the flare. It might burn his skin dangling that way, but another scar on his body wouldn’t matter.

Azula activated her flare and took a running leap with Suki into the night. Their gliding sheet flared behind them and caught the wind, billowing out and carrying the two girls towards the ocean.

Partially reassured, Zuko ran and jumped out after them.

Compared to some of the other stunts he had pulled, Zuko found the experience to be only mildly terrifying as the islet- and then the dark waters of the ocean- passed far below his dangling feet. The wind splashed against his face while the flare bounced against his arm and there was nothing to his world but the Air cradling his body and the Fire against his skin.

There was also gravity, and its hold on Zuko increased as he drifted out over the ocean.

When he landed, it was a moment of chaos.

The water splashed around him as he crashed into the waves, and then the gliding sheet fell down on top of him, absorbing the seawater quickly and dragging him down. The flare on his sleeve sizzled as it submerged, but soon Zuko’s ability to hear was blocked by the waves that enclosed his head.

The harness. He had to get the harness off.

Zuko fumbled at the straps, and quickly decided that it was easier to just grab the ropes that attached it to the gliding sheet and pump enough heat into his fist to burn through them. Bubbles of steam burst out from between his fingers with each pulse of fire, but the ropes snapped easily, and then he was yanking the cloth away from him. The white material bobbed and pulsed like an octo-jellyfish as it sank into the dark waters, and then Zuko turned his eye away and kicked up to the surface.

He found Suki and Azula both treading water, waiting for him.

At least Zuko didn’t need to ask about what came next. "You have someone waiting to pick us up. That's why we wore the flares."

Azula finally pulled her mask up, and she was smiling through the seawater that dripped down her face. "It's good that don't need everything spelled out for you. Father provided a boat that will take us- all of us- to the Earth Kingdom to continue your hunt."

Zuko looked over at Suki, who smiled in the starlight and said, "I'm just doing what your sister tells me. This is your sister, right? She gives orders like a little sister."

Zuko turned back to Azula. "And what's to keep Zhao from chasing me? He’ll be looking for me now."

"Hmmm." Azula bobbed in the water like she was vacationing at Ember Island. "That is a concern. I wonder how we will ever manage."

Zuko scowled back at her even as the sound of a motorized boat grew louder over the waves. An
armored ship - small but hardy enough for ocean voyages - skipped over to a stop nearby, and Zuko swam over to it. The crew helped him up first, then Azula, and only brought Suki aboard after Azula's nod. As the Kyoshi Warrior was climbing up, a crack echoed through the air, and Zuko turned back to the islet to see a plume of smoke rising from where the prison building would be.

He spun to Azula and found her leaning against the boat's rail, dripping with satisfaction. "Oh, what do you know, someone left an explosive in the prison that brought most of it down. I guess now no one will know that you've escaped."

So that was what the mysterious keg was for. Azula had killed so many to make this escape happen - Father had *authorized* this kind of activity, or Azula never would have even considered it.

Now that the war was over, was the Fire Nation turning in on itself for conquest?

Zuko hated this. But he had promised himself that he wouldn't give up. He would return home, and discover the truth about Father. He would honor the people who had to die to overcome traitors like Zhao.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

Of course, the crew looked to Azula before they got to work.

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Zhao had been in the Fire Nation for just over a week and was expecting word of Zuko's arrival any day now. This evening he planned on attending a dinner party at Admiral Chan's estate, where they and the other officers in their partnership would celebrate their upcoming audience with the Fire Lord to present Ozai's treason.

Everything was going according to plan.

He was in his office, just finishing up an analysis on the pirate attacks on the platinum shipments when there was a knock at his door. "What is it?"

The door slid open, and Admiral Jeong-Jeong strode in with a straight back and a steady gait.

Zhao rose and was about to ask what this was about, but then Jeong-Jeong threw a piece of paper on his desk.

Zhao had a bad feeling about this. He picked up the paper and read: "PIRATE OR REBEL ATTACK ON HUANGYAN ISLET REPORTED. COMMANDER KANRISHA DEAD. PRISON DESTROYED. MOST PRISONERS KILLED. IDENTITIES OF SURVIVORS CANNOT BE VERIFIED. REINFORCEMENTS AND SUPPORT DISPATCHED. FURTHER INTELLIGENCE PENDING."

Oh no.

Prince Zuko - what if he was dead? What if he was missing? What if- what if he had escaped? And what was Zhao going to do about his accusations against Prince Ozai now? He had no witness! No hard evidence!

Zhao looked up at Jeong-Jeong, whose face was as serious and grave as he could remember. "Do you know what this means for me?"

Jeong-Jeong nodded. "It means, as the enlisted men say, that 'you've really stuck your foot in it this time.' That's why I'm here to offer you something.
"What?"

"A way out."

Zhao definitely had a bad feeling about this.

TO BE CONTINUED
Deal and Demons

Chapter Summary

Zhao discovers what he's willing to do to survive. Piandao, meanwhile, demonstrates his expertise.

Deal and Demons

Cadet Zhao's first Firebending lesson with Admiral Jeong-Jeong was nothing like he expected.

Zhao had recently begun his formal apprenticeship under the admiral, serving as Jeong-Jeong's personal aide aboard the command ship Dominance. His only two official duties were to perform whatever errands the admiral had for him and gratefully accept any lessons offered, which for the first few days had left Zhao standing by and occasionally retrieving tools or passing messages to the ship's crew. Finally, late on the third night of the apprenticeship, Zhao returned to Jeong-Jeong's shadowy cabin after passing on some orders to find the admiral kneeling at a desk and squinting at some reports in the low light of a single lamp.

Jeong-Jeong looked up. "Cadet Zhao, it is time to begin your training."

Zhao immediately stood straighter. "Sir! It is my honor."

"Yes. Come forward, and stand right there."

Zhao did as directed, taking a position in the center of the cabin.

"Good. Now, take a horse stance."

Zhao did so, lowering into the wide-legged squatting position. He had already learned the basics of Firebending at the Academy, and made sure to keep his legs far apart to show how well he had taken the lessons.

Jeong-Jeong's eyes fell back to his reports. "Wider."

Straining, Zhao shifted his legs a bit further apart.

"Good. Summon the Flame in your hands."

Zhao brought his hands together, and with a single exhalation, brought an instance of light and heat into the world. The flame easily outshone the cabin's cloudy gas lamp, a proper testament to the power that Zhao had within him.

Jeong-Jeong continued reading his reports.

Zhao held his stance and frowned. Perhaps the admiral's eyes were failing, and he didn't realize that anything had happened? Zhao began taking heavier breaths, putting more power into the flame in his hands, making the cabin shine with light.

Jeong-Jeong never looked up.
Zhao waited, straining in his stance, trying to focus on keeping his breathing steady. The flame in his hands danced and roiled, supple with energy and longing to be released. It would be easier to control at a smaller size, but Zhao refused to show weakness in front of his new master. He gritted his teeth, ignoring the sweat slowly traveling down his neck and into his armor, trying to keep his legs from trembling even as the flame in his hands flickered with ambition.

Zhao made it another two minutes before he collapsed in a heap and the flame died.

Only then, with Zhao panting on the floor, did Admiral Jeong-Jeong look up. "I didn't tell you to stop."

Zhao scrambled back to his feet, the lack of dignity hurting more than his legs. "You were ignoring me!"

"I was reading."

"Exactly!"

Jeong-Jeong's expression never changed. "Why do you think I asked you to create a light? I have another hour of reports to go through, here, and in this low light I'd quickly get a headache."

"You-" Zhao tried to swallow his fury. The admiral was highly respected, and known as one of the greatest Firebenders alive, but to be treated like a- like a utility lamp- "You said you would train me!"

Jeong-Jeong snapped to his feet so fast that Zhao never even saw the transition. "How dare you question my honor!" His formerly placid face was twisted in a scowl that made the thin scars across his right eye disappear in the folds of skin. "Do you think yourself so important that you can dictate what you will learn?" He stepped over the desk and approached Zhao with slow, deliberate steps.

Zhao was beginning to fear that he was about to get a beating. "No, sifu, I-"

"Shut your mouth."

Zhao shut it.

Jeong-Jeong sighed, and turned away. "I asked you to create a flame. I did not tell you for how long. If you had not been so eager to receive praise, you would have realized that and produced a flame over which you could maintain precise, ongoing control. Instead, you pushed yourself too far. Success in this lesson would have been to keep the flame going long enough for me to finish my reading. Success also would have been to last as long as your gong fu would have allowed, demonstrating the limits of your technique. You suffered failure because you didn't listen to directions, you over-reached, and then you lashed out in a vain attempt to deny our own failings."

By the last word, Zhao was standing hunched and defeated. This was nothing like he had expected. Surely, the admiral would dismiss him from service now, declaring the favor owed to Zhao's father repaid but unsuccessful.

Jeong-Jeong apparently saw that his wisdom had been accepted, and gave a half-nod that almost looked satisfied. "I can see I have much to teach you."

Teach? He still-

Cadet Zhao snapped back to attention and bowed. "Thank you, sifu!"

Jeong-Jeong glanced back out of the side of his scarred eye. "Thank me by learning, and letting me
save you from your flaws."

Decades later, Zhao once again stood before his sifu in a posture of defeat.

Zhao's office in the Central Command building was much more comfortable than Jeong-Jeong's sparsely appointed cabin on the *Dominance*, and was properly illuminated with several well-cleaned lamps, but he nevertheless felt like he lacked any advantage. The audience with the Fire Lord, where that traitor Zuko would have been presented as evidence of Prince Ozai's treasonous conspiracy, had already been requested. The rest of High Command was depending on him. He had pushed them all to make a play against the Royal Family, and now-

-now Zuko was either dead or escaped, and *someone* had to be sacrificed. Zhao was under no illusions that his superiors would offer him any protection. This was definitely the end of his career, and possibly the end of his life.

And now Jeong-Jeong stood before him once again, his hair whiter, but nothing about him any softer.

Zhao clenched his fists. "What help can you possibly give me now?" Perhaps his old sifu intended to take the blame?

Jeong-Jeong showed no sign of the drunkenness he had displayed when Zhao first came to Capital Island. His gaze was as steady as ever, and there wasn't even the slightest tremor in his hands as they clasped together. "I will get you off the island tonight. I will get you out of the Fire Nation, beyond the reach of any political enemies, including the Fire Lord. I will give you a new career, and the chance to once again rise to power."

Zhao didn't feel any better. "And what would you be getting in return?"

Jeong-Jeong's eyebrows rose, but he said nothing.

Zhao shook his head. "I don't believe you are doing this out of kindness. You want something from me, or your allies want something. You traded favors with my father, once upon a time, and now you're trying to trade favors with me."

Jeong-Jeong gave a single, crisp nod. "You're right, of course. There will be a trade of services. And I am honoring my original promise to save you from yourself."

Zhao didn't want to hear it. "What are your terms?"

Jeong-Jeong shook his head. "They don't matter."

"No?"

"No. You agree to them, because you have no other choice. I will explain them when you need to know, but until then that knowledge will just be a distraction."

Zhao wanted to argue. He couldn't be treated this way! But Jeong-Jeong wasn't *wrong*. Zhao briefly considered what kind of duties would be too terrible, too odious for him to perform in exchange for his life-

-and could think of nothing. "Very well, Master. I *do* accept. So what do we do now?"

Jeong-Jeong gave that same half-nod he always did whenever Zhao finally absorbed one of his
lessons. "Now, we begin. Spies have been tracking your movements, and some may even be watching his building right now."

Zhao blinked. "In Lower Harbor City? But the Navy has every street under guard here, and-

"And are you confident that those guards would keep your enemies out? Zhao, that wire about the prison attack came this morning."

Zhao's stomach lurched. The sun was setting on the capital now, and soon Admiral Chan's dinner party would be starting. Did he know-

Of course he did. It was possible that Chan was even attempting to set Zhao up, although knowing the admiral, it was just as likely that keeping the party was to give the impression that everything was fine. Either way, Jeong-Jeong was right. Zhao could rely on nothing at this point. "We need to leave discreetly, then."

"Yes. I doubt the Navy is spying on you, for now, so we can move freely in this building, at least."

Jeong-Jeong motioned to the door. "I have a disguise waiting in my own office, the armor and helmet of a duty guard. I'll give you identification and a packet of orders to carry to my ship in the harbor, and meet you there later."

Zhao nodded. So long as the paperwork was good- and Jeong-Jeong had always been meticulous with his paperwork- then it would be both a simple and effect ruse. He followed his old master into the corridors that would lead to the office, using the walk as an opportunity to try to make sense of his new world.

"So what," he said softly to Jeong-Jeong, "was that display back when I first arrived? I never took you for a thespian, Master, never mind so capable as to fake inebriation."

"That was not theater," came the soft reply. Jeong-Jeong's face betrayed no shame or embarrassment. "When I have no honorable service to perform, I fill the hours as I am inclined. Liquor is most effective in helping me to forget the horrors of the war."

"And spirited me away from accusations of treason is honorable service?"

"Serving my new lord is honorable. The Fire Lord- the Fire Nation- has no honor."

"New lord?" Zhao didn't like the sound of that. "Who is your new lord?"

A trace of a smile was almost twisting Jeong-Jeong's lip. "That is one of the details which will only distract you now."

Piandao knew something was wrong when it was only an hour to Admiral Chan's dinner party and Zhao still hadn't left Central Command.

"You're sure you haven't seen him pass through the gate," he said, hidden from view by both the shadows of the alleyway and a stylish hood. There was no question in his words.

The old woman- a cook who sold fried foods out of cart to the Navy personnel and did some spying in Lower Harbor City as a sideline- nodded. "He always makes a fuss, that one, even when he's on business."

Piandao had to agree with that. Zhao couldn't blow his nose without putting on a show for anyone who happened to be watching; he was probably his own best audience, but the psychology of the
man was hardly important compared to his habits. Zhao should have left for the party by now, which
would have let Piandao conveniently murder him on a lonely street somewhere, but he had broken
his habits, which meant he was trying to evade detection. Had he received word of Zuko's rescue
already? The news had forced Piandao himself to finally execute Ozai's assassination orders this
night.

It wasn't hard to guess what it might force Zhao to do.

"Thank you," Piandao said to the old woman, and tossed her a coin that glinted even in the dim light
of the crescent moon. Piandao quickly made his way back through Lower Harbor City, staying off
the main lanes and always keeping his hood up. Even so, when he reached the gate to the Capital
Harbor, he tossed the guard there two coins of the kind he had given his street spy.

Even with the sun nothing more than a mere orange glow on the horizon, there was activity on the
docks. The cities of the Capital- especially the Caldera- had 'special' needs when it came to
resources, and so there was always cargo of some kind being unloaded. Piandao kept his hood up
and found a dockworker who had proved reliable in the past, and started a conversation by holding
up a coin. "I want to know if any ship- any ship- intends to set sail tonight. Use the regular dead
drop."

The burly man took the coin and made it disappear into his vest with a quickness and grace that any
martial artist would have envied. "I'll ask around."

"Discreetly," Piandao said.

"Discreetly. Yes, sir."

"Good man." Satisfied, Piandao began to hunt down a rickshaw that could take him back up the hill
to Caldera City. He had a dinner party to attend.

Admiral Chan was said to host such wonderful gatherings, although tonight's was likely to have
problems.

Zhao couldn't help but let out a relieved breath when he boarded Jeong-Jeong's ship, still wearing his
anonymous guard armor. The craft was a standard destroyer docked close to the Royal Plaza, the
kind of floating fortress that had allowed the Fire Nation to dominate the seas for decades. Zhao
didn't know what role the ship was serving currently, but most of the crew carefully paid him no
attention as he walked up the boarding plank. Before Zhao could even get his helmet off, the captain
walked over and said, "I believe you have orders for me."

Zhao handed over the scroll provided by Jeong-Jeong.

The captain accepted it without bothering to look at it. "All right, then, go wait for the admiral in his
cabin. Don't talk to any of the crew."

Zhao didn't like this. He pondered the situation as he made his way into the depths of the ship. He
had been thinking that Jeong-Jeong's new lord was a noble working to get his or her claws into some
Navy assets, but those kinds of agreements were never shared with a crew right in the Capital
Harbor. It was just a short rickshaw ride to the Central Command building, where the whole thing
could be reported by someone with an overdeveloped sense of honor. That suggested this crew
thought they were operating under legitimate orders, but knew Zhao's presence to be a secret.

What was his old master dragging him into?
A dinner party was no place to wear a hood, so instead Piandao wrapped a scar around his head that left only his eyes visible. He approached Admiral Chan's house openly, and carried his sheathed sword at the ready.

The guards at the mansion's gate visibly blanched when they saw him coming.

Piandao was not in a good mood, considering the difficulties with Zhao, but that was no excuse for a lack of professionalism. The guards were not his designated targets, so when they drew swords against him, he made sure to merely disarm them, and then smashed their faces with the butt of his weapon.

He walked on without slowing.

This was the Caldera, the center of all Fire Nation culture, and so there were no other guards to hinder Piandao as he proceeded across the courtyard and into the mansion itself. Servants scattered at the sight of him stalking through the halls, and Piandao could hear the echoing chatter of Admiral Chan's dinner guests.

Piandao headed deeper into the mansion. The guest of honor had not yet arrived, after all, so Chan himself would not have made his own appearance.

He found the admiral pacing in his bedroom, dressed in a fashionable set of orange robes that looked new. Chan turned with an expression of annoyance at Piandao's arrival, but then his eyes went wide and his face went white.

Before Chan could move, Piandao had crossed the distance and raised his jian sword so that the point hovered- unwavering in the air- just shy of the admiral's throat.

Chan said, "What-

"I want Zhao."

Chan gave as much of a shake of his head as he could without touching the blade. "I don't know!"

Piandao looked in the other man's eyes, and nodded. "No, you don't."

His blade whistled in the air, and Chan's body dropped to the ground. Piandao flicked the blade to get the blood off of it before returning it to its sheath. If Zhao was not found, at least his commanding officer and co-conspirator would carry the message of Ozai's wrath.

On the way out, Piandao was confronted by a young man- he couldn't have been older than Prince Zuko- with well-muscled arms and a dimness in his eyes. "Who are you? Where's my dad?"

Piandao brushed past the boy without slowing.

Chan the Younger's cries for his father echoed as Piandao walked out into the night. This time, the guards made no attempt to challenge him.

Zuko had slept through most of the day, exhausted from the effort of escaping the Navy's island prison, lost in dreams of dark spirits. Goblins, fanged and snarling, dragged him through forest paths that led nowhere, leading him along so quickly that he stumbled over rocks and roots. They laughed at his tripping with voices like thorns covered in honey, and taunted him to burn them for their disrespect. Yet when he tried to attack them, to show them what his rage could do, they turned to smoke and flew away on the wind.
He woke with a start to find Azula watching him from the other side of their ship's small cabin. "What do you want?"

"Are you rested? There's planning to be done, but I wouldn't want to push you too hard." She smiled sharply in the light of the lamp. "You're not used to this kind of excitement, after all."

Zuko sat up on the cot. "I'm ready for anything."

Azula rolled her eyes and moved to the cabin's door. She opened it, leaned out, and called, "Get in here. It's time."

When Azula stepped back into the cabin, Suki followed her. "Now," she said, looking back over to Zuko, "our first order of business is to determine why I shouldn't kill your little girlfriend and throw her body into the sea."

Zuko stood up, startled at the threat, but Suki didn't seem concerned. She bowed to Azula and said, "That's a fair question. I know that Zuko has been banished from your homeland, and that he's chasing the Avatar. Well, I used to be a double agent hidden amongst the rebels of Kyoshi Island, and I lived and worked with the Avatar for almost a month."

Zuko already knew this, and so looked over to see Azula's reaction, but of course his sister's face betrayed nothing. She could be as inscrutable as Mai, sometimes.

Suki continued, "Zhao murdered my handler and framed me for it, then arrested me and kept me on his ship so that he could use my knowledge to hunt the Avatar. Except he lost the trail completely after Crescent Island, so he stowed me and Zuko in that prison and went off to chase something else. I don't have much knowledge of Zhao, but I know the Avatar and his companions. I can help you."

Azula looked over to Zuko. "And you trust her?"

Zuko lowered his eye to the floor. "I trusted her enough to free her. She was imprisoned unjustly by a traitor." He remembered something Azula had said earlier, and added, "And we're not dating. I would have done the same for anyone."

"How honorable of you." Azula snorted. "And our little double agent thinks her help is worth the risk of letting her live with the knowledge that I assaulted a Fire Navy outpost?"

"Ha," Suki scoffed. "Who would believe me? I'm a filthy foreign spy who obviously would sell out to anyone with two coppers to rub together, and I'm probably just trying to seduce Zuko to get to the Royal Family's riches, anyway. Someone as capable as you isn't really risking anything with me."

"No?" Azula's voice was tinged with amusement, and Zuko wondered if it was safe to bait his sister this way.

"No." Suki crossed her arms over her chest. "That's why you still owe me for my help. I want you to get my sister to safety, and in exchange I'll do everything in my power to get you the Avatar."

Zuko blinked. He remembered what Suki had told him about her sister, and so explain, "An Earthbender serving under Zhao's command in the Navy. You want us to- what, kidnap her?"

Suki shrugged. "That would work, but I'll leave the details up to you. Your sister obviously has connections."

Azula nodded. "Obviously. So we get your sister out of harm's way, set her up somewhere beyond Zhao's reach- not that I expect him to be long for the world- and win the services of the world's only
free-agent Avatar Expert?" She tapped her chin. "I'm not sure how much you really know about the Avatar, but you're capable, scrappy, and intelligent. And you know how to flatter. Very well, we're agreed. I'll send a wire to my Father to recover your sister as soon as we land."

Suki's own eyes were narrowed. "And how do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't," Azula said simply. "But Zuzu is a man of honor, and he'd get cranky if I went back on my word. Right?"

Zuko decided to say nothing. His sister had apparently noticed his inability to challenge her worst tendencies.

Azula waved it away. "Well, we want the Avatar as quickly as possible, and I'm not delaying until you have proof of your sister's safety. Your best guarantee is to make yourself a useful tool, so that I'll have incentive to reward you and cultivate your eager and happy service. I expect much from my allies, but I am more than happy to reward loyalty and high standards. Your first advance payment will be your life. Is that sufficient?"

Zuko noticed that Azula wasn't making any threats against Suki's sister. If Father made the arrangements Azula described, then his forces would obviously always know Suki's sister's whereabouts and hold full responsibility for her protection.

He doubted that Suki had missed that angle, either.

Nevertheless, she fell to her knees and bowed to Azula, pressing her forehead against the floor.

Azula herself was grinning. "Excellent. You may rise. Now, we just need to make our plans. We have the staff, and once we reach the Earth Kingdom and I wire Father, I can ask him to arrange another meeting with June."

At Suki's questioning glance, Zuko said, "June is a bounty hunter. She has a shirshu- a big hairy thing that can hunt by scent, even across a continent. She'll track down the Avatar for us. The problem is when we get close. The Avatar is powerful and wily, and he has people protecting him."

Azula nodded. "The Waterbenders and Water Tribe rebels. Also, those Blue Spirit warriors- yes, Zuzu, I didn't come up with the mask on my own; I'm curious as to who will respond when reports of a Blue Spirit attacking the prison are circulated. And the Avatar is most likely building a coalition of Earth Kingdom rebels as well."

"And Mai," Zuko added. He couldn't keep his voice from darkening at the memory of her betrayal.

Azula blinked. "Mai?"

"She sided with the Avatar at Crescent Island." Zuko felt Fire flare within his heart, but it was not a good fire, not a clean fire. It seared his Qi-lines and made his stomach hurt. "That's why I couldn't capture him. I had him in my hands-"

"What?" Azula's shriek echoed off the cabin's metal walls.

Zuko took a step back from his sister. "I never saw Mai after the volcano erupted, but if the Avatar survived then-"

"I thought she was dead!" Azula's fists were clenched, and smoke was pouring from between her fingers. Her gaze lost focus and she meandered through the small cabin. "She betrayed me! Me! I don't- Why-" She whirled on Zuko. "Are you positive? This makes no sense! You make no sense!"
Zuko held up his hands in a weak defense. "She said it to me, directly, before pinning me to a column." He left out that Mai had also offered for Azula to lick ash.

Azula went very, very still. Zuko was beginning to think that she had hurt herself, but then she said, almost at whisper, "Mai is dead. Mai, and everyone she still cares about."

Zuko couldn't help but shudder at the certainty in that voice. He didn't want anyone to die, he just wanted to go home, but he had the feeling that contradicting his sister now would be physically dangerous. Instead, he decided to go outside for some fresh air. He motioned to Suki as he moved, and she was quick to follow him.

It was much cooler outside on the deck, where Father's mercenaries piloted the ship across the waves. Zuko didn't remember it being that much warmer inside, at least not when he had been alone. "That was kind of scary," Suki said once they were beyond Azula's hearing.

Zuko could only nod. "Now you know the kind of deal you just made. No one denies Azula what she wants."

The starlight revealed Suki's shudder.

Zhao paced and wondered if he was about to die.

Jeong-Jeong's cabin on this ship was as sparsely decorated as any of his rooms over the years, but Zhao found it overwhelming nonetheless. The metal walls seemed to close in on him, hiding him from the rest of the world but also keeping him from seeing any dangers that might be coming. Zhao had no desire to die, but if he had to, he'd rather it be in close combat, where he could at least leave his enemies a burn to remember him by. Why had he engaged in the skullduggery of politics? Why had Prince Zuko and Lady Mai sought to ruin his path to power? Why had the Spirits reached out and sabotaged the good work Zhao was doing for his nation?

Zhao didn't expect that the explanations would make him feel any better, but having them denied to him was just insulting.

He was startled out of his pacing when the door screeched open and Jeong-Jeong walked in. "There were no problems with the disguise or the journey, I take it?"

Zhao shook his head. "I seem to have successfully deserted from the Navy. You have my considerable thanks for assisting in this last stage of the ruination of my career."

Jeong-Jeong walked over to where his old writing desk waited in the center of the room. As he kneeled, he said, "I have failed you as a teacher. After so many years and lessons, you still assume things that could not be further from the truth."

Zhao kneeled on the other side of the desk. "What are you saying? Now that I'm safe, I want to know what's going on!"

"You are not safe yet. The ship cannot leave its dock until the proper clearances have been filed. But that will take some time, so I might as well indulge your curiosity." Jeong-Jeong produced a scroll from his belt, and he unfurled a stack of papers and laid them out on the desk for Zhao to see. "These are your transfer orders."

Zhao leaned over and read. "I'm being transferred to the Northern Fleet to command a task force under orders from Prince Iroh?!" Zhao looked up at his old master. "You're in contact with
Iroh?

Jeong-Jeong gave that single teacherly half-nod. "He is not as disconnected from the world as most think."

Zhao fell into a slump and tried to process this. Prince Admiral Iroh outranked everyone else in the entire Navy, and although he didn't serve as part of High Command, his orders could override theirs. If Jeong-Jeong's paperwork was legitimate, then Zhao was indeed saved from charges of desertion. He had simply been tasked with an emergency secret mission that brought him out of the Capital on short notice. And if Iroh was agreeing to protect him, then that was a power that could indeed rival Prince Ozai. Iroh was still the crown prince, after all, so despite his strange self-exile from the Homeland, he must have enough of the Fire Lord's favor.

Zhao looked up at Jeong-Jeong. "Am I to conclude that Prince Iroh approves of what I was attempting against Prince Ozai?"

Jeong-Jeong closed his eyes. "I doubt he cares. He is no omniscient manipulator. But Zuko's rescue was conducted in such a way as to jeopardize some of Prince Iroh's plans, and so Ozai needs to be opposed before he causes real trouble."

"And what are Prince Iroh's plans?"

Jeong-Jeong opened his eyes again and looked at Zhao with something that was almost a smirk. "That information is need-to-know. I was directed to tell only that Prince Iroh requires the presence of the Avatar, alive and unharmed, at the North Pole. You are to track the Avatar, capture him, and then arrange a rendezvous according to instructions that you will be given when you've taken formal command of your task force."

Zhao blinked. "The Avatar? What does Iroh want with the Avatar?"

"Need-to-know, Zhao. Prince Iroh is working for the betterment of both the Fire Nation and the world as a whole, so you can be assured that you will be performing honorable service, if that matters to you."

It didn't, of course, but Zhao didn't feel the need to say so. A more relevant concern was that he could still have the glory of capturing the Avatar, the opportunity to finish off Lady Mai, and the chance to run his own operation.

On the other hand, this business of a rendezvous after the Avatar's recovery was too mysterious. Would the Avatar be taken off Zhao's hands and brought back to the Homeland by Iroh as a kind of redemption? Was Zhao being used and discarded? Jeong-Jeong seemed to consider Iroh honorable, and even Zhao had to admit that his master was quite insightful, but he had also proved to be unstable. Was he so desperate for honor after his problems with the war that he was putting too much hope in the Prince Admiral?

Did Zhao have a choice?

As if sensing his thoughts, Jeong-Jeong nodded from across the desk. "You belong to Prince Iroh, now, to use as he wills."

Zhao's Inner Fire flared and he snapped to his feet. "I belong to nobody!"

"Perhaps I misjudged you. Then feel free to disembark from my ship, and find what mercy you can from High Command and Prince Ozai."
Zhao could think of nothing to say to that.

Jeong-Jeong rose to his own feet, and turned to leave. "We should be departing soon. I will observe from the bridge. You may join me, if you wish, as you will be commanding this ship once we reach the Colonial Continent." He stepped out of the cabin, leaving Zhao alone.

Alone, and trapped.

Certainly, Zhao could leave if he wanted. But that would simply be stepping back into the fires of the Caldera's deadly society. He would be dragged before Fire Lord, accused of treason against the Royal Family itself, and subjected to whatever tortures Old Azulon could devise in his senility.

So one path was certain death.

The other path was haunted by a possible loss of glory, but it did offer survival, and that was no small thing. As long as Zhao survived, he could work for advancement. If Iroh wished to take credit for the Avatar's capture, it would rankle, but Zhao could act agreeable, present himself as a good little servant like Jeong-Jeong, and earn Iroh's favor. Surely, Iroh would not forget that when he became Fire Lord. Zhao was no traitor by choice, merely by necessity. If Iroh had any wisdom, he would not recreate the necessity for a loyal, capable Commander- no, Admiral. Maybe even High Admiral, someday.

Zhao felt a little lighter as he made his way to the ship's bridge.

Even by the time he arrived, the vessel was still docked. "We haven't been cleared yet?"

Jeong-Jeong said nothing, but the Captain pointed through the viewport, to the far side of the harbor. "They will light a yellow lamp when they're ready for us, but it's taking far longer than I expected. I notified them of our departure this morning, so this isn't entirely last-minute. Why would-"

Jeong-Jeong said, "It's because everyone manning the lamp station is dead or incapacitated."

Silence descended on the bridge.

Zhao took it upon himself to ask, "How do you know?"

Jeong-Jeong pointed out the viewport, at a solitary figure approaching their dock. "That man walks like a warrior with the ability to slay every person on this ship. And he is coming for us."

Zhao blinked. Someone like that couldn't be an assassin for hire. Such a warrior would have been made a Weapon of the Fire Nation years ago-

Piandao. Also called Piandao Clanless, for being a foundling with no home of his own. Also called Piandao Hundredslayer, for the time he proved there was no such thing as numerical superiority when engaging him in battle.

Ozai's pet murderer.

Zhao's legs went weak, and backed up to lean against the wall to stay upright.

Jeong-Jeong turned on his heel and walked past Zhao, saying, "Set sail as soon as I am off the ship. I will buy you the time you need."

Zhao immediately stood up straight and added, "As Commander of this ship, I confirm the Admiral's orders. Get us out of here!"
Beneath the crescent moon, Piandao approached the ship that he had been tipped to and found a single man in Navy armor disembarking to face him.

The torches on the dock shed enough light to reveal the man’s identity: Admiral Jeong-Jeong, a staff member at Central Command and Zhao’s old Firebending master. It all fit, and meant that Zhao was almost certainly hiding in the ship.

All of that was incidental to Piandao right now. The light of the torches also revealed the way Jeong-Jeong moved, the easy grace in his limbs, the everyday precision that echoed his Firebending style. There was a confidence in Jeong-Jeong’s body language that said he did not fear Piandao, and that was perhaps the most revealing.

Jeong-Jeong reached the bottom of the boarding plank and took a Firebending stance.

Piandao stopped well short of his opponent and drew his sword.

The battle began, but neither man moved. Piandao fought only with his mind, focusing on his opponent and analyzing every possible factor and outcome. Jeong-Jeong would be doing the same, with just as much skill (if not more), and Piandao determined he would be at a disadvantage if he attacked first. Jeong-Jeong would read his movements and intentions and take control of the fight, establishing what could very well prove to be an unassailable defense. He was well known as a Firebending Master of the highest order, and commanded both power and subtlety that could overcome Piandao’s skill.

But the ship began pulling away from the dock, and Prince Ozai would not be pleased if Zhao escaped.

Holding back a sigh, Piandao dashed with all his speed and strength, gambling that he could get past his opponent and leap to the departing ship without getting drawn into an exchange. But Jeong-Jeong struck so fast that the air snapped, sliding his left foot out to full extension while punching his left fist in the same direction, sending out dual streams of fire that mixed and rose up into a wall.

And that was no metaphor on Piandao’s part- the fire was truly forming a long, tall field of flame that cut off all sight of the ship and the bay and the night sky.

So Piandao fought back another sigh and angled his run to take him right at Jeong-Jeong. The wall proved self-sustaining as Jeong-Jeong moved into another attack, punching a series of fireballs so small and rapid that they might as well have been a single massive bloom. Piandao couldn’t stop in time to avoid it, so he surrendered to his own momentum and forced his body into a leaping twist that would carry him just past the edge of the attack. Except his landing area was soon the focus of another firestorm, and he tumbled into a roll that mixed the scrape of the stone ground with the heated sting of fire. Piandao came up to find his clothes aflame, but he could shave with his sword if he were so inclined (and completely uncivilized) so a quick slash was all that was needed to free himself from the burning bits.

The little tatters of flaming clothes had not yet struck the ground when Jeong-Jeong kicked out another wall of flame.

This one was smaller than the first, but effectively divided Piandao’s battlefield in half, forcing him towards Jeong-Jeong’s right side. The same tactic could be used repeatedly to force Piandao into an increasingly narrow lane that would leave him no room to dodge, so he had to put an end to this immediately, but Jeong-Jeong was simply too fast to approach like this.

So rather than doing it the fair way, Piandao threw his scabbard at Jeong-Jeong's head.
Jeong-Jeong dodged it, of course, but in that split second of distraction, Piandao lunged forward like the winds at the peak of Kunlun Mountain with his sword extended for a stab. A slice would have had a greater chance of connecting, but at this range both were likely to miss, and the stab specifically encouraged Jeong-Jeong to sidestep.

To do that, he had to drop the smaller wall of fire bisecting the battlefield.

And Piandao was ready for that.

Even before Jeong-Jeong began his counterattack, Piandao whipped his sword back into a close guard and shrank into low cross-legged stance. Jeong-Jeong kicked out with flame but this close he could not turn it into a wall before Piandao was springing to the side and slicing in. The blade found nothing to bite into as Jeong-Jeong was already moving. He batted the sword aside on the flat edge with a slap that also left a trail of fire in the air and Piandao shoved with the hilt but Jeong-Jeong spun and punched and kicked and slapped and shoved and punched again and Piandao twisted and crouched and sprang and spun and deflected but whole world became a basket of flame with the paths of Jeong-Jeong's fire tightening and drawing in on Piandao so he centered himself right in the path of the next flaming punch and Jeong-Jeong's fist shot out with skin tight over the knuckles and fire exploded from it and Piandao could sense nothing but light and heat so he closed his eyes and listened only to the sound of the blood flowing in his own veins and he rose up onto his left leg alone and sliced across the middle of the inferno with all the power in his body and all the efficiency of his deepest reflexes-

-and the blade moved so fast that the wind of its passage yanked the flame along to the side even as it starved the fire of air. Jeong-Jeong might have been surprised at the tactic but Piandao wasn't paying attention because he was drawing his sword back and so he was in a perfect position to fall forward onto his coiled right leg and stab forward with one last lunge.

Steel passed through armor and flesh and heart and flesh and armor again.

Jeong-Jeong's fire faded from the air, leaving the just night and the glow of the stars and crescent moon.

Piandao glanced over his dying opponent's shoulder and noted that the ship had pulled too far from the docks to reach. Even Lady Caldera Yu Ty Lee wouldn't have been able to make that jump. Piandao had lost.

So he turned his attention to Jeong-Jeong, smoothly extracted his sword from the body, and gently laid the man down on the dock. "You have succeeded, Admiral. Your charge is safely away."

"Service-" Jeong-Jeong labored to breathe, but he did not give up his strength. "Service with honor."

Piandao took Jeong-Jeong's hands in his own. "You have been loyal and diligent for your whole career. Your death is the culmination of an honorable life."

"No-" Jeong-Jeong gasped- "no honor- in war- in killing. They died- died for our- greed. Only- at the end did- did I find honor. Too- too- late…"

And with a wet rattle, Jeong-Jeong breathed his last.

Piandao closed his enemy's eyes, and bowed low to the body.

After a long moment, he rose and flicked the blood off of his sword. The ship was passing through the harbor gates now, and it wouldn't be long before the city guards came to investigate all the disturbances. He recovered his scabbard, pulled his hood over his head, and then ran off into the
night. He could make for Upper Harbor City and hide out there until morning. Prince Ozai would have to wait until the sun was in the sky to get a report.

Piandao was not looking forward to that. Zhao had escaped, and there were forces that still apparently supported the egomaniac. Hopefully, Ozai would at least be pleased that Zhao’s immediate backer in the scheme with Zuko, Admiral Chan, had been assassinated, and that Jeong- Jeong had at least paid with his life for Zhao’s safety.

If not, Piandao would have to find a new master to serve or die a criminal.

But if Jeong-Jeong was right and there was no honor in killing, then Piandao feared that no matter his master, honorable service was now forever beyond his grasp.

Through his spyglass, Zhao was able to get one last look at his master’s body before the ship passed through the harbor gates and onto open waters. He might have died, but Master Jeong-Jeong had at least given his life for a worthy cause:

Zhao’s continued survival.

And now Zhao had an Avatar to catch, and glory to win anew.

Jet could feel his thoughts moving slower than they were supposed to, but he kept himself sane by reminding himself that he knew where he was.

He had originally thought that the Fire Navy had been his captor, back when he first woke up on a big metal ship steaming away from what used to be Crescent Island. Locked in the brig, he had shouted for Smellerbee before he remembered that she was dead, killed by the unstoppable Firebenders girl with the blue flames. He had assumed that the Fire Navy would deposit him in some island prison, and began thinking up ways to escape from a place he hadn't even seen yet.

Then the Firebenders girl had come down to see him, along with a group of big soldiers. Jet had put up a fight, of course, but without his swords he could only do so much, and so had been dragged out of the brig while the Firebender watched.

Jet had been amazed when he was dragged off the ship to find himself at what seemed to be a civilian dock nestled right next to bustling Fire Nation town.

At that point, Jet had done the only thing he could do- what he had been trained to do- look around a lot and memorize landmarks. So he had stayed quiet and concentrated on that as he was dragged to a carriage and locked in the back with the Firebender girl. He had done the same thing when they got to their destination and he had been dragged out to find an abandoned mansion on cliff. He had continued his memorization as he was dragged inside and locked in what had clearly used to be a nicely-sized closet. In the time between his interrogations, he had replayed the memories of what he had seen until he began to dream about them at night.

That's around when Jet's thoughts began slowing. He had eventually figured out that his captors- whoever they represented- were decreasing the amount of water they were giving him. They were dehydrating him. The headaches were the giveaway, and Jet was grateful that he had experienced such effects before. Unfortunately, this insight came only after the Firebender girl had begun the conversations.

Jet knew them to really be interrogations, at first, but as the confusion and headaches got worse, and the girl shared her wine and spoke so pleasantly about all kinds of topics, Jet forgot what was going
He forgot that he wasn't supposed to talk. He forgot that the Firebender had killed Smellerbee. He forgot Smellerbee was even dead. The worst was that he forgot that the Firebender girl wasn't beautiful, because she wasn't really, because she was Fire Nation.

Then, one day, she was gone, and Jet had been left to wait in his closet day after day, wishing he had more water.

At that point, the dreams began happening while he was awake. The memories of that dock, of the town, of the mansion all floated around him like ghosts, and the Firebender girl danced through the illusions first with Smellerbee in her arms, and then the Avatar, then Sokka, and finally that spy Mai. Sometimes, Jet would hear echoes almost like human voices saying, "We are coming for you," but he would forget as soon as the words reached his ears.

He didn't remember until they actually came for him.

One day, Jet drifted out of one of his waking sleeps to hear shouts and crashes coming from somewhere else in the mansion. There was the ring of metal clashing against metal, and something like a series of splashes, and then silence.

Jet almost forgot about the noises when footsteps sounded outside the door of his closet, and then a blade made of ice smashed through the door, followed by men in blue clothes with skin and eyes just like Sokka's.

The first of the men smiled, and glanced at the others. "It's him."

Jet nodded. He was indeed him, and glad that these nice people realized it. There was just one more matter he needed to clear up: "Thirsty."

The man who had spoken frowned. "They deny you water? And they call us barbarians." He immediately produced a water skin, but rather than giving it to Jet, he ripped off a piece of his own sleeve and soaked it, then offered the wet cloth.

Jet accepted it eagerly, and was soon moistening his mouth and throat by sucking the water right out of the fabric. He continued doing that as the other men pulled him to his feet and helped him stumble out of the closet. The leader was saying as they walked, "We know they took your mask. We'll have to debrief you to see if we can tell what else they got from you, and then you'll have another assignment. As much as you deserve rest, the situation is becoming tense enough that we can't leave a Blue Spirit of your capability out of action for long. The boss still needs you, Jet."

Jet nodded agreeably, and it wasn't until he was out of the mansion that he forgot all about the conversation.

He would not forget it for long.

TO BE CONTINUED
The Fortuneteller

Chapter Summary

Katara learns some things about her distant future, but the immediate future is probably the greater concern.

The Fortuneteller

Katara woke up and didn't know where she was, so panic momentarily gripped her heart before she remembered that the cage wasn't supposed to be there anymore.

Just like every morning.

She let out an anxious breath and took a moment to reorient herself. She was in a sleeping bag in a tent, somewhere in the Earth Kingdom. Beside her, Sokka was still snoring away in his own sleeping bag, so big and gangly and loud compared to the image of her brother that she had cherished in her mind for a decade. The rhythm of his snuffling helped settle her panicked heart and reminded her that she wasn't alone, that her family hadn't forgotten her. The tent was small enough to be comforting.

Katara could hear Aang and Appa 'conversing' outside, prompting a smile. She still couldn't get over the Avatar being back. Sure, he was just a goofy kid, but he also really sweet, and he wanted more than anything to help people. As far as Katara was concerned, that made him a truly great Avatar- or would, once he learned all four elements. That was important, too. Katara slid out of her own sleeping bag, threw on her outer tunic, and reached for her hat. She knew that Sokka was worried about the hat, and she wanted to be able to go without it for him, but the very thought made her breath quicken. She needed more time, more strength, more experience in the world, and then maybe she could give it a try.

She put the hat on and tied it beneath her chin before making her way out of the tent. As expected, Aang was talking to his sky bison while sharing a breakfast of apples. Momo flew around them both, chasing some of the winged morning-mites that made this green glen their home. Katara kept her focus on the little group and not the big broad sky that sprawled above them.

A quick glance around the campsite revealed that Mai's tent was still sealed up. That didn't surprise Katara. Mai wasn't anywhere near as lazy as Sokka, but she still had a preference for sleeping late, as well as a fairly strong aversion to daylight. Katara had no criticism for that last part, as she couldn't imagine how anyone with skin as light as Mai's didn't sizzle in the bright sun. Still, she also sympathized with Aang, having to deal with two such lazy teenagers by himself for so long.

"Good morning, Katara!" Aang hopped over with a burst of his Airbending and offered an apple as he landed. "Breakfast?"

"Thanks." Katara took a bite and motioned over to the river a short way from their camp. "Ready to get the water?"

"Sure!"

Katara and Aang had made a daily ritual of collecting water every morning with a shared bending
exercise. As simple as the task was, they figured that practicing their teamwork was worthwhile, just in case. It had become habit, and now it took barely any effort for them to stream some of the river into the air to snake its way into their biggest pot. They moved as one without having to so much as look at each other, the knowledge of the other's movements coming from feel alone.

By the time they brought the pot over to the campsite, Mai had emerged from her own tent in her green robes and was scowling against the sunlight. Katara made a point of waving and saying, "Good morning!"

Mai blinked back and didn't say anything in what Katara had learned was Mai's way of not showing hostility. Katara helped Aang get the campfire going under the pot, and then went over to the group's other girl. "Excited for today?"

" Probably not. What are we doing today?"

"You know, that spirit festival we heard about?" Katara looked over at Aang to make sure she didn't have the day mixed up, and he took a break from stirring the rice to give a thumb's up. Satisfied, she turned back to Mai. "The one we've been flying towards for two days straight?"

Mai waved it off and began pulling her loose hair together in preparation of setting it in her usual complicated style. "Yeah, I remember that. I mean stuff I'd be actually excited for."

Katara gave a laugh, not caring if it was actually meant to be a joke. "It's going to be amazing! Those people the other day said that all the best mystics come to the festival, and there's also food and dancing and stories from history-"

"I thought I heard someone mention food," came Sokka's voice from his tent. His head poked its way through the opening. "Is there food?"

"Coming up," Aang said, shooing Momo away from the steaming pot.

Katara turned back to Mai, and found her struggling with making the bun at the back of her head. Katara reached over and helped hold an errant bit in place. "There has to be something about the festival that you're looking forward to!"

Mai sighed as she worked her hair. "It's just going to be a lot superstitious people crowding around acting like fools."

"How can you not be 'superstitious?' You're traveling with the Avatar!" Katara helpfully pointed over to where Aang was scooping rice into everyone's bowls.

Aang, for his part, looked up and smiled. "I am kind of spooky."

Katara nodded in satisfaction. "See?"

Mai made an, "Ugh," sound, finished with her hair by pulling the tails forward to rest on her shoulders, and went over to get her breakfast. "Yes, obviously spirits and monsters and glowing boys in icebergs are all real."

"Don't forget ghosts," Sokka said through a yawn as he took his own bowl of rice. "You Fire Nation types made lots of ghosts."

Mai threw a glare at him, but then let her gaze drop to her boots. "And ghosts." She produced a long knife from somewhere in her sleeve- Katara still had no idea where the other girl kept all those weapons- and used the flat of the blade to scoop some rice into her mouth. "But I just have a tough
time believing in all the stupid little superstitions that these kinds of festivals get so worked up about. I'm pretty sure that shooting off fireworks doesn't actually chase away any spirit monsters that might be lurking nearby, and using a broom on Cinder Day won't really bring down eight years of bad luck."

Katara acknowledged the point with a nod even though she didn't think it was entirely right. "But you have to admit that showing reverence for the spirits is worthwhile, and that's what festivals like this are really about."

"No I don't." Mai pointed the knife at Katara in the same kind of casual manner as most people would point a pair of chopsticks. "You have to admit that people manage to pack an awful lot of games and commerce into these festivals for something that's supposedly about a bunch of spirits. Besides, our reason for being here is to find Aang someone who can tell him about energies or something. It's about as reverent as a visit to the Yukuefumei Library."

Katara sighed and went to get her own bowl of rice. "I think we're all going to learn something today. And we'll all be better for it."

The camp was silent for a moment, and then Sokka said, "I'm here for the food."

Katara flicked a grain of rice at him.

They ate the rest of their breakfast in silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable. Katara would have liked it if Mai and Sokka could have more respect for these kinds of things, but that was their cynical personalities at work. Both of them were probably just arguing for the sake of it. Maybe if they spent a decade in a prison, they'd be more inclined to look for the bright things in life.

Not that Katara wished that on either one.

She finished her rice and put her bowl down carefully beside the big pot. "So, Aang, how are we going to find the festival? It would be risky to fly Appa above it."

Aang winked and put his own bowl down. He took an Airbending stance and began moving his arms in broad, slow sweeping motions that made the wind around the campsite pick up. It was a strong wind but a soft one, cushioning Katara like a pile of furs and tugging gently on her hat. It was such a pleasant sensation that she almost missed the other part of it: the faint sound of music—bells and flutes and drums—that was being carried on the wind.

Katara held her hat down and felt a grin growing on her own face. She looked over at Aang to find him returning the expression.

"We just follow our ears," he said.

When Aang found the Valley of the Mountain of Death, it was a complete surprise.

He had led the way as they traced the music back to its source, guiding Katara, Mai and Sokka-Appa and Momo had been left back at the camp with a bushel of apples—over the undulating landscape, around the little cliffs and stone outcroppings. At first, he had stopped every so often to use his Airbending to catch the snatches of tunes on the wind, but soon enough it was audible with no extra effort. Even so, he found himself walking around the side of one outcropping to suddenly find the ground falling steeply below him to reveal a massive gathering in the center of a wide grassy valley, a lone mountain rising beyond it all.

Beneath the gaze of the Mountain of Death, deep in which the bodies of the Kings and Queens of
the ancient Earth Kingdom were said to be waiting for the Earth to awaken them once again, the Spirit Festival was in fully swing. Drawn from all the villages in the province and probably all over the Earth Kingdom, a thousand people—maybe more—were sprawled across the length of the valley, filling the air with the sounds of talking and music and chanting. Tents and shelters rose up at what seemed like random points, each one the center of its own uniquely shaped crowd. And the colors were amazing! Most people were wearing green, but tunics of other hues were present in significant numbers, and many people wore accessories or masks or even full costumes that assembled a range of colors second only to the Hanging Flower Gardens of the Eastern Air Temple.

Aang was ready to run on down and join the fun when he noticed something else. Apart from the festival, atop one of the low valley walls on the east side, a large Fire Army camp overlooked the festivities. More armed and armored soldiers than Aang could easily count stood guard at the edges of the camp.

Katara hissed when she noticed them. "Are they going to attack?"

Mai pushed her way to the front of the group, and Aang could see her sharp eyes running over the sight. "No," she eventually said, "they're on alert, but there's not enough activity for an imminent attack. I bet they're here to watch over things and keep the peace."

"Yeah, keep the peace." Sokka snorted. "You mean spy on a big gathering of Earth Kingdom folks and come down on them like a hammer if anything vaguely anti-Fire starts up."

"Basically, yes." Mai straightened her green tunic. "The festival is too big and well known to shut down, but obviously the Fire Nation government here wouldn't be happy with a major cultural thing from the people they conquered."

Aang stepped forward to stand between Sokka and Mai. "Okay, then I'll need to cover my arrow, but as long as everything stays peaceful, it should be no trouble. Right?"

Katara nodded. "Right! We'll keep an eye on the eye the Fire Nation is keeping on the festival."

Sokka blinked. "How many eyes is that?"

"As many as we need!" Katara smirked and tugged her hat.

Aang laughed and pulled out one of the scarfs Mai had given him back on Kyoshi Island. He tied it as a bandana over his shaved head, but didn't worry about the rest of his clothes, what with all colors and costumes already present amongst the crowds. He led everyone down the sloping grass into the valley, and soon the sights and sounds and smells of the festival welcomed them into its fold.

As they worked their way into the flows of people, one man took notice of them and jogged over. On the edge of his vision, Aang caught Mai reaching for a weapon, so he stepped in front of her and turned to greet the man.

He was fairly young and dressed in green, and he was carrying what looked like a bundle of leaves and red berries. "Greetings, travelers! Here, take a dogwood sprig."

Aang accepted one of the little cuttings and took a look. The berries ranged in hue from bright red to an almost purple deepness, and the leaves were orderly little things, smoothly shaped with strong visible veins.

Sokka sniffed at his. "Do we eat these?"

The man laughed as he handed one to Katara. "It won't poison you, friend, but you're supposed to
wear it. It will purify you, helping you remain in harmony with the valley."

Aang smiled. Now *this* was a proper festival. "Hey, I have a question, if you don't mind?"

"Sure." The man handed one of the sprigs to Mai.

"How come the festival is happening now, instead of at the summer solstice?"

The man lost his cheery expression for a moment. "Er, well, yes, that's when the natural world and the spirit world come together, and the festival *is* about honoring the spirits and keeping the energies of the province balanced. But we like to hold the festival when the spirits are still far away enough that they can sense our good will, but not confuse this all for an *invitation*, you know?"

Aang wasn't sure he did, but Sokka nodded and said, "I understand completely," so the man smiled once again and moved on to pass out more sprigs.

Aang looked at his own and wondered how he was going to wear it. Maybe if he could find some string, he could tie it and wear it like a necklace-

Mai sighed and snapped her hand up to reveal four long needles between her fingers. "Go ahead, just give them back when we're done here." Everyone accepted one and pinned a sprig to their clothes.

Feeling more spiritually pure already, Aang led the way deeper into the festival. Now that he was in the midst of it, the gathering was revealed as a lot more boisterous than an Air Nomad holiday like Yangchen's Festival. Singers shared songs with an elder sound to them, and bands worked instruments that ranged from works of art to ramshackle things assembled out of junk. There were even little stages where actors put on plays, comedies and dramas and operas and pantomimes. The only thing uniting all these entertainments was the row of sitting mats right in front of the performers, always left empty by the audience.

Aang ignored that stuff for now. He fully intended to find out more and have some fun with the entertainments later, but he wanted to get started on business first. Guru Pathik was a man of rare knowledge, and finding someone who could even begin help Aang in the same way could be a long task. Aang had failed to learn enough in time to save the Guru, and he wasn't going to fail again.

He found a quieter section of the valley where people lounged instead of moving about, and the sound of conversation was more muted. Peace emanated from older men and women in the robes of shamans, and people respectfully listened to their words.

Aang turned to the others. "Let's split up and ask around. Remember, we're trying to find out more about how to bring the world back into balance, but the Guru said it had to do with Linghún energy, and the way everything is connected. We need someone who can really teach me about that."

Mai added, "And let's not mention that you're the Avatar. Not right away. We want to be sure we don't cause the wrong kind of disruption."

Aang blinked. "What do you mean? Wouldn't any shaman be glad to help the Avatar?"

Mai's eyes shifted, and Aang followed her gaze up and over to the eastern wall of the valley, where the Fire Army watched over everything. "The last thing we need is someone to overhear the wrong word and see what the Fire Nation will pay for a tip."

He hated to admit it, but it was a good point. "All right. But come and get me if you find anything. Okay?"
The other three nodded, and then they all spread out to explore the area.

Aang started his own search, picking out a group listening and asking questions of an old man with a droopy mustache who wore a puffy fur vest. Aang sat at the edge of the gathering and tuned in to a discussion of the physical and spiritual healing properties of properly mixed mud...

Three hours later, Aang was bored out of his skull.

He had heard about mud, had heard about the correct composition of a Tranquility Garden, had heard about proper meditation technique, and had heard lots of stuff about the unsettled nature of the world, but no one here seemed to know about how to really look beyond the physical.

He hoped the others were doing better.

Katara was taking a break from an ongoing but fairly lacking discussion of how a traveler could actually get into the Spirit World when a girl who was half-pigtails walked up and said, "Excuse me, you wouldn't happen to be from the Water Tribes?"

Katara blinked and turned his attention to the girl. She was a few years younger than Katara and was showing off a gapped-tooth smile that was immediately disarming, so Katara nodded. "I am."

"And are you traveling with the Avatar?"

Katara couldn't stop herself from gasping. "I- Uh- What?"

The girl bowed. "My name is Meng. I was told that there would be a beautiful Water Tribe girl here who could bring the Avatar to my employer."

"Uh, hi, Meng. Uh- and who is your- uh- employer?"

"A fortuneteller from Makapu Village." Meng motioned back towards the busier side of the festival. "She said you could come meet her, if you like."

Katara bit her lip. She could investigate this fortuneteller before putting Aang in danger, but that would mean walking into a trap herself. Maybe she could go get Sokka or Mai- no, there was no need for that. She had her waterskins and was a warrior now. She could handle this. She was strong enough. She needed to be.

Katara pulled her hat down lower. "Lead the way, Meng."

The fortuneteller's tent proved to be one of the plainer in its area, surrounded as it was by stands where people were selling luck charms, incense sticks, and what looked like old coins. The only decoration on the tent was a pair of crossed tree branches tied above the entrance, unusual things with tips that hung like long fingers, almost looking like the reaching tentacles of the shark-squid.

Meng pulled aside the large tent's flap and bowed low. Without hesitation, Katara flicked the caps off her waterskins and walked inside.

"Welcome, child." A smiling old woman sat within, her streaked white and gray hair dully reflecting the glow of the fire in the pan beside her. "No need to be shy, it's just us in here. I am Aunt Wu. Please, sit down."

Katara sat on the waiting mat, shifting her waterskins so that they would be accessible. "Nice to meet you." She eyed Aunt Wu's golden robe. "Your assistant was telling stories about you."
"I know." Aunt Wu sighed. "Fortunetelling has changed, since the end of the war. I used to have to look harder to see ahead, and could only focus on one destiny at a time, but things have changed. The details are all too easy to see, now, and I get visions without even trying. The world is out of balance, and its energy is not flowing properly, so it's flooding all over the place. The Avatar knows this."

Katara decided to risk a nod. "He wants to fix it."

"Of course. And I want to help. The funny thing is that the more destiny someone has, the harder it is to for me to see right now." She winked. "People with lots of destiny tend to let it get all cluttered and mixed up."

Katara smiled. "So how can you help?"

"Oh, I know some tricks. I can reveal some touchpoints to focus the Avatar on a good path. You can bring him to me, and stand by to protect him if you like."

Katara pushed her hat up to get a better view. "I'd like to see your fortunetelling first. If you don't mind! I just- I want to see how it works before I bring him."

"Of course." Aunt Wu reached beside her to an open box with shadowy compartments of various sizes. She produced a bundle of thin sticks from one of them, and held them out. "What would you like to know?"

Katara took the sticks and considered. Maybe Aunt Wu could tell her if she would ever fix herself, if she could ever be able to go back to her Tribe without being a failure. But the more Katara thought about, the more she wasn't sure she actually wanted to know. Maybe she could do something that would be a clue, but wouldn't rule anything out- "Can you tell me who I'll marry?"

Aunt Wu nodded. "Throw the sticks to the ground."

Katara did so, and then looked at the results to see if they were spelling a name or something. Aunt Wu didn't show any reaction, and merely plucked some of the sticks out of the pile and laid them aside. "Again." Katara picked up the remaining sticks and once more tossed them to the dirt. Aunt Wu removed a few more of the sticks and then said, "The Avatar's destiny clouds your own, but I see possibilities. Throw the sticks once more."

Katara did so, and Aunt Wu nodded.

"What is it?"

"The Avatar himself is working his way into your heart. If the Fire Nation girl doesn't give him what he needs, you and he will marry."

Katara was on her feet before she even realized it. "Me and Aang?!" The Avatar?! And wait, what Fire Nation girl? Did Aunt Wu mean Mai? Why would Mai be a problem? Aang and Sokka were both kind of upset at her, and love didn't seem likely even with Mai being sorry. And if Katara was supposed to marry Aang, did that mean she'd never be ready to go back to the Tribe? Or would Aang come with her? He didn't have any people of his own, after all. Would their kids be Airbenders or Waterbenders, or maybe a mix? Why was she already planning out the kids she would have with Aang? What did this really prove about Aunt Wu? Obviously, Katara needed more information.

"Thank you. But, um, before I bring Aang, is it okay if I bring someone else?"

Aunt Wu smiled. "You do what you feel you need to, child."
Sokka rested his chin on his knee. "So when you say you saw a group of women flying through the air, you mean- what, exactly?"

The old shaman scooted closer. "I mean I saw them flying. I was passing by the cliff my people call Great-Grandfather's Nose, and naturally I looked up to take in its majesty, when I saw people running at the edge. I was going to shout at them for being stupid and jumping to their deaths, but then the winds picked up, and their clothes were very baggy and flapped in the air, and then they swooped right over my head and went back up in the air, and proceeded to flip and twist through the sky. They were like fish darting through water, except fish don't laugh!"

Sokka nodded like he believed what he was being told. "And then what?"

"Well, I started proclaiming the return of the Air Nomads, of course. The Airbender Avatar has returned, you know, and he must have brought his harem."

"His-" Sokka choked. "His harem?"

"Well, of course. Why else would these all be girls?"

"Are you sure Air Nomads have harems?" Sokka tried to imagine Aang- with all the awkwardness he had displayed around Mai- lounging amidst a gaggle of girls, and found his imagination completely insufficient. "Maybe they're his sisters? Or bison tenders? Or maybe they were Air Nomad ghosts? I've heard that some people are having problems with Air Nomad ghosts."

The shaman ran his hands through his bristling hair. "Nnno, I don't think they were ghosts. The simplest explanation is usually the best, so they're probably his harem."

Sokka once again lowered his chin onto his knee. "Well, I'm certainly not inclined to argue against that logic."

"Ah, you're a smart boy!"

Sokka was about to agree when he felt a tap on his shoulder, and looked up to see a dark-skinned girl whose pigtails stuck out to easily triple her natural width. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Meng. Katara sent me to bring you to her."

A short walk later, Sokka found his sister standing in front of a large tent with willow branches tied above its entrance. As soon as she saw him, she ran over with anxious eyes and grabbed his hands. "Sokka, I'm going to marry Aang!"

"WHAT?!" Sokka clamped down on Katara's hands, the world spinning around him like that time he tried riding a tiger-seal. "No, no you can't! You just got out of prison, and there's lots of people to meet out there."

"What?" Katara blinked. "No, Sokka, I mean that Aunt Wu predicted I'll marry Aang. She's a fortuneteller."

"Oh." All of the sudden, the world decided to stay still. "Oh, good. Wait, what are you doing with a fortuneteller?"

"Aunt Wu knows we're with Aang, and has information for him. But I wasn't sure if it was okay, so I talked to her first, and she told me a fortune that I'm going to marry Aang if Mai doesn't get him first."
Sokka let go of his sister's hands so that he could properly smack his own forehead. "That's- that's just silly. You don't have anything to worry about from Aang or Mai."

"What about Aunt Wu?"

Sokka turned his gaze to the tent, where Meng was holding the flap open for him and trying not to meet his gaze. "I'm going to find out about that right now." He stalked into the tent and found an old lady sitting on a mat beside a fire pan. "What have you been doing to my sister?"

Aunt Wu motioned to the mat across from her. "Sit down, and we'll talk. I didn't mean to upset her, but she asked for a love fortune."

"Yeah, just an innocent misunderstanding." Sokka remained standing. "The problem is that fortunetelling is just a scam, and now I'm wondering why your scam involves getting my sister all upset and trying to make her fight one of our allies."

"Ah, you're not a believer." Aunt Wu eased herself to her feet and looked at Sokka with narrowed eyes. "Normally, I'd just push you away with some vague prophecy of doom, but I want to prove myself to you. To the Avatar. He and I share a kind of sight, but he doesn't know how to use it like I can. I want to use my gifts to help him, so that he can set the world right."

Sokka crossed his arms over his chest. "Making junk up about my future isn't going to accomplish that."

"I know." Aunt Wu stepped forward, and the light of the fire played across her face in a way that almost made her look like Gran-Gran. "You and I, we're both protectors. You have your tribe, and your grandmother, and those she has taken into her care. You've seen death, and you've seen loss, so you try to stay aloof even as you do everything in your power to help them. When you take someone under your care, you take them as family. That's why you'll protect the Avatar as much as your sister, even if you sometimes tell yourself you can make a choice between them. It's why the Fire Nation girl's betrayal hurt you so much. She was your new sister, and she was a traitor."

Sokka's thoughts had come to a halt in the midst of that whole stupid speech, kind of like what Aang said meditating was like. Sokka's focus was so strong that there was nothing left in him to devote to thought, and that focus was the kind his dead father had taught was the true power of a hunter. "You want to stop talking about me now."

Aunt Wu nodded. "Then let me talk about myself. I live in Makapu Village. The people take care of me, and I take care of them. They find reassurance in my word, even when I don't really tell them anything. So many of them were lost, and I brought them together so that they could be safe. Happy, even. They have no idea what I really do, but they love me all the same. But I can't protect them from what's happening to the world. Only the Avatar can do that. So I help them by helping the Avatar. Helping you. And you can see that. You're observant that way."

Sokka breathed in sharply. He had been focusing during her little speech, watching her face, her eyes, and her movements. He saw the bit of moisture at the edge of her eyes, heard the slight tremble in her voice, noticed the way she worked her hands opened and closed as she talked.

His focus revealed these things, but then he let himself think again and his thoughts wondered if Aunt Wu might not just be a really good actor.

"Wait here," he said. Then he stepped outside to talk to his sister.

Katara found Mai standing apart from the gatherings around the shamans, staring up at the kites
being flown from the edge of the festival. The kites were decorated with faces, and Katara thought she recognized something more like a pixiu amongst the many dragons. "Mai!"

The other girl looked over, and while her face didn't move, her voice was intense as she said, "There you are. You and Sokka just disappeared. Aang went with the parade to the Death Mountain thing."

Katara gave a little bow of repentance. "Sorry, but we found out about this fortuneteller who we think can help Aang! But we're not sure if we should trust her because she revealed that you're going to determine if I marry- well, details aren't important, and then she told Sokka what he says were a lot of the secret thoughts in his head but he's still not sure if she's telling the truth so he didn't actually say so but he implied that he'd feel better if you went to see her and gave us your opinion. So that we know if it's okay to bring Aang."

"Wait, hold on." Mai blinked slowly. "A fortuneteller said that I'm going to marry you?"

Katara could feel her face warming, and she couldn't even talk for a moment. "I- I didn't say that!"

"Well, I wasn't sure, but it sounded-"

"That's not what I meant!"

"If you're sure."

"I am! Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay." Katara was glad that was settled.

Mai held up a hand. "So how am I keeping you from getting married, then?"

"Oh, for-" Katara decided that the truth couldn't possibly be more embarrassing than this. "She said that if you don't seduce Aang away from me, we'll get married."

"The 'we' being you and Aang, not you and me."

"Yes!"

"Okay. I just want to be clear on all this." Mai's face had remained perfectly calm and perfectly pale the whole time. "So let's check out this scandalous fortuneteller."

Katara was grateful for the chance to turn away and blush in peace. She tugged her hat down and led Mai back to Aunt Wu's tent, where they found Sokka pacing and glaring at Meng. The young girl didn't seem to care and was trying to twist her pigtails into a more traditional position, but she let go when she saw Katara and opened the flap of the tent with a bow.

Katara turned and pointed in the tent. "There!"

Mai folded her hands together in her sleeves and walked into the tent.

Katara turned away from Sokka so that he couldn't see the blush that could still feel on her cheeks. She stood and waited for a while, but it seemed like Mai was taking forever in there.

Katara decided that anything was better than waiting, and so walked over to Meng. "Hi."

"Oh, hi." Meng let go of her pigtails again. "Can I do something for you?"
"No, I'm fine. I was just- well, I was hoping you could distract me for a moment."

"Oh." Meng blinked. "Then do you mind if I ask what you put in your hair?"

"My hair?" Katara flicked her head so that her long braid was visible. She hadn't liked her hair until recently, when it had stopped breaking at every little tug or manipulation. Sokka said it was because she was getting real food now and wasn't spending all her time in that awful volcano heat. "Nothing, really. My friend lets me use her soap to wash it."

"Oh."

"So, how long have you been working for Aunt Wu?"

Meng thought about it for a moment. "I guess it's been three years now. It's a good job. I get to meet people, and Aunt Wu gives me fortunes whenever I ask."

"Oh, yeah?" Katara decided that it was time for someone else to deal with a little embarrassment. "Anything about romance?"

Meng grinned, showing off the big gap between her front teeth. "She said I'm going to marry a guy who wears glasses and talks with a southeast accent. So I'm still keeping an eye out."

Katara nodded and was going to ask what a southeast accent sounded like, but then she heard the rustle of the tent and turned to see Mai emerging into the sunlight. "What happened? Did she give you a fortune?"

Sokka ran over. "Did she say anything creepy?"

Meng hopped up to look over Katara' shoulder. "Are you going to bring the Avatar now?"

Mai held up a hand and waited for everyone to stop talking. "Aunt Wu is fine. We should bring Aang. He can decide for himself about what she has to say."

Katara was going to ask how Mai could tell, but then Sokka actually pushed her aside and stepped forward to say, "How can you tell?" Katara slapped the back of his head.

Mai ignored it all. "I'm not surprised that you can't see it, but 'Aunt' Wu is a very high-class lady. Half the nobles in the Caldera wish they could be so good. My maternal grandmother is the same way, and women like that- of that age- are always exactly where they want to be, and they have no need whatsoever to lie. Ever. If Aunt Wu is here, then she's not working for the Fire Nation. If she says she has something for Aang, she does."

Meng began applauding, and Katara moved to give the short girl her space before saying, "But can she really tell the future?"

"I don't know and I don't care." Mai stepped away. "Aang can deal with that part. He went with the big funeral procession to the mountain tomb, so I'll go get him. You two watch the tent to make sure it doesn't fly away or something."

Katara watched the other girl walk away, and struggled with a mix of relief that Aunt Wu wasn't an enemy, disappointment that Mai didn't reveal what they had discussed, and continuing anxiety over the surprise love triangle she might still be caught in the middle of. She looked over at Sokka. "So should I be worried that they're already visiting mountain tombs together?"

He groaned. "Please don't tell me you're still taking that thing seriously."
"Well, why not? Mai said Aunt Wu was okay, so even if she's a fake, what reason would she have for lying to me about that?"

"Oh, it's possible she really believes that she has fortunetelling powers." Sokka crossed his arms over his chest. "But if she's so good at that type of thing, why didn't she just intercept Aang directly and avoid this whole mess with us?"

Katara frowned. "But Meng knew who I was and where to find me. So Aunt Wu knew something that only a fortuneteller would."

"Then she's a fake."

Meng snarled, "Hey! Watch it!"

Katara just poked her brother. "But then we go back to what Mai said. You're contradicting yourself."

Sokka pushed her finger away. "Did you ever consider that maybe Mai isn't as trustworthy as you'd like her to be? You've been pretty nice to her considering that her people stole a decade of your life."

Katara only realized that her jaw had dropped when she tried to speak and found that her mouth wasn’t working. "Y- you're telling me how I'm supposed to feel about growing up in a cage? You're so angry at Mai but what did she really do to you? What did any of them do to you? You got to grow up with Gran-Gran, surrounded by your Tribe, and you're the one who gets to decide how I'm supposed to feel about the Fire Nation? You're so full of slush!"

Sokka was backing away, eyes wide, and Katara was glad that he was intimidated. She had forgotten how- how mean her brother could be, and she wasn't going to tolerate him getting meaner.

"I-" His voice cracked, and he quickly turned his back on her. "You're right. Sorry." He trotted off into the flow of the festival crowd.

Oh.

He-

She-

Katara pulled her hat down so that she couldn't see anything. Apparently, Sokka wasn't the only one who had gotten meaner.

She looked over at Meng, who was doing an industrious job of examining a blade of grass and not paying attention to anything else, and then to Aunt Wu's tent. Maybe she could talk to Aunt Wu about this, see if there was a fortune that would tell her where to find Sokka and what she could say to him.

"There! That tent! The sorceress is in there!"

What?

Katara whirled as the crowd pulled back and left her and Meng standing alone beside the tents and stalls of this lane. Even the vendors who had neighbored Aunt Wu's setup were leaving their charms and tokens and money boxes behind. What could-

An ostrich-horse emerged from the receding festival-goers, carrying a living symbol of Earth
Kingdom prosperity in its saddle. The rider was a heavy-set man with a long beard, and he might have been mistaken for a mere merchant were it not for the sheen on both his green silk robe and his black wide-brimmed hat. Unlike Katara’s hat, the simple coniccular type that allowed rain to slide down, this man’s hat had a tall cylinder as its main body, giving him an artificial height that was nevertheless quite impressive.

Nevertheless, Katara took a position between the ostrich-horse and Aunt Wu’s tent and tensed for a fight.

The man glared at her from beneath the brim of his hat and spurred the bird-steed into an awkward amble that its powerful legs weren’t built for, making the ostrich-horse sway with enough force to make the beaded strings hanging from his hat sway in the air. Katara stood her ground and waited to see if this busybody had the guts to run a teenage girl down in the middle of a festival crowd, but he surprised her by turning and saying, “This girl is interfering in a lawful arrest! Take her- take the sorceress- take them all!”

Katara followed his gaze, and hissed when she saw Fire Nation soldiers emerging from the same gap in the crowd, all of them lowering their spears in her direction.

She took in the threat as Meng ran to stand behind her. She could see at least a dozen soldiers, and there might be more behind them in the crowd. Her only chance of fighting them was to reveal herself as a Waterbender, and she didn’t have to be an experienced world traveler to know that such a discovery would bring more than just a dozen soldiers.

Still, it was important that Aunt Wu talk to Aang—maybe important enough to be worth Katara’s life. It wasn’t like she had any real purpose, because—

Katara felt a warm hand on her shoulder, and turned to find Aunt Wu behind her. ”It’s okay, child. I’ll answer the accusation.”

Before Katara could decide, the man on the ostrich-horse sneered and said, ”You’ll all answer at the trial! Arrest them!”

Katara moved to take a Waterbending stance, but the shaft of a spear smacked against her head hard enough to send her hat flying, and through the explosion of pain in her skull she got a brief look of the terrifying openness of the sky before everything went dark.

TO BE CONTINUED
The True Face of Love

Chapter Summary

The gAang works together to save Aunt Wu and fix other people's love lives.

The True Face of Love

Katara woke up in a cage and smiled, feeling comfortable for the first time in a long while but not knowing why.

Then she realized that she wasn't alone, and remembered that she was supposed to be done with cages.

Katara scrambled to her feet, making Aunt Wu and Meng jump. She found that her hat and waterskins had been taken from her- although the leafy dogwood sprig was still pinned to her tunic with the borrowed combat needle from Mai. Looking out past the metal bars of the cage, she saw that the fabric of a tent cut off all view of the sky, and an armored soldier for the Fire Army stood guard with a spear resting in his hand and a sour expression lounging on his face.

Katara forced herself to relax. "Aunt Wu, can you see how much trouble we're in?"

Meng whimpered, but Aunt Wu met Katara's gaze with steady eyes. "There is a glare on the horizon of the future, but your friends might find their way through it to us."

Katara nodded. There was no question about it for her; the Avatar, whether or not she would really marry him, would come for her.

And if the worst came to pass, she would make sure that she would not live another day of her life in a cage.

The Mountain of Death rose up above Aang, with the music and colors of the festival echoing in the valley behind him.

He whistled to himself as he swept the entrance to the Tomb. The monks had always taught that the while the dead might be dead, they appreciated a clean home just as much as someone with a body and a pulse. In this case, the Royal Tomb within the Mountain was beyond anyone's reach thanks to the lock on its front door; it reminded Aang of the one on the Southern Air Temple's Sanctuary, only instead of tubes designed for Airbending, this lock took the form of a stone puzzle cube that seemed to be missing some pieces. But the fancy tunnel entrance, a tiled vestibule, could still be tidied up and decorated for the festival.

Aang used his borrowed broom to brush away the dirt and dust from the white tiles, moving nimbly around the pillars, snarling statues, and temporarily deactivated death traps. Some of the other festival-goers who had come to the Tomb were putting out gifts for the spirits of the dead monarchs and decorating the vestibule with purifying plants. Incense sticks standing up in pots of pure white sand had been used to line the tunnel, giving the atmosphere a heavy scent that let Aang float down through memories of Air Temples and the festivals of a time of peace.
He paused to straighten the dogwood sprig pinned to his tunic, and when he looked up again, he found Mai ambling towards him. In her green robes, she was ignored by the other tomb-cleaners.

She gave a lethargic wave. "Our Water Tribe siblings found something."

"Great!" Aang had to resist the urge to Airbend in a little dusty celebration. "They found me a teacher?"

"Kind of, sort of." Mai drew close, and in a lower voice said, "They found a Fortuneteller who seems to be the real deal. I talked to her, and I think you should, too. I don't know if she can teach you all the stuff the Guru was talking about, but she can definitely help."

"Wow!" A Fortuneteller! Aang had never met one before, but he had heard of the divination arts passed down through carefully chosen practitioners and sometimes circus performers. "Just let me finish my sweeping and we can go check it out!" He proceeded to do the fastest cleaning job (that didn't involve Airbending) in the history of the world, and then tossed the broom to one of the volunteer overseers (who for some reason was staring and blinking at Aang). "Ready to go!"

They left the tomb and mountain behind and walked together through the grass, back down into the valley. The afternoon sun was providing warmth that seemed to be energizing the festival, and Mai led the way right into the heart of the activity.

Aang tried to keep from hopping ahead of her sedate pace, but it wasn't easy. "So, you said you talked to his fortuneteller?"

Mai nodded. "Her name is Aunt Wu, and she doesn't charge for her fortunes. Sokka and Katara talked to her, as well."

"Ooh, did you all get your fortunes told?"

"I don't know. Katara did, but Sokka won't talk about what Aunt Wu said to him. I mostly just had a conversation about you to feel her out, but I did ask for one quick prophecy."

"What did you ask?" Aang glanced over at her, but she kept her own gaze pointed straight ahead.

"I'd rather not say."

Aang considered that, and a quick thought flitted across his mind that it was dangerous for Mai to have secrets, but then he pushed the notion away. Mai was trying, now. He could trust that. "Okay. So what about Katara's fortune?"

Mai's lips actually quirked into a smile, and she finally turned to meet Aang's eyes. "I could tell you the full story, but I think Katara considers it to be embarrassing. She asked for a romance fortune, basically, and was surprised at the answer."

"Oh." Aang could definitely understand that. The way he had felt around Mai during their search for Katara was vivid enough in his memory that he could feel his cheeks warming even now. "Yeah, I think I won't ask her about it."

"Truly, the Avatar is a font of wisdom." Mai motioned at a large tent just ahead of them. "There's Aunt Wu's setup- but why is no one here?" She glanced around, and her right hand went to the sheathed sword that hung off the back of her belt.

Aang looked around, trying to find either Sokka or Katara, but spotted neither face in the crowd around them.
Mai went over the tent and pulled the entrance flap aside just enough to peek inside, and then stepped away again, her hand clutched tightly on her sword's handle but still not revealing the blade. "No Aunt Wu. Something happened."

Aang's stomach flipped. What could have gone wrong? How could his friends have disappeared? Did he lose them because he wasn't vigilant enough? And had he just lost another teacher before he could even meet her?

No, he wouldn't let that happen. Not again. Aang looked around once more, but instead of looking for the Water Tribe siblings, he was looking for disharmony, for things that weren't quite right. He spotted a man working in a nearby both trying to sell charms for good luck, and couldn't help but notice that the man was keeping his eyes firmly averted from the area around Aunt Wu's tent.

Aang had dashed and hopped over to the booth in an instant. "Please, you have to tell me what happened here."

The seller's eyes went wide and he frowned beneath his mustache, but then he gave a very loud laugh. "Ha, ha! Yes, my friend, I can sell you charm that will make you irresistible to the ladies! After all, that's why you're here, to inspect my wares and buy something. Ha. Why just look at this one, made by the Sisters of the Biao Zi Abbey. Look very closely, young man."

Aang blinked. What was this guy going on about?

The man reached over and pushed Aang's scarf-covered head close to the booth's counter so that his nose was touching the charm, and then the man leaned over so that his own head was right next to Aang's. "Your friends were arrested," he whispered. "The Fire Army arrested the Fortuneteller, and the girl in the hat tried to stand up to them, so they took her and the young assistant as well."

Oh, Aang got it now! He whispered back, "What about a boy with a little scraggly ponytail?"

"I never saw him. He wasn't there during the arrest."

Well, that was either very good news, or terrible news. "And why were they arrested?"

The man raised his head just enough to make what seemed like a very aggressive gesture against his forehead. "That scoundrel Jae Choi put the Fire Army up to it."

"Jae Choi? Who's that?"

"You've never heard?" The man looked up briefly, and then raised his voice again. "Certainly, sir, I can show you something more potent! Ha, ha! This one will get the girls trailing after you like elephant-mice after a piper!" He swapped the charm beneath Aang's nose for another, and then whispered, "He's an administrative noble for this province. Comes from an old, respected family of bureaucrats, but Jae sold us out to the Fire Army and does their bidding, now! He thinks he can buy our forgiveness by paying for all the food for this festival, but he's nothing but a scoundrel! With lots of spears backing him up. But I have to say, the frosted tangguo on the food tables is pretty tasty."

Aang nodded as best he could with his head still being held against the counter. "Thanks."

The man finally let go of Aang's cranium, and then loudly said, "Very well, sir, the charm is yours. Good luck."

Aang blinked, wondering what this part of the act signified, but then a cold hand grabbed his collar and yanked him back up. Aang turned and found Mai staring back at him with dark eyes. "Take your sexy charm and let's go find the Fire Nation camp."
Katara was just getting set to ask the guard about bathroom breaks—both for the opportunity of an escape attempt and a real desire for a bathroom break—when Aunt Wu's accuser stepped into the tent.

Katara recognized him instantly from the earlier confrontation. He no longer had an ostrich-horse beneath him, but the gleaming green robes and wide-brimmed black hat were the same. He was scowling so hard beneath his long beard that it looked painful, and his eyes blazed with fury as he pointed at Aunt Wu and said, "Now the reckoning is at hand!"

The Fire Army captain who stepped into the tent behind him—an older woman with hair that was just starting to turn grayer than her polished armor—snorted with what sounded distinctly like amusement. "Let's not get overly dramatic about this, Jae Choi. State your formal charge against the accused."

The man—Jae Choi—continued to point. "Thank you, Captain Shimofuri. This sorceress, with the help of her nefarious disciples, placed a hex on my son Yeong that has completely taken away his wits."

Katara was going to voice a protest of such a ridiculous idea, but Captain Shimofuri looked over with hard eyes, and the whole thing died in Katara's throat. Shimofuri said, "Let the record state that Jae Choi is making an accusation of malicious sorcery. And how does the accused answer?"

Aunt Wu finally stood up behind Katara. "I am just a humble fortuneteller. Yeong came to me requesting a fortune, and I predicted that he would meet the love of his life at this festival after taking part in one of the purifying dances. I have made several love predictions this week, and so far have had no complaints."

Captain Shimofuri nodded. "And the 'nefarious' disciples?"

Meng held up both of her arms as if surrendering on a battlefield. "I just work here, but Aunt Wu is telling the truth."

Shimofuri looked back at Katara. "And you?"

Katara stood tall and proud. "I'm just a festival-goer, but I couldn't stand by and let Aunt Wu face unjust persecution! I got a love fortune as well, but I haven't done anything unwise."

Shimofuri snorted like she found that funny, but Jae Choi snarled and said, "And what of this love fortune? Has it got you chasing your betters?"

"I'm not chasing anyone!" Katara's hand clutched into fists at the idea that she couldn't marry the Avatar because he was somehow her 'better.' Not that she was intent on marrying Aang. "It just—made me realize some things I hadn't thought about before."

Shimofuri's eyebrows rose, but all she said was, "Let's get back on track. Let the record state that the accused deny all charges."

Katara stepped forward to clutch the bars of the cage. "So, now what?"

"Now," Shimofuri said, "we finish this. The accused are to be put to death at sunset."

Over Meng's squeal, Katara shouted, "How can you do this?! This wasn't a real trial!"

Shimofuri simply nodded. "No, it wasn't. I am the law here, and I want to be done with this. Guards, deal with them."
"Objection!"

All heads turned as someone new entered the tent, someone in a dingy green robe who had her shining black hair done up in ox-horn buns that-

Mai?!

And Aang- his head still covered in his borrowed scarf- was standing right behind her, with another spear-carrying guard bringing up the rear. Katara couldn't help but smile. Her friends had come for her! But where was Sokka? Was he still mad at her, after- after those awful things she said to him?

Captain Shimofuri turned to regard the new arrivals. "And you are?"

Mai bowed low. "I am Ty Lee, a humble friend of the accused, here to visit them. I apologize for speaking out of turn, and I mean no disrespect to you or your position, but Fire Lord Azulon's Writs of Colonization clearly state that while Fire Nation forces are empowered to arbitrate conflicts between natives of the colonies, they also specify that the accused have the option to present evidence countering the charges. In his wisdom, the Fire Lord saw that corrupt natives might seek to use the Fire Army to serve their own ends, and so he created laws to allow for a fair hearing."

Shimofuri didn't so much as blink. "I am the law, here."

Mai bowed again. "Yes, Captain. You are the embodiment of the Fire Lord's will here in this region of the colonies."

"Ridiculous!" Jae was growing red in the face, and he moved his heavyset frame to stand in front of Mai. "This filth knows nothing. I am an administrative official for this province, and I demand the sorceress be destroyed!"

Shimofuri stepped forward so that she stood face to face with Jae, and hissed, "You are Earth-born, and have no power to command me. The point the 'filth' makes is correct. In accordance with the Fire Lord's law, I will provide an hour to assemble evidence in defense of the accused, and then render my final judgement. And if you interfere in any way, interfere with Fire Army business, I will have you in a cage. Is that clear?"

Katara could see Jae's eyes moving to take in the guards and their spears, and then he gave a single nod and stormed out of the tent.

Shimofuri looked over at the cage, and then at Mai. "One hour." She turned and followed Jae, leaving the two guards behind.

Aang and Mai immediately made their way over to the cage. Aang was the first to speak. "Are you okay?"

Katara nodded. "Thanks for coming. How did you guys know that stuff?"

Aang shrugged. "I didn't."

They both looked over at Mai. Her eyes briefly flicked towards the guards, and then back to Katara. "My father made me read and memorize all that stuff. He thought it would be useful for his family to know, given- given his latest job. And it almost didn't work."

Aunt Wu stepped forward to join Katara beside the bars of the cage. "Well, things work out as they're supposed to, and I'm very glad that you're here with us now." She looked at Aang. "And I'm very pleased to meet you, as well. I hope we'll be able to talk comfortably, soon."
Katara nodded. "You need to find some evidence to get us out of here. What can we use?"

"The fortune-telling stuff," Mai said. "We can bring it here and show that there's nothing spooky, just sticks and dice and whatever."

Aang shook his head. "I don't think that will be enough. That mean guy is upset about his son and making stuff up, so showing some sticks won't prove anything. We need-" His eyes lit up. "We need to bring the son here! What was his name?"

Katara smiled. "Yeong! Yeong Choi! You can bring him here, and the captain can talk with him and see that he's not under any spell."

Aunt Wu stroked her chin. "That might work. Jae is clearly trying to exploit politics, so having someone from his family and class would be helpful."

Katara looked over at Mai. "And it might be a good idea if you stick around to help us with Fire Nation colony law. To make sure that Jae doesn't try anything before we get his son here."

Mai sighed. "I guess that makes sense."

Meng let out with a "Yay!" and Katara had to agree that things were looking up.

Then Aang said, "Um, but how do I find this Yeong Choi guy?"

Katara looked at Aunt Wu.

Aunt Wu looked back.

Meng and Mai both sighed simultaneously.

"Maybe I can help with that."

Katara gasped at the sound of that voice; it was a voice she was still growing used to, a voice that she thought she had chased away. It was the voice she didn't deserve to have coming to her aid now, but a voice that nevertheless had come to fill her with light once again. "Sokka!"

Her brother stepped into the tent, accompanied by another spear-carrying guard, and walked over to the cage. "I heard about your arrest, and— and I'm sorry I wasn't there to help."

He was apologizing to her? "No, Sokka, I shouldn't have—"

He held up a hand. "We'll worry about it once we get you out of jail. Again. Hopefully, this time will be a lot less stressful." He looked around at everyone, his gaze lingering on Aang but moving quickly past Aunt Wu. "Now, I heard your plan, and the only way to find the guy you're looking for is with some detective skills. Fortunately, you have a master detective here to help you."

Mai said, "Who?"

Sokka slapped his forehead.

Aang walked out of the Fire Army camp with Sokka at his side, and looked down the slope of the valley to the festival that was still in full swing. It seemed as though even more people had arrived since the morning, and the valley rang with the echoes of their talk and music. "So what's your plan for finding this Yeong guy? If you were hoping to use Appa, the whole thing about sky bison being able to sniff out a hiding monk from above the clouds is just a myth."
Sokka shook his head. "No, I'm thankfully depending on something a little more solid. You said that Jae Choi jerk is one of the big organizers behind the festival and paid for all the food that's being given away, right?"

Aang nodded. "I've seen the food tables. Each one has four groups of plates that represent the four elements. It's different from the stuff the vendors are selling, but-

"Not important. This guy is responsible for the food, but Choi the Elder is busy harassing old ladies and Water Tribe girls up in the Fire Nation camp. So someone has to be watching over things down here, right? Someone who everyone knows is in charge?"

Aang felt a smile growing on his face. "Someone like Yeong Choi!"

"Exactly!" Sokka crossed his arms over his chest. "And I, being an expert in the use and consumption of food, have a plan."

Aang nodded, eager to hear the details. Sokka was the perfect combination of cleverness and loyalty, and no doubt he had figured this whole situation out.

The plan might even work!

Sokka watched from a distance as Aang approached one of the food tables in the heart of the festival. The crowds were thick, here, but Sokka had been observing things, and the food was refilled just as fast as the plates were being emptied. Obviously, they were in the center of one of the most efficient service networks in the world.

Over at the table, Aang plucked something edible from the 'Air' corner of the display and popped it into his mouth. Sokka kept his eyes focused as Aang chewed, swallowed, and then threw himself to the ground with a loud, "Oooooaaauuuuuggh!"

People immediately backed away while Sokka pushed his way through until he burst out into the small clearing around the table and Aang's body. Aang was clawing at his own throat and twitching around on the ground, and looked for Sokka's nod before turning one of his 'twitches' into a kick that knocked the whole food table over.

Pleased at the din of the crash, Sokka ran over to his friend. "Oh no," he said as loudly as he could. "He's eaten one of the rare leaves of the Igkyak Plant, which are deadly poison but look no different than a sprig of mint!" The crowd murmured with distress, and Sokka spotted a few people with food in their hands carefully inspecting any garnish. No Choi had stepped forward yet, so Sokka continued, "Who prepared this food? We need to know how much Igkyak he might have eaten so that we can prepare an antidote!"

At that point, a young lady dashed out of the crowd in a robe big and long enough to billow out like a sail at the speed of her run. She threw herself to the ground beside Aang, and Sokka saw that she was examining the kid's throat with hands covered in old burn scars.

"No swelling," the woman said. She pried Aang's jaws open with a healer's confidence and added, "No sign of inflammation here, either." She clamped her scarred right hand down over Aang's nose, and he choked for a moment before reflexively sucking in some air through his mouth. "And you don't have any problem breathing when no one is interfering." She sat back on her knees and crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at both Aang and Sokka. "What's going on here?"

At that point, a young lady dashed out of the crowd in a robe big and long enough to billow out like a sail at the speed of her run. She threw herself to the ground beside Aang, and Sokka saw that she was examining the kid’s throat with hands covered in old burn scars.

"No swelling," the woman said. She pried Aang's jaws open with a healer's confidence and added, "No sign of inflammation here, either." She clamped her scarred right hand down over Aang's nose, and he choked for a moment before reflexively sucking in some air through his mouth. "And you don't have any problem breathing when no one is interfering." She sat back on her knees and crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at both Aang and Sokka. "What's going on here?"

Before Sokka could answer, a man came running out of the crowd wearing the same style of dress as Jae Choi, right down to the shiny outer robe and tall horse-hair hat. He stumbled to a stop and
wheezed, "What- (ahh-) is (ugh-) wrong?"

Sokka turned away from the woman's angry expression and looked to the fancy young man. "You're Yeong Choi, right? Your father had my sister arrested because he thinks you're under a curse and I need your help to make sure no one dies."

Yeong just stared.

The healer woman's expression crumbled into confusion. "And you couldn't have just asked around for us?"

From the ground, Aang said, "That was our backup plan."

Sokka nodded. "This one seemed quicker."

A few minutes later, back in the large tents where the food for the free tables was being prepared by an army of cooks, Aang bowed to Yeong and the healer woman. "We're sorry for the deception. We have less than an hour until our friends will be judged and were feeling pretty desperate." Beside him, Sokka bowed as low as he could go.

"I suppose I understand." Yeong waved for them to stand up. "No, I lie, I get why you did something so foolish, but I don't understand why my father had your sister arrested. I don't even know your sister!"

Aang nodded. "But you know Aunt Wu. She gave you a love prediction. And now your dad says that it took away all your wits, or something."

Both Yeong and the scarred healer went still. Finally, Yeong nodded and motioned to the woman. "This is Song. We intend to marry as soon as possible. I was waiting in the particular spot that Aunt Wu suggested, and then Song came up, and-" He looked over at Song, and his face softened. "And-"

Song smiled and stared straight up into Yeong's eyes. "...and..."

Looking at them, Aang couldn't help but crave the same thing. To love someone who completed him, and to be loved in return, had to be the most fulfilling feeling in the world. He could almost imagine something like memories of loves like that, but the faces that came with them were just shadows in the mist of time.

"We get it," Sokka put in. "And the expected happened, and then your father got all upset."

The lovers ended their mutual adoration, and Yeong nodded heavily. "I told him of my desire to take Song as my wife and give her the life she deserves, and he was angry. We had words, and I had to walk away, but I never expected-" He sighed. "With what has he charged Aunt Wu?"

Aang wondered briefly how to word it. "He kind of is accusing her of being an evil sorceress who cursed you."

"Then I must set this right. Take me to the Fire Nation camp."

"Both of us," Song said.

Yeong turned to her with obvious alarm. "But if he commands the Firebenders, you could be in danger!"

Song held up her hands, letting the sleeves of her robe fall away to reveal that the mottled, shining
scars extended down to her wrists and beyond. "I have dealt with Firebenders before. I am not afraid."

Yeong looked like he was going to say something, but Aang thought of innocent Aunt Wu dying because of an angry father, of losing the chance to learn what he needed to fix the world for everyone, and of Katara once again being stuck behind a cage because of the Fire Nation's heartlessness. "Well, whoever is going, let's go. We don't have a lot of time!"

Sokka nodded, Yeong sighed, and Song smiled with satisfaction.

Katara was nearly falling asleep listening to Mai teach Meng how to brush her hair a hundred times a day when Aang burst into the tent again with a harried guard on his heels. "We did it!"

Katara jumped to her feet as Sokka came into the tent followed by a man and woman. The woman was wearing short, easily maintained hair and the simple robes of a peasant, but the man bore what Katara was coming to recognize as the clear marks of the nobility for this province. He was even wearing the same hat and facial hair as Jae, although his silk robes were orange, rather than the typical Earth Kingdom green. "Yeong Choi, I presume?"

The man nodded. "I apologize for my father's dishonorable actions. Let us end this farce as soon as possible."

Another guard brought both Captain Shimofuri and Jae into the tent, and Katara was almost starting to be grateful for the cage around her, as it kept people from pressing in around her in the limited space. An open sky was terrifying, but getting crushed in a mob was no fun, either.

Captain Shimofuri looked around at the assemblage. "What am I dealing with now?"

Yeong stepped forward, holding one of Song's scarred hands. "I am the supposedly cursed, witless son, and with me is Song, the woman I intend to marry of my own free will. I have come to demonstrate my sound mind."

Jae lurched forward with a finger pointed right in Song's face. "She is a peasant! A beggar with no means to support herself! She got the sorceress to bewitch my son so that she could live a comfortable life on my money!"

Katara winced at the expression that overtook Song's face. Yeong shoved his father's finger aside as Song said, "I- My hands lack the feeling needed for most healing work, but my love for Yeong is genuine. I would marry him if he had nothing."

"And I love Song!" Yeong turned to Captain Shimofuri, and Katara silently cheered him on. "I only met Song today, but I have quickly learned that she is the most giving, caring person I could ever hope to meet. Her hands were burned trying to treat a sick Firebender long ago, before the war even ended, and she doesn't need my money to survive. She is quite knowledgeable in the ways of healing herbs, even if her fingers cannot feel her patients. I am marrying her because I want to, and no magical force in this world or that of the Spirits could change my feelings."

Jae through his hands into the air. "You see! Listen to his nonsense! The son I raised would never bother with a lowborn with clumsy hands. I raised a practical son!"

"Practical?!" Yeong's face had gone red, just like Katara had seen his father's, before. "Then see how practical you have raised your son!" He tore at his outer robe, pulling it off to reveal the white shirt and pants that had been hidden beneath the orange silk. He folded the robe up, took his hat off and placed it atop the bundle, and held it up in Jae's face. "I disown you, Father. I was silent when our
province was surrendered, because you said it the world was changing and I believed you, but now I see what you truly think of our people. Even the lowliest worker supports the nation and gives you the means to live, and that deserves respect. The world is changing, and no matter her station, Song deserves my love. I am grateful to have hers in return, and I would rather marry her and live as a beggar than live in comfort in your house."

"Witchcraft!" Jae shrieked, swatting the robe and hat out of his son's hands. "Witchcraft!"

Katara heard Aunt Wu murmuring, "This could be going better."

Captain Shimofuri punched a hand into the air and a blossom of flame exploded above everyone's heads. "I will have order!" Jae and Yeong both fell silent, and Shimofuri nodded. "Good. What I have seen here is evidence of nothing. Maybe the boy is cursed and maybe he isn't. I don't care anymore. The younger girls can go free, but the Fire Army has an outstanding alert for dangerous Spirits, and there is too much doubt for me to release the fortuneteller. I will be done with this before the sun disappears. Now, all of you get out of my camp!"

Katara was going to argue, to say that the Captain couldn't be done with this- couldn't kill Aunt Wu just on suspicions- but then she noticed Mai reaching into her sleeves, going for a weapon. She was going to fight to free Aunt Wu! Katara tensed and for a moment was looking forward to the chance to show the Fire Nation that it couldn't just take people's lives away like this, but then she realized what she was about to do. Could they really get Aunt Wu out of the middle of the camp? And then what would they do, drag her through the festival while the Fire Army chased them? People would get hurt, and Katara couldn't imagine that Aunt Wu would be very safe.

Katara shook her head, and it was a long, heart-pounding moment before Mai's gaze caught it and she took her empty hands back out of her sleeves.

Then a guard sprang into Katara's view to open the cage and yank her away.

Aang stumbled as the Firebender guard threw him out of the Fire Army's camp, and he heard the impacts of his friend's bodies on the grass and they got the same treatment. Mai, Sokka, Katara (and her hat), Yeong, Song, and even the small girl with the giant pigtails had all been released, but the fortuneteller was still inside.

There was no time to waste! The sun was falling behind the Mountain of Death and the sky was a mix of purples and reds. Aang didn't even wait to check that no one was looking before throwing a gust of air to pop himself back to his feet. "I'll go get Appa, and then we can swoop down and grab Aunt Wu out of there." He spared a quick moment to make sure his friends got the plan.

He found confused stares from Yeong, Song, and the pigtails girl. Mai's expression was blank. Katara was biting her lip, and Sokka shook his head as he stood up and said, "You'll never make it in time. We left Appa pretty far back."

"So, what, you don't even want to try?"

Sokka opened his mouth to say something, but Katara silenced him with a hand on his shoulder. She then stepped over to Aang and looked at him with blue eyes that reflected the first few stars in the sky. "Do you really think you can make it?"

Aang wanted to say yes, that he could cover the distance back to the camp easily with his glider, but then he remembered that he had lost his staff back on Crescent Island. He couldn't stop his eyes from flicking over to Mai, but he quickly looked back to Katara. "We have to do something!"
Yeong said, "I'll rally the people. We can pressure the Captain, show her that we won't stand for this bullying." He grabbed Song's hand, and together they went running back to the festival.

Aang didn't think they'd be any quicker than going back for Appa. Explaining the situation just once would take too much time, never mind trying to spread the word to enough people. There just wasn't a way to speak to everyone all at once, to give them real understanding without wasting words on-

Wait!

"Wait," Aang said. "I have an idea." He looked around. He was too close to the Fire Army camp, so he needed some space. Waving the others along, he ran with a burst of Airbending-enhanced speed across the top of the valley wall. He skidded to a stop once he figured that none of the camp's guards could see what he intended to do, and then sank into a lotus position so that he could meditate. He had slowed his breathing by the time his friends (and the pigtails girl) sprinted over, and he smiled up at them as he closed his eyes. "Everyone at this festival is sharing a kind of connection. I'm going to find it, and use it to send a message."

Sokka scratched his hair. "What kind of connection?"

Aang felt for the dogwood sprig pinned to the front of his tunic. He pulled Mai's needle out and took the little bundle of green leaves and red berries in his cupped hands. "Everyone at the festival is wearing one of these. They're doing it because they all believe that it will purify their spirits. They all believe. Just like me." He put his focus on the feel of the leaves in his hand, on the way they tickled the skin of his palms like the air tickled his nostrils as he breathed in and out. He focused on what that meant to him, on the old feeling of peace that he would find in the gardens of the Southern Air Temple, and on the feeling of being gathered here with so many respectful, spiritual people.

He sank into the flow of the invisible energy that ran through this valley like a river flowing down from the Mountain, and found the other dogwood sprigs floating on that river with the same peace he felt now.

Aang plunged himself into that river.

He inhaled sharply at the sharpness of it, of the feeling of throwing himself into the raging rapids of the valley’s spiritual energy. He tried to reach out towards the other dogwood sprigs, but they bobbed in the flow of energy to create their own currents. It was like trying to swim up a waterfall! He would no sooner touch one than he would go spinning away in a dizzying swirl. There were no strong connections to anchor him, to let him follow a safe path through this world of spiritual energy. He didn't have the strength to do it.

"Can't," he grunted.

To Katara’s ears, it was like Aang spat the word out through clenched teeth. Sweat dripped down from beneath the scarf on his head, and he was clearly fighting to not clench his fists and crush the little dogwood sprig resting in his palms.

Katara knew she had to help. She took the scarf off, revealing the glowing arrow tattoo beneath, and then flipped the cork off of one of her waterskins and streamed some of the liquid out with a hurried finger motion. As she sat down to face Aang, she moved her arms to separate the water in half and pool it around each of her hands, and then raised them so that her palms were on either side of Aang’s head. He didn't have any wounds to heal, but Katara tapped into the repairing energies of the water nonetheless, using that power to flare his Qi in the same way she should coax a body to restore itself. His breathing quickly settled, and she could see the tension leaving his muscles.
Katara shut her eyes, took off her hat, and leaned forward until her forehead was resting against his. She concentrated on keeping the healing power of the water going, thinking of Aunt Wu as she did so, of everything the old woman did for people, and how the Fire Nation wanted to kill her for it. She also couldn't help but think of the prophecy Aunt Wu had made, that Katara might someday marry Aang.

Whether or not that happened, the Avatar needed her now. 

_Aang_ needed her now.

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Sokka watched Aang and Katara glowing, and couldn't stop himself from pacing. What were they doing? How was this going to help Aunt Wu?

"Relax," Mai said as he paced past her again. 

Sokka didn't even look at her. "No."

He heard Mai sigh. He thought that might be a sign of surrender, but then she added, "You know, they make a cute couple, touching heads and glowing together like that."

Finally, Sokka tore his eyes away from the spectacle and looked over at Mai. "Don't. I know you're joking, but I don't do that with you anymore." He didn't wait for her response- if she planned to make any- before turning back to Aang and Katara.

What were they doing? How was this going to help Aunt Wu?

Then Meng called out, "Look!" Sokka turned to find her pointing, and then followed said pointing down towards the valley. The festival was being lit up by torches and candles as the night settled on the gathering, but those lights weren't staying still. They were flowing up the grassy sides of the valley.

The people- almost the entire gathering for the festival- was walking up to the Fire Nation camp.

He glanced back at Aang and Katara, both of them still meditating and glowing, and then over to Mai. "Guard them. I need to see what's happening."

He ran back to the entrance of the Fire Army's encampment and met the first wave of people as they approached the obviously nervous guards, with Yeong and Song at the front of the crowd of almost a thousand people. It was actually the scarred healer who spoke first, saying, "We've come to petition for the release of the Fortuneteller. One of our people is being held here unjustly."

As a single guard went running into the camp, no doubt to find someone with more authority to take the blame for whatever trouble was about to happen, Sokka trotted over to Yeong. "You worked fast."

Yeong tried to smile, but didn't quite manage it. "I barely needed to say anything. The first people I told immediately started moving for the camp, and everyone else just began following. I don't know how word spread so quickly, but I heard the crowd chanting Aunt Wu's name as they marched."

There was some motion amongst the remaining guards, and Sokka turned to see Captain Shimofuri stepping through the line of soldiers with Jae Choi beside her. She held a hand up and a burst of fire came to life in her palm, acting like one of the torches being carried by so many people in the crowd.

"What is the meaning of this?!!"
Yeong stepped back and bowed. "Captain, we are here to express the will of the people. We mean no harm and will do no violence, but you are holding one of our people without just cause. We ask for her release."

Sokka saw Shimofuri eying the size of the crowd. Her forces were outnumbered, although Sokka doubted that there were many fighters amongst the festival goers. If it came to a fight, the Fire Army had a good chance of winning. Judging from the Captain's expression, she had done the same math as Sokka, but Jae looked absolutely terrified of the mass of people in front of him.

The captain turned back to Yeong and Song. "I told you, the Fire Army can't risk anything when it comes to Spirit troubles. She must be killed."

"What if," Sokka broke in, "all the people took responsibility for Aunt Wu? They don't want people being cursed, either, and Aunt Wu hasn't done anything to anyone from the Fire Nation."

Jae took a step closer to Captain Shimofuri. "She cursed my son!"

"I," Yeong said, "am not from the Fire Nation. Nor am I cursed."

Song took one of Yeong's hands in her own scarred pair. "We're just in love. Love knows no nation, nor do the spirits. They're risks and blessings for us all. Please, Captain, release Aunt Wu to the custody of her people, and let us solve this peacefully and in friendship."

"You can't," Jae hissed. "I cannot allow it!"

Captain Shimofuri raised the hand that wasn't on fire to her brow. "You just don't know when to shut up, do you? You may be an official, Jae Choi, but until you can get control of your own people, I won't believe that you can make me do anything." She looked out once again at the crowd.

"Aunt Wu," Sokka called out. "Aunt Wu!" Yeong and Song both took up the chant, repeating Aunt Wu's name, and soon it spread amongst the whole gathering. The Fortuneteller's name echoed down through the valley and off the Mountain of Death. Sokka thought it was a pretty neat effect.

Captain Shimofuri turned to one of her guards and said something that Sokka couldn't hear, and then the soldier ran off into the camp.

The chanting had gone on for five more minutes when the guard came back with Aunt Wu. Shimofuri motioned, and all her soldiers stepped back to clear a path for Fortuneteller to the crowd. "I release your elder to you. Make sure she stays out of trouble. Now remove this assembly from my camp or I will consider it to be hostile."

Sokka left Yeong and Song to do all the appropriate bowing while he jogged into the crowd, shouting, "She's free! We did it! Back to the party!"

Not that the festival was really a party, but in Sokka's opinion, this definitely called for one.

A few hours later, Katara stood with Aunt Wu and all her friends while they watched an Earth shaman and a volunteer scribe finalize the marriage between Yeong and Song. The couple kissed, and the crowd around them hoisted their candles and cheered.

Katara raised the brim of her hat and looked to Aunt Wu. "That has to be good advertising."

The answering smile was almost indulgent. "If I charged money for my services, the profit would probably be worth the trouble, but I think I'll keep a low profile for the rest of the festival. Just
provide a little help here and there if I see an opportunity." She turned to face Aang, who was once again wearing the scarf over his arrow. "Speaking of which, Avatar, I believe I owe you a talk. And my thanks."

Aang shook his head. "You don't need to thank me. But I was told that you had some helpful information for me..."

Aunt Wu raised a hand to touch his covered forehead. "I know the information you seek, but I can't give that to you. You are delving into the rare lore, from before the world was divided into nations, and few know such things. Even Fortunetellers." Aang's face fell, and Katara's heart stung for him, but Aunt Wu continued, "I can tell you, though, where such knowledge can be found. The Earth Kingdom's greatest cities were older than the Kingdom itself, and much lore was accumulated in their libraries."

Mai broke in with, "Omashu and Ba Sing Se are gone."

Aunt Wu nodded. "But Ba Sing Se itself was too large- too deep- to be wiped out, even by the Fire Nation's power. There are remnants of the city still around, remnants devoted to preserving Ba Sing Se's culture, and that includes the knowledge it accumulated. I tell you, Avatar Aang, to seek Avatar Kyoshi's legacy near the ruins of Ba Sing Se." She turned to Katara. "Seek your Tribe that waits there for you. With them, you will find welcome, and the beginnings of the knowledge you need to save the world."

Sokka crossed his arms over his chest. "That's kind of vague, don't you think?"

Katara elbowed him. "She's telling us what she can."

Aunt Wu turned to Katara. "But your brother is not telling you all that he can."

Katara blinked. What did that mean? "Sokka?"

He said nothing, but Aunt Wu went on, "You had a fight, earlier. I heard it, and now I'm going to be a bit of a busybody. Your brother has known more hardships than you've imagined, Katara, even if he will not speak of them. He keeps those burdens to himself, but don't let him. Talk more to him, and don't be afraid of what you'll learn. It will only bring you closer."

Katara tried to blink back the tears she felt welling up in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Sokka. I didn't- but even if I didn't know, I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. I shouldn't be cruel because of my worries."

"Don't-" He was red in the face and trying to act none of this was a big deal. "Look, don't be sorry. It's all fine. We can- you know- talk. If you want. Sometime."

Katara reached out and hugged him, of course. He endured it for a moment, and then wrapped his arms around her. She couldn't help but smile at that.

She heard Aunt Wu say to Aang, "And we should have a little private talk of our own."

When Katara finally let go of her brother, she looked back over at the wedding celebration. Jae Choi was approaching the newlyweds from amidst the various well-wishers. He handed over a bag and immediately turned to go, never looking back even as Yeong lifted a gold coin out of it.

The little moment went unnoticed amidst the other celebrations.
Aang finally stepped into Aunt Wu's tent, just as all the others had, earlier. It was dark in there, but the fortuneteller lit a little fire in a pan, and it illuminated the space with a warm, living glow.

"So what did you want to talk to me about?" Aang sat down on the guest-mat on the floor.

Aunt Wu settled down on the other mat, beside the fire pan. "An extra fortune that you need to know. I thought you'd want a moment to take it in, by yourself. It's no secret, but it should be up to you as to how to handle it. How you want to share it."

"Okay." That sounded ominous to Aang, but he trusted Aunt Wu. "What is it?"

She took a deep breath and looked him straight in his eyes. "The element of Air has returned to the world."

He had to smile. "Yeah, I kind of noticed. I'm not exactly sleeping in an iceberg, anymore."

She didn't smile back. "The Spirit World is encroaching on the material world, and you've seen how things have been affected. The unsettled dead make their displeasure known. Creatures from legend are making new lives in our modern world. And we've been too long without four nations for the four elements, so a correction has begun."

Aang felt his heart starting to hammer. She couldn't mean- "There- there are new Airbenders?"

Aunt Wu nodded. "It's happening slowly, but not without violence. Not without danger. Nevertheless, this is my fortune for you, Aang: if you go to Ba Sing Se's ruins without the friendship of new Airbenders, all will be lost. And that friendship will be hard for you to give."

Aang reached up to run his hands over his shaved head, but he found the scarf still in place, so he yanked it off before completing the worried gesture. "How- how can I find them? Who are they?"

Aunt Wu shook her head. "That is something you need to discover for yourself. Anything I could tell you would only sabotage what you need to do."

Aang blew out an annoyed breath. Wasn't that just typical?

Katara found Mai sitting a little ways off from the wedding celebration, watching some children making Ghost Lanterns on the valley grass. "So, Mai, did you ever get a fortune for yourself?" She sat down beside the other girl in a way that made it clear that she wouldn't be chased away.

Mai raised a single eyebrow. "Why, looking to get some clarification on whether you and Aang..."

She raised a hand and intertwined two of the fingers.

Katara felt her face heat up, but after today, she wasn't going to let a little embarrassment stop her. "Aunt Wu said it wasn't clear. So I'm not going to worry whether or not it will happen. I'm just going to see how things go."

Mai nodded with what could almost have been respect. "Then I'll answer your question. Yes, I did get a fortune."

All at once Katara was reaching out to take Mai's hands in her own. "And?!”

Mai frowned and tried to tug her hands away, but Katara held on. "Well, Sokka wanted me to test the old lady. It was simple: I said that if she could really tell fortunes, she would know what question I wanted to ask without my having to ask it."
Katara blinked. "I guess that logic works."

"It did." Mai used Katara's surprise to free her hands. "Aunt Wu told me exactly the question I was thinking of."

"And what was it?"

Mai turned so that Katara could no longer see her face. "I- I wanted to know if I'd ever be forgiven. After Aunt Wu provided the question, I asked for the answer, too."

Katara waited a very generous half a second before saying, "And?!"

Mai turned back to look over at the children, who had risen to run around in the night air and chase each other with their lanterns. "She said yes."

"Yes?"

"The answer to my question was yes."

Katara frowned. "But who's going to forgive you, exactly? For what? And when?"

Mai shrugged. "It doesn't matter. That was the only answer I cared about."

Katara considered that. "You're an odd girl, Mai."

"Yeah."

"But that's fine."

"Yeah."

Katara smiled, and took a brief moment to look up at the stars. The sight sent that spike of panic through her heart, but she adjusted her hat and focused again on the friend beside her and the family nearby.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Ozai's faction moves to secure Suki's help, and the some of the mysterious Kyoshi Rebel's past is revealed.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter depicts an explicitly abusive family relationship. It's nowhere near as bad as what Zuko experienced in the original cartoon, for comparison, but it is all 'on-screen' here, so it might affect some people in a more impactful way.

Kirai's name and appearance were created by Lavanya Six, based on an idea by me.

The Sisters of Kyoshi Island

Zuko threw his arm out to send a wave of flame at Suki, but the fire was still in the process of blossoming when she threw herself into a forward roll that carried her under the attack. Zuko shifted his stance and brought his leg back for a snapping side-kick, but instead of striking out, he held his position and used his raised foot to catch Suki by her left shoulder.

He looked down at her and said, "You're dead."

Suki nodded and leaned back. "You're quicker than most of the Firebenders I've fought. I need to learn to take that into account."

The sound of slow clapping echoed through the dojo, and Zuko turned to find Azula observing them. "Well done, Zuzu. I'm glad to see that you've been keeping up with your practice. I just received word that June has finally arrived, and I'm sure she'll be glad to see that all the training she gave you isn't going to waste." Without waiting for a reply, Azula turned to Suki. "And as for you, if you can't improve your speed and tactical reasoning, then get a weapon. My brother is no master, and I will not tolerate anything less than perfection in my agents."

To Zuko's annoyance, Suki lowered her head to the dojo's floor and said, "Thank you for the suggestion. I know how to use a katana sword."

"I know the type. It operates on the same principle as a dao saber. Go tell the outpost's commander that I'm requisitioning one for you. Now."

Suki pressed her forehead to the floor again and then scurried away.

Zuko crossed his arms and gave his sister as much of a glare as he could with one eye. "You wanted her to leave us alone."

Azula gave him a sharp little smile that didn't reach her eyes. "My, winning a sparring match and
seeing what's going on right in front of your one-eyed face. Today is a good day for you! But yes, after I got word about June, I stopped by the communications office to check for messages. Father sent a wire that the operation to recover Suki's sister has begun. Piandao himself has been tasked with it, which I presume is an excuse to get him out of the Capital for a little while. The operation against Zhao got a little hot, from what Father shared."

Zuko blinked. Since arriving back in the Earth Kingdom - the Colonial Continent, they had been staying at a small Fire Army outpost, waiting for June to meet them, and Azula had been sending and receiving telegraph messages several times a day. She hadn't said what they were about, except for one brief aside that Father had moved against Zhao but he had disappeared in response. The only thing she would share about her business was that she was making arrangements and gathering information so that Zuko could finish his hunt for the Avatar.

Zuko wanted to inquire further about the details, but he knew it would be futile. "So why not tell Suki? She'd probably be glad to hear it."

"After Piandao missed getting Zhao, I'm not going to risk getting her hopes up." Azula turned and began stalking out of the dojo. "She'll hear about it once I know that the mission has been completed successfully."

So Piandao had been involved in the play against Zhao? Zuko trotted to catch up with his sister. Her logic about Suki made sense, but as he followed Azula, he noticed that she was walking with an unusual tenseness, and as they emerged from the dojo into the open air of the outpost, he saw that she was stomping with enough force to leave boot-prints in the packed dirt of the ground. Usually, she walked with a grace that let her move without any sign of her passage. "Something else is wrong. You're angry."

Azula stopped short and turned to scowl at him. "Like you?"

"Well, yes." Zuko offered a shrug.

Azula held his gaze for a moment, but then turned and rolled her eyes. "If you must know, Father denied my request to have Mai's family arrested and tortured. His wire said that they still have value as allies, that it would be 'needlessly cruel' to try to hurt Mai through them, and that her brother Tom-Tom was too young to be a target."

Zuko couldn't help but let out a relieved sigh. He had never really gotten to know Mai's parents, but Azula had previously mentioned the little boy who had been born to the family during his exile. "That sounds reasonable."

"I don't want to be reasonable. I want to be strong." He watched as Azula clenched and unclenched her fists, and before she stalked off to complete whatever other business she had here in the outpost, she tossed out, "Get ready. We leave in half an hour."

Zuko stood there, considering that. His memories of Father were full of lessons on strength, but did that extend to hurting the innocent families of traitors? Had it extended to Zuko himself, when he failed to do his duty during the siege of Ba Sing Se?

Had Father changed, or were Zuko's memories deceptive?

He would find no answers standing here. Zuko went to get his things together, and then to find Suki. He would be ready to leave at Azula's appointed time, so they could continue the hunt for the Avatar and the only way home.
Piandao found the Imoto Island Navy Base much to his liking. It was a typical naval outpost with docks and coal depots and all the various things that the Fire Nation needed to project its power across the oceans, but what had caught his eye were the training grounds for the Marine soldiers. There was an entire scuttled junk on the shore that was currently being used to practice a boarding action, and one whole corner of the base had been devoted to a mock pirate fortress that was in the process of being mock-attacked.

It looked like fun. Battle was always more amusing when no one was dying.

Sadly, Piandao was not here to have fun.

He followed his escort through into the base, trying to feel comfortable again in his old service armor, and the sword at his side helped with that. The escort took him past the various buildings and piers over to the mock-fortress, where an officer was observing the proceedings. Piandao glanced over at all the activity for a moment to watch a squadron commander lead a team of Firebenders in a rush at the fortress, and turned away just as they were hit with a bag of ink representing the contents of an enemy catapult. The escort led Piandao straight to the observing officer and whispered, "Commander Wairo will see you, now."

Piandao nodded an acknowledgement, then stepped forward and bowed to Wairo. "Sir, Lieutenant Lee reporting, on direct assignment from Central Command."

Wairo turned and regarded Piandao with hands clasped formally behind his back. "Rather old for a Lieutenant, aren't you? Who's your commander?"

"I regret to say that both of those answers are classified, sir." Piandao produced a scroll from his belt and offered it to the commander. "I'm here to retrieve one of your marines for reassignment to Special Operations." He glanced over again at the drill, taking note that amidst the spears, fireballs, and arrows flying through the sky at the fortress, a cabbage-sized rock was also arcing along.

Wairo looked up from the scroll. It was a genuine document, endorsed with one of the rare anonymous imprints given to the highest ranking officers- and royals who had served in the military, such as Prince Ozai- and listed all the relevant details of Piandao's request. "You're here for Lieutenant Kirai? Why?"

"I'm afraid that's classified, too, even from me. I just know her name and number, and that I'm to bring her back to the Capital." Piandao looked over at the mock-battle again, once more picking a flying rock out of the sky.

"I see." Wairo grinned. "You know, I also have some special, classified orders about Lieutenant Kirai."

Piandao nodded. This had always been a possibility, and he had already resolved to make this as clean as possible. "I hope those orders don't conflict with mine, sir?"

"Old and cheeky for a lieutenant. Execute Protocol Sister."

Piandao heard the sound of a knife being pulled from its sheath, and immediately snapped his left arm backwards to smash his elbow into his escort's nose. Even the unsheathed knife clattered to the ground, Piandao was drawing his sword with his right arm in a cut that put a shallow gouge across Wairo's face. As the commander raised his hands to the wound, Piandao kicked him to the ground.

Then he ran straight into the mock-assault on the Fire Nation's imaginary enemies, dodging surprised marines and taking a very particular path that led him in the direction of the source of those two
thrown rocks. He took a deep breath and bellowed, "Lieutenant Kirai, report!"

Amidst the charging soldiers, one turned her head in response, and Piandao saw a young woman's face beneath the helmet, a few locks of sweaty black hair plastered to her forehead.

Of course, he had no idea what Kirai was supposed to look like, but Azula's communique had said that she was an Earthbender from Kyoshi Island, and the woman staring at him was unarmed, barefoot, and maintaining a low and solid stance that was completely unsuited for Firebending. Also, the eyes Piandao saw now were a blue color that could almost be green in a certain light- a shade that evoked the islands of the Southern Seas, the stepping stones between the Earth Kingdom and the Southern Water Tribe.

Piandao sheathed his sword just before he reached her, so as not to present himself as a threat. While the other confused marines immediately around her took reluctant defensive stances, he said, "Suki sends greetings. I think your Commanding officer is going to try to kill us both now."

Piandao had just finished the warning when Wairo's voice rang out with, "Lieutenant Kirai, subdue that spy and report to me at once!"

Piandao waited, and Kirai stared back at him with those bluish eyes.

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The Past

Half a World Away

Roughly three years before she would meet the deadliest swordsman in the world, Kirai had been watching from the shadows as her neighborhood was invaded. In the dark of the night, she didn't even need to seek cover, her dark clothes and facepaint working with her complete lack of movement to make her functionally invisible. When she finally struck, it would be like a shadow itself coming to life.

And she wasn't the only one ready for trouble.

The invasion in question was small in size, just a few carousing swordsmen in red tunics- probably bodyguards from one of the merchant ships come to trade- but soon they would learn that they should have stayed closer to the docks. Parts of the village were able to thrive on the commerce that came from the trading ships and the business offered by the soldiers in the big Navy base, but this particular neighborhood did not see much of that coin. This was the haven for people who couldn't or wouldn't hold a job in the civilized areas, and some visitors thought that gave them the freedom to do what they wanted with the residents.

That's why Kirai and her friends were here. A call like a cranefish's warble had sounded when the invaders had crossed the invisible border to the neighborhood and been echoed across the streets, and now a whistle like a blue jay went out to signal the completion of the defenders' gathering.

Kirai stepped out into the swordsmen's path, walking with confidence and aiming her worst glare at the invaders. "You made a mistake coming to Unagi territory."

They stopped short, eyes going wide with fear. A day shy of her sixteenth birthday, Kirai knew she didn't normally make for a very imposing figure, but that was what the facepaint was for. The real Unagi had the face of a monster that would have been intimidating even without its massive size, and replicating that appearance with gray and black facepaints could turn even a slight teenage girl into a figure out of a nightmare. And anyone who knew of the monstrous beast in the bay would know it's ferocity, a quality the Unagi gang was more than happy to evoke.
Of course, even scary facepaint and reputations could only accomplish so much. The swordsmen blinked their way into enough sobriety to realize that their opponent was a single girl to their three. Kirai had been wondering if they would bluster or go straight to violence, and was only mildly surprised to see that they were reaching for their swords.

By the time blades cleared sheathes, the rest of the Unagi gang had stepped out of the shadows.

The swordsmen froze, finding that the dark and formerly lonely lane had sprouted a small army of teenagers, all with faces painted like the island's most dangerous aquatic predator. Kirai saw the swordsmen's eyes widen as they noticed the weapons being brandished by her gang-mates; none of the bits of sharpened metal had started their artificial lives as weapons, but it didn't take much work to take scraps of worn battleship hulls, broken armor, and shattered windows and give them lethal points.

The swordsmen turned back to Kirai. She grinned at them, then leaned down and sunk her hands into the dirt road as easily as if it was a babbling stream. When she rose and lifted her fists, they were encased in dirt packed hard enough to form some credible spikes.

One of the swordsmen said, "Wait, we can leave-"

But they hadn't yet, so Kirai lunged forward and swung a left hook at him, and even as he was clumsily deflecting the blow with his sword, the rest of the Unagi warriors were closing in with their sharp bits of metal.

Kirai didn't put too much effort into her subsequent assault. The strength of Unagi gang was in its numbers, and as the group's sole Earthbender, she was too valuable to risk. She cautiously boxed at her chosen swordsman, enjoying his fear of her fists, and only pressed forward when another Unagi girl came in at him with a glass shank and drew his attention. The swordsman raised his dao to chop at the interloper, and Kirai took advantage of the moment to first deliver a hammer punch down on his closest shoulder with her right hand, and then she slammed a punch in at his chest with her left, laying him out.

That's when the whistles of the Fire Nation guards sounded.

The attack ended in an instant. Kirai dashed out of the lane, melting back into the shadows. As always, the first rule of concealment in this neighborhood was lack of motion, so as soon as she was safe from the moonlight, she froze and let her makeup and clothes turn her invisible.

Out in the lane, Kirai's opponent picked himself off the ground, while the swordsman still standing tried to rouse the third, who was lying unmoving in the dirt. Kirai had a good view of pool of blood around the prone man, and she did not expect him to rise again.

The Fire Nation guards who arrived on the scene apparently shared her assessment. "This is what you get," one of the guards said, "for walking into Unagi territory without paying the toll. Idiots." The two survivors began to protest, but the guards grabbed their arms and hurriedly yanked them away, leaving the dead man behind.

Kirai nodded with approval. The guards were not encouraged to linger in this neighborhood, but neither was the Unagi gang in a hurry to start a fight with them. It was a healthy arrangement that kept everyone alive.

Mostly everyone.

Satisfied with whole encounter, Kirai shook the stone off her hands and moved out of her shadow. She passed down an alley that stank of goat-dog, and when she emerged, another Unagi hopped
down beside her from a roof and chirped, "Did you see me? I came at that guy like a real Kyoshi Warri-
"
Kirai turned and smacked the gray and black facepaint right off the newcomer. She was shorter than Kirai and younger, and her glass shank went flying as she fell, but she was quick, and was scrambling back to her feet before her body had even settled in the dirt.

So Kirai leaned down and planted her heaviest fist in the other girl's stomach, then followed it with a couple of hard kicks at her legs.

This time, the kid had the sense to stay down.

Satisfied, Kirai knelt down next to her sister and laid a comforting hand on her head. "You never pay any attention, Suki. You never saw my attack coming because you were too excited, and you missed how that guy was going to plant his sword in your head because you were too busy trying to be like Gramma's stories of Kyoshi Warriors. You're going to get yourself killed."

Suki scrunched her face in what Kirai recognized as an attempt to keep from crying. "I- I- I-" She drew in a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry. I'll be better. Promise! I just- I-"

"You want to be a real Unagi, and to be Recognized you need to spill blood." Kirai stared down at her sister. "Like I did when I was your age."

Suki nodded.

Kirai rose, and held out a hand. "Stop trying to be other people and start thinking about yourself, or you're going to get yourself killed."

Suki nodded again, and reached up to take Kirai's hand. Once they were both back on their feet, the sisters headed back home.

Piandao made himself stand without worry as he stared down Lieutenant Kirai. He watched as her hands tightened into fists, and a warm sea breeze wafted over them.

"Unagi breath," she hissed. Then she quickly dipped down to touch the ground and came up to smack her nearest marine compatriot with a stone fist.

Piandao had his sword back out in an instant and moved it in a loop that deflected three spears trying to stab in at him from different directions. He took advantage of the torque the long weapons offered to shove back at his attackers and twist them off their feet. He was resetting into a classic defense stance when he felt Kirai's back press again his own.

She floated a rock out the ground with both arms and flung it with blurring speed. "You have an exit strategy?"

"Yes." Piandao threw out a sequence of slices that cleared enough room in front of him to stab at a particularly brave attacker, making sure that the blade hit just enough bone to cause blinding pain with minimal damage. "I'll cover you while you make us extended cover."

"Unagi breath," she spat again, and extended her arms out in a long stretch in front of her. She held that stance while Piandao moved in a circle around her, chaining every rapid step he took into blade sequence that protected her from the variety of attempts to kill her. The spears and swords were easy to deal with, as they could be caught and deflected, but the Firebenders were the real trouble, and he had to keep a dedicated eye out for them so that he could strike before they could finish their own
attack, pushing hands and feet off target before flame could bloom, and occasionally slicing deep into a limb that he couldn't otherwise reach in time.

He had lost count of his steps when she finally drew her arms in and stamped a foot down hard enough to make the ground explode into a cloud of choking dirt.

Piandao used his free hand to wrap a cloth to cover his nose and mouth, then grabbed Kirai and pulled her along in a run. He couldn't see in the dust cloud, but he had already picked out his escape route, and long ago learned how to pick out opponents by sound alone. While the marines coughed and stumbled, Piandao ran and sliced and stabbed. He made what efforts he could not to deal any fatal blows, and given how long it took cuts to bleed out, he was reasonably sure that he was keeping casualties low.

Kirai, flinging heavy stones as she ran, didn't seem to be making the same effort.

The Past

Half a World Away

Kirai saw the Unagi sentry stir as she and Suki approached Boss Oyaji's Nest, but a quick hand signal was enough to gain entry. She led Suki in through the main entrance, past the foyer where another pair of sentries greeted them with quick hugs and friendly obscene gestures, and then into the Nest proper.

As always when the Unagi gang had taken a life, they were throwing a party.

Someone tossed Kirai a small jug, but she wasn't in the mood, so she passed it on in an underhand throw to an older Unagi, while beside her, Suki caught a biscuit and immediately began nibbling. Kirai settled in against a wall and took in the scene. Most of the Unagis from the skirmish had made their way back by now, and it didn't take long for the last few to arrive. The Nest was a bit crowded with the whole crew here, but it had started its life as a fish warehouse, from back before the Fire Nation had brought its civilization to Kyoshi Island. There was plenty of room, even with the back half of the building given over to living space for the Unagi members with no other home of their own. Kirai and Suki shared a threadbare hammock back there.

As Kirai watched, the Unagi Boss emerged from that half of the Nest, pushing past the curtains that served as the walls for his own 'suite.' The revelry quieted down as Boss Oyaji- the old bearded man who was Master and Father to everyone in the gang- looked around, and when he was sure that he had everyone's attention, he began clapping. "My little eels! You've done well tonight! You protected our friends and family from invaders, and demonstrated the grace and skill that has defined Kyoshi Island since the day our land was sundered from the mainland.

"But even better, I have heard that one of you is ready to be Recognized!"

Excited chatter broke out amongst the Unagis, and Kirai glanced over to see Suki nibbling at her biscuit with distracted intensity.

Boss Oyaji grinned through his beard. "Chijin, step forward and show us your blade!"

A girl around Suki's age stepped out from the crowd, and held up what looked to Kirai like the sharpened shin-plate from a set of Firebender armor. Blood had dried on the metal, but it was still plainly visible in the light of the lanterns as a dull stain on black paint.

Boss Oyaji took the blade from Chijin and held it high above his head, almost as tall as his massive
topknot. "This night, Chijin has become a true Unagi. By the blood of our enemies, she binds herself to us as family, and we are in turn bound to her. She has taken the ultimate step in protecting her people, and for that we are eternally grateful. Chijin, your name will be written on The List, and we will chant it in The Litany every Kyoshi Day. A century from now, when we are all dead, the Unagi gang will still be living on, and you will be part of its eternal memory!"

Everyone cheered and hollered, the Unrecognized like Suki loudest of all, and someone began pounding a drum in a celebratory beat. Kirai lost sight of Chijin as a crowd pressed in around her to congratulate her and offer her gifts, but she did catch Suki diving in to the press of bodies to be amongst the first.

Kirai hung back, and soon Boss Oyaji was shuffling over to her. "I heard that you, too, did well tonight, Kirai."

She shrugged. "It's not hard to be brave when I have the Earth beneath my feet and thirty warriors with weapons backing me up."

Oyaji chuckled. "Don't sell yourself short. An Earthbender is in danger from the Fire Nation just for existing. I'm glad you have our protection."

"You mean," Kirai said slowly, "you're glad my parents drowned and I had to go to you to survive?"

"Come, now!" Oyaji leaned forward and put a hand on her shoulder. "You know me better than that. I wish all of our people could live happily and safely. I would be glad if your parents were alive to protect you. By all accounts they were good people, and your mother was the daughter of a Kyoshi Warrior. I have no doubt she would have done right by your gift." He gave her one last pat on the shoulder, and then leaned back again. "Not looking forward to your birthday, are you?"

Kirai didn't even bother to think about. "I don't know. I'll be of age, finally. Sixteen."

"An adult at last." Oyaji nodded. "Free to get travel papers, free to own property, free to marry. I know you don't want to spend your whole life wearing facepaint and fighting. And I don't want to stop you from finding what makes you happy. But consider that you need to be careful. The Fire Nation controls everything here in the Southern Seas, and the war on the mainland isn't going well. Ba Sing Se itself is under siege. And the rounding up of Earthbenders isn't just stories."

Kirai nodded. "I know. I think a lot about what could hurt me."

"That's because you're smart. Here." Oyaji reached for his belt, and took one of the little bags hanging from it. He tossed it to Kirai, and it jingled as it landed in her palms. "Celebrate your birthday. Take a friend or two, or your sister, and go on a jaunt. Maybe enjoy the hot springs up the mountain, or one of the beaches that the Unagi leaves alone."

Kirai held up the bag, weighing it in her hand. "Thanks. I guess I'll set out tomorrow."

"That's right! Enjoy tonight, and then when the sun rises, use your birthday to see what's on your horizon." Oyaji gave her one of the Family Signs, and moved on to join the celebration.

Kirai tied the bag of coins on her belt, and looked up to watch Suki dancing as part of a group in the center of the Nest.

Piandao poked his head through the doorway onto the deck and watched just long enough to get a sense for the pattern, then eased himself back down into the cargo hold.
For a scuttled Earth Kingdom junk on a Fire Navy base, the accommodations were fairly nice. The base personnel must have put real effort into maintaining the ship, even though it would never sail again, but that made sense. The Fire Nation may have already conquered the world, but it would always have enemies, and without a ready supply of real combat, it would have to invest in training. This junk would be valuable for as long as marine soldiers were stationed at this particular Navy base.

For now, Piandao found it valuable as a hiding place. He made his way down into the secondary hold, and found Kirai waiting for him in the deepest shadows. The only light down here came from a crystal Safety Lamp hanging from the ceiling, but the sound of her breathing was enough to reveal her presence. "We have about half an hour," he told her as he sat down against the hull. "Then two of the search teams will converge here and probably do a very thorough search of this ship. I propose that we avoid fighting them and try to sneak around their approach."

Kirai stepped forward to let the furthest edge of the light reach her. "We should leave now. We can make our way up the shore."

Piandao shook his head. "I can guarantee that the shore is already being watched, most likely from the water, and they will have ways to draw attention to our position. I think our best bet is to sneak back through the base to the port town. It has already been searched, and we're both capable of creeping through with minimal violence. Once we're in the town, it will be easy to get to the dock where I have a smuggler on standby, and he can get us safely away."

Kirai didn't say anything for a long moment. "You're not Fire Nation."

"Actually, I am." Piandao smiled. "Retired military, currently a servant to a powerful lord."

"But you're fighting them."

"I'm fighting elements within my nation. It might not seem that way from Kyoshi Island, or even in the lower ranks of the Navy, but the Fire Nation is not entirely united. And, I'm sorry to say, you've wound up in the middle of the whole mess."

Kirai's eyes narrowed. "You mentioned Suki."

"Your sister wants you to be safe. I am in the process of arranging that."

Kirai crossed her arms over her armor. "So my little sister got involved in Fire Nation politics, and now I'm collateral damage. My career with the Navy is over."

Piandao nodded. "If it helps, your sister stands to be well rewarded."

Kirai gave a single, bitter laugh. "It's her methods I worry about."

The Past

Half a World Away

The morning after Chijin had been Recognized, Kirai woke up in her hammock to find Suki gone. This wasn't unusual, but today it was inconvenient. Kirai wanted to talk to her before setting out on her birthday trip. There were some important decisions to make, after all.
Kirai packed everything she owned into a small knapsack— a few sets of clothes, various weapons she had made, the pouch of money Oyaji had given her, and a seashell a three-year-old Suki had given her as a birthday present—and made her way out of the Nest. Some Unagis were hanging around playing a dice game, and another pair was engaging in some light sparring and trading knife-fighting tips, but Kirai ignored them and only stopped to talk to the sentry—today it was Seppun, a boy who Kirai had given his first kiss— at the building's door. "Where's my sister?"

Seppun grimaced. "A girl came around asking for Suki, and they went away together."

Kirai suppressed a groan. "Which girl?"


Kirai's stomach flipped. It sounded like— "Unagi breath." She turned and ran.

Getting out of town wasn't an easy task, thanks to the defensive wall that ringed the entire settlement and the Fire Nation's control of the only gates. There were ways around the problem, some of them even available to the Unagi gang, but Kirai had her own special method. She dashed through the town as fast as she could, dodging people and buildings, and sought out a section of the outer wall that she knew would be deserted this time of day. She didn't slow as she approached the tall wooden barrier, but she did transform her run into a flying leap as soon as she came within sight of it. The jump, of course, wasn't enough to take her anywhere close to the height of the wall— it wouldn't even take her as far as the wall itself— but that wasn't the point of the jump. Instead, she focused on her landing, extended her senses down through her bare feet, and commanded the Earth to match her downward motion. It resisted, because it was solid Earth, but it did yield a little bit, cushioning her fall.

Then Kirai raised her arms and showed the Earth how to turn its resistance into reverse motion, and the ground snapped back up to shoot her into the air. She flew up over the wall and down the ground on the other side, landing harder than she wanted but without injury. She got back up and returned to her running as she made her way into the forests that surrounded the wall just as the wall itself surrounded the town.

She found Suki and Sabure exactly where she expected them. "What do you two think you're doing here?!!"

Both younger girls startled at her voice, and Sabure immediately stepped back and fell to her knees with her head bowed penitently. Suki remained standing, clutching something. "S- Sabure wanted to show me something! Don't be mad at her, I said it was okay to—"

Kirai cut Suki off with a gesture, and turned to Sabure. "How did you get her past the wall?"

Sabure just bowed her head lower.

Kirai twisted her right foot, and a rock that had been lying amidst the bramble on the ground rose up to float beside her. "You want to try it, Sabure? You finally want an Earthbending duel? Me and you, the last Earthbenders descended from Kyoshi Warriors? Get up and let's go!"

"No!" Suki grabbed Kirai's arm. "Please, she knows a tunnel! She didn't use her Earthbending, we were safe!"

Kirai didn't give in to the temptation to shake Suki off. She kept her gaze down on Sabure. "And where did this tunnel come from? If she didn't dig it, then it's one of the old smuggling tunnels the
Kyoshi Warriors kept. You think the Fire Nation would be okay with that?"

"We were safe!" The strain in Suki's voice pulled at Kirai's gaze, and she glanced over to see tears falling down her sister's face. "We made sure no one was watching! Please, don't hurt her!"

Kirai finally shook off Suki's grasp, and then leaned over so that she was even with Sabure's bowed head. "I ever see you around Suki again, I'll kill you. If I can't find you, I'll tell the other Unagis, and one of them will kill you for me. Now get out of here."

Sabure nodded once and scrambled off into a run.

Kirai turned back to Suki. The younger girl was trying to breathe through sobs that wanted to escape from her throat. Kirai heaved a sigh and beckoned. "Come on, let's go home."

Suki followed obediently, and the sisters were silent for a while as they walked back through the forest. Kirai waited until Suki's sobs had subsided to say, "So what did she give you?"

Suki only hesitated a little before revealing the golden piece of metal. She flicked her wrist, and the thing expanded into a full metal war-fan, solidly built and boasting sharpened edges. "It's a real Kyoshi Warrior weapon. Her mom took her to the hidden dojo and let her take something for herself, and she asked if she could take something for me, too. Because Gramma-

"I know, Gramma was a Kyoshi Warrior." Kirai snorted. "And why did Sabure do that?"

"I-" Suki abruptly stopped walking. "I told her the other day that I'm not sure I'll ever be Recognized."

Kirai stopped and turned to keep her sister in sight. "So she gave you a weapon you can use?"

Suki shook her head. "I- I told her that if I can't be a real Unagi, I don't know if I want to stay in the gang after you leave."

Kirai blinked. "You know?"

Suki nodded. "You don't care all that much about anyone in the gang. I think Boss Oyaji is worried, too. You joined because he gave us a home and food and protection so that we didn't have to beg anymore, but- but you don't care the way everyone else does. And you're of age, today. You can go anywhere."

Kirai considered that. She had figured Oyaji was doing his 'Father of the Gang' thing by giving her the money, but if Suki was right, then he was sharper than she had expected. But what Suki was saying still didn't entirely make sense. "So what were you planning?"

Suki smiled and held out the fan. "To give this to you. Happy birthday!"

Kirai started to reach for the fan, but then pulled her hands back. "Why?"

"Because if you don't want to be an Unagi anymore, I thought we could be Kyoshi Warriors! Not real ones, but Sabure says there are people who don't like the Fire Nation ruling our island, and they remember and love the Kyoshi Warriors. So if you leave, maybe I- or maybe we could go to them together, if you want, and they could be our new family, and-"

"Our family drowned, Suki." Kirai took the fan and held it out so that the metal caught a shaft of sunlight. "Our stupid parents got their boat fixed by a drunk who ripped them off and they drowned. We're the only family we have left, and no gang, no rebels, no army is going to change that." She
sighed, and motioned for Suki to get moving again. "Besides, the old ways are gone. The Fire Nation killed the Avatar and brought their new ways to Kyoshi Island. We're better off in a lot of ways. The only reason they don't just wipe out the Unagis is because they don't know where our hideout is, and we have too much control of the neighborhood for them to try anything."

After that, they walked in silence until they came to the wall. With more time and privacy, Kirai put in the effort to slowly raise a set of steps that she and Suki could climb to the top of the wall, and once they were over the other side, she collapsed them back into the dirt. Then she turned and smacked Suki's head.

She kept smacking as Suki fell, and only stopped when Suki couldn't stop herself from crying anymore. "I will kill Sabure if you ever talk to her again."

"I'm sorry," Suki sobbed.

"No, but you will be. Now, I'm leaving on a trip. I want you to stay away from Oyaji's Nest. Don't go back. If you do, I'll kill Sabure. You hear me? Stay away from the Nest. Sleep over by the wharf, under that slant. If you see an Unagi and get asked why, tell them- tell them you made me mad and I said you're supposed to stay away until I get back from my vacation. Tell them the truth. I'll be back in a few days. Then- then we'll figure out what we're going to do. You and me, together. Family. I'll take us away and find something that will make us happy."

Suki kept sobbing.

Kirai sighed. "Stay away from the Nest." Then she turned and marched away. She already had her knapsack, so she didn't need to go back to the Nest. She made her way back across town, going around Unagi territory, until she reached the dock area. The merchant ships in port made for a buzz of activity as things were loaded and unloaded, and everyone ignored Kirai. That would have changed if she flashed a weapon, or even better, flashed some coins, but the boxes of goods here were too big for her to steal, so she offered neither danger nor opportunity.

She found a bit of pier where she could stand out of the way, and laid her knapsack at her feet. She took a moment to look at the collapsed war-fan, but didn't dare to open it here where a guard or informant could see. To Suki, it represented all the elements of the past that she wanted to believe in, but she was a dumb kid who didn't understand anything.

Kirai wound up and tossed the fan out over the water. It rose until it was lost in the glare of the sun, and then came back down with a quiet plop into the ocean.

Satisfied, Kirai picked up her knapsack and moved on. She had a birthday to celebrate.

She had decided to have her party at the nearest Fire Navy recruitment office.

TO BE CONTINUED
Chapter Summary

The rest of Suki's relevant past is revealed, and the Fire Nation solidifies its bargain with her.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter depicts an abusive family relationship. It's nowhere near as bad as what Zuko experienced in the original cartoon, for comparison, but it is all 'on-screen' here, so it might affect some people in a more impactful way.

Kirai's name and appearance were created by Lavanya Six, based on an idea by me.

Sisterhood's End

Piandao could write a book about sneaking, if he was so inclined. He had done quite a bit of it since entering Prince Ozai's service, and had learned all the tricks of the trade.

For example, he had the goal right now of sneaking back through an entire Fire Navy base, full of people who wanted to kill him, so that he could meet up with his charge- Kirai of Kyoshi Island, sister to Prince Zuko's new ally Suki- by the gate, so that they could disappear into the nearby settlement together and then make their way back to the Capital. Arranging for Kirai herself to get through the base had been a complicated task since she was known here, and so it required all kinds of dangerous things like procuring a disguise, working out the timing of the guard patrols, and identifying back-up routes- the elements most people thought of when they considered the matter of sneaking.

Piandao, on the other hand, had been seen up close by only a few of the base personnel. All he had to do to accomplish effective sneaking was to keep his armor, pick up a bundle of replacement piping that had been lying around, and walk with the unhurried gait of someone counting the hours until shift's end. With a little help from the dark of the night and unimaginative soldiers who suspected too late that their dangerous quarry would be stumbling around with a load of piping in his arms, he reached the gate without having to knock out more than one person at a time.

The trouble began just after he arrived at the expected meeting point.

Piandao hid himself near the stables with a vantage point that gave him a clear view of the gate. This base was no fortress, despite its walls, and the gate was just a pair of large wooden doors- currently closed and mechanically locked- built more to accommodate the orderly passage of freight than to keep people out. There were plenty of torches around to light the area up, and it appeared that about thirty soldiers or so had been posted to bolster the defenses, no doubt because of the dangerous infiltrators lost somewhere on the base grounds, but it was nothing that Piandao couldn't handle. With Kirai's help, he would probably even be able to avoid taking a life.
The problem was that Kirai was not here, yet.

Piandao waited, now in a more classic sneaking mode. When patrollers came by to do another search, he used his light and precise footwork to move silently beyond their vision. Even when he had to duck into the stable, the komodo rhinos didn't so much as sniff at his presence. When the danger passed, he would go back to his little shadowy corner beside the stable and continue his watch of the gate. The night dragged on and Kirai failed appear, but neither was there any kind of activity- messengers, alarms, distant sounds of battle, or even the trembling of the ground- that suggested she might have been captured. It was possible, of course, that she was simply a very slow sneak.

It was also possible that those thirty soldiers posted at the gate were waiting for something.

Piandao drew his sword and stepped out into the main lane. The guards saw him immediately, and readied their weapons. There was no surprise and no panic amongst them.

Piandao walked calmly until the distance between him and assembled guards was a bit more than a fireball's throw. He held his sword out at his side and called, "So you've come to an alternate arrangement."

There was a pause, and then the guards parted to allow Commander Wairo- the ranking office on this base and Commander's Zhao's apparent crony- and Lieutenant Kirai to step forward.

Kirai's face held no expression, but she was once again wearing her Marine armor, except for the helmet that would normally cover her black hair.

Wairo, no longer bleeding from the facial cut that Piandao had given him, said only, "Surrender."

Piandao just raised his sword into a ready position.

Then the fight started.

The Past
Half a World Away

Kirai had walked all the way to Mokuzai Village, up slope from the Port Town where she lived, just to join the Fire Navy.

Boss Oyaji had told her to take a vacation to the hot springs at Kyoshi Island's higher elevations for her birthday, and she had indeed set off on the road that would eventually take her there. However, she had only walked for a few hours before stopping in Mokuzai Village. The little settlement had telegraph station that connected the big Navy base to the Watchtower on the other side of the island. It was busy enough to be continuously staffed, and far away enough from Port Town that no one from the Unagi gang would be around.

The station's staff, including a set of Marine guards, was more than happy to talk to a local about enlisting. The duty officer for the day brought her into a small workroom with a desk covered in papers and reference books, and the subsequent short interview was everything Kirai expected, simply establishing who she was, that she was of age, and that she did indeed want to sign up to spread the glory of the Fire Nation to unconquered lands. At the end, the officer asked, "Anything else to add?"

That's when Kirai smiled for the first time since approaching the outpost. "Yes, sir. I'm an
Earthbender in the Unagi gang that terrorizes Port Town. I can name every single member of the gang, identify them all on sight, describe the habits of the leadership, and direct you to their main base and secondary hideaways."

The officer blinked once, and then sighed. "I think I'm going to need to wire for someone with more authority to handle this, then."

Two hours later, Commander Yon Rha- the highest authority in Kyoshi Island's Navy base and the closest thing they had to a governor here- stepped into the little workroom. "So you're selling out your comrades, little port rat?"

Kirai incline her head deferentially, but remained kneeling. "Yes, sir."

"Indeed?" Yon Rha had a face built for frowning, long and heavily lined, and he was doing so now. "What kind of a deal do you think you can make with this information?"

Kirai shook her head. "No deal. I just want to join the winning side, and do it fully. I want to be a soldier for the Fire Nation, and I want to help defeat its enemies. I can start right here, where I know about a bunch of criminals too small-minded to see that the world has left them behind, and that their actions make them dishonorable rebels."

Yon Rha finally kneeled down at the desk, but not across from Kirai- he went to the desk's side, so that just a single corner separated them. "I'm told that you're an Earthbender. Your kind aren't considered very trustworthy by most in High Command."

"I'm not trustworthy. I'm selling out my people." Kirai met Yon Rha's eyes, and saw her curved, monstrous reflection on their surface. "That's why I'm not demanding anything. I just want to get out of here, away from the people I despise. Send me anywhere in the war where you don't need trustworthy people."

"Even the high seas?" Yon Rha finally grinned, and it was even uglier than his frown. "I've heard that Earthbenders get uncomfortable without dirt under their feet."

Kirai snorted. "Honestly, it will be a relief."

Yon Rha stood up and brushed the knees of his uniform. "Very well. I'll approve your enlistment. But before we ship you off for training, I'll give you a taste of what you say you want. Your first action as a member of the Fire Navy will be to participate in the raid to wipe the stain of the Unagi gang off my island."

It came as no surprise to Kirai. The commander wanted to test her, to make sure she wasn't a spy or saboteur. Someone would be watching her, to make sure of her unhesitating participation in the coming slaughter, to make sure that her complete betrayal of her people. Only once she had the blood of her family on her hands would Kirai be accepted as a true servant of the Fire Nation, and if her new masters were smart, they would make sure the knowledge of her treachery was spread all over the island. Every native daughter of Kyoshi would know that Kirai was a traitor.

Today was Kirai's birthday, and she was getting everything she wanted.

Piandao had failed to kill Commander Zhao, and he was not about to fail another mission. He had no desire to kill his fellow honorable servants of the Homeland, especially not the rank and file of the military, but he had his duty, and even the memory of Admiral Jeong-Jeong's dying words, that there was no honor to be found in the service of death, were not enough to deter him.
And so his sword flew, and his attackers fell.

Arrows and spears and fireballs and blades all came in at him, but none of them found his body. Even in his old service armor, especially in the armor he had been given when he joined the Fire Army, he could move with an efficiency that would be easy for an observer to confuse with inhuman speed. The Fire Army had trained him to fight and use a sword, but now in the higher service of the Royal Family, he turned his skills against men and women who were no different that he had once been.

The slaughter was regretful, and he did not lose himself in it. As the last of the more or less thirty guards fell, Piandao made one last spin and came to a stop in front of Kirai, with his sword pointed at her neck, the tip of the wet blade just a hair from her skin.

Commander Wairo still stood beside her, staring at Piandao with mouth agape. He stammered, "Wh- wh- who-"

Wairo was another servant of the Fire Nation, but he had been entrusted by conspirators with Lieutenant Kirai's posting, and had tried to have Piandao killed earlier on 'special' orders that had no doubt come down from Commander Zhao himself.

A flick of the sword was enough to end Wairo's life, and the blade was back at Kirai's neck before she could move.

Piandao stood there, looking at the girl, and waited. In the distance, an alarm gong was being struck with frantic energy. No doubt every Marine in this base would soon be descending on the gate.

But Piandao's mission was to bring Kirai back to safety, so that her sister Suki would help Prince Zuko capture the Avatar and fulfill the terms of his banishment.

Kirai finally moved, pushing a nervous smile on her face. "Well, that- that was great. Just like I planned. Wairo had no idea I was setting him up for you! So- so let's go?"

Piandao raised his eyebrows at the lie, and did not move his sword.

The Past

Half a World Away

Kirai was once again on the hunt amidst the dirt lanes of Port Town, of her home neighborhood, but this time she was wearing armor instead of intimidating facepaint, and now the sun was her ally, not her enemy.

She heard the distinctive sound of a cranefish's warble, but knew that it came from no bird. She had crossed the invisible boundary into Unagi gang territory, and that sound was the signal for all gang members to assemble in defense of their homes.

Kirai clutched the spear she had been issued with one hand, and gave the warning signal with her other hand.

The other soldiers in her new squad all responded with nods, and readied their weapons.

Kirai knew exactly how the next few minutes would go. The Unagis normally liked to give intruders the chance to back down, but against soldiers stalking forward with obvious purpose, the gang wouldn't waste time trying to intimidate the intruders. They would just attack, jumping out from
alleys and down from rooftops, throwing rocks and glass and shards of old clay jugs. Powder bombs- handfuls of ground spices wrapped in porous cloth- would get tossed at the intruders' faces. And always the Unagi warriors would be making running strikes, dashing forward to stab at vulnerable places with their shanks and then running away again while others launched an ambush from behind. Kirai had described all of this to the officers in charge of today's operation.

And so when the first Unagis popped out of hiding, the Fire Nation was ready for them.

Teenagers with faces painted in black and gray leaped into battle to find weapons and flames waiting for them. Those hanging back to throw long-range attacks found arrows already descending on their positions. The few warriors who managed to avoid being struck tried to run away only to find another wave of soldiers cutting off escape routes.

It was so quick and chaotic that Kirai didn't have the chance to do anything but hold her spear at ready and keep marching forward with the first wave.

The fighting stretched out along the neighborhood's main lane, and Kirai spotted many of the residents- the older people with no direct ties to the Unagi gang- rushing out of their homes and running for safety. She hadn't seen any homes get damaged so far, but it was still a sensible precaution. The Fire Nation had no interest today in causing trouble for anyone who wasn't harboring an Unagi gang member, but she had always heard that war had a tendency to become sloppy.

The fighting was still going on behind Kirai's wave of soldiers when they reached the old fish warehouse that was Boss Oyaji's Nest.

Even in the daylight, there was nothing to mark it as the home base of the neighborhood gang. However many people might be inside, it stood silent now, its dingy gray walls that might have once covered in paint failing to reflect the sun's glow.

Kirai's fellow soldiers didn't hesitate. Their lieutenant punched a fist out to send a fireball streaking at the building, followed by the squad's other Firebenders. The lieutenant called out, "Ready," and Kirai and the other spearmen raised their weapons, then began running forward at the cry of, "Charge!"

Another volley of fireballs struck the warehouse as Kirai ran, and the building's whole roof was in flame as the first Unagi sentries ran out the entrance to find the spears of the Fire Nation stabbing in at them.

Kirai's spear wound up buried in the chest of Suppun, the boy who she had given his first kiss. His eyes found hers as he let out a gargling scream, and she saw recognition in his expression as she yanked the spearhead free of his body and stabbed at him again.

With the sentries dead, the attack on the Nest became a clean-up action. Gang members were fleeing the burning building, at first through the main entrance and later by crashing through the parts of the outer walls that were most rotten, but none got past the wall of spears. Some were able to stop short of Kirai and the other soldiers, and actually chose to rush back into the warehouse, but that was fine. They would be killed by the smoke and flame.

Boss Oyaji was one of the last to try to escape. He stumbled out of the warehouse's main entrance with a soot-stained child in each of his arms and the tip of his massive topknot hosting a small flame. He got free of the smoke and immediately crashed to his knees.

By then, Kirai had drifted away from the front of the warehouse, having helped with a pair of Unagi
warriors who had leaped out of one of the holes in the building’s wall with a fighting fury. She would have been content to simply watch Oyaji’s execution, but the squad's lieutenant looked right at her, and made a chopping motion with a flaming hand.

Kirai nodded. She understood the test she was being asked to complete.

She brought her spear over to Oyaji, paying no attention to the kids he had carried out as they ran from her. The children would either survive or would be caught by other soldiers. It didn't matter either way. She only cared about Oyaji as she took a ready stance in front of him.

He coughed, and then looked up at her. His eyes grew wide as they centered on her face, and he had to fight through another coughing fit to ask, "Why?"

Kirai didn't feel the need to answer. "Was Suki here?"

Oyaji coughed hard enough knock himself over, catching himself on his sooty hands, but he managed to look up again and start to say, "N-"

Kirai didn’t need him to finish. She thrust her spear straight into his chest.

With that, the 'battle' at the warehouse was over. Her new comrades all came by to slap her back and tell her what a great job she had done on her first mission for the Fire Nation.

Kirai smiled back at them, thanked them, nodded at their jokes, and listened as they traded stories. Word came from the other squads that the fighting in the streets was done, that only a few of the Unagi attackers had escaped but even now other soldiers were heading for the homes that Kirai had revealed. Some few of the Unagi gang might survive, but they would be too few; the organization was broken.

Kirai endured it until people finally stopped paying attention to her, and then drifted away. Technically, her squad was still guarding the warehouse until it was nothing but a pile of ash, but that hardly required everyone's attention. She stayed close enough to hear her fellow soldiers, but stepped into an alley where she would be out of sight.

Then she leaned on her bloody spear and let out a noise that was half sob and half retch.

She didn't regret what she had done, didn't regret joining the people who had real power, who could give her something more than a life fighting for a poor neighborhood too pathetic to lift itself out of squalor. It was the right decision for her, but that didn't mean she had enjoyed hurting the people she had grown up with.

She was sure, though, that she would get over it.

"Kirai?"

She turned with surprise at the voice, and blinked through tears to find Suki standing at the far end of the alley. Her sister was trembling with her own suppressed sobs, but tears were already streaking her cheeks.

"Kirai, what did you do?"

Her first instinct was to wipe at her eyes with her forearm, but that was covered in armor now, so she had to make do with the back of her hand. "I told you to stay away from Unagi territory."

"What did you do?"
Kirai clutched her spear and made herself stand tall. "I proved myself to the Fire Nation. I'm getting out of this dump."

Suki's lip trembled, and she took a step back.

Kirai took a step forward. "I can't protect you now, so you have to be smart. Stay away from Sabure, and any other Earthbenders. Stay away from anyone who talks about Kyoshi Warriors or Avatars or fighting the Fire Nation." She tightened her grip on her spear, and put a firm growl in her voice as she added, "I won't protect you if you get in trouble with the Fire Nation, so stay safe."

She knew she couldn't trust Suki to do what was smart, so she had to try one last time to frighten her little sister into doing the right thing. People weren't dependable, but the right amount of fear could make anything reliable. And if Suki broke under all that fear-well, it was better than Kirai doing nothing.

Suki finally let out a full sob. Kirai kicked at the ground with one booted foot and used her Earthbending to lift out a small but solid stone that went sailing at her sister. Suki ran away from the poorly aimed attack, and was lost to sight.

Kirai nodded, satisfied, and went back to her new comrades.

Piandao looked across his blade at Kirai's sweaty face, and said, "I'm sorry I can't give you a choice, but your sister only bargained for your safety, not your happiness or autonomy."

"I'm- I'm on your side! I just- I-"

"Please stop talking." Piandao glanced at the gate, which was still locked, and at the rest of the base. No reinforcements had arrived yet, but the alarms were still going, and he could hear cries and movement in the distance. "I need you to dig a gap beneath the gate doors. We can crawl out." He lowered his sword.

"Yes!" Kirai nodded and jogged towards the gate. "I can do that!" She took an Earthbending posture, a low horse stance, and then brought her fists together. She held them that way for just a moment, and then yanked them apart as if she was tearing a scroll in half. The ground between her feet parted into a shallow trench that ran under the gate doors.

Piandao was shoving her into that trench even as the first of the reinforcements were arriving. They emerged on the other side of the gate half crawling and half skidding and Kirai didn't even stand back up before punching at the trench in a move that collapsed it back into level ground.

That was good. They would now have time to flee while the Marines in the base worked to get the gate open again. It wasn't very much time, but it would be enough.

Piandao raised his sword again and inclined his head at the dark town a short distance away. "We need to get to the docks, to my smuggler friend. You lead the way. I'll take over when we get there."

Kirai nodded frantically, her eyes never leaving the blade. "Yes, sir. I know a fast route."

And she did, indeed. They didn't encounter any more trouble as they made their escape, and before the sun rose on the horizon, Piandao and Kirai were both safely ensconced in a hidden cargo hold within a ship that was headed out to sea.

Kirai showed no discomfort at the rise and fall of the ocean, so Piandao settled down to clean his
sword. This was no intimidating display, but rather just a necessary part of being a warrior. Blades had to be cleaned if they were to be reliable, and no true swordsman could tolerate the lack of respect a dirty blade would signify.

Kirai watched him for a while, and then said, "Why me?"

Piandao looked up. "As I said, your sister-"

"I know. I mean, why does Suki want me? You saw what I am. I was never any better to her."

Piandao shrugged and went back to his oiling and wiping. "I couldn't say. I haven't met her myself. Hopefully, her reasoning is rational."

Kirai snorted. "You obviously don't really know Suki."

Piandao acknowledged that with a nod. "I have had no contact with her. All I know of her came from reports. Trusted reports."

"Well, she's a brat." The venom in her voice seared the air. "She does whatever she wants, whenever she wants. She takes without thinking. She's ungrateful, and couldn't follow an order to save her life. Literally. I've done everything I can to keep her safe and happy, and she's never shown the slightest scrap of 'rationality' about any of it. She drove me away and I never looked back."

Piandao responded with a quiet grunt. He had been unimpressed with Kirai's behavior thus far, and most of what she was saying sounded like typical parenthood. Had Kirai tried to raise Suki? Had she taught Suki to be just like her?

Silence reigned for a while, until Kirai spoke again. "And now what's going to happen to me?"

"Well, you've proven duplicitous, so it's possible that my Lord will choose to put you in a prison, somewhere." Piandao glanced over, and saw Kirai blanch. "It won't be comfortable, but you'll certainly be safe, and that's all we're obligated to deliver, according to our agreement with your sister." He paused before adding, "Ideally, we'll be able to find some kind of use for you, one that won't involve actually trusting you but will allow you a manageable degree of freedom. That would be easier for all us, I think, but don't mistake that for weakness. I hope we won't have to keep you in line with fear of my blade, but I am my master's servant, and I will do as I am ordered."

Kirai was silent for a long time after that, but eventually she was overcome by a yawn, and moved to lie down on the floor of the hold. As she closed her eyes, she said, "Suki hates the Fire Nation. Whatever game she's playing, I'm surprised she's working with any of you. You ruined her family's legacy, killed most of her friends, and you took me away from her. All of this could just be her grand scheme for revenge."

Piandao thought that sounded unlikely, but took the assertion under advisement, regardless.

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The Past

Half a World Away

Kirai indulged in leaving her feet bare as she watched Kyoshi Island get left behind on her journey to success.

She stood on the deck of one of the Fire Nation's impressive metal warships, an escort craft heading down to the South Pole to help transport the products of the mines down there. There were
supposedly pirates who tried to prey on the shipments of ore, but the Fire Navy had no fear of them. The Fire Navy was strong, and had no fear of anything but the storms of the oceans.

Kirai was officially assigned to the ship's crew as an apprentice, to learn sailing as they went about completing their mission. Her training had already begun before the ship even set out, and she had no doubt that she would soon be given a completely crushing workload, but for now she had a moment to look back at her home for what would no doubt be the last time. She had lived her whole life on that island, and her parents had worked and died in these very waters.

Even from a distance, it looked pathetic- a primitive land that had to be dragged kicking and screaming into modern times.

Kirai was taking once last look, about to turn away and get back to work, when she spotted a pair of small figures standing on one of the civilian docks. She squinted against the sunlight, but she already knew who it was just from the postures of the figures. One stood with the discomfort of an Earthbender with no earth beneath her feet, and the other Kirai had known all her life.

Suki and Sabure were seeing her off.

The stood together unmoving, offering no waves or acknowledgement, but it seemed as though each girl was holding something in front of them. Whatever the objects were, they were too small for Kirai to make out from this increasing distance.

Then the ship bobbed up on a larger wave, and both Suki and Sabure disappeared for a moment in twin gleams of golden light.

When the ship lowered again and both girls were once again mostly visible, Kirai had figured out what they were displaying. Suki and Sabure were each holding an unfolded Kyoshi Warrior fan over their chests, risking the wrath of the Fire Nation to make one last act of defiance against Kirai's good sense and practicality.

She shook her head and turned away. If her sister wouldn't do the right thing, if she refused to have a healthy amount of fear, then there was nothing that could be done for her. Kirai would just have to wait to hear about Suki's death, one of these years.

She wouldn't even be sad about it.

After all, everyone else she knew was dead.

The Present

Half a World Away

On the third day of their race to find the Avatar, they got word about Suki's sister.

Zuko had wanted to press on and let June's shirshu keep following the Avatar's scent-trail, but Azula was insistent that they detour to a nearby town to spend the night and check in with the local Fire Army outpost to collect her telegraph messages. "It's good that you're so motivated," she had said, "but let your sister take care of you. A good night's sleep in a bed will help prepare you for the coming battles."

Not that she was giving him a choice.

Azula swept into town on her ostrich-horse, stopping at the nicest inn in the area- not that she was
pleased with it, but to Zuko it was more than comfortable enough- and emptying the building of all its other guests with flashes of gold and plenty of implied threats. June took it all in stride, as she had during their earlier journey, but Suki observed it all with wide eyes. Zuko was growing worried that Azula's behavior would reflect on him, would give Suki a concept of Fire Royalty colored by Azula's own personal excesses, but couldn't think of anything to do or say about it. Just like during the prison break. Besides, if he did nothing to temper his sister, didn't that reflect on him anyway?

The only relief came when Azula went off to the Army outpost, leaving the rest to get some dinner. The innkeeper brought out a feast to the empty common room with just a little too much eagerness to please, and Zuko's approving nod seemed to do little to set the man at ease. June started in on the food with the same gusto she usually reserved for high-speed travel, but Suki took the time to assure the innkeeper that, "This all looks great and you've been very helpful. Thank you."

The three of them had put a good dent into the food spread out on their table when Azula returned with the kind of unstrained smile that she hadn't shown for a while, her footsteps light and her hands raised in a call for attention. "Well, my family and I have officially kept our side of the bargain: Suki, your sister is safe in the custody of my father's forces."

Zuko looked over to Suki and found her staring down into her bowl of stew. She didn't react in any way, and he wondered if she had heard the pronouncement.

Azula was evidently thinking the same thing. "Did I fail to enunciate? I did say your sister is now safe. I expected you to be pleased. Unless you don't really have the information you claimed."

"No." Suki took a deep breath, and then stood up and turned to Azula with a matching grin. "Thank you for the news, and your family's efforts. Not that I ever doubted the Royal Fire Family's ability to produce to results! You have my eternal gratitude, Princess, and I am eager to repay my debt with efficiency and honor." She sank to her knees and bowed.

June snorted in clear amusement and went back to her steak.

Azula made Suki wait several heartbeats, and then nodded. "As polite as ever. Well done." She looked around the common room and briefly grimaced. "I've never been one for rustic decor, so I'll take my dinner in my rooms after a bath. Zuzu, tell the innkeeper that I'll have today's special with a bowl of grapes." She made for the suite she had picked out for herself, leaving Suki still on her knees.

As soon as Azula was out of sight, Zuko turned to tell Suki that she could rise again and get back to eating, but he found her already getting to her feet with slumped shoulders and head bowed, her back curved as though she was weighed down by heavy chains. Suki glanced over at her bowl of stew, and then turned away. "It's been a long day. I think I'll turn in early. Goodnight, Prince Zuko, June."

She walked away, not taking the hallway that would lead to the rented rooms, but rather the one that would go outside to the stables.

Zuko glanced over at June, but she kept her own attention firmly on her dinner. "I'm not being paid to handle personnel issues," she said as she chewed, "and if she messes with Nyla, she'll just get what she deserves."

That left things to Zuko. He wanted to follow Suki, as something was obviously wrong with her. She had put on a show for Azula, but the way she had moped out to be alone was disturbing. Had she only just fully realized how dangerous it was to be in debt to the Royal Family? Zuko would have thought it to be obvious long before now. Maybe Suki was having second thoughts about going after the Avatar? She claimed to be a double agent, but what proof did he really have of that?
He stuffed the last of his fried fish into his mouth, remembering the years when he had gone days at a
time between finding something edible in garbage heaps, and followed after Suki.

The stable was dark on this moonless night, with the only light coming in through the windows
being the dull glow of the lanterns, but even with one eye, Zuko didn't have trouble finding Suki.
Above the noise of Nyla chomping away at his own dinner in the pen at the back of the building, the
sounds of Suki's sobs led him straight to where she was crouched on the hay in an empty stall.

Zuko stopped at the stall's entrance, not sure what to do to make a person stop crying. Azula had
never cried after she learned how to throw a proper tantrum, and warriors of the Fire Nation were not
couraged to let their softer emotions overwhelm them.

Suki spared him the need to take the initiative and wiped at her tears before turning to face him. Her
features were obscured by darkness, but her eyes and the trail of moisture on her cheeks glinted in
the thin light, and the edge of her chin caught just enough illumination to glow like the crescent of a
newborn moon. "Can- can I help you, Prince Zuko?"

Zuko decided that he wasn't going to bother with pretense. "What's wrong?"

"Noth-" Suki squeezed her eyes shut for a long moment, but then let out what sounded like a full-
body sigh and looked back up at him. "Nothing, really. Just mixed feelings about my sister."

Zuko thought he understood. "She really is safe. My father has considerable resources, and Azula
doesn't bother with lies when the truth is easier. We can trust her word, this time."

Suki gave a sniffly laugh. "You're an honest one, Prince Zuko. Thank you for your reassurance."

The tone of her voice revealed the deception. "That wasn't why you were- were upset.

She scrubbed at the tear stains on her face with her forearm. "You're right. Are you going to stand
there until I tell you the truth?"

"No." Not that he hadn't considered it. "If you want me to leave, I will."

Suki opened her mouth to say something, but no sound emerged from the darkness of the stall. Then
it seemed to Zuko like the shadows were shifting, but it was just Suki rising from her crouch and
stepping out to join him in the relative light. Her gaze was aimed firmly at the ground as she
whispered, "Don't tell anyone else." She began rubbing her shaking hands together. "I- my sister
used to- to pretty much- well, terrorize me. Threaten me. Threaten my friends. Hurt anyone she
thought might get in her way. In our way." She looked up at Zuko briefly, and then quickly averted
her gaze again. "She'd- she'd hit me." Suki nodded to herself and repeated, "She'd hit me."

"Your sister hurt you." Zuko's stomach clenched and he was unusually aware of the way the scar
tissue pulled at the healthy skin on his face.

Suki's eyes snapped over to him, and she shook her head. "She wouldn't hit me hard. Well,
sometimes it would be hard. But I could get back up if I wanted to. It was just- it was better if I
didn't. I'd usually remember that. Then she wouldn't keep- keep hitting me and- and I hated it
and hated her!" Suki's fists clenched, but then she let out a breath and let her arms dangle at her sides.
"Not really. I love her. I've always loved her. She's my sister. But- but she- and I thought it was my
fault- my- my-" Her voice trembled into incoherence. She pushed past Zuko, wiping at her eyes
again, and hurried to the stable's door.

Before she could escape, Zuko said, "My father hurt me, too."
Suki stopped halfway out the door and turned back towards him, the light of the torch outside illuminating half her face while leaving the other side in darkness.

Zuko raised a hand to his missing eye and the scar around it. "My father did this to me. And I think he did it on purpose." Suki stared back at him, showing no sign of surprise or acknowledgement, and he felt his cheeks warm at the ridiculousness of his admission. Why had he told her this? "Never mind, just forget about it."

Suki crossed her arms over her chest in a move that seemed half guarded and half like a hug for herself. "Thank you for telling me. You're ashamed, aren't you? You feel like it's your fault it happened, and your fault you can't just leave it behind."

Zuko blinked. Was he? He had never really thought about the pain and discomfort he felt when he remembered. After all, it made sense that memories of having his face lit on fire wouldn't be pleasant, but- but the words she used resonated with him. Ashamed. His fault. Did he really feel that way?

Zuko shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe."

"And you still want to go back home." There was no question in her voice. "To see him again."

Zuko nodded. "I need to know for certain. And- and he's my father. I don't know what happened to my mother, my uncle and cousin went away years ago, Grandfather never really wanted anything to do with us, and Azula- she loves our father. She wants to bring me back. She says he wants me back."

"I've seen what your sister wants for you." Suki let out a soft snort. "I didn't have anyone else, either, now. The Kyoshi rebels are probably gone now. My parents died when we were young, and I trusted Kirai to take care of me, but she- she-" Suki shook her head. "You understand."

"Yes." Zuko walked over to her, and she surprised him by reaching out and clasping his shoulder. "What?"

She smiled. "I'm glad I met you. Whatever else happens."

It was an admission that deserved a response, but Zuko didn't have the words, so he simply nodded. Suki didn't seem to mind, and together they left the darkness of the stable behind and made their way back to the inn.

The team Zuko had assembled- or had been given- hadn't grown at all, but he nevertheless felt like it had become more of a team that it had been before. June was dependable in that she wanted to be paid, and Azula would do whatever Father ordered. And now, at least, he knew that Suki was a real person, someone who suffered from doubts and bad memories.

Someone just like him.

Now they just had to work together find and capture the Avatar, so that he- and Suki- could go home and finally make sense of their lives.

TO BE CONTINUED
Chapter Summary

The hunt for the Airbenders begins, and Mai fails to deal with her issues.

An Old Wind

Mai sighed, threw a cherry over the side of Appa's saddle into the sky below, and watched as Momo took a flying leap after it. "Are we there yet?"

From his position up on Appa's head, Aang called out, "I'm ignoring you!" Sokka, meanwhile, was ignoring her for real, leaning over his side of the saddle.

Katara adjusted her hat and inched over to Mai. "You know, if you helped us look, we might be able to find it quicker and start the real search."

Mai threw another cherry straight into Momo's return path, idly wishing she could go back to wearing clothes the same color as the fruit. "I've been hanging off this bison and examining landscape for days. I see Earth Kingdom terrain in my dreams, now. And I've decided that this whole task is ridiculous." Momo alighted back in the saddle, licking his lips.

Katara's eyes narrowed. "Negative attitudes aren't going to help us find Great-Grandfather's Nose."

"And what makes you think flying around is going to do it?" Mai tossed her last cherry into the space between her and Katara, and Momo was quick to leap up and snatch it. "All we know is that some old guy from the Gun Dong province told Sokka at the Spirit Festival that he saw a group of flying girls near some cliff his people call 'Great-Grandfather's Nose.' But in case you haven't noticed, provinces are fairly large, and there are lots of cliffs around where Earthbenders live."

"That's why we're asking around! In fact, maybe we should land again and check with the locals. The last time we talked to someone was the day before yesterday."

"That's another thing." Momo crawled up on Mai's shoulder and pawed at her face, but she brushed him away. "For all we know, 'Great-Grandfather's Nose' was named several hundred years ago and the landscape is all different now, so the only people who still call it that all live in a single tiny village that holds tight to stupid traditions and forbids talking to strangers."

Katara opened her mouth to retort, but Sokka got his say in first with, "As much as I hate to admit it, Mai's got a point. It's nice that Aunt Wu clued us in on the return of the Airbenders, but it would have been really nice if she could have given us more information or told us before I walked away from the guy telling stories about flying girls. Seriously, does she think the mysterious routine makes her a better Fortuneteller? Because I think it does the opposite."

Aang floated down into the center of the saddle, a scowl on his face. "Well, does anyone have a better idea?!" He threw his arms out at his sides. "Appa's the one who's been doing all the real work, flying around without any rest and hiding up into the clouds every time we see a sign of the Fire Nation. The least we can all do is keep an eye out for clues!" He turned and aimed a glare at Mai. Momo climbed up on his head to copy the expression.
Mai blinked. She wasn't used to seeing Aang's anger, and especially not directed at her. She drew herself out of her slump and mustered something like a soothing tone in her voice. "Sometimes, doing something just for the sake of doing something is worse than doing nothing. We're occupying ourselves with a losing strategy, and that's stopping us from doing something more effective."

The words didn't seem to make any dent in Aang's mood, but Katara crawled over to him and reached out to take his left hand. He looked down at her in surprise, and Momo scampered down their linked arms to settle around Katara's shoulders.

She looked over at Sokka and Mai. "Maybe we need to talk this through. We know the general area where the flying girls were seen. If we can't find the specific cliff they were jumping off, then how else can narrow down our search without drawing too much attention?"

Aang sat down beside her. "Aunt Wu told me that the world is trying to correct the absence of the Air Nomads. That the Spirit World is intruding and things are going crazy. She said Airbenders are returning slow, and- and-"

Mai leaned forward, recognizing the words he was trying to say. "And 'not without violence.' That's what you repeated to us."

Aang nodded.

Sokka crossed his arms over his chest. "And what does that mean? Are the new Airbenders attacking people? Then you'd think there would be more rumors."

Aang sighed. "After what the Fire Nation did to us, it's more like they're the ones attacking any new Airbenders."

Mai hated it, but she knew Aang was right. And even worse, it gave her a new idea for how to go about their search. She didn't want to say anything, but if the Fire Nation had to be stopped from doing anything like that again- if Aang could find his place in the world after her own people had tried to kill his- she had to say something. "Well, if it's Fire Nation violence you want, you're in the right province. There's an ashland around here."

"It is." Mai forced herself to go on. "Ashlands are areas that got the brunt of the Sozin's Comet Offensive."

Katara sat up straighter. "That's right, you've mentioned those before. When we were leaving Crescent Island."

"Yes. There was a battle in this province against an Earth Kingdom fortress that was protecting a critical pass or something. A tough nut to crack, apparently, especially with Ba Sing Se and Baolei and Omashu keeping the Fire Army busy elsewhere." Mai made sure that no expression reached her face, despite the roiling of her stomach. She didn't want a reminder of what she had revealed on that day, especially given where they were probably headed. "But of course the Comet changed that game. Even small groups could generate enough fire to wipe the fortress off the map and light up everything around it-" Her voice caught, and she let herself stop talking.

That's when Mai realized she was holding a knife, squeezing the handle with all the strength in her fingers.

That was strange. She didn't remember taking it out.
No one seemed to think much of it. Sokka raised his hands and said, "So, that sounds like it's worth investigating. And if we see a cliff shaped like someone's great-grandfather's nose near there, then all the better."

Aang sighed. "I guess so. We haven't seen an ashland yet, so at least it's a new place to search. That's just as good as still searching here."

Katara nodded. "Then we're in agreement."

Mai stayed quiet. She never said she was in agreement, but she was the one who had aired the initial complaints, had made the suggestion. She was responsible for what happened now. For what she was going to experience. It would all be self-inflicted.

But then, that seemed to be the way of making decisions and expressing herself.

When Aang first saw the ashland on the horizon- a brownish smudge that got darker as they approached- he misjudged how close they were. He simply couldn't imagine clouds of ash on that scale, and so his perspective was completely off. But they had kept flying towards it only to seem like they were crawling across the sky, for all the distance they seemed to be covering. It wasn’t until mid-afternoon that they reached their destination.

At least the cloud wasn't very tall. He pulled on the reins, signaling for a stop, and Appa settled into a hover far above the black winds. Aang looked down at the flying ash and said, "Give me a minute to settle things. Then Appa can bring the rest of you down."

He expected Mai to say something about not wanting to get dirty, but she stayed quiet as she stared over the side of the saddle at the ash.

Katara offered a small smile. "We'll be waiting for you."

Sokka and Momo both waved as he jumped down into the swirling cinders. They were the last thing Aang saw before the world went dark.

He kept his eyes and mouth shut against the storm, but the particles flying through the air still stung at the exposed skin of his head and hands. It was unpleasant, but it made the direction of the winds into something even more tangible than it usually was. Aang reached out and took hold of those winds, using them to turn his fall into a glide, letting his body become just another cinder in the swarm. He could feel the disharmony of this place, of the wrongness that came from all the death it experienced when that infamous comet had come, but even here the wind remained true to its nature, a nature Aang knew too well. It was simple for him to use his own body and Qi to influence that wind, and all he asked it to do was relax for a little while.

Aang's glide turned into a fall again as the air calmed, but the sun did not return to the sky. The ashland was far too big for him to soothe all its winds, but at least this stretch of land would be habitable long enough to search.

Nevertheless, soot bounced up when his feet hit the ground, making him sneeze.

Aang was still wiping his nose when Appa landed with the others. Their arrival kicked up another cloud that soon settled without the wind to sustain it, but Mai, Sokka, and Katara were all coughing as they climbed down from the saddle. Momo flew over and landed atop Aang's head, holding on like it was a matter of life and death. Aang allowed the lemur to stay put. He could still smell the ash on the air, a dirty scent with a dangerous and lively element to it, and he suspected that Momo had it even worse with his sensitive nose and tongue.
"I never imagined it would be this bad," Katara whispered. She was pulling her hat down as low as it could go, and she never moved more than a step away from her brother.

Sokka, for his part, was just looking around with a grim but unsurprised expression. "Well, we'll be able to do a cursory search, but there could be lots of things hiding in all this ash. I'm hoping we're not expecting secret trapdoors or anything trick like that?"

Aang shook his head as much as he could without dislodging Momo. "I don't think anyone is trying to hide anything in here. We're just looking for signs of life."

"Obvious paths out of here, buildings or that fortress Mai was talking about, or-" Sokka stopped talking for a moment as he turned to look back at Appa. "Or maybe even signs of sky bison visits. Hey, you think the whole Return of the Airbenders thing means new sky bison?"

Aang blinked. He hadn't considered that. "I guess it could be possible. Maybe there was a small herd hiding in this area? But- but then it wouldn't really much of a return, would it? The sky bison would just be more exposed after they escaped the fires."

Sokka shrugged. "Who knows what kind of riddle Aunt Wu was trying to tell you? Anyway, we should split up and take a quick look around. If you can't find anything, or if you feel the winds picking up again, meet up back here at Appa and we'll move our search."

Aang nodded. "I'll go this way."

Katara inhaled and exhaled slowly, and then pushed her hat back to clear her vision. "I'll go that way."

"Great." Sokka pointed to his left. "I'll take that route. Mai, figure out what that leaves you." Without waiting for a reply, he walked off. Katara got moving on her own path, and Aang reluctantly got started on his own search.

When he looked back at Mai, she was still standing silently amidst the ash, staring at nothing.

Mai was almost grateful for all the seasickness she had experienced in the last year, and for that time she had to clean out the dusty remains of Air Nomad monsters who used to be people. Those experiences had taught her how to suppress the urge to vomit all over her boots.

One way of coping was telling herself how unlikely it was that any of the soot she was breathing contained any of Ty Lee's ashes.

This ashland was where Ty Lee had died. The remains of the circus group- of the people and animals and wagons and machines- had been found by the Fire Army soldiers after they finished conquering their fortress. They felt so bad about accidentally killing Fire Nation civilians while turning this whole into an inferno that they had even made the effort to identify the circus in question. But not bad enough to actually apologize to anyone.

And now here Mai was, standing in the remains of the trees and grasses and whatever that had burned around her only friend.

She wasn't breathing in any of Ty Lee's ashes right now.

Probably.

Mai made herself move, to walk off in the direction Sokka had indicated with barely concealed
loathing, so that she could finish this search and get out of here. She wondered if telling everyone how hard it was to bring them here would earn her any sympathy points, but had no real desire to found out. She didn't want sympathy. Sympathy was messy. Besides, it wasn't like she was breathing in any of Ty Lee’s ashes right now, probably.

Mai followed the terrain into something like a gulch, kicking up ash with every step. No water ran through here now, but certainly had at one time. Mai braced herself with a hand against the stone walls, but pulled them back when she felt the filthy sooty texture smeared across her palms. It was silly, of course; none of those cinders had been Ty Lee, probably. Her stomach churned, but she promised herself she wouldn’t vomit.

She made her way through the gulch, stopping only when she heard the sounds of little girls giggling.

Mai whipped around, looking for the source, and found nothing behind her but her own trail through the ash.

Okay, she was just going crazy. That was better than throwing up on her boots.

She resumed walking, and the gulch expanded until the wall on her left fell away to reveal a wide plain. The other wall still stood tall, but no amount of staring made it look like a great-grandfather's nose, so she moved her attention elsewhere, enjoying the sight of the wide spread of ash in front of her and the sounds of distant howling winds.

Then she heard the giggling again.

This time, Mai drew her platinum knife. She had left the platinum sword she had stolen from the Rough Rhinos back with Appa, and was regretting that decision, now.

But no ghosts came. The ash stayed on the ground where Aang had put it.

Mai held the knife in a ready position in front of her as she continued her search. Continued sounds of little girls giggling didn't lead to any attacks or sightings. As unsettling as it was when those giggles turned to sobs, no ghosts presented themselves. And when Mai clearly heard voices mixed with that weeping, she safely concluded that it was all in her head.

After all, she already knew the dialogue:

"Why are you crying?"

"Because I'm going to miss you so much. It's breaking my heart."

"Well, then don't go. Not that I care much either way, but it sounds like you have a preference."

"I'm sorry I'm leaving you, but I have to go. I'm going to wither if I stay here."

"Like I'm withered?"

"Your aura is grey, but you're strong. You're not withered at all."

"Well, I wish my mother shared that opinion."

"I wish you could come with me."

"I'm not coming with you. Running away to join the circus sounds filthy."
"I know. I just wish you could. You're the only thing I'm going to miss."

"Not any of your sisters? Not even the Princess?"

"Not my sisters. And I love Azula, but she's part of what's withering me."

"Hn. Technically, I could kill you for that and would probably be rewarded."

"But you won't. Because you're not withered."

"Ugh. I'm not going to miss you at all when you leave."

"Heh. That's okay. I'll miss you enough for both of us."

As Mai continued her search- ignoring the voices in her head that had somehow become so loud and clear in this place- her eyes grew itchy, but she attributed that to the sooty quality of the air, which didn't include any of Ty Lee's ashes.

Probably.

Aang's search took him uphill, and as he climbed, the sky became darker as ash slowly returned to the sky. It wasn't fast enough to worry him, but he wouldn't be able to dawdle on his search.

The whole time, Momo kept clinging to Aang's head.

He reached up to pet the lemur's quivering body, trying to pass on some kind of reassurance, but he had little to give. Since Aunt Wu had told him about the new Airbenders, he couldn't stop his thoughts from flying through all the possibilities. He figured the most likely explanation was that the new Airbenders were simply the descendants of the old, keeping alive the ways and blood of a few Nomads who had escaped Fire Lord Sozin's attack. Still, that didn't explain why the guy Sokka talked to had seen a group of girls. Maybe there were enough new Airbenders that a full society had formed, and a random group of friends had been spotted? That would be nice.

Aang also wondered about Sokka's earlier idea, that the new Airbenders were wild sky bison. The whole Air Nomad culture had grown in tandem with the art of sky-herding, to the point where the humans and bison were both essential parts of it. What would sky bison be like who had never known the friendship of an Airbender? Would Appa even recognize the modern bison as being like him? Could they be actively dangerous to people?

But mostly, Aang wondered what he was supposed to do with these new Airbenders, whatever they turned out to be. Was that how he was supposed to fix the world?

Lost in his thoughts, Aang put a foot down wrong, and his boot failed to find traction on the ash-covered slope. Momo screeched, and Aang slipped and fell face-first into the soot, smacking hard against the rocky ground beneath it all, almost becoming buried in the cinders as he slid a short distance down the hill.

When he picked himself up and spat the ash out of his mouth, he looked up again to find Monk Gyatso standing in front of him.

"Hello, Aang." Gyatso smiled broadly behind his drooping gray mustache. "I've missed you."

Aang blinked. He looked around, searching for some kind of clue as to how hard he had hit his head, but found only the colorless terrain of the ashland. He looked back to the figure in front of him and
noticed that ash was clinging to Gyatso's robes as if he was really here. There was no otherworldly blue glow or transparency, and the dull light of the ashland fell on him the same way it did on everything else. "How are you here?"

Gyatso shrugged, and kneeled down in the soot so that he was at eye-level with Aang. "That's a very good question. I'm rather surprised to be here, myself, but let's not worry about it for now. The winds have brought us together for a moment, and I'd like to make the most of it. Now come, give me a hug! It's been so long..."

Aang moved forward without hesitation and threw himself into Gyatso's arms. He recognized the warmth that came through the robes, the unique smell of fruits mixed with old-man-scent, and the feel of the mustache-tips tickling the crown of his bald head. It was really Gyatso, in every meaningful way.

"I'm sorry," Aang said.

"For what?"

"Everything! Running away, getting stuck at the South Pole, letting all this happen-"

"Oh, Aang, I know. I know. I've always known." Gyatso patted Aang's back, and shifted their embrace so that they could look each other in the eyes. "I'm just worried now about how to help you. Why are you here in this terrible place?"

That's when Aang remembered that he had been covered in ash, and the hug had just transferred most of it onto Gyatso's robes. "I- my friends thought we might be able to find the new Airbenders by coming here. I found out- well, I was told- there's supposed to be new Airbenders somewhere, and my friend Sokka heard this rumor from a guy from this province, so we- we tried just searching around for a while, but weren't finding anything so-"

"So you came here." Gyatso craned his head to look around. "Well, it's not a bad place to start. This area is near where an old herding trail ran. Many of our people would have passed overhead in the summer months."

Aang considered that. "So maybe the new Airbenders are sky bison."

"That could be. I wish I could say more, but I'm afraid I've been a bit out of touch, eh?" Gyatso chuckled, and Aang couldn't help but smile in return. "Although, there are other ways I can help. You're very troubled, Aang. What is the matter? Really?"

"I just-" Aang sighed. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. About anything. So many bad things have happened while I've been gone, and I don't think I can fix most of them. If I could just find these new Airbenders, I might be able to help them, but if I can't- what if I can't, and the Fire Nation kills them, too? Everything that's happened has been because I was missing, but being here now doesn't mean I can stop more from going wrong! I couldn't save Guru Pathik, I couldn't stop the disasters at the South Pole and Crescent Island, and now- what if I can't save the Air Nomads?"

Gyatso smiled, and placed both of his hands on top of Aang's head. They were warm, and their soothing roughness was a relief compared to the feel of the ash on the wind. "Then you will have set an example for the rest of the world, and maybe in time the winds will change direction for a more favorable journey forward. I believe in you, Aang. I believe in you. Show the people around you the way, and see where the winds carry you."

Gyatso pulled Aang into his arms once more, and Aang sank gratefully into them. He didn't know
how Gyatso could be here, didn't know how these words had reached him in this land of ash, but they were what he needed. As he sought out the new Airbenders, he would keep in mind the wisdom of the greatest of the old.

The wind picked up into a heavy gust, pelting Aang with cinders, and he flinched away from the foul sting.

When the wind died again, Gyatso was gone.

Aang rose from the ashes and looked across at empty, brown horizons. He walked around the area, investigating. There were no footsteps, no trails, no signs of approach. Whatever had happened here, it had happened on just that one spot.

Aang turned back to it, and found Momo waiting for him, still swatting soot out of his fur. Apparently, the lemur had dug himself out of wherever he had landed when Aang fell. Aang went back, put Momo back up on his head, and continued on his search of the area, climbing up the hill with renewed determination.

Mai put up with the voices- the whispers, the giggles, the things she and Ty Lee had said to each other that had all just led to death- for as long as she could, and then headed back to meet with the others.

When she saw that Aang, Sokka, and Katara all looked as rattled as she felt, it came as a relief. Either she wasn't the only one going crazy, or this ashland was haunted.

"Voices?" She twirled her platinum knife as she walked over to the gathering beside Appa.

Everyone else stared at her for a moment, and then nodded. Katara hugged herself as she said, "And they weren't saying very nice things about me."

Sokka shuddered. "Why does everything we come across lately have to prove something by stealing our most terrible thoughts and fears from the deepest recesses of our mind and fling them back in our faces? Whatever happened to just going 'OooooOOOoooooh!' to haunt someone? I don't think I like this new-age haunting."

Aang reached up to pet the lemur on his head. "I don't know. I didn't hear the kind of voices you guys did. My experience- it helped me. I don't know where it came from, but it was a good place."

Mai snorted. "Sure, the Avatar gets special treatment. Well, aside from disembodied voices, did anyone find anything, or has this just been a massive waste of time and sanity?"

Sokka pointed back the way he came. "I spotted something in the distance. It was hard to tell, because it was out where the winds were still active, but it looked like there was some kind of building at the top of one of these hills. That by itself wouldn't be too weird, since there's supposed to be a fortress around here, so there's probably all kinds of outposts or waypoints scattered about, but get this- I think I saw lights. Now, whether they're real lights or spooky ghost lights or whatever- that's a good question, but I-"

Mai went ahead and began climbing back into Appa's saddle. "We can debate it while we fly. Let's go."

Everyone followed her lead, and soon Appa had them all airborne. Sokka sat up with Aang on Appa's head, directing their search, and Katara sat at the front of the saddle to listen to them.
Mai, meanwhile, prepared for battle. She checked the blades she had left (after her latest purchasing trip, she was now back up to three full sets, including her Lui Shui steel collection), and decided to load up with extra razor discs in case she had to target something around a corner. Once she had completed that, she took out her platinum sword. Should she take it? The voices everyone had heard—the sounds of her last words with Ty Lee—were a sign that spirits or worse were inhabiting the ashland, but that didn't rule out human bandits from being holed up in the structure Sokka found. She had the platinum knife, so she had a weapon to be used against spirits, but she also had plenty of steel knives, too. Which would be the best choice?

If she brought the platinum sword and saw a ghost of Ty Lee, could she even bring herself to use it?

"I can tie them together so that you can wear both," came Katara's voice.

Mai spun, startled, and realized she had pulled the platinum knife and held it ready to throw.

"Sorry!" Katara held up her hands as if surrendering. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Did they not teach the concept of minding your own business where you come from?" Mai sheathed the knife and turned back to her supplies. "Idiot."

"I-' Katara's voice went soft. "I'm sorry, but I- it looked like you were having trouble deciding between your swords, so I-"

"Hey," Sokka shouted, "what's going on back there? Is Mai causing trouble?"

"You can mind your business, too, Tribal."

Sokka was stalking back into the saddle in an instant. "What did you call me?"

Mai glared back at him, hiding the regret she felt for using that word. She knew he hated it. She had no good reason to use it. It wasn't even instinct, this time; she had done it on purpose because she wanted to hurt him.

Katara stood up and positioned herself to block Sokka's path. "Hey, no fighting. She's being a jerk, but that's no reason-"

"Oh, I think it's plenty of reason." Sokka let himself be stopped by his sister's shove, but he kept his eyes on Mai. "Maybe she's fine helping us get rid of the royal Fire royals in charge, but bringing back Airbenders is something else. You heard what she called me. She still can't stand anyone who isn't from the Fire Nation."

"What I really can't stand is the way I'm treated around here." Mai stood up and sought for her anger, boring deep into all her feelings of shame and regret and pumping enough heat into them to turn them into hatred and resentment. All of it—every snide thing Sokka had ever said to her, and every pained expression on Aang's face when he thought about how she had betrayed him—blossomed into proof that they would always hate her, and it was an easy thing to hate back. "Yes, I tried to be loyal to the people who raised and trained me. You've made such a big deal out of how I tried to betray you, but you were fine back when you thought the only ones I was betraying were the people you hate! You have no honor. I've been nothing but helpful since Crescent Island, but I still get nothing from attitude from you!"

Katara stopped Sokka from approaching again. "Guys, stop it, you're-"

"Oh," Sokka interrupted, "so you think that playing nice for a little while means we forget what you tried to do to us? I'm never going to forget. Once Fire Nation slime, always Fire Nation slime."
"Slime?" Mai stepped forward to find one of Katara's hands shoving her back as well, but she didn't mind. She pulled her steel sword from its sheath and held it so that the flat of the blade was battered by the wind of their flight. "Come on, Sokka, show me how I'm slime. You always wanted to be a warrior, right? Then let's go right now. The pride of the South versus the Fire Traitor. Just you and me settling things up."

"Hey!" Katara let go of her brother and grabbed Mai's sword hand. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm-"

Mai didn't have time to finish before a tornado suddenly sprang up in Appa's saddle, a tornado that came with hands and feet that struck at her. She was swept off her feet by a kick at the same time a precise palm strike to her arm made her hand open spasmodically and drop the sword. As she fell back to the floor of the saddle, she heard Sokka cry out as well, and Katara gasped with surprise.

Then Mai landed on her butt and the winds died.

Aang was standing in the center of the little violent gathering, holding Mai's sword in a reverse grip with distaste evident on his face. When he spoke, his voice was flat but hard: "This is wrong."

"Ugh," Sokka groaned. Mai was surprised to see that he was lying on his back as well. "What the slush, Aang? She started it."

"Both of you were looking for a fight. Both of you were wrong." Aang looked over to Katara, standing by the edge of the saddle and clutching her hat. "Could you take Appa's reins? These ash-winds are making him nervous. Oh, and take this for me?" He held out the sword, the blade pointed straight down at the saddle.

"Sure." Katara took the sword with slow care, keeping the blade pointed down in a reverse grip, and then hurried away like she was retreating.

Aang looked over to Mai, and for the first time, she realized that he had eyes the color of old ash. "What are you doing, Mai? You don't really want to fight anyone."

Mai knew he was right, but admitting it seemed like the worst possible thing she could do at the moment. "Maybe I just feel like a fight. You ever get the urge to take that staff you used to have and crack someone's head with it?"

Aang's brow tightened with confusion. "No. That's not a normal thing. Not for me and not for you."

"I-" Mai tried to think of a retort, but the best she could come up with was, "Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do."

She heard Sokka snort, but Aang just shrugged and said, "I know you a little bit, at least. I know that you hate showing people how you really feel. So if you're trying to seem like you're angry now, then it's because you're feeling something else, and you don't trust yourself to hide it from us."

Mai, for once, couldn't keep her surprise from her expression. Her jaw dropped as she realized that Aang was right and she had been completely wrong about herself. The feelings of shame and embarrassment struck her hard enough to leave her lightheaded, and she burned with anger at herself for actually pulling a sword on the people she wanted to forgive her. She raised her hands to cover her face. "Don't look at me."

She heard Aang step over and crouch down beside her. "Mai, you don't have to look at us, but we
need to know what's going on. You've done too much to keep hiding it."

Mai was going to tell him to lick ash, but her breathing was growing heavier as she fought back sobs, and she didn't trust herself to try to tap into that fake anger again. She forced herself to do a meditation exercise, ignoring the shudders that came from the sobs that tried to escape from her, and managed to bite out, "She died down there."

"Who?"

"My-" More breathing. She shut her eyes against the sight of her own ash-stained hands. "My friend. Ty Lee. The circus girl." Her only friend in the world. The one person who had come close to understanding Mai as a person. The single oddball throughout all of the Fire Nation who Mai could appreciate. "She burned down there."

"The one who- Ohhhhhhh. I see." She heard Aang get back up again. "We just arrived. I need to calm the winds again. If you can, then we could use help investigating. If not, stay with Appa and Momo." She heard him stepping away over the sound of her own breathing, and thought she was finally done, but then he added, "You should apologize to Sokka and Katara. When you can. Come on, Sokka."

The boys both left Mai cowering in the back of the saddle, and she finally gave up the fight. As the sounds of the winds calmed, she cried completely without noise, her hands never exposing her face.

Sokka and Katara were quiet, but neither one hesitated as Aang led them across the ash.

With the winds calm, the building Sokka had spotted was easy to discern, if not its purpose. The main structure was wide and stood several stories, its ornate pagoda roof rising into the brown sky. An empty courtyard surrounded the building, enclosed by four walls with massive dunes of ash piled up against them. Aang had left Appa- with Mai and Momo in his saddle- by the sole gate in the walls, directly opposite the building.

He looked at the doors, and noted that they were held closed with a beam of wood slotted on the inside.

"And I saw lights before," Sokka said, "but the building is dark now. Either we dropped in at a bad time, or someone is expecting us. Probably both."

Katara tilted her hat back to look at the locked doors, and then shifted her waterskins forward and popped their corks. "Probably both."

Aang waved them along. "Come on, let's check out the building." Nothing reacted to their approach, but they found the doors locked. Aang cupped his hands and used his Airbending to enhance the volume of his voice: "Hello! We're not going to hurt anyone! We just have some questions!"

No reply came.

Sokka sighed. "Well, we tried the nice way. Let's bust the doors open."

"Sokka!" Katara shook her head at her brother. "Not so fast." She turned to the doors and shouted, "We can help! We can take you out of the ashland, or bring you supplies! It's going to be okay!"

Still no reply.

Aang shrugged. "Bust open the doors?"
Sokka nodded. "Bust open the doors!"

Katara sighed. "Okay, bust open the doors."

Aang kicked out, using a burst of Airbending to bust open the doors. They swung apart and smacked into the walls with loud crashes, and pieces of the wooden beam that had been holding them closed clattered further into the shadowy hall.

Aang led the others in. The hall was large but plain, with no furniture or decoration to suggest what kind of building this might have been. The place was filthy with ash, of course, but there were no dunes or piles, so this place couldn't have regularly been open to the outside air.

More worrying were the scorch marks on the white walls.

Sokka walked over to one and ran his finger over it. "Hm, not quite fresh, but not old either. I'd say it's been about... uh, a few weeks? Maybe?"

Katara pushed her hat off, letting it hang behind her from her neck. "So the lights you saw weren't Firebending."

"Well, not combat Firebending, anyway."

Aang listened to the exchange with half an ear, giving most of his focus to the flow of the air through this building. It was odd, not quite unmoving, but not even the whisper of a breeze, either. It was almost- "I don't mean to get anyone worried, but does anyone else feel like we're being hunted?"

The Water Tribe siblings turned to him with wide eyes, and Sokka said, "You mean that tense-eared, skin-prickling sensation where you can tell that someone is just behind you but you also know that if you turn around you won't see anything, and making any kind of move will probably just lead to being ambushed?"

"Yeah, that."

"Well I didn't until you said something." He and Katara stepped so that they were standing back to back. "Ugh, I hate this spooky stuff."

Aang quickly trotted over so that he formed a triangle with the siblings, their backs all together and each one facing in a different direction. "Let's be careful while we explore."

So they moved as one into the hallways of the building, finding empty room after empty room stained with ash and scorch marks. They had to rely on their lanterns for light, as the windows had all been covered with thick paper, and the resulting shadows did not set Aang at ease. The air still had that odd quality, although every now and then it moved with a whisper that almost but didn't quite actually make a sound. After one such instance, Aang said, "Hey, guys?"

"Yeah?"

"Yes?"

"Did either of you see anything just now?"

"Nope."

"Sorry."

"Okay."
It was far too much like the Fire Temple on Crescent Island. Where he had been hunted by a Fire Prince, and betrayed by Mai.

By the time they reached the shrine room, Aang could feel sweat dripping down his head. The room was somewhere deep in the back of the building, and the shrine itself- or rather, the remnants of a shrine that was barely recognizable beneath several scorch marks- stood in the center of the longest wall. A single square mat lay askew before the shrine.

He once again the half-felt, half-heard the air move around him. "Guys, I'm really starting to feel like we're not alone in h-"

He was cut off when something dropped from the ceiling on top of them, the sound of its movement all roaring and snapping and screeching. Aang cried out as something struck his back and knocked him to the floor, but his ability to make noise came to an end when he struck the ground hard enough to knock the air right out of his lungs.

He could only lay there gasping as he listened to the pained cry of his friends.

TO BE CONTINUED
The gAang discovers the secret at the heart of the ashland, but also find new obstacles- both internal and external.

See the end of the chapter for notes

A New Wind

Mai wasn't sure what she was more embarrassed about- getting herself mad and pulling a sword on the people she was trying to be friends with, or breaking down and crying where they could see her.

Either way, Mai found herself sitting alone in Appa's saddle in the middle of an ashland feeling very silly.

She took her hands away from her face and looked at the world around her. The winds were dead, and the dunes of ash- almost certainly not any of Ty Lee's- rested across the grounds of the complex around Appa. Tall walls cut off the rest of her view of the world, enclosing the grounds and leaving the several-story building at the far end as the lone interesting feature. Well, Mai was always looking for things of interest, and chasing after Aang, Sokka, and Katara was better than sitting here bored and silly. She would eventually have to face them. Might as well get it out of the way and die of embarrassment sooner rather than later. She grabbed her platinum sword and hung it from the back of her belt.

Momo chittered at her as she climbed down from the saddle, but didn't follow. Appa, too, looked at her as she left him behind, but she turned to meet her with his wide gaze. Those massive eyes aligned on her with real weight. They were deep, full of moist warmth even in the ashland, and large enough for her to see her reflection, to see her own blank face atop the green smear of her clothes.

She gave a small smile, to see how it looked on her, and Appa snorted with enough force to push the ashes in front of him.

Then she made her way over to the dark building and plunged into mystery.

She could see, through the dim daylight that came in through the front doors, that the place was filthy. Ash was, of course, everywhere. More surprising were the scorch marks on the white walls. There were several different hallways and rooms branching off from the vestibule, and no sign of which path the others had taken. She stood alone, hand going for the handle of her sword, and tried to decide her course.

Then a cry echoed from deeper in the building, and Mai recognized the voice as Aang's. She dashed off in her closest guess as to the source, getting further encouragement from the distinct sounds of Sokka's aggressive roaring and the splats of Katara's Waterbending impacting against something. They were soon all drowned out by the howling of moving air, and Mai found herself running against a headwind that almost felt solid. It was a useful sign that she wasn’t about to run into a wall, as she was losing more of the sunlight with every step, and she had already accumulated enough
embarrassment for the day without running headfirst into a wall.

Instead, she plunged into a dark room and ran headfirst into the enemy.

Mai had no sooner impacted than a storm of blows rained down on her. Her hands flew up in defense, but the hits were not especially powerful, and that was the enemy's downfall. As Azula had once said, more warriors had died from flinching than any real tactical errors, and so Mai's combat training had included lessons on overriding such reflexes. Even as something smacked her across the face with only enough force to sting, she held onto a sliver of focus and drew her platinum sword in a motion that became a full aggressive slash at her opponent.

The enemy retreated into a chaotic world of shadow and harsh crystal light before the blade found purchase in anything. The others' lanterns had apparently been dropped and left to roll on the floor, and Mai so got only a glimpse of a dark, nebulous shape before it passed beyond the moving green light. The sounds of the enemy's movements were more distinct, snaps and an unsettling noise that was half roar and half howl, but as Mai raised her sword in a defensive position, she realized that there was something familiar in the cacophony.

The 'snapping' was the sound of long cloth- most likely robes- moving so quickly that they were cracking like whips.

Mai knew that noise well. Her sleeves cracked the same way whenever she threw a knife with enough force a rip someone off their feet.

That's when she realized what she was fighting, and how to win.

Mai dropped her sword and went for her blades, for her needles and razor discs, and unleashed her swarm of metal in the direction of the sounds. The first volley would close off one avenue of escape, the second would block another, and the final volley would strike right at the enemy itself. Or, rather, those final blades would be hitting the exact bits of the robe that had been creating the snapping sounds, giving away their position in the dark.

The blades disappeared into the darkness and a moment later the shadows stopped moving. Mai waited just long enough to confirm that the fight was over. "Is everyone alive in here?"

"Probably," came Sokka's stained voice.

Some of the green light stabilized and rose to reveal Katara holding one of the lanterns up. "I lost my hat in here and my heart is racing, but I'm okay. Aang?"

Aang was sitting on the floor, wheezing but making a gesture that he was okay. He must have had the wind knocked out of him during the fight, ironically.

Sokka crawled into the light, one hand dragging himself forward while the other clutched his left knee. "I'm going to be limping for a while, but all my blood is where it's supposed to be."

"Good." Mai drew a pair of stilettos and pointed them in the direction where the enemy was still pinned. "Let's see what I caught."

The boys got to their feet, Aang's breathing finally settling as he picked up the other lantern. Sokka leaned on Katara, and they all approached the enemy.

It was almost anticlimactic when the light fell on an old woman pinned to the wall by her voluminous golden robes. Mai's blades had found every free corner of clothing, including the oversized sleeves and even some of the long bits of white hair that had escaped from the woman's bun. Their captive
looked back at them with hard eyes and said, "I won’t let you take me. None of you should be here!"

Mai shifted her knives so that the blades would catch the light. "Well, that's one opinion."

Aang's eyes flickered to her before looking back to the old woman. "We're sorry for trespassing, but we're here to help. I'm the Avatar, and I-

"The Avatar?!" The woman leaned forward as much as she could with Mai's blades still firmly pinning her to the wall, squinting in the lantern's illumination. "The Airbender child?"

Aang pointed the big, obvious arrow on his head. "That's me!"

"The Avatar!" The old woman's eyes darted across the rest of them, and then seemed to continue darting to take in things that weren't there. "The Avatar, here. Is it true? No, it doesn't matter, the Avatar doesn't have to be real." She centered her gaze on Aang again and bowed her head. "My apologies, Avatar I did not get a clear look at you before I attacked. I should have greeted you in peace. I am Mother Malu, master of this abbey, and it is an honor to meet you. I hope you will find me of The Gift bestowed upon me by fate." She raised her gaze again and frowned deeply. "Can you tell me if you're all real?"

Mai blinked. "The knives holding you against the wall aren't proof enough?"

"Oh, if only you had seen the dreams, but can your evil eyes even behold such things?" Mai was going to ask what made eyes evil, but Malu continued rambling, "The dreams. I've had such horrible dreams. Dreams that were real, dreams that weren't real, dreams that I dreamed weren't real but really were." She abruptly turned to glare at Mai. "You're trying to trick me. You just want me to think you're real, but you're-" She gasped. "You're the voices, aren't you?"

"Voices?" Mai took a step back. She could deal with old lady ambushers, and had enough platinum that she was reasonable sure she could fight a spirit monster, but this old Malu lady seemed to be cracked, and how was that supposed to be handled?

"From outside! The horrible voices that say horrible things!" Malu looked over at the others, a growl entering her voice. "Let me go! Leave and let me go! I do not recognize your power! Go find peace in the grave and leave the living alone!"

"Oh, hey, calm down, the voices are something else entirely." Sokka held up his hands with palms outwards, at least as well as he could with one arm still hooked around Katara's shoulders. "We met the voices outside. They're jerks. We can take you away from the voices. To where the sun shines."

"How long," Katara said, "have you been here?"

Malu blinked. She looked around, blinking at each one of them. "Since the fires. They destroyed everything! The abbey and the girls survived, but everyone else-" She swung her gaze to Mai, and there was a glint in her eyes that were far too evocative of Azula on a bad day; there was a detachment to the gaze that kept it from seeing the world in front of it. "So many died! We did our best to help, especially after we discovered the Gift. I sent some of the girls out to find help, but-" She turned Katara. "The ashes rose. And then the ghosts came. We couldn't-" She snapped over to stare at Sokka, who yelped. "We were trapped! Trapped until the Firebenders came! There was so much screaming, so much it drowned out the voices, so much-" Malu looked over at Aang (who immediately grabbed the closest of Mai's arms with enough force to yank her down to his height) and finished, "Now I'm alone, alone in the dark, and you're not real! Get out! Geeeeeeet out!"

They all backed away from her continued screaming, and Mai freed herself from Aang's clutches
before he cut off all the circulation in her favorite arm. "So, this is what happens to someone locked up alone for a while in the middle of an ashland. Let's not experience it firsthand."

Katara shook her head. "We can't leave her here like this."

"We can't?" Sokka motioned back over at Malu. "We could free her from Mai's knives, then leave her here."

"Sokka!"

"Sorry."

Mai ignored the sibling act and kept her attention on Aang. Even in the light of his lantern, he was clearly worried, and there was conflict behind his eyes as he said, "I- I think there's more going on. When she attacked us, she was- I don't know, but I felt- something. In the air. I think she was- well, I think she was kind of Airbending."

_Airbending?_ This old crackpot was the new Air Nation that Aunt Wu had sent them to find?

Mai sighed. "Nothing is ever easy, is it?"

Aang had to keep going over it in his mind to make sure he hadn't imagined it. He had been startled by Mother Malu's initial attack, and then getting the breath knocked out of him had been distracting, but at the very edge of his perceptions it had seemed like the air in the room wasn't moving naturally. As his ability to breathe returned and Mai had arrived to save them (_that_ had been good timing), he had become more conscious of the strangeness, of the way Mother Malu had been able to move as though her body was lighter than it really was.

"There has to be something we can do for her. She's- she's one of my people, now."

They were silent in the light of the lanterns until Katara spoke: "My Waterbending might be able to heal her."

Sokka's head jerked up. "I forgot you could magically fix stuff! Why am I leaning on you and limping when you can just magic my knee?"

"I'll get to you when we have some time, Sokka." Katara looked back over to Aang, but then averted her eyes. "It's not easy, but water-healing can work on minds, as well. Kind of. Old Master Anibik- the healing master with us in Crescent Island- told me a little about it, but- well, I didn't ask much about mind-sicknesses. And it doesn't fix everything, it strengthens the mind so that it can start sorting itself out. Mother Malu will have to want to be healed. To use the clarity I'll be giving her."

"I think we have to try." Aang reached to take her free hand. He meant it to be reassuring, to show his confidence in her abilities, but he couldn't deny that it felt good to have her support as well. "Thank you."

Katara smiled and turned away from him. "Of course. But someone is going to have to hold Sokka up for me."

With a flash of reflected light, Mai returned her knives to wherever she kept them. "I can handle that. But first, I have something I need to say to all of you. About _before_."

Aang observed her face, and the way it was completely devoid of expression. "Go on."
She brought her hands together in formation that looked familiar, but then she hastily moved them so that she simply held her right fist in her left palm in the universal sign of respect. She bowed at the waist, lowering her head until it was nearly at the floor and her face was hidden from sight.

Mai's voice rose in an echo from the floor: "I'm sorry. I was stupid and did a terrible thing. I insulted without cause for the purpose of picking a fight, and threatened your lives like an uncultured criminal. I feel shame for my actions and regret them all. I will accept any punishment or censure in order to restore what little honor I possess."

Aang was going to forgive her right there, touched by the Fire Nation's typical excessive show of remorse, but Sokka spoke first with, "Will you accept having your weapons taken away?"

Wait, what?

Katara tilted her head. "What if we have to fight?"

Sokka nodded. "Then she can have them back whenever we're in danger. She's a good fighter, but she's shown she's not responsible enough to be walking around with an arsenal under her clothes and a collection of swords lying around. Unless she has a real need for them, she doesn't get to touch her knives and needles and junk."

Mai remained bowing, and her head bobbed once. "I accept with humble gratitude."

Sokka nodded. "Then it's fine. Thanks for the apology and stuff."

Aang couldn't believe this. They were really going to do this? "We're really going to do this?"

Katara ran a hand over her hair, and Aang was reminded that she had yet to retrieve her hat. "Maybe it's for the best. Until she's feeling better." She looked away from him.

Mai straightened, and her newly revealed face betrayed nothing. "Then it might be a long wait. Let's see about the crazy lady, now."

Mother Malu groaned and yanked her arms, but the wall would not let go of her. Those ghost children, those intruders, had done something to her, and now she was stuck against the wall. Their voices were beautiful and their faces chased away the voices, but they had called upon the wall to trap her and now she was stuck. It was the one with the evil eyes and the hair like sleep who had waved her hand and commanded the stars of death to glitter in the darkness and fly about casting the spells of doom.

Tears sprang to Malu's eyes. She missed her girls. Her dutiful girls, so full of life and balance. If anyone deserved the Gift it was them. But they were gone, taken by the Firebenders. Malu had failed them, failed to free them, failed to bring help. She knew she wasn't right, that her thoughts flew like ash on the winds, that not all the voices were real, but what could she-

Healing.

What?

Malu focused, trying to find the thread of the thought amidst the chaos. Someone was speaking to her. It was the voices! They were back! Back to kill her! She looked up and saw the faces of the children, the intruders, and the one with the evil eyes was standing in the back with glistening stars from the night sky in her hands! Malu drew back, pressing herself against the wall that held her and wouldn't let go.
Healing. The voices were talking about healing.

Malu focused again, and realized that the youngest one, the one with the arrow on his head—*the Avatar!* The true Airbender! He was speaking to her.

She forced herself to listen, to look at his moving lips in the light of his lantern. "What did you say?"

"We want to try to heal you. Will you let us?"

"Heal me?" Malu wanted healing, yes. But the whispers started again, saying that she would never be restored, that she had lived too long in the dark and the ash and the failure. They spoke of how unworthy she was of the Gift, how she defiled the world just by possessing the Gift and so had to suffer for her presumption. "Noooooo. Please, no."

"We think we can. Will you let us try?"

Malu shook her head, getting caught up in the motion and letting her whole body sway with it, pulling at the grip of the wall that wouldn't let go of her.

"Please? You'll feel a lot better. And we think it's the only way to learn what happened here. We want to help, so we need to know what really happened to— to the new Air Nation."

Malu froze. Air Nation? There was no Air Nation, just the Gift. The Gift and Malu's lack of worth. But the girls! The girls were taken by the Firebenders, maybe because of the Gift, and Malu couldn't save them. But the new voice was the Avatar! He could do it! "Yes! Do it! Save them!"

"Them?"

"Save them! Do what you must!" Malu looked at him, and put her whole strength into it. "I will help you save them!"

"Well," said the one with the evil eyes, "sounds like she's in."

The boy in blue added, "Or as 'in' as she can get."

"I guess." The Avatar moved to Malu's left and took her hand in both of his. He was so warm, and his touch was the greatest thing Malu had felt since she returned to the abbey. "My friend is going to do some Waterbending for you, now. Just stay calm."

Malu clutched his hands. So warm. So nice.

The girl with the soft eyes, wearing blue like the other boy, stepped in front of Malu and raised her hands. They were covered in water, water that flew like the ash outside, but this water stayed on the hands and glowed blue with a light that overwhelmed Malu's vision. She dreamed that she was drowning, and the voices said she was going to die, but the Avatar's hands kept hold of her own, and she heard him trying to say something. A coolness flowed into Malu's skull as if the flying glowing water had streamed in through her ears to push her brain out of her body and replace it with a lump of ice.

But the coldness that erupted deep within Malu's skull settled some of her fear, as she realized that she was breathing and thinking, so she couldn't be drowning or having her mind washed away.

But with that clarity came the memories.

The fires.
The burned bodies.
The heat, the choking heat.
The smell of the dead.
The new breeze. The feel of changing fates. The lights in the dreams.
The Gift.
The girls' joy.
The hope.
The rising ash. The voices.
The call for help.
The Firebenders.
The screams, the fear, the return of the stench of burning.
The march across the ash.
The fear. The confusion.
The escape.
The long return.
The exhaustion, the dreams, the voices, the ghosts, the darkness, the solitude.

All of it returned at once, sharps as knives and black as night. Malu's brain felt like it was burning, boiling, expanding in her skull and hammering to break free. Surely the glowing water was being boiled around her head! Her blood must be turning to steam and whistling out through her ears!

The thought of it was enough to make the dream real, and Malu screamed.

The scream made Aang jump as high as he could go without letting go of Mother Malu's hand, and when he landed, he realized that he had dropped his lantern again. "What's going on?"

Katara had hopped back, and the water was lying in twin puddles on the ground. She was breathing hard and looked to Aang with wide eyes. "It- I'm not strong enough. There's so much- so much confusion!"

Mother Malu had stopped screaming now, and she hung limp from Mai's knives while muttering about ashes.

Aang let go of her hand and let his gaze fall to the lantern lying beside his boots. "So we can't help her."

"I can't," Katara said. "But maybe you can."

Aang's head snapped up. "What? But I can't heal! You have to be a- a-"

Katara nodded. "A Waterbender."
Sokka scratched his chin. "Technically, the Avatar is a Waterbender. But can all Waterbenders heal? I've never been clear on that."

"Master Anibik said that there are degrees of natural talent, but we can all commune with water in the way that's the root of the healing power." She looked to Aang again. "You don't have to do it alone. I can direct everything; you just need to put more energy into it. Make up for- for the strength we need." She straightened, and moved her arms to summon more water out of the skins that hung from her back. The liquid streamed up to cover her hands, and she stepped forward to hold them out on either side of Mother Malu's head. "Now place your hands over mine. Let the water take them in."

Mother Malu didn't react to any of the activity as Aang stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Katara and placed his hands on the backs of hers. The water flowed as he pressed his palms against her skin, and Katara exhalation sent the liquid surging to engulf his hands.

It was cold.

"You need to feed the water," Katara whispered. "Water wants to heal. It cleans and cools us naturally, and washes out our wounds. Remember how it felt the last time you satisfied your thirst with a cold drink. Focus on that as you extend your Waterbending and let the water drink from your Qi as it needs. I'm going to start now."

Aang closed his eyes and remembered the taste of the water that came from the cold springs near the Southern Air Temple, the water he'd drink after a long day of Airbending practice. He meditated on that, on the healing atmosphere of his old home, and let the liquid on his hands become one with his being. The darkness behind his eyelids lit up with what must have been the light of the water coming to life, and he could feel Katara directing the energy in the liquid with a subtlety and gentleness that amazed him. He felt the flow of his life-force surge and fought to keep his breathing steady, turning his focus deeper inward with that memory to guide him, silently asking Gyatso and Roku for help. He felt the heat of Malu's mind pushing back, and shared the coolness of the mountain water of his childhood.

It was like drinking that spring water again.

A sharp, sucking gasp brought Aang back to reality. His eyes flew open to find Mother Malu once again straining against the knives that pinned her and staring with wide eyes. Katara stepped back and the water exploded out to soak Aang's sleeves, but he didn't have time to worry about that before Mother Malu swing her face right up to his and hissed, "I remember! The Gift, Avatar! It was Airbending! I saw them taken to the hole in the ground, to the Tiankeng Fortress! Save them, Avatar! But beware- beware the- the traitor..."

Then she closed her eyes and collapsed.

"Mother Malu!" He tried to hold her up, supporting her underneath her arms, and Katara pushed through to do a quick examination. "Is she okay?"

"She's breathing, and seems healthy. She might just be exhausted." Katara looked over to him with a shrug. "I've never done healing like that before, and her mind was under a lot of strain that we tried to fix quickly. She needs time. Then- then we'll see."

Aang nodded. "Let's get her out of here. The winds outside will be returning soon."

"And," Sokka added, "we have another clue to investigate. This Tiankeng Fortress."
"Ugh." They all turned to Mai. "I know that name. I'll explain once we're airborne, but you're not going to like what I have to say."

Sokka snorted. "When do we ever?"

Aang tried to tell himself that he was too busy freeing Mother Malu to respond, but the truth was that any opportunity to say something had passed by without his ever figuring out what he should actually say.

The ash was starting to swirl when Mai helped carry Malu outside and ease her up into Appa's saddle. They were all no sooner flying up above the reaching of the coming storm of cinders than Mai found Sokka's expectant gaze on her. Sighing, she began drawing her blades out of their various pouches and hiding place and piling them up in front of her. The last weapon she relinquished was her platinum sword, placing it atop the mound of knives.

Then she turned to the supply packs stacked up at the rear of the saddle to fish out her backup sets and steel sword. They all went into the pile as well.

Sokka looked it all over. "You didn't keep one, did you?"

"What would the point of that be? There's no danger up here, and I can't do much with just one blade." Mai scooted back and indulged in a spine-folding slouch that would have killed her mother to see.

"Maybe Katara should search you."

Over on the side of the saddle, crouched over Malu's comatose body on self-appointed nurse duty, Katara rolled her eyes beneath her recovered hat. "I'm not searching anyone. If Mai says she's disarmed, then we're accepting her word."

Sokka grunted. "Do we have time for you to heal my knee, now?"

Katara turned away again. "I'll get to it later."

Mai almost wished Katara had performed a search. She didn't think she could possibly feel more humiliated at this point, having her knives taken away like she was an irresponsible child, and it was an accurate enough comparison. Proving her compliance wouldn't be a bad thing, and she really had held nothing back. She wanted to erase her stupidity. She wanted to have the danger she represented—pulling weapons on her allies with no real provocation—forgotten. More than anything, right now, Mai just wanted to stop being Mai.

And, really, she was almost there. She had given up her family, given up her nation, given up her red clothes, and now just gave up her knives. What did she have left, besides her name?

Hoping that no one was looking at her, she reached for the twist of hair on the back of her head and began undoing it. With that foundation gone, her ox-horn buns and twin tails quickly fell into a plain cascade of black tresses. She pulled it all together and twisted it behind her into a short, ugly knot that hung to her shoulders.

She bet Mother wouldn't even recognize her, now.

"I think we're clear of the ashland now. I need to know where we're going," Aang said from his usual position on Appa's head with Momo. He turned around, and blinked in obvious surprise when he saw Mai. "Um-"
"Tiankeng Fortress," she cut him off. "Simultaneous proof of both the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom's complete stupidity."

Sokka looked up from her knives for the first time since she turned them over. If he noticed her hair, he made no sign. "Okay, you have my interest."

Aang climbed up into the saddle and sat down beside Malu's still form. Momo scampered over to Mai and pawed at her head, but she brushed him away and continued, "The Fire Nation built fortresses wherever it conquered territory, right? Well, in one particular place, the ground was too geologically unstable to dig deep enough to put the long metal walls they use to keep Earthbenders from just tunneling into the base. So, naturally, they picked a massive sinkhole in the area, covered the whole floor with metal plates, and built the fortress at the bottom of a mile-deep hole in the ground. They constructed a whole system of ramps along the walls of the sinkhole, and a complicated system of cranes to move supplies and equipment in and out."

Aang's head tilted from side to side as he took it all in. "So Earthbenders filled the hole on them, right?"

"No. That's why both sides are stupid. The Fire Nation built a fortress at the bottom of a giant hole in the ground, costing more than any other single Fire Nation military installation in history, and then the Earth Kingdom forces failed time after time to do anything about it. Last I heard, the fortress was still there, and it had become the favorite post-war conversation piece of politically-minded nobles. They liked to argue whether it's too expensive to keep running, now that there's no rebel resistance."

Katara looked out into the distance. "And now they're holding the new Airbenders there."

Aang stood up. "We have to help them."

It was like if he kept saying it, it would just happen. Mai sighed. "Yeah, I figured. I'll tell you how to get there, but getting in is going to need another one of our crazy, clever infiltration plans."

Sokka groaned. "How many high-security Fire Nation bases will this be us breaking into, now? Three? Four?"

Katara sat up, her expression perky for the first time since they had brought Malu aboard. "I've never broken into a Fire Nation base with you guys. I broke out of one, but that's not really the same."

"It's not a fun as it sounds," Sokka said.

Mai pushed Momo away from another attempt to investigate her hair. "Maybe this one will be less dangerous, and you won't have to give me my knives back today."

A while later, Aang looked down from his perch on Appa's head at Tiankeng Fortress. The sinkhole was wide and deep enough to be easily visible, even from this height, but he couldn't spot the fortress that was supposedly at the bottom. The area around the hole had been scorched free of vegetation down to bare rock and replaced by tree-sized metal spikes sunk into the ground and angled outward like rays from a dark sun. Catapults and trebuchets were scattered throughout the artificial forest, and a complicated structure of platforms and cranes had been constructed on the rim and even right over the hole. Past those, Aang could make out ramps spiraling down the sides of the space that- if his sense of scale was right- were wide enough for three full-grown sky bison to traverse side-by-side. Smoke billowed out from pipes conveying the foul air from deep within the hole, further muddying the view.

Plus, the soldiers and tanks moving around all over the place were pretty distracting.
Aang looked back up at his friends. "Sokka, give Mai all her knives back."

"I don't care how many knives I have or how we're dressed," Mai said, still staring down at the sinkhole, "we are not going in the front door this time."

Katara backed away from the view, her face a little green to Aang's eyes. "So, clever plans, right? You guys do that? How do we make one?"

"Earthbending!" Aang turned at Sokka's exclamation to find the other boy pointing a finger at him. "Maybe you can get us in? Not through the metal floor, obviously, but even getting us around that mess down there would be really helpful."

"Sorry." Aang hated to think back at it, but if he was going to save his new people, he had to reveal the details of what had happened at the Southern Air Temple to his friends. "When we fought the monsters in the Temple, I was in the Avatar State. It wasn't me doing that Earthbending, it was Avatar Kyoshi working through me. She knows Earthbending, but for me, it's just, it's like a distant memory that I know happened, but I don't know any of the details. Sorry."

"It's okay, Aang," Katara said immediately. "Mai, do you have any ideas?"

Aang looked over at their Fire Nation compatriot, and couldn't help but wonder once again about why she wasn't wearing her normal fancy hairstyle. She had agreed to Sokka's demand about giving up her weapons, and he in turn seemed to be treating her just as he had been for a while now, but the fact that she had changed her hair worried Aang. She was always so fastidious about keeping clean and well-groomed, and the fact that she had made a deliberate effort to undo that image had to be a sign of something. He could only hope it wasn't a bad sign.

Mai just shrugged. "This is the first time I've seen the fortress for myself. Maybe we can watch long enough to see where their supplies are coming from, and smuggle ourselves in somehow, but that could take a while, and if we were discovered, they'd go ahead and shoot us out of the sky. Do you see how that siege weaponry is set up? It's all aimed up. The enemy they consider most likely to attack is coming in close and high at the sinkhole." She looked around at everyone. "They know we're coming. They might be watching for us."

Aang's stomach clenched. This was getting worse by the second. "Well, then let's get somewhere safe while we think about how we're going to do this." He snapped Appa's reins and steered in a wide loop that would them descend out of the sight of the base.

Once they were on the ground, everyone disembarked from Appa. The ground here was hard and rocky, but the feel of it had been softened by mosses and a vibrant community of crawling and climbing vines. There was a moist smell in the air, and Aang tried to enjoy the novelty after a day of wandering ashlands.

While Katara finally healed Sokka's knee, they talked about ideas for getting into the sinkhole.

"Can you just drop down in a freefall," Sokka asked at one point, "and then Airbend yourself to a safe landing once you're through the defenses?"

Aang had been forced to shake his head. "I'm not sure I can cushion myself at those speeds without my glider. Anyway, without a good view, I could crash into something before I even know it's there."

They made a few more tries on Mai's idea of smuggling themselves in with a supply delivery, but nothing came of any of those conversations. Sokka speculated about building some kind of machine
vehicle specialized for getting them through the defenses, but Mai testily poked holes in that idea until they had both fallen into sullen silence.

Once they ran out of concepts to discuss, everyone began seeking distance. Sokka walked around and poked his foot into the largest clumps of vines for reasons Aang couldn't guess. Mai's hands disappeared into her sleeves, but then Aang heard her sigh and her hands reappeared holding nothing. She then marched off to a spot far away enough that the expression on her face (or lack of it) was lost to sight, and sat down.

Katara checked on Mother Malu again in Appa's saddle, and afterward went over to a nearby stream to refill her waterskins. Momo followed her over and lapped from the creek.

In the silence, Aang could no longer enjoy the moist air. Now it just felt like oppressive humidity. He went back to Appa and rubbed his old friend's massive nose. "How about you, buddy? Feeling okay?"

Appa responded with his resonant lowing, and there was a dark tone in it that perfectly summarized how Aang felt. The new Airbenders were beyond their reach, and it was starting to feel like this great team that had carried him so far was starting to malfunction. In the past, even when they were afraid or frustrated, they had still moved forward with energy and perseverance (or at least stubbornness).

Maybe they were thinking about this fortress the wrong way. Maybe it wasn't about how they should be getting in, but rather getting the Airbenders out. If Aang attacked the fortress directly, tried to bring out the Avatar State, then he might create enough damage and distraction for the Airbenders to make their own escape up from the sinkhole, and since they were the first of the new nation and he was just the last of the old, then risking his life that way would probably be worth it even if he d-

"I got it!"

Aang spun to see Katara standing up beside the creek and pushing her hat back to reveal a broad smile. "What did you get?"

"Our way in! There's lots of water in this area, and it runs underground. This creek disappears over there, and the water has to be going somewhere."

Sokka stepped over. "That's right, that's probably what created the sinkhole. The water running underground wore away the support until everything collapsed."

Aang blinked. "We can't flood the sinkhole. That would drown everyone!"

"Oh, no, I didn't want that," Katara said quickly, coming over to put her hands on his shoulders. "Since we don't have any Earthbenders, we can use the water to just wear away a path underground. Just a small tunnel for us to use to get in. And then we let the water drain away underground."

Aang looked to Sokka, who shrugged. "The theory works, but I don't know enough about your Waterbending to say if you can do it. We're talking precise work, and you'll be guessing about your end point- you won't be able to see into the sinkhole to tell where your tunnel will end up."

Aang nodded. "Still, it might be our best option. And we can give it a try without risking anything. If we can't Bend the water enough, or if we can't figure out where our tunnel is going, we just stop and try something else. The Fire Nation shouldn't realize what's going on."

Katara pointed back at the stream. "We can start there, so some of the work will be done for us."
Aang looked up at the sky. It had turned red as the sun met the horizon, and night would be on them soon. It had been a long day and they could use some rest, but on the other hand, night would be the best time to work on this. And from what Master Hama had said, Waterbending was strong under the moon, so that would give them another advantage. "I think we should try it."

Katara nodded, and Sokka raised his hands in surrender as he said, "It's your call. I'm for anything that will work."

Appa pushed forward to lick at Aang, making him laugh, and even Momo chittered with what sounded like excitement. This might really do it!

"I'm going to need my weapons, then," came the last voice. They all turned to find that Mai had joined them. As usual, her face gave nothing away. "If the Waterbenders are going to be making a tunnel into the unknown, then we'll need our best warrior ready and waiting to jump out and deal with whatever is on the other end. And as wet as I'm sure it's going to be, that means me. Right?"

Aang looked to Sokka.

His shoulders slumped, and he nodded.

With that, it was time to get to work. Aang and Katara started things off by the creek, taking arrow stances on either side of it and swaying their arms in sync over the flowing water, becoming one with its movement and energy. As they breathed, Aang and Katara exerted their control, putting more power and slowness into their forward arm motions, letting the backward motions just become quick resets, and the stream accordingly began flowing faster and with more pressure. Then Aang and Katara began walking forward, letting their arrow stances carry them as far as they could bend their knees before actually taking each step. The creek's pressure increased accordingly, and by the time they reached its end, it had worn away a large enough hole in the stone ground that Aang could probably squeeze through it with minimal discomfort.

He wasn't heading down there just yet, though. He and Katara remained standing on opposite sides of the hole and shifted their arm motions so that they went up and down rather than side to side. It was harder without being able to see the water they were Bending, but Aang could feel the push and pull of it in the darkness below the ground, and he found himself closing his eyes so that he could let the sensation become his whole reality. The stone of the underground was strong and unyielding, but the water had flowed against it for more years than the Fire Nation had maintained their sinkhole fortress, and so foundations crumbled against the wet pressure, and a new underground river began to flow.

Hours later, Aang and Katara both crawled underground, lanterns hanging from their belts, and dropped into knee-high water to continue building their underground path.

Of course, stone did not yield without time. The only reason they were able to make measurable progress at all was because there were already natural chambers and openings throughout the stone, thanks to the water already here. The hard work really came from breaking down the walls between the bubbles in the stone (Sokka's knowledge of mines was helpful in making sure they didn't collapse everything), and with each new breach, Aang had the chance to breathe ancient air flavored with both stone dust and water.

As time wore on, Aang's muscles became fatigued. He and Katara began taking shifts, one working while the other rested, and Sokka and Mai rigged up a rope ladder so that they could climb up out through the creek's enlarged drain and have a snack- even a nap- up where it was warm and dry.

They worked all through the night. When the sun rose, they all retired to the camp Sokka had set up
and passed the day away in something like the coma that Mother Malu was still in.

Work resumed on the second night, and they kept at their driving pace. Aang had to rely on Sokka to visit Appa and Momo for him. Katara got some extra-long breaks to take care of Mother Malu with Mai's help. The old woman still showed no sign of when she might wake up.

The time all blurred together until Sokka put his ear up against the wall at the end of their tunnel- a check he made regularly- and held up his hand. "I think we're there. I hear activity that's not wet."

Aang heaved a sigh of relief.

Mai thankfully didn’t have to argue to wait for the third night to make the final breach. Everyone slept through the day again, and then rose with the moon to get ready to make war.

Mai was loaded up with a full set of throwing blades again, and had her steel sword in its place at the back of her waist. It felt so good to be weighed down by sharp metal again, but she told herself not to get used to feeling.

Then, in silence, Aang led the way down into their secret 'tunnel.'

Great. Back into soggy land.

The water was still knee-high throughout the tunnel, but there was no staying dry even above that line. The water foamed and splashed as it rolled down the meandering path and struck the uneven walls. Mai might have only gotten a brief look at the mines at the South Pole, but even she could tell that this tunnel was far less professional in structure. It had a natural feel to it that gave it a frightening quality.

She was soaked from head to toe by the time she reached the end of the tunnel, her clothes clinging and her boots spongy. It was just as well she had given up her usual hairstyle, because there was no way her ox-horn buns could have survived this environment. Mai splashed after Aang towards another green crystal light, but Katara ran ahead of them and took a position where she could do her Water-dancing. The water that had been draining from a whole at the tunnel’s end slowed and began rising at a pace that Katara seemed to have under control. Sokka splashed over to stand beside her, seemingly unbothered at being thoroughly soaked. But then, he was a Water Tribe.

"Okay," Aang said. "Katara's going to maintain the draining, and I'm going to use my Waterbending to slice through the wall. Mai goes first, then Sokka. Katara and I will settle the water and then join you. We figure out things from there."

Sokka pulled his knives- the ones Mai had given him at the start of their journey- from his belt. "You know, it's probably too late to bring this up, but it just occurred to me that our plan after this point is distressingly vague."

Everyone ignored him, of course. Aang splashed over to the last wall, took a Waterbending stance, and raised a thick ribbon of liquid out of their artificial river to slice at the wall up and down like the saw of a lumber mill. But while water was an effective power-source for pumping a metal blade fast enough to make short work of wood, stone wasn't so cooperative. Everyone winced as the sound echoed shrilly throughout the tunnel, and Aang sped up his movements to put more strength into his cutting.

Faster than Mai had expected, the wall burst open.

She dashed forward with a splash and dove through the opening with arms out in front of her so that
she could turn her landing into a roll. She hit the ground but failed to find traction, slipping and sliding forward across what she realized was a metal floor.

She came to a stop when she crashed into a pile of wooden boxes, getting a good battering from the weight and hard corners, and then something else smacked into her from behind, something softer than a crate, and Sokka's cry of pain made her realize that he had taken the same tumble she had.

The clatter of their crash sounded impossibly loud to her, but then it continued even after everything had finished tumbling, and she realized that something else was causing the noise. She pushed a box off of her, crawled around Sokka's body, and looked around. Her eyes adjusted to the red glow of Fire Nation lamps, and she figured out which shadow was the entrance to the tunnel just in time to see the stone wall around it collapse with a sound that was both wet and crunchy.

Mai was assaulted by both a wave of water and a heavy sprinkling of rock dust, and after she wiped the resulting gunk out of her eyes, she found that the only thing left of their tunnel was the obvious outside of a cave-in.

Aang and Katara were either trapped, or already buried in their grave.

She and Sokka were trapped in a fortress sinkhole.

And she could hear voices, shouts of "What's going on over there?" that promised imminent investigation.

Mai decided that Sokka was right. Their plan had been far too vague.

TO BE CONTINUED

Chapter End Notes

There is a reference in this chapter to miles as a unit of measurement. I'm not crazy about it, but there were already instances in the original AtLA cartoon where English/Imperial measurements were used, so that's what we're stuck with.
Old Friends

Chapter Summary

Mai and Sokka are trapped in a giant hole in the ground with an entire Fire Nation army and a few old friends.

Old Friends

Zhao's career had gone down a hole.

Literally.

He looked out through the window of his temporary office at the interior of the world's largest sinkhole, and the Fire Nation outpost- Tiankeng Fortress- that had been constructed within it. The office itself was in one of the many towers extending up from the fortress proper at the base of the sinkhole, an architectural strategy necessitated by the enclosed location. Tonight, Zhao could see little activity aside from the regular patrols, but nevertheless the torches and lanterns throughout the space were all lit, filling the underground with crimson-tinted light. The complex network of ramps and scaffolding were shaded like bloody bones, making the sinkhole into their crude grave. It was far from the best view in the Colonial Continent, but Zhao was not here for sightseeing.

There was a knock on the office door, and Zhao looked up from his desk and barked, "Come." An aide appeared in the doorway with a stack of papers. "Those are the latest communications?"

The aide nodded, and deposited them on the desk. Zhao started going through them, but didn't see the routing codes he had been hoping for on any of them. "Nothing about our special guest, then. Dismissed."

The aide bowed and retreated, and Zhao got on with reading the latest news.

He was disappointed at not getting the orders he was hoping for, but he would not let that hold him back. Other than the one complication presented by that guest, his mission was proceeding well. He had been surprised, all those weeks ago, at the specific orders waiting for him when he landed on the Colonial Continent after his escape from the Fire Nation, but they had all been well within his abilities. He had learned about desert survival during an observational assignment to the Si Wong Desert years ago, and so he had been able to lead an assault force into the local ashland with little trouble. His soldiers had assaulted the abbey they found exactly where they supposed to with skill and precision, capturing the denizens without losses.

That most of the residents of the abbey were actually Airbenders- further proof of Zhao's theory that resistance to Fire Nation rule was more secret and dangerous than anyone suspected- was even better. Now, the prisoners were all secured here in Tiankeng Fortress, ready for the next phase of the plan as soon as Zhao received reliable intelligence on the Avatar's location. If the orders Zhao had requested didn’t arrive before then, he could always leave his complicated guest behind in the care of the Tiankeng’s regular commander and let Prince Iroh worry about the resulting political complications. After all, that was what royalty was supposed to do.

With that in mind, Zhao began the dreary task of reading the latest reports about the Avatar's possible
movements. It was now believed that one of the Avatar's suspected companions- a young Water Tribe man who had disappeared from the South Pole during the uprising there- was present at an incident between Fire Nation authorities and local citizens taking place during a major cultural festival. It was centered on some scandal involving a Colonial Bureaucrat which didn't interest Zhao at all, but if the Avatar really had been at the festival, then according to the maps, that would have placed him somewhere in the-

A gong rang out through the main body of the sinkhole, and kept ringing in a pattern that meant there were intruders somewhere on the fortress grounds. Could someone have really gotten through all the outer defenses and into the sinkhole itself? Had some Earthbenders rebels gotten delusions of grandeur?

Zhao got up and ran for the window, searching the red gloom for signs of activity. He spotted several squads of soldiers running along the ramp system, converging on a reinforced loading platform at about the sinkhole's halfway point. There seemed to be some activity on the platform, a fight between guards and someone in green, someone who seemed to move well and fought with a sword and-

-and-

-throwing blades-

-and-

-Zhao’s jaw dropped. Lady Caldera Yu Mai herself was in the fortress. The Avatar might be with her, somewhere.

Zhao's surprise turned into a grin. All his enemies were trapped here with him. He hurried out of his office and said to the first aide he could find, "Put the base on full lockdown. Seal off the entrance to the sinkhole completely. Nothing is to get out."

Then, without waiting for an acknowledgement, he ran off to take command of the defense. The glory of this capture would be his!

Sokka couldn't make himself move. He sat there, completely soaked from the Secret Waterbent Tunnel, unable to even shiver. His whole reality was transfixed by the sight of all the piled stone against the sinkhole wall, formerly the hole he had jumped through with Mai, and now was-

-was-

His little sister had been in there. Aang had been in there. They had still been in there when it came down.

Sokka knew about cave-ins. They were a danger in the South Pole mines, and they were always fatal for anyone caught in them. No one could survive having a mountain dropped on them, not without Earthbending, and Aang said he didn't know how to do it. There hadn't been time for him to start that crazy glowing thing and call on Kyoshi or whoever the kid relied on for all his rock-moving needs. So Aang had to be dead. Katara had to be dead.

They were dead.

Sokka had gotten them killed. He hadn’t seen the danger, and so they had died.

He could only stare at their final resting place while chaos happened around him. Mai had extricated
herself from the pile of boxes they had crashed into together and gone see about something she must
have found interesting. There was a sound like an alarm going on in the background, and noise that
could have been a fight nearby, but it was all muted in Sokka's ears. The world around him was
nothing compared to the sick feeling spreading throughout his whole chest at the thought that he had
freed his sister from a cage just to get her crushed to death in a grave of rock and water.

The red light of the sinkhole's lanterns even colored the stone like blood. That was appropriate,
Sokka supposed. Gross, but appropriate.

He couldn't stop himself from picturing his little sister's flattened body.

Then cold hands grabbed his shirt and yanked him up so that his vision was filled with Mai's face.
Like him, she was soaked, and drops of water streamed down from her hair across her blank
expression. They almost looked like tears, but Sokka knew Mai would never cry for anyone not from
the Fire Nation.

"Get up," she hissed. "More soldiers are coming."

Sokka hated Mai. She really wanted to do a whole fighting'n'running routine now, with Katara and
Aang dead? Why bother fighting at all? She probably just liked fighting. This was a big game for
her.

She shook him hard enough to rattle the thoughts in his head. "Get up. I'm not going to let you die
here."

"Why bother?" Sokka tried to push her away, but his arms were weak, and they collapsed against
her tensed muscles.

"Because I can't think of anything else to do right now!" She let go of him, and Sokka dropped back
to the metal floor. Mai wiped at her face and flicked the water onto the ground. "Aang has powers I
don't understand, so he might be alive and might have saved Katara. And I'm pretty sure that without
you, I'm going to die. But you don't care, do you?" Her eyes flicked to the side, and she turned
around and drew knives. Sokka noticed that her clothes were torn in places and even sported singing
at the end of one sleeve. How much fighting had she already done?

Sokka moved his gaze back to the collapsed cave. His little sister was dead in there.

But she had come here because she wanted to fix the world. Fix it for Gran-Gran, and the Tribe, and
even people she didn't know. Aang wanted to fix it for everyone, even the Fire Nation. They were
weird that way. The only reason Sokka had ever risked anything was to save the people he already
liked. He knew he couldn't save the world, and wasn't inclined to try, especially not now.

But he could help Mai, supposedly, according to her very biased opinion. Katara and Aang liked
Mai for some reason. They'd hate it if he let her die. Especially if she was right, and they might still
be alive. Could they be alive? Mai had seen all the same freaky Avatar stuff he had, and more
besides. She had been in that volcano with him when it exploded. Was she just being optimistic, or
did she really know something that Sokka didn't?

Wait, what was he saying? Mai being optimistic?

So it was just a matter of deciding if he trusted her judgement. Did he have enough respect for that
stuck-up, selfish, crazy, manipulator of a woman?

Sokka breathed in, and breathed out again. Yes, he did respect her. Just barely, but it was enough.
Fine, then. Time to go to work.
Sokka pushed all thoughts of the cave-in behind that Wall in his mind, where he kept all those things that were far too heavy to think about. If he let them out, they would weigh him down until he couldn’t move, couldn't find a reason to move, couldn't do anything. Behind the Wall were the deaths of his parents, the separation from his Tribe, and all the ways he had helped the Fire Nation back before he found his courage thanks to- thanks to Aang and Mai.

With the cave-in solidly behind the Wall, Sokka stood up, and turned to fight.

He barely had time to straighten before he saw the edge of the saber blade coming down towards his head.

He twisted out of the way with a battle cry of, "Aaaaaaghhhhwatchwhereyou'reswingingthat," and shoved at the soldier who was trying to kill him. The guy stumbled back and bounced against a rope railing, and a second shove sent the guy over the railing to fall screaming into a massive abyss.

With that sorted, Sokka decided that it was time to check out his surroundings.

Everything was covered in that ugly red light, but the situation was pretty clear. An alarm gong was indeed being hammered with frantic energy, and Sokka seemed to be stuck on a platform halfway down the sinkhole that was- judging from the number of soldiers approaching on ramps and bridges and ladders- a pretty popular place. Mai was moving back and forth between the connecting ramps, using her sword and knives and even some well-placed kicks to keep the soldiers from flooding in.

And she was losing.

Some attackers got past her while she fought their compatriots, and came in at her with chops of sabers and thrusts of spears and Sokka screamed as he ran at one and tackled the guy to the ground. The soldier had armor and a spear, but neither of those was exactly the best stuff to bring to a brawl, so Sokka twisted and shoved and wrestled and yanked and suddenly found himself stumbling backwards with a spear in his hand. His opponent got up and took a step forward and Sokka panicked and shoved the spear straight into the soldier's gut, but then he realized he was holding the weapon backwards and so had done nothing but poked his opponent hard with a stick. Turning it around again would take too much time, so he thrust it again, this time right into the soldier's nose with shattering strength and when the guy went down Sokka took a moment to check out the situation again.

It seemed that several other soldiers had started paying him a whole lot of attention. But that meant they weren't focusing on Mai, and she was one of those Weapon of the Fire Nation things. Sokka expected her to clear the area of enemies any second now, filling the air with flying knives and sprays of blood. He would enjoy seeing it.

Instead, Mai ran to him, grabbed his arm, and yanked him along to the far end of the platform.

Sokka blinked as he stumbled. "Why are we running?"

"We're retreating," Mai grunted as she came to the platform's edge. A slash of her sword cut through the rope railing, and then she pointed it into the air. "Not running."

Sokka followed the line of her sword to a large cargo-hook dangling out in the open air just beyond the platform.

Oh.

He glanced over and found her looking just as unenthusiastic as he felt about it. "Who goes first?"
In response, she spun around and threw herself into battle with the soldiers who had been about to kill them. Well, okay, that was a pretty clear answer. Sokka discarded his stolen spear over the edge of the platform and backed up as much as he could without intruding on Mai’s rear-guarding. Then he took a running leap off the platform, screaming, "Ohhhhhh sluuuuuuuuuuuuush I haaaaaatiiiiiiiiiiis," as he flew through the air.

He slammed into the crook of the hook and grabbed on with all the strength in his as the momentum of his jump transformed into a violent swinging. He barely had enough time to start to feel sick when the hook jolted again and the swinging got even more violent. He looked up to find Mai clutching the rope above him.

A fireball flew past Sokka's head. "So, uh, what next?"

Mai wrapped her arms around the rope and kicked out with both of her legs into the air in front of her. The move generated enough force to set the rope swinging even further, and when it reached the highest point, she twisted to the side and kicked again.

They swung back again, but now did so in an arc that took them away from the platform full of soldiers- an unpleasantly fast arc. Sokka swallowed heavily and held the hook like his life depended on it, which of course it did because he and Mai were terrible at the whole Planning thing.

Amidst the wind of their travel and the constant sounding of the alarm gongs, she called out, "Find us a spot to land."

"Me?"

"You have a better view."

"Ugh." Sokka made himself look down and focus through the twisting motion. He had to find something below them, but not so far below that they would die on impact. Nor could he find something past where their momentum could carry them. And, ideally, there wouldn't be a whole mess of soldiers waiting for them. That didn't leave a whole lot of options, but- "There! Drop in three- two- one-now!"

He and Mai let go of the rope at the same time, and Sokka felt like he was falling for an eternity before he crashed down on the open-air elevator platform he had picked out, although he knew it couldn't have even been a whole second. Mai landed on top of him, and the combined force of their impact set the elevator wobbling like stormy seas. They slid towards the closest edge together, but were stopped by the rope railing.

Good thing the Fire Nation valued safety so much.

Sokka pushed Mai off his back, dumping her on the platform beside him. "You're heavier than usual."

"I wear a sword now. And I’m soaking wet." She clutched the rope railing and swallowed heavily. That's right; she got seasick, didn't she? Well, that would be the perfect addition to this whole experience. "We need to find a way off this thing."

"Sure, fine." Sokka stood up and glanced around, trying to find some way to control the elevator but not seeing anything. He hoped they weren't stuck here. He looked up to see where they was hanging from, but he was immediately distracted by the spears and arrows and fireballs all dropping down towards them.

He eyeballed a few kinematic calculations related to projectile motion of the incoming objects and
realized that the elevator platform was at the center of far too many vectors, and there was nothing that could be done about it. So he took the only option open to him: he jumped on top of Mai, threw his arms around her so that they wouldn't get separated, and pressed them both down to the floor into the smallest shape they could manage.

With his vision filled by Mai's hair, Sokka could only listen as those spears and arrows and fireballs struck the elevator platform around them. He felt the warmth of flames passing over and around him even through his soaked shirt, and while some of it abated quickly, there was a lingering heat that had to be bad news.

Sokka looked up and found that spears and arrows lodged into the wooden platform were burning and threatening to spread their flame, but more importantly, the large ropes keeping the whole elevator suspended were also on fire. Slush. He had nothing to put the fires out with, nothing to replace the ropes with, no way to fly, no way to magically summon Appa from outside the sinkhole, and was fresh out of favors owed to him by gravity-controlling Spirits.

He was still trying to figure out what to do when the ropes broke and the whole elevator dropped out beneath him. He didn't even have time to start a good scream.

He could only hold onto Mai in a death grip- and she was returning the favor- as they fell. The drop lasted long enough to almost feel like flying, but then he crashed into something hard enough to make his body blaze with pain, but somehow he was still falling and there was another crash and Mai cried out as she took the brunt of that one and more falling then Sokka hit something hard and color exploded in front of his closed eyes and breathing was suddenly impossible and he was rolling across something hard too fast to stop and then more open air and one last hard impact that brought him to a halt so jarring that the world just plain went away for a moment.

Reality came back and he gasped for air, but his chest was burning and half of what he was trying to breathe turned out to be Mai's hair. Was she even alive?

There was a loud, ominous creaking of wood.

Then whatever they were laying on collapsed for another short fall and this time when the world went away, it stayed gone for a good long time.

Zhao looked down through the sinkhole and tried to calculate the odds that Mai and her Water Tribe companion were dead. He thought it likely, but they hadn't suffered a straight drop, so there was a chance of life. And even with her body bruised and broken, Mai would probably not just lie down and wait for him to come for her.

Well, that was fine. She might be a Weapon of the Fire Nation, but she was only mortal. She was injured to some degree, trapped in the sinkhole, and all alone with just one ally who might even be dead. Zhao had an army, and the battleground was under his complete control.

He looked up at the soldiers standing around him on the large ramp. "Well? Get down there and find them. I'll have two corpses or two more prisoners by dawn, and I don't particularly care which."

The troops moved out, but Zhao took a moment to linger. He was in command, after all, and had to take in all the relevant considerations. Mai was here with her pet Tribal, but so far there was no sign of the Avatar. There were signs of a cave-in near the platform where she had first appeared, but what did that signify? Surely the Avatar, the one who had commanded the Everstorm and powered a whole volcano, wouldn't allow a tunnel to collapse on him. And Mai was wearing green, now, matching the reports from the Rough Rhinos. Perhaps he and Mai had connected with more
conventional Earthbender rebels? Signs of enemy activity occasionally popped up in this area, but nothing that local command saw as organized resistance.

And then there was the matter of the Airbender prisoners.

How had Iroh known that they were living in the middle of an ashland? Word must have come from an informant of some kind. Zhao had been given strict orders to take all the Airbenders alive, when they obviously posed a threat to the Fire Nation's domination. And Iroh had specified that the Airbenders should be taken to this very fortress; Tiankeng was an ideal place to hold people who could fly, but perhaps Iroh had more than one consideration in mind.

And then there was the special guest that had prompted Zhao to request further orders with no response. Was it just an ordinary delay or deliberate silence?

Zhao remembered the theory he had presented to High Command back in the Fire Nation- which might even be true- that Prince Ozai had been in cahoots with an organized rebel organization allied with the Avatar. Zhao had implied that it was Ozai's way of trying to seize the throne.

But what if he had implicated the wrong Prince?

Iroh had always been the more superstitious of the two. Iroh was the Crown Prince and had no need of conspiracies to make himself Fire Lord, but if there were other things the Avatar might offer Iroh-

Well, Iroh was Zhao's patron now, and of course loyal service was the best way to get ahead at the moment.

But Zhao would keep all the possibilities in mind.

He looked to his subordinates standing beside him, and motioned to the platform where Mai and her companion had first appeared. "Post some guards over there, and wake up one of the geology specialists on staff here. I want to know what's under all that rubble, and how infiltrators got into the sinkhole. In the meantime, I will lead the search for these intruders, and see what they have to say for themselves before they die."

"Uargh," Mai groaned as she opened her eyes. Wherever she and Sokka had landed, it was dark and there were walls around them, and they seemed to be alone. And they were alive. So far, so good.

Then a blade of doubt stabbed into her heart. Was Sokka alive? That had been a pretty bad series of falls, and he had taken at least as much of a battering as she had. They were still twisted up together, so she untangled her limbs with the same care she used when sharpening her most dangerous blades, and slid away from his body one bit at a time.

When she was free, she sat up and took a quick look around: very dark, small room, furniture of some kind, and lots of wood debris. She glanced up and saw that the wooden ceiling- a nice, reinforced ceiling- had a jagged hole in it, and the tenderness of her body was the only clue Mai needed to identify the hole as their own improvised entrance.

She leaned over Sokka and pressed one hand to the pulse in his neck while she held the other under his nose. The good news was that he was alive and breathing. The bad news was that he wasn't reacting to her touch. Could he have hit his head at some point? She couldn't see any obvious injuries in the dark, and the last thing she wanted was to start prodding without any idea what she was doing.

If Katara was still alive, she would hate Mai for getting Sokka killed.
"Hey, bonehead. We need to get out of here." Mai waited, but there was no response. "There could be soldiers on their way right now. We have to get back on the move." Still nothing. "If this all goes wrong, it's going to be your fault."

Was that a twitch on his face?

"Sokka!"

His eyes flew open, and then immediately shut again as he winced. "Ooh, I am- in so much pain right now. Hurts to- hurts to breathe."

Mai heaved a sigh and sat back. "I hate you so much. You had me worried."

"Well," Sokka groaned, "you worry me (ow) all the time, so fair's fair." He started to move, but then his eyes went wide again and he twisted like had fallen into a campfire. "AaaAAAAaaahhAAAAaaaahhhhhH!" He finally stopped in a prone position, panting. "Ow, I think that's a rib." He poked at his left side, and immediately repeated, "AaaAAAAaaahhh! Yeah, that's a rib. Slush, that's going to (ow) be a problem. I can (hn) barely move."

Mai resisted her own impulse to curse. "Well, we have to move. So suck it up and deal with the pain."

"Did I (nhn) mention that it- it hurts to breath?"

Mai sighed. She patted herself for a knife- it seemed that she had lost some of her arsenal during the falls- and when she found one, she started slicing away at her robe. It hung long over her pants, so there was plenty of extra fabric to spare, and her clothes had dried enough that it was an easy cut. First she sliced just below her waist to turn the robe into a long-sleeved shirt, and then took all the extra fabric and cut it into long strips. "Sit up. I don't care how much it hurts."

Sokka groaned but did as she said, and Mai proceeded to tie the strips over his chest as supportive bandages. She tried to be as gentle as possible, and he only whined like a baby a little before she was done.

She sat back and looked at him. "Well?"

Sokka took a moment to steady his breathing again, and then eased himself up until he was standing with the care of an old man. "That helps. Thanks. I'm still not going to be any good in a fight, but I can move."

"Any really sharp pain?"

"No, I think it's just a plain fracture. I can breathe now."

Well, that was some relief. Sokka had been a help up there in the first fight, but even Mai couldn't fight a whole army on hostile landscape. If it came down to another battle, it didn't really matter whether Sokka could join in. On the other hand, he probably wasn't in any condition for running, either, and that was something he was much more likely to need to do in the near future.

It was starting to look like it didn't matter whether Aang and Katara had survived the cave-in. Mai and Sokka weren't going to live to see them again either way.

But the prospect of dying did keep things interesting, didn't it? She got to her feet and took a better look around their sanctuary. "We'll have to stay out of sight, and see if we can find where the
Airbenders might be. If we can get them free before we're noticed, we'll have a- is it just me, or is this room pretty nice?"

Some of the sinkhole's lantern light was shining in through the hole in the ceiling, and now that Mai was really looking, she realized that she was in what seemed like someone's apartment. There was a lounging chair, a small desk, a table with some books on it, a little shrine, and even a decorative wall scroll.

Mai spotted two doors, one of which was much thicker than the other. She checked that one out first, and found it to be a metal thing with a good lock that wouldn’t open from this side. The walls, too, were metal, and there was no chance the door was coming off without specialized tools. Mai had the sinking feeling that she and Sokka had fallen into some kind of weird posh prison, but there was one more door to check.

And maybe someone living in this jail-apartment.

Drawing her sword, Mai waved Sokka to stay where he was as she approached the small door. This one was wood, and slid open without resistance.

The next room was a bedroom, and the bed had obviously been slept in very recently.

Mai raised her sword into a defensive position and immediately sidestepped out of the doorway that- combined with the light coming through it- were making her a target. She had barely moved before she heard the sound of footsteps- the light, graceful movements of a true warrior- and a thin silhouette rushed in at her. Mai twisted out of the way of a series of hand-strikes and then sprang forward with a stab of her sword, but her attacker was already somewhere else. Mai instinctively backpedaled again and heard the distinct sound of fists rushing through the empty air in front of her, and then she ducked and heard the enemy blows missing her again so she kicked out with a sweeping leg but somehow her attacker was already jumping and Mai stabbed up with her sword and there was a little tug of resistance and a few hairs fell onto her face and she rolled forward to avoid what she knew would be the next attack and smiled because this was just like the old days and-

-and-

-old days?

Mai threw herself back towards the doorway in a movement that was half a run and half a jump and grabbed the door to push herself into an even faster stumble that left her crashing to the floor of the room where Sokka was still waiting.

He said, "What is it?"

Mai's fall hurt far more than it should have, which she guessed meant she was covered in bruises from the earlier crash down the sinkhole, but she had accomplished her mission- she was back where the red light of Tiankeng's lamps filtered in through the hole in the ceiling, and Mai could see again.

She could see her attacker follow her into the room.

She could see that her attacker was a cute young lady, loose brown hair flying through the air and white shift straining against her athletic body as she leaped through the doorway.

Mai was on her feet in an instant despite her pain, and her sword had tumbled from hands that no longer had the strength to hold any kind of weapon.
Somehow, she was seeing a ghost.

The familiar figure landed, fists (arrow fists, with one finger on each raised a bit so that the knuckle could make a precision strike) held high an all-too-familiar extended guard. Her eyes locked on Mai, and then the aggressive expression melted from her soft features as she blinked her big, vulnerable eyes.

"Mai?"

Mai had to concentrate to make herself breathe. "Ty Lee?"

They stared at each other across the apartment.

It couldn't be. Ty Lee was dead. Mai knew this. Ty Lee's circus had been caught in the conflagration started when some over-excited soldiers had turned the power of Sozin's Comet on some stupid fortress no one cared about. The soldiers had investigated it, had found the remains of humans and rare animals, and enough identifiable equipment to confirm which circus it had been. No one could have survived.

And yet here Ty Lee was, at the bottom of Tiankeng Fortress and trying to punch Mai's lights out.

Mai stood there, blinking and confused.

Then she laughed, threw herself forward, and met Ty Lee's hug with a crushing one of her own as she cried, "You're alive!"

"Yes!"

"That's great!"

"I know!"

"I thought you had burned to death!"

"Sorry?"

"You should be!" Mai couldn't make herself let go of her friend. It was Ty Lee's voice, Ty Lee's stupid way of talking, Ty Lee's smell, Ty Lee's smooth skin, Ty Lee's strong muscles, Ty Lee's weird way of wrapping her arms around Mai's neck and pressing their faces together, even Ty Lee's odd habit of humming during any hug that lasted for more than three seconds.

Mai pulled back out of the embrace, but only to gain enough distance to look at her friend again. She was afraid that if she let go, Ty Lee would somehow disappear again, as irrational as that sounded. Ty Lee wasn't a ghost or a hallucination; she was a real girl, the one Mai had known for a decade, that collection of habits and factoids and quirks so familiar that Mai could dream of her with more accuracy than anyone else.

Mai blinked against the itchy feeling in her eyes. "How are you alive? They told us you burned to death."

"I got lucky, and I had some help. It's a long story. But how did you find me? I didn't think anyone knew they were keeping me here."

Mai opened her mouth to answer, but Sokka cut in with, "Sorry to say, but we're not here to rescue you. We kind of fell in here by accident. I take it you're an old friend of our Fire Nation reject here?"
Ty Lee startled and Mai sighed. Sokka had sat himself down on the lounging chair, and was looking at them with what seemed to Mai like a mix of amusement and annoyance. She was going to tell him to go find someplace uncomfortable to stick his head, but Ty Lee got up and reached for a lamp on the wall. A flick of a switch brought the same red glow that had lit the outside, and Ty Lee bounced over to bow formally at the waist to Sokka. "Nice to meet you. You're with Mai?"

Sokka blinked, and Mai bet he found the sight of Ty Lee bowing in her shift to be more than a bit overwhelming. "I- uh- um, nice to meet you, too? And yeah, I- well, I guess I'm with Mai, as much as we both hate it."

"Oh, you two aren't friends?" Ty Lee rose again, and spun to face Mai again. "Actually, you look pretty awful right now. Your aura was completely black before you realized who I was. And your clothes and hair! I didn't think anything would be able to get you out in public looking like that!"

"Gee, thanks." But Mai had to suppress a smile. Hearing Ty Lee mention auras again was just the kind of stupidity she had been missing. "I've had a pretty bad year. But the meathead is right, we didn't know you were here. Finding you is just some kind of crazy coincidence." She braced herself for Ty Lee's disappointment.

Instead, Ty Lee ran forward and grabbed Mai in another hug. "The universe brought you here to save me and you didn't even realize it! That's the most romantic thing that ever happened to me!"

Mai laughed.

She was even more amused when Sokka stammered, "R- romantic? You two-"

In an instant, Ty Lee had cartwheeled over and landed sitting beside Sokka on the chair. She leaned against him and said, "Oh, things can be romantic without being romantic. Don't be jealous of Mai, cutie. I'm still unattached. So, what's your name?"

Sokka's jaw had dropped, and he seemed to be having trouble coming up with a reaction.

Ash, Mai had missed this. Watching Ty Lee wrap a guy around her finger was one of the Fire Nation's most entertaining spectator sports. Still, they were running out of time before someone found them. "That's Sokka, a rebel from the Southern Water Tribe. We've both been working for the Avatar, who's back. We've both been working for the Avatar, who's back. I'm a traitor to the Fire Nation and Azula will kill me if she ever finds me. We live on the back of a giant sky bison who flies us around the world having heroic adventures."

Ty Lee looked at Mai. She turned to look at Sokka. Then she looked back at Mai. "I can't tell if you're joking."

"Yeah, it's hilarious. We were here with the Avatar to try to free some Airbenders that are supposedly being held prisoner, but we had some trouble with our infiltration, a cave-in separated us from the Avatar and our resident Waterbender, and Sokka and I wound up trapped in here. We just kind of landed in your apartment-" here, Mai pointed up at the hole in the ceiling- "while trying to survive an attack by every soldier in the entire sinkhole. And now we need to find a way to get out of here alive, preferably with those Airbenders. Any questions?"

Ty Lee raised a hand. "If I help you, can I meet the sky bison?"

"Yes."

Ty Lee was on her feet in an instant. "Great! Let me just throw on some clothes and we'll do a daring escape." She ran back into the bedroom and slid the door closed. Over the sound of clothes being thrown around, she called through the door, "I know those Airbenders you're looking for. They're
the ones who saved me from the fires. They live in an abbey that's now in the middle of a big ash desert, right?"

Mai and Sokka exchanged glances before she answered, "Yes. You saw what happened to them?"

"Sure! They used to be an order of nuns, and that abbey was right near the fires. When my circus and a whole bunch of other travelers got caught, they came in to get some of us out. They were amazing! But it was even more amazing after that, when- when they discovered that they had become Airbenders! They were really surprised. They took care of the survivors, and we all worked together, but then one day the Fire Army showed up and arrested us all. I did my Azula impression and was all, 'I am Lady Caldera Yu Ty Lee, and what is the meaning, of this?' But that Commander Zhao guy didn't care, and just told the soldiers to make me comfortable while he-"

"Wait, Zhao?!" Mai's side- the stretch of skin marred by a burn scar- tightened, and her hands went to it reflexively. "Zhao's in command here?"

The door slid open, revealing Ty Lee in what looked like a circus costume. It was bright pink and left most of her midriff bare, while a redundant dragon-dancer's skirt hung over the pants. Both the sleeves and legs were comically wide, but they were cut short to just past the elbows and knees. Ty Lee had also done her hair up in a braided ponytail.

As if she had no idea how ridiculous she looked, Ty Lee nodded solemnly in the doorway. "Zhao said he'd keep me here until he got word about what to do with me. I've been afraid that he was sending a wire to Azula, but it's been a while, and she'd never take so long to come and punish me."

Mai listened with only half an ear, fighting against the memories of that painful night on Kyoshi Island, when Aang and Sokka had taken care of her while they raced to find her a healer on the Earth Kingdom mainland, all because of a wound she received betraying them.

So it was left to Sokka to ask, "Why would Princess Azula punish you?"

Mai shuddered, and made herself pay attention to the here and now. "Azula doesn't need an excuse for anything. We should definitely get moving. Is there a way out of here?"

Ty Lee looked up at the ceiling. "Well, it looks like you made a pretty big hole?"

Sokka cleared his throat. "Uh, I don't suppose you have way to unlock the big door instead? That hole is pretty high up, and I think I broke a rib when I-"

"Oh no!" Ty Lee cartwheeled back over to him, and gently rubbed the injured area that Sokka had been pointing at. "You hurt yourself coming to save me! Here, let me help."

Mai couldn't be sure in this light, but she thought Sokka was blushing as he stammered, "Um, Mai- she, um- she wrapped it up pretty good, so- well, unless you're a- ooh, that tickles- a Waterbender, then, uh- uh- what are you doing?"

Mai walked over to get a better look. Ty Lee had leaned over so that her face was right next to Sokka's injured side, and she was staring with a serious expression. She held a hand out and said, "I need three needles."

Mai retrieved the weapons from her belt, but hesitated before handing them over. "You're not going to bleed him out, are you?"

"No, the nuns taught me a lot about healing. I'm going to fix his Qi flow with acupuncture."
The only reason Mai didn't dismiss the notion outright was because Ty Lee was probably the most knowledgeable person around when it came to Qi paths and meridians. She knew exactly where to poke to shut down a person's limbs, or even Bending, in the midst of high-speed combat.

Mai handed over the needles, and Ty Lee immediately plunged them in quick succession through Sokka's bandages and clothes deep enough to pierce his body.

Sokka yelped and went stiff, of course, but after a moment he let out a heavy breath and relaxed again. "Hey, that feels a lot better."

Ty Lee nodded. "That should straighten out your energy flow, so you'll be in less pain. Ooh, and it will make you heal faster with regular treatments! But just because it hurts less doesn't mean that it's okay to stress it. It's still broken." She stood up again and put her face right up in Sokka's. "So don't go straining yourself. Let the girls keep you safe, okay?"

Sokka gave a single short nod.

Mai covered her smirk with a hand. Sokka's attitude problems were nothing compared to the power of a flirty girl, it seemed.

It was amazing having Ty Lee back. Maybe, with her help, they could do this. Maybe Aang and Katara were alive after all. Maybe they could save these Airbenders, and get Aang the knowledge he needed to fix the world.

No problem.

That thought caused Mai to frown. Optimism was a good way to get killed.

Sokka hadn't been able to climb up to the hole in the ceiling, even with the bedding from Ty Lee's prison-bedroom all tied together in the form of a ladder. Mai's perky friend had scrambled up first with a series of leaps and springs, carrying the sheet-ladder, and then she lowered it down. Since climbing put too much strain on Sokka's broken rib, he was forced to cling to Mai's back while she climbed up for both of them, which of course wasn't completely humiliating at all.

Once they were once again outside the fortress, Sokka was able to get a good look at their position for the first time. They were on top of a tower, rising up from a complex at the bottom of the sinkhole that was half oppressive fortress and half evil castle. Leave it to the Fire Nation to go for that kind of look.

Sokka glanced over at Ty Lee. She and Mai were conferring, and he distinctly heard the latter mention, "Airbenders." So they were figuring out their next destination, all without Sokka.

He couldn't deny that it made sense. They both knew Fire Nation stuff better than him, and Ty Lee had even gotten a look at this exact fortress when she had been brought in.

Ty Lee was everything they needed right now. She could fight on Mai's level, helped with his rib, was going to lead them to the Airbenders, and then could help them escape. She was friendly, and more than a little beautiful.

But she was Fire Nation.

Sokka found himself not wanting to trust her.

Mai trusted her unconditionally.
But did Sokka trust Mai that much?

The girls apparently finished their planning, and Mai started to climb down the tower. Ty Lee came over with the sheet-ladder again and smiled. "We're going to make you a harness and lower you down. Hold still!"

"So, uh, Ty Lee," Sokka said as she worked. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, anything you want. But I can't promise I'll tell you anything."

Sokka felt his face heat up. How did she do that with such innocuous words? "Well, uh, Ma- that is to say, the source that sent us here said- well, they mentioned a traitor who had- uh, we don't really know what the traitor did, but obviously traitors are never a good thing to have around, right?"

"That's a really good question."

Sokka pretended she was agreeing and went on, "So, do you know anything about this traitor? Name, accomplishments, address- that kind of thing?"

Ty Lee stood up and cocked her head to the side. "I don't know anything about any kind of traitors. It's probably better to not think about that kind of thing, right?"

"Yeah." Sokka tugged his makeshift harness. "Sure."

When they all finally got down to another roof, Ty Lee pointed to a low installation at the center of the fortress. "That's where the Airbenders should be."

Sokka looked around at the rest of the base, and noticed all the soldiers moving in groups through the lanes on heightened patrol. He looked up and saw plenty more searches going on all over the walkways running up and down the sinkhole's walls. Only the scale and complexity of the fortress had probably saved Sokka and the girls from being spotted. Someone could look out from above in this red light and miss a few small figures scurrying across the tops of the buildings.

Heh, so much for Fire Nation ingenuity.

"Okay." Sokka stepped over to the edge of the roof. "We'll need to play this smart. Since I'm injured, I'll stay here. You girls will make your way to the prison across the rooftops, but only when I give an all-clear signal. As long as I'm stuck here, I'll be your spotter and make sure no one is looking while you move. Once you're at the prison, I've noticed that all these buildings use the same ventilation technology as the base at the South Pole, so Ty Lee should be able to make her way through- if you're even half as flexible as you seem- and get to the Airbenders. You free them, and Mai can hit the guards at the front door, so you'll both will work your way to each other, and then once the way is clear come back and get me and we'll see about how we're going to get out of this stupid sinkhole. Sound like a plan?"

Before either girl could respond, something hot and flamey exploded behind Sokka.

He spun around to find Fire Nation soldiers scrambling up ladders and dropping down from elevators to his rooftop. Standing tall on a ramp just above the whole scene was none other than Commander Zhao himself in all his sideburny glory.

"Well, slush," Sokka said.

TO BE CONTINUED
New Friends

Chapter Summary

Mai and Sokka are still trapped in a hole, but things get worse even while they make some new friends.

New Friends

Aang stood in a fortress of ice that might soon become his tomb.

He raised his crystal lantern a little higher, trying to hold it so that the ice pillars around him caught and reflected more of the light. It was a marginal improvement, but that only meant that he could see Katara's worried expression more clearly as she used her Waterbending to reinforce the existing ice from the water that still filled the cave up to his knees.

As soon as she finished, Katara sagged. "That should do it for now."

Aang knew the feeling. The lantern was heavy in his hand as he said, "We can't keep this up forever. We're either going to run out of air or the cave-in will shift enough that the ice won't be able to hold it up anymore."

A drop of melting ice plopped down on Katara's head- she had lost her hat in the cave-in- as she nodded.

Aang let his gaze fall to the dark waters around him. The worst part wasn't even the danger that he and Katara were in- it was not knowing what had happened to Mai and Sokka. They had jumped through the hole Aang had cut into the tunnel wall, right into the red light of Tiankeng Fortress, but he hadn't even been able to see their feet touch the ground before the cave-in started. Katara's reflexes had been quick, and she had grabbed Aang's waist with one hand as she shoved the hand down at the water running through the tunnel, resulting in something like a small explosion that had sent them both flying backwards. The collapsing ceiling had followed them, though, and overtook them even before Aang's Airbending-assisted running could them back to the surface. Only quick-thinking and panicked Icebending had saved their lives.

Temporarily.

But at least their final moments would be peaceful. Who knew what was happening to Sokka and Mai. They had a whole Fire Nation fortress to fight, and they had been on the verge of turning on each other for a while now. Aang had a bad feeling about their chances.

Katara came over and put her hands on his shoulders. "You're worried about them?"

He nodded.

Katara pulled him into a hug, an embrace that felt all the warmer for the ice-water surrounding them. "I believe in them. Sokka worked for ten years and crossed the whole world to help me. He'll find a way. Even if- even if it's too late for us, he'll get himself- and Mai- out of trouble. He’s a pretty reliable guy, in certain ways."
Aang wondered if he could just let himself believe that. It didn't really matter what he or Katara thought if they couldn't get out, but sharing her optimism would be a comfort before the end, at least. He opened his mouth to say something in reply—what, exactly, he didn't know—but then the little fortress-tomb of ice shook, and he looked up to see what he expected to be a mountain of rock coming down on him with finality but—

—but instead a shaft of light fell down to illuminate him. There was a hole in the rock above him, and although it seemed to be a deep hole, a spot of color at the end glowed like the dawn sky.

The silhouette of a man shifted into view to eclipse that dawn glow. "Ah, the Avatar child! What a fortunate surprise," he said in a deep, cultured voice. Aang noticed a long braid hanging over the speaker's shoulder. "It looks like you've started my work for me. Might my men and I be of some assistance?"

Sokka raised his hands high above his head, making his broken rib twitch, but he clenched his jaw and focused through the pain. He couldn't be distracted now, with a whole platoon of Fire-jerks surrounding him. Most of them were above him, on the platforms and elevators that clung to the massive sinkhole's sides, but a growing number were approaching right in front of him. Sokka, Mai, and Ty Lee had been standing on the edge of the rooftop of one of the many sprawling buildings that made up the bottom level of Tiankeng Fortress, and what had once been a cozy—if-slightly-suspicious solitude had become the worst party ever as more and more troops climbed up onto the roof under Commander Zhao's direction.

But the Fire-jerks weren't attacking. Sokka looked around, and noted that despite all the arrows, spears, and cocked Firebender-fists at ready, the soldiers were being very disciplined and only ready to kill him ten times over. They wanted at least part of Sokka's little group alive.

Well, okay then. He could work with that.

Standing very still with his arms above his head, Sokka whispered, "Can Ty Lee fight well?"

Mai's voice came back equally soft: "Better than me. She's probably the second best Weapon of the Fire Nation alive."

"Aw," Ty Lee chirped. "Thanks!"

Oh, another one of those Weapon things, huh? Well, in that case, Sokka's plan might actually have a remote chance of almost kind of working. "Who's the first?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mai shiver as both she and Ty Lee simultaneously said, "Piandao."

"Is he here?"

"No." Mai sidled a little closer to him, while keeping her own dangerous hands up. "What are you planning?"

Sokka looked back at the soldiers. Zhao motioned, and several Firebenders began approaching with slow steps. Their fists were raised so that they could attack with only half a moment's notice, three-quarters of a moment on the upside. "Okay, we have one last chance. If you can sabotage the source of the natural gas powering all the sinkhole's lanterns, the lights go out and there's still a chance of getting to the Airbenders even though everyone knows we're here. You probably won't make it without Ty Lee, but watch out because she's keeping a secret from you and I hope it's not the kind that leads to lies and betrayals." He heard Ty Lee give a squeak at that, but before she could start an
argument, he pressed on, "Tell Katara I'm proud of her and please find a way to justify what I'm about to do."

Mai got as far as saying, "What are you-" when Sokka turned around and shoved both her and Ty Lee so that they stumbled and fell right off the roof.

Zhao shouted something and suddenly the air was filled with deadly things but Sokka dropped to his knees and scrunched himself as small as he could get with a broken rib and his hands held up in what he hoped was an acceptable sign of surrender.

Then something slammed into his back and crushed him down to the ground, making Sokka's broken rib scream and-

No wait, that was him screaming.

That idiot!

That idiot!

Mai wanted to call Sokka a lot worse things in her thoughts, but she was too distracted by the running fight with an entire army to get creative with her insults. From the moment he had shoved her off the roof, she had been forced to work to survive, kicking out against the fortress building's edifice to transform her straight drop into something like a rolling landing that rattled her bones and sent waves of pain through her already sore body. Then, from the moment she and Ty Lee had touched the ground, they were at the center of a whole fortress's accumulated bad intentions. Spears and arrows and fireballs streaked down towards them while soldiers with swords and spears and staffs and chains and all kind of weapons rushed in at them.

If she had been with anyone else, Mai wouldn't have survived it.

But Ty Lee was back from the dead (Sokka said she might be a traitor) and if a Weapon of the Fire Nation was a person capable of fighting a small army, then she and Ty Lee (Sokka said she might be a traitor) were ash-streaked, goose-ducking Tanks of the Fire Nation when working together. After all, that's what Azula had wanted them to be, and Azula always got what she wanted.

They didn't even need to make plans. Mai came up shooting bolts from her wrist-launchers at the soldiers above who still had a viable vantage point. Those soldiers needed a few seconds to adjust their aim now that she and Ty Lee (Sokka said she might be a traitor) weren't on the roof anymore, but in those few seconds her bolts snapped bowstrings and sunk into exposed fists and poked into all those little places that armor couldn't cover if its wearers wanted to move.

Then she and Ty Lee (Sokka said she might be a traitor) started running.

They met a wave of soldiers, of course, but Ty Lee (Sokka said she might be a traitor) didn't even have to slow down as she engaged the whole lot with her acrobatic dodges and jumps. Mai ignored the brawl because it was no danger to her; she trusted Ty Lee (Sokka said she might be a traitor) to take down every soldier before a single one could so much as even think about making trouble. Instead, she kept her sharp eyes looking for distant threats, sending more bolts at distant attackers and noting the enemy reinforcements coming up the lane. Her body was sore and weary, but that was just background noise as she pushed herself into that perfect state where she was at the center of a world of targets and there was nothing was beyond her reach.

Meanwhile, she knew that Ty Lee was twisting and tumbling and leaping and spinning around her attackers, each movement coming with three or four fist-strikes that landed in those same impossible-
to-armor spaces that Mai liked to target. Ty Lee's punches were far stronger than a girl her size and slimness should have been capable of, but the power behind them wasn't what made them dangerous. Ty Lee didn't strike at muscle and bone, like Mai had to. She struck at the body's invisible power points, the spots where flows of Qi converged and pumped. When Ty Lee struck those points the Qi was disrupted, so limbs fell dead and Bending snuffed out and pain exploded into horrifying numbness.

This all happened so fast that Mai didn't even need to slow her run, which was good because she wasn't sure she would be able to get back up to this speed. The soldiers fell and she called out, "Fifteen degrees, twenty-five degrees, and one-hundred-sixty degrees," and continued on her shooting.

And so Ty Lee adjusted her run to match Mai's directions and found new battles to wage without having to stop and look for them.

Azula had come up with that system. After all, as long as Mai needed to be looking at things in the distance and calculating vectors, why not figure out where Ty Lee needed to take her magic fists next? It was a little more efficient, and Azula had always said that entire battles could be lost based on a few seconds worth of bad timing.

With this pattern of attack, they made rapid progress through the bottom level of the fortress, and Mai was able to keep too busy to wonder if Sokka was right and the girl her life depended on right now was planning to betray her.

An eternity and an army later, they reached the furnace station where coal would be burned in such a way as to release the flammable gas within, providing fuel for all of the fortress’s lanterns and machinery. Mai and Ty Lee plunged into the heat so that they could find a way to plunge the fortress into darkness.

She hoped Sokka survived to see it.

He said Ty Lee might be a traitor.

Mai's friend might be keeping harmful secrets from her.

Is this how Sokka felt at Crescent Island?

The Tribal boy was obviously in pain, but he managed to grin as he was dragged onto the platform and said, "Commander Zhao! I just have to say that- going all the way back to the South Pole, really- I have always admired you as a leader and administrator. I even tried to grow sideburns like yours, but I just couldn't make them work as magnificently as you do!"

Zhao nodded to the guard holding onto the boy, and enjoyed it when she shoved an elbow into the Tribal’s side.

When the boy stopped groaning, he brought the smile back. "S- so, my name is Sokka. What can I- hng- do for you?"

Zhao glanced out over the sprawl of the fortress. He couldn't see Mai or Ty Lee anymore (and was already composing a report that would blame Iroh’s lack of orders for the latter’s escape), but it seemed that the troops were converging on the mechanical sector. He frowned at the thought of the kind of damage a pair of Weapons could do there, but at least they were still stuck on the bottom level of the sinkhole. Eventually they would be overwhelmed.
Zhao turned his attention back to the prisoner he actually had. The fortress’s regular commanders could direct the troops just as well as he could, and he had real gains he could make here. "I'm glad we could finally speak, Tribal Sokka. We have much to discuss."

He expected the boy to play dumb or spit back some defiance, or maybe even just shut up. He didn't expect Sokka to nod and say, "I have a feeling we have a lot of misconceptions to clear up. What do you want to know?"

Very well, Zhao would play the game for now. "Who are you working for?"

"The Avatar, unfortunately. He's the one who sets the agenda."

"And who is the Avatar working for?"

Sokka's eyes narrowed. "Avatar Roku, I think? I'm not really sure how that works, though. Is he a ghost with his own opinions, or some kind of facet of Aang’s mind that acts as a delivery method for subconsciously stored knowledge? Either way, it's spooky Avatar stuff."

Zhao decided that the answer was too stupid to be fabricated. "And what about Lady Caldera Yu Mai? Where do her orders come from?"

"Oh, that's a whole thing." Sokka looked around, then leaned forward and spoke in a quiet voice, "See, up until Crescent Island, she was working for you guys."

Zhao suppressed a grin. He knew it! "And what happened on Crescent Island?"

"Well, she met up with the guy she was working for, Prince- um, Prince Z- er, something with a Z. He has one eye."

This time, Zhao did grin. "Prince Zuko?"

"Yeah, that's the name! You're not a fan of him either, huh? Well, she found out that this Zuko guy is apparently an even bigger jerk than she is, so she kicked his butt and saved Aang. More or less. Now she says she's working for us, and I haven't seen evidence of that not being the case."

"And what was she supposed to do for Prince Zuko?"

"Help him capture Aang. I think he's on a quest or something, and it would be a big glorious deal if he succeeded? So she joined up with us, helped us get away from all the other Fire-heads, and then told Zuko we were headed for Crescent Island so that he could ambush us himself."

Zhao nodded. It all fit, all matched his theories. And if Mai had truly betrayed Zuko- and Ozai’s faction with it- they had lost their link to the rest of the conspiracy. "And what of the rebellions?"

Sokka blinked. "Um, which ones?"

"Your people rose up using the power of the Everstorm. Now you're traveling the Earth Kingdom, striking at Fire Nation forces."

"Oh! Okay, yeah, I see what you're getting at. So, see, that's where we get back into the Avatar junk. Roku told us that the war broke the world, so we're trying to fix it. That's why we're getting ghosts and monsters and ashlands and stuff. And new Airbenders! The only reason we're fighting the Fire Nation is because you guys keep coming after us, and Aang likes to help anyone he feels sorry for. I
know you have a beef with Avatars since they don't like it when you steal the whole world from the people who are supposed to share it, but it would actually be better for you if you let us take care of these problems. You can't enjoy dealing with monsters any more than we do."

Zhao sighed. And so the flow of information ended. "Yes, I'm sure you'd like me to think that. But don't worry, we'll have the opportunity to discuss your true purposes now that you're in my power." He nodded, and the soldier started to drag Sokka away.

That's when the lights started going out.

It was like the stars were leaving the night sky as one by one the lanterns throughout the sinkhole faded into darkness. It started at the top of the vertical fortress and worked its way down. A blanket of shadow descended on everything, broken up only by the few solid-fuel torches scattered throughout the structure. Some of the Firebenders on active duty brought up their own flames, but it was a futile struggle. When Zhao had ordered the fortress put on complete lockdown, the top of the sinkhole had been covered by a system of linking platforms that formed an armored lid, cutting off any view of the sky and what would by now be a dawning sun. They were sealed in a pit beyond the light of the outside world, and it could get very dark beneath the ground.

Zhao raised a hand and chased away the darkness that had covered this particular platform with a small ball of flame. He immediately looked in the direction that the guard had been dragging the Tribal Sokka, and found that they had paused when the lights went out. The Tribal himself was maintaining a carefully blank expression.

Noticing Zhao's stare, Sokka blinked. "What? I didn't say anything."

Mai sighed in the darkness. "Well, I'm out of bolts, and I'm down to only seven blades. At least I still have my sword."

The sabotage of the gas supplier had gotten hairy, since survival was no longer just a matter of running and striking. Mai and Ty Lee had been forced to take cover behind machinery and strike when even the narrowest opportunity presented itself. It was tense work, and each attack had spent a little more of the desperate strength Mai was forcing into her body. About the only thing that had gone smoothly was the sabotage itself, thanks to her experience aboard Fire Nation warships when her family had been touring the world before their journey to the South Pole. The coal-burners here had worked on the same principle as the ones aboard the ship, and supplied gas to the lanterns through the same kind of pipe-based distribution system.

Ty Lee had acted as defense while Mai had gone about breaking machinery, and the ensuing darkness had allowed them to escape the building and finally evade their pursuers. There were enough torches and Firebenders to produce a very dim ambient light in places, but it was just enough to avoid walking into walls. Mai and Ty Lee had put some distance between themselves and any patrols, and had sat down beside a supply shed for a rest and maybe some planning. They just had to figure out, now, how to free the Airbenders.

And find Sokka. Katara and Aang wouldn’t like it if they thought Mai had traded their brother for an old Fire Nation friend.

She had to bite back another curse for that Water Tribe moron’s overblown sense of responsibility. What did he think he was accomplishing? Even if she found the Airbenders, it wasn't like they’d have a herd of sky bison with them that could carry everyone out of the sinkhole. It was a pointless sacrifice, and she would probably die trying to give it meaning.
She heard Ty Lee shift somewhere beside her, and then her friend said, "Seems like we're clear to get going again. No torches, and no auras glowing in the dark."

Mai would have rolled her eyes if she thought the detail would be visible. "I don't believe in auras, and I certainly don't believe that if they did exist you would be able to see them in the dark."

"Then how do I know what a sour yellow color your aura is right now?" There was enough ambient light that Mai could see Ty Lee's held tilt to the side, and long experience filled in the amusement that was supposed to go with it. "Come on, the prison is just over this way."

They joined hands, and Mai suppressed a groan as her sore muscles protested being on the move again. As they flitted down the lane, the ground gave a shake beneath their feet. It had been doing that every so often since they stopped for a rest, and Mai could only hope that her sabotage to the gas system wasn't going to destroy the whole sinkhole. At least, not before she and Ty Lee found a way to get the Airbenders- and Sokka- out of here.

She was relying on Ty Lee, just like when they sparred together before their lives had dragged them apart. Back then, they had kept no secrets from each other. Mai knew all about Ty Lee's family, about her issues with being a septuplet, about her mother's addiction, about her father's apathy. Ty Lee in turn knew what Mai had been like before she found her courage, about the punishments she got speaking out of turn in public, about her anger when Tom-Tom was born. They had both trained with the princess, and had learned together where the Azula's boundaries could be found.

And now after knowing her for just half an escape attempt, Sokka claimed that Ty Lee was keeping secrets.

Only the fact that his stupid plan had worked out so far gave Mai any doubts. So she decided to go ahead and prove him wrong. "Hey?"

"Yeah?"

"What aren't you telling me?"

Ty Lee froze. She turned around, and Mai could almost make out the glistening of her eyes in the glint of distant torches. "Please."

"Please what?"

"Please don't ask me that."

Mai's stomach flipped. "Sokka was right."

"Um, kind of?"

"Oh, no." Mai shut her eyes against the sight of her friend's silhouette and yanked her hand away. Sokka was right. That moron was still right. He was right about everything- Ty Lee had secrets, sinkhole fortresses needed lamps to operate, digging tunnels with water was a bad idea, Mai couldn't be trusted with anything, and all their plans were destined for failure. Maybe next time he told her to take a flying leap off of Appa, she'd go ahead and do it. If she ever saw Appa again, of course. "Oh, why do I bother?"

"I'm sorry!"

"You're supposed to-" She bit off the rest of the thought: that her only friend was supposed to be better than an honorless maverick like Mai, but why bother saying it? Reality didn't care what it was
"What?" Ty Lee’s voice was quivering. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Never mind." She opened her eyes and forced her face back into a neutral expression before she remembered that Ty Lee couldn't see it anyway. She wondered if she was supposed to pull a weapon on her friend now. "Don't you have something that you want to say?"

"I'm sorry!" Ty Lee's voice had gone hoarse, a tell-tale sign for those that knew her that she was deeply stressed. "I really am!"

The squeak of the last word was like a hot needle down Mai's throat, and she found herself hissing, "You're not supposed to lie and betray your friends and-

"Whoa, wait!" Ty Lee lunged forward and grabbed Mai's shoulders with soft hands. Her breath splashed against Mai's face. "I didn't betray any friends! I'm not betraying you! I just- I did something bad. Really bad. I- I don't want anyone to know about it. I know that's stupid and you're going to find out, but-" Mai heard her friend's breath hitch. "I don't want you to look at me like I'm a monster. At least for a little while longer. Please, let me keep my secret? It won't hurt you. I'd never hurt you! I love you!"

The ground gave another shake.

Mai sighed. Ty Lee loved everything she didn't actively dislike, and she could be just as catty and hurtful as Azula when she was cranky, but the truth of the words didn't matter. Ty Lee couldn't actively lie; at worst, she could just say incorrect things that she honestly believed, but mostly she just avoided talking about anything that made her uncomfortable. She was mistaken about a lot of things-like auras- but that was because she was as dumb as a bag of rocks.

Mai was supposed to be the smart one, of the two of them, and she knew that right now she was being dumb as well. Just because she hated herself didn't mean she had to hate Ty Lee, too. She breathed out, expelling all the stale air in her lungs. "Okay, fine."

"Okay?"

"That's what I said. Keep your secret for now." Mai couldn’t help but wonder if Ty Lee had done something to sell out the Ozai faction. If so, it had probably been an accident. "And when it comes out and you're revealed as the monster you are, I'll be glad that you're not the dippy pink clown you've always acted like."

The darkness was silent for a long moment, and then Ty Lee gave a laugh and Mai was suddenly being hugged to death. "Thank you! You're the best person I ever knew who likes to dress like swamp spirit!"

She patted her friend's shoulder. "Yeah, pink auras all around. Now let's go free these Airbenders and figure out if the plan we don't have has a next step."

Once again traveling hand in hand, they reached the prison without incident (aside from the intermittent trembles from the ground), where another full platoon of soldiers was waiting with torches and hand-held lanterns. They hid themselves well short of the light, taking cover behind the foundations of a tower of some kind, and then both peeked out to discern the enemy numbers and positions. There were no more than two dozen, arranged in a fairly sensible defensive formation all across the front of the prison. No doubt there was a full guard staff inside, as well.

Once she was satisfied, Mai gave Ty Lee’s hand a squeeze and let go to unsheathe her sword, and
then they both dashed into battle again. The soldiers didn’t know they were under attack until Ty Lee dropped out of a massive leap behind their front lines, when they turned to face her, Mai’s blades struck home.

As the fight dissolved into elegant chaos, Mai acted as the eyes of the team. While Ty Lee flipped and cartwheeled into each fight, Mai hung back and kept track of the wider situation. The torches and lanterns the soldiers were carrying made their carriers easy targets, and she only had to dash, jump, roll, and even kick off the building’s face to appear instantly at the side of anyone who thought to strike at Ty Lee while she was distracted. Each time someone rose against her friend, Mai would swing her sword against them. The armor they wore wasn’t a problem, because she didn’t need- or want- to kill anyone. She could slash at exposed faces, stab at unshielded joints, and shove at anyone in an unbalanced stance. It was enough to temporarily disable her targets, because Ty Lee would soon be there to shut down their joints and disable them on a more long-term basis.

Then they both slipped back into the shadows and struck again from a different angle before their disappearance had even fully registered.

In the end, Mai and Ty Lee left behind a pile of not-quite-dead bodies as they entered the prison and locked the front door behind them. They weren't locked in with the prison’s guards- the guards were locked in with them.

As Mai turned around in the darkness of the building's vestibule, her boots splashed in a thin puddle of water that had somehow accumulated on the floor.

Sokka had spent a lot of his time, back in the South Pole, imagining what course his life would take. Even now, traveling with as part of some kind of Wandering Hero Group, he tried to anticipate the various fates that might await him. Despite what Aang might think, thinking on the fly was a good way to run over a cliff.

Even so, Sokka never expected to be chatting in Commander Zhao's tower office by candlelight. It could almost have been a parody of something romantic if Zhao weren't threatening light Sokka's hair on fire between questions.

"I repeat: where are the other Water Tribe refugees hiding, and what aid have you all received from mainland rebels?" Zhao was standing somewhere behind Sokka's chair, and he could feel the heat of a flame against the back of his neck.

Sokka groaned. "Look, Commander, I have two ways I can answer this. Either I can make up something that sounds true so that you get off my back, or I can repeat the answer I've been giving to this question for the tenth time and say that I have no idea because I immediately took off with the Avatar to go make trouble elsewhere. At this point, I'm going to let you make the call."

"Hm. You think you're clever, don't you?"

"Well, I never thought I was recruited to the South Pole laboratory for my singing voice." As soon as he finished speaking, Sokka realized that he might have been getting a bit too mouthy considering that fire still held near his neck. He cringed as much as he could without irritating his broken rib.

Then the office door slid open to reveal a panting aide with a hand-held lantern. "Commander, we have a problem!"

Sokka was professionally interested in all of the Fire Nation's problems, especially any that would have flunkies running up all the flights of the tower's stairs to deliver a report, and so listened as Zhao
stepped into view with a scowl on his ugly, sideburn-framed face to say, "Is this about the traitor girls?"

"No, sir! Guards on the base level are reporting-"

"Are you telling me no one has managed to find them yet? Is this a fortress or a day spa?"

"Sir, please, the girls are holed up in the prison building, and two whole platoons are surrounding it now, but we're also getting-"

"Then what about the lights, why haven't they been fixed yet?"

The aide grimaced, and Sokka almost felt sorry for winding Zhao up like this, but the woman soldiered on and said, "Those girls did a lot of damage to the piping around the furnaces, and the system is building up a lot of pressure. The technicians say they have to divide their efforts between repairs and just keeping more damage from accumulating. But sir, we're also getting reports of heavy flooding on the base level!"

Zhao blinked. "Flooding? You mean water is coming up through the floor?"

Sokka himself was thinking of the water that had been running underground in this whole region, the water that Katara and Aang had used to carve a tunnel straight into the sinkhole's interior. What had happened to it after the cave-in? He couldn't imagine that their little Waterbending venture was now flooding the whole massive sinkhole. To push up through the metal plates that were supposedly covering the whole bottom of the fortress, there had to be a lot of water accumulating.

He also thought about all the equipment here in the fortress, and what the aide had said about the repairs to the gas system.

He stood up. "I think you should consider evacuating. Right now."

Zhao glanced over at him, sneered, and gestured at the aide. "Get this Tribal out of here. Perhaps he'll be more helpful after being locked in a dark supply closet for a day or two."

Sokka found himself taking a step towards the commander, but the aide's hands clamped down on his shoulders with enough force to make his broken rib twinge again. "You don't (hrg) understand, that water will be cold, and if it gets into the equipment you're trying to fix, there could be a huge reaction!"

The aide yanked, making Sokka cry out, but then the fire in Zhao's hand suddenly went out, leaving only the candles and the aide's lantern to keep darkness from completely filling the little office.

"Wait," Zhao barked.

The aide relented, and in the dim light Sokka found Zhao looking at him with wide eyes. "Yeah?"

"How huge a reaction?"

There was a clap like thunder outside the tower office, and it felt like the whole sinkhole shuddered in sympathy.

Sokka just had time to say, "That huge," when something smacked into the tower with enough force to knock them all of their feet. The candles all went out at the same time that gravity decided to try some new things, and Sokka's world became nothing but darkness and pain.
Hunting through the prison building of Tiankeng Fortress was almost too easy, even as tired and pained as Mai was. Just like outside, the guards were forced to carry torches to see anything, giving away their positions. Their every step through the puddles of water on the floor echoed through the claustrophobic corridors, revealing their every movement. Whenever Mai lunged at them from the darkness, her sword extended like a monster's talons, she saw fear explode on their faces just before she struck. She had more than enough time to pick non-fatal targets, and in the few events where she missed at first, Ty Lee was soon coming in low and snap a punch into unarmored thighs to remove the guards’ ability to stand.

The last one flopped to the ground with a splash and a wail, and Mai caught his torch before it could finish falling. She stretched her arms to try to work some life back into them as the ground shook again. "All right, I give up- what's with the water and the quakes? Does that happen often?"

Ty Lee shook her head in the light of the torch. "Not that I've ever noticed. Do you think we did something when we closed off those pipes for the gas?"

So even Ty Lee was thinking on those lines. "Maybe, but there's no reason there should be water down here because of that." She thought back to Katara's plan to get into the sinkhole. Maybe this was a sign that she and Aang were alive? "Whatever's going on, it would probably be best if we hurried." She looked down hallway to the door at the end. "One room left."

Ty Lee turned to look, and even in the haphazard glow of the torch, her expression fell noticeably. "If there's one room left, then they must be in there, right?"

"Along with whoever else is being kept prisoner, yes. And there might be a last guard or two." Mai shifted her grip on the torch so that she could throw it like one of her knives if needed. "I'll go through first, you follow and save me from whatever we find?"

Ty Lee nodded, and they started forward. They barely got two steps before the whole world shook and the entire building rocked down into a tilt that slammed Mai into the wall on her left. She dropped the torch, and it sputtered as it landed in a puddle and its light almost went out. She quickly picked it back up. Most of the material was wet and refused to burn now, but a section still maintained a flame. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Nevertheless, she forced herself back into motion.

When she reached the door, she started by giving it a good kick. She was fairly sure that her boots were thick enough to protect her from breaking her foot if the door was locked, but it proved to be a moot point. The door flew open when she struck it, and she dove into the darkened room and drew her sword.

She landed in a crouch and moved the torch around to shed light in one direction at a time, but the only company she found was the shrieking and cowering women behind the bars of the cells. Mai rose up and sheathed her sword again. There were four cells, and the women- their ages ranging from girls her own age to Mother Malu's contemporaries- occupied three of them. They all wore the same set of robes, heavy things of white and gold that even recently might have been clean and in good repair. Now, they were streaked with the unmistakable stains of ash, torn and burned in ways that spoke of a sudden and inadequate education in combat.

The women blinked against the slim torchlight, and made sounds of fear.

Mai sighed. "Hi." She poked into her belt to produce the set of keys she had taken from one of the guards. "I'm guessing that you're Mother Malu's Airbenders. Potential issues about quality aside, this
is a rescue."

To a chorus of relieved sighs, Mai went to unlock the first cell. One of the nearby women, who looked in the torchlight to have quite a few years on Mai, said, "I am Sister Matagi. Our abbess sent you?"

"And the Avatar." The lock clicked, and Mai stepped back as the door swung open. "As much as I’d like to personally meet each and every one of you to exchange stories, we’re in a rush. I need you to keep everyone organized and moving, okay?" She didn’t wait for Matagi’s reply before moving on to the second lock.

It wasn’t until Mai was unlocking the third cell that she realized that Ty Lee hadn’t come into the room with her.

She looked back at the door, but the light of the torch didn’t reach that far. She pushed her way through the nuns and Matagi gathered them in her wake. Mai, however, only had eyes for the empty doorway. Where had Ty Lee gone?

It didn’t turn out to be a long search. Mai only had to walk down that first corridor, Matagi and the others hurrying after her, when she found Ty Lee leaning against a wall in the dark.

"Ty Lee," came Matagi’s almost horrified wail.

For a moment, Mai was trying to remember how she could have mentioned her friend to the nun, but then she remembered that Ty Lee had been sheltered at the abbey, and the Airbenders would all know her.

Ty Lee gave a wan smile and waved. "Um. Glad you're all okay."

The silence that followed prompted Mai to turn around and raise her torch. The nuns were all glaring at Ty Lee, some with thin-lipped anger and others with wide-eyed hurt. Did this have to do with her secret, the one that would supposedly make Mai look on her as a monster?

The ground shook again, once again sending her stumbling into a wall, but at least this time she held on to the torch, despite the exhaustion nipping at her heels.

Then there was a lurch and suddenly the whole building was in freefall.

It didn't last long, maybe not even a second, and ended with a crash that broke gravity. Mai found herself floating during the fall- perhaps this was what it felt like to be a sky bison- and instinctively let go of the torch and pulled her limbs in before her sudden landing. She wound up in a crouch that still had enough momentum to turn into a tumble, but the floor decided that it didn't want to stay put, and suddenly gravity was pulling her towards the prison's front door, making her slide across a flat floor that had become a downward ramp and then another jolt sent her rolling towards a wall that suddenly became a new floor and finally Mai was dumped shoulder-first up against the locked front door just before gravity shifted so that she was lying on the world’s first door-floor.

It hurt, but she was too tired to do anything more groan.

A light descended on her, and Mai looked up to find Ty Lee skidding to a safe stop with the recovered torch in her hand. As the nuns- all them landing softer than Mai had managed but not as gracefully as the a professional acrobat from the Fire Nation- came to a stop around them, Ty Lee helped Mai to her feet and said, "You okay?"

"Okay enough to not give you a real answer." Mai stepped to the side of the door so that she wasn't
standing directly on it, and crouched down to undo the lock. She doubted there were any soldiers waiting outside now, which was one nice benefit of the scary disasters. "How about everyone else? All Airbenders accounted for?"

Matagi conferred with them for a moment, and then announced, "We are well enough. But please, what's going on? What happened to the building? And why is Ty Lee with you? I thought Mother Malu sent you."

"Ty Lee is my partner. Any problems you have with her can wait until we're all out of here. As for the building." The lock finally came undone, and the doors popped open to reveal a swirling, muddy rapids some distance below. The doors swung in the empty air, and the whole building creaked with disturbing promise. "I don't know, but I think the whole sinkhole is dying and we're stuck in it."

Reality came back to Sokka with the sound of angry cursing and the distant echoes of rushing water. He stretched, made a high-pitched sound when he was reminded of his broken rib, and opened his eyes to see what new disaster he had fallen into.

He was still in Zhao's office and the lights were still out. Zhao himself was still here, standing on the other side of the room. A military flare hissed on the floor at Zhao's feet, filling the office with harsh red light and revealing that everything seemed to have picked up an unusual case of The Sideways. Sokka blinked a few times, tilted his head, and blinked some more. Yes, the room was sideways. He was willing to bet that was the reason the furniture was all thrown around in a pretty sorry state. Either that or he had slept through Zhao giving a truly legendary tantrum. "What happened?"

Zhao turned around just as a rope snaked down through a hole in the ceiling- no, that was the window that had originally looked out over the sinkhole- behind him. "Ah, you're alive. Are you in any state to climb, Tribal?"

Sokka bit back his annoyance at the slur and said, "I have a broken rib. I don't think I can."

"Oh." Zhao shrugged, grabbed the rope, and tied it around his waist. "Too bad. You would have made a useful prisoner." He tugged the rope once, and was quickly lifted up through the window and out of sight.

What a jerk!

No, seriously, what a jerk!

Sokka got up and went over to the space beneath that ceiling-window. Looking up, he could see a steady stream of torches moving up the sinkhole’s dark ramps, with shadow that might have been Zhao rising up towards a crane lit by its own set of military flares. Sokka squinted and looked for other flares, taking in what details were revealed by the harsh light.

Those details all told the same story- Tiankeng Fortress was in pretty sorry shape. Equipment was thrown around, ramps and scaffolding were broken, and everyone seemed to be in a big hurry to go up. The flares seemed to be congregated around the remaining functioning equipment, all of it fairly high up. And there was still that matter of the echoing water.

Sokka had a hard time believing that Aang and Katara's Waterbending had somehow managed to destroy a whole mile-deep sinkhole in a single night, but until he got other data, it was his only theory. And if the Fire Nation was evacuating, then he probably should make that his mission, too.

He proceeded to scour the sideways office, hoping to find a whole sky bison hidden beneath the crushed desk and scattered papers, but was predictably disappointed. There were no ladders, either,
and even the few chairs were in pieces. If he could find some string or binding agent, maybe he could cobble together something he could climb, but even without a broken rib he'd be hard pressed with these materials. Maybe if he leaned some of the larger pieces against the wall, he could-

The soft sound of stone scraping against stone somewhere above him pulled Sokka straight out of his musings.

He looked up and in the light of the flare found a man in a long robe and cone-hat crouching on the ceiling.

Sokka blinked, and quickly scanned the room around him. The office was still sideways, the ceiling had once been a wall, the wall to his left had once been a floor, gravity was still pulling things down, and how was this guy sitting on the new ceiling?!

The man peered down with an expression like a tundra-hawk's. "Are you Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe?"

Sokka blinked. "Yes! Yes, I am! Did Aang and Katara send you?"

"I'm not at liberty to say." The man's face was about as expressive as Mai's. "Do you require assistance?"

Sokka shrugged as carefully as he could to avoid stressing his broken rib. "If you don't have anything better to do."

The man nodded once and then dropped down from the ceiling straight onto Sokka's head. He tried to get out of the way but the man was reaching for him and then stone hands clamped down on his throat and he tried to fight back but his head became heavy and the light of flare receded into oblivion.

Mai looked up to see Ty Lee grinning down at her in the torchlight. She groaned, reached up with a trembling hand, and was quickly grabbed and pulled the rest of the way to solid ground.

"Well," Mai said as she collapsed on the floor, "that was kind of terrible."

And it truly had been. Back down in the prison, she had sent Ty Lee to climb out with the torch to see if she could find a way to safety that didn't involve falling into muddy rapids. That had left Mai sitting in absolute darkness with the Airbender nuns, and while she had been tempted to start a conversation about their reaction to Ty Lee, her inability to see who she would be talking to had made her even less eager to converse with other human beings than normal. So instead she listened to the nuns talk amongst themselves, using names like Heni and Keiki and Ipo and Anahira and Vea and Ulani and whatever. Eventually, Ty Lee came back and described the grueling climb that would allow them to make their way down and around the prison building (which had fallen to wedge in a brand new mini-sinkhole-within-the-big-sinkhole), and up into the main chamber.

The only good news had been the confirmation that no soldiers had stuck around to see if anyone in the prison survived.

So they had all climbed by the light of a single dying torch. The Airbenders were practiced enough with their new elements to make some rather effective giant leaps, but Mai had been forced to climb up the old fashioned way. Ty Lee had helped, of course, but now that Mai was back on solid ground, she realized that she was done.

Or, more accurately, her body was done. Her limbs were so weak she doubted she could throw a
knife further than her own toes even if she had any blades left. Every inch of her was sore and tender from the various falls and beatings she had taken. She had a headache, and of course she was just filthy. It was just as well that she had cut up her green robe because it was probably a lost cause after everything else, and not doing up her hair anymore was seeming like a better decision every second.

Mai just plain had no more fight in her.

And now Ty Lee and Matagi and all the other nuns were looking at her for the next step in her daring escape plan.

Mai sighed, but it was lost in the noise of the rushing water coming from the pit behind her. "We can't stay down here. We need to find a ramp and do our best to stay out of sight of the local traffic." Speaking of the local traffic, Mai wondered if the Fire Nation had bothered to evacuate Sokka. Was he even alive, or had whatever was killing the sinkhole killed him, too? She could only imagine meeting up with Katara again, passing on his last message, and noting that the last she had seen him was at the bottom of the Sinkhole of Doom.

Matagi looked at the other Airbenders and stepped forward in the torchlight. "And if we're able to find a way up, what then? We saw when we were led into the fortress that the Fire Nation has defenses stretching all around the sinkhole. Do you know a way past them?"

The question made Mai want to burst into tears, but she kept her face blank. "One step at a time. I might have allies outside waiting for us." She got moving before Matagi could ask any more questions.

Ty Lee quickly trotted up beside her. "Do you really? I thought you said-"

"I'm not inconsiderate like Sokka," Mai interrupted. "So I'm letting you know right now that there's a possibility I'm going to have to leave the nuns in your care. I might need to take care of some things, things only I can do. If that happens, will there be a problem with you taking command of the nuns?"

Ty Lee looked away. "They don't seem to like me anymore."

Nothing else was said, and Mai let it be.

The journey across the bottom of the sinkhole was the longest walk of Mai's life. Or so it seemed. The sinkhole continued to shake as they went, and the damage that had already been wreaked by the seismic activity had turned the whole area into a wasteland. None of the land was flat anymore. New streams and geysers had dampened the place up considerably. Some buildings had sunk like the prison, leaving behind gurgling holes, while others were covered with debris. Some of the wreckage looked like it came from the fortress towers that had risen above the rest of installation. Mai felt even more tired at the thought that Sokka's dead body might be buried in some of that debris. For all Mai knew, she was the last member of their little group still alive.

For all she knew, she'd soon be joining them.

The thought lodged in her mind and wouldn't go away. She had faced death many times already, not the least of which was when she had been ready to sacrifice herself for Aang's survival after Crescent Island had erupted, but at least that had been her choice. This situation now just seemed like the culmination of a thousand mistakes, a marathon of bad judgement that looked just enough like a workable situation to keep her going until she finally reached a dead end. She continued to lead the others across the sinkhole floor, but her walk was more like a continuous stumble, and she was pretty sure that if she stopped, she'd fall to the ground and never get back.
So she kept going, and nearly died when the ground beneath her shifted, collapsing and dumping her into freefall.

It happened so fast, and her body was so sluggish, that she never had time to react. She just fell with a gasp, plummeting into darkness. She had only enough time to register the sound of more rushing water somewhere below when the air around her came alive, slowing her fall and pushing her into a lazy drift. Then strong but thin arms wrapped around her waist and a body was pressed against hers while the air shifted direction. It was almost like being back in Aang's arms, riding the winds with on the ash-filled winds of Crescent Island, and her savior even kicked off a wall in a similar way to gain altitude.

Mai closed her eyes and wondered if she had in fact died, and Aang was the one sent to carry her into the reincarnation cycle.

Then she landed with a jolt on cold hard ground, and the pain convinced her that such a mercy had not been granted.

Mai opened her eyes and looked around. The nuns were gathered and Matagi was holding the torch. Mai was back on the sinkhole's main floor, and there was a new pit beside her that she had apparently fallen into. One of the nuns must have caught her, which was unusually quick thinking but-

-but-

-Mai turned around to look at the person whose arms were still around her waist, and found herself gazing into goldish-gray eyes that were all too familiar.

Despite her exhaustion, Mai's mind snapped into motion: Ty Lee's secret, the shame she had displayed, the promise that she would never betray her friends, the worry that she would be considered a monster… it all made sense now.

"First Fire," Mai hissed at Ty Lee. "You're an Airbender."

TO BE CONTINUED
Bury the Old

Chapter Summary

Old allies fall, and Aang takes control.

Bury the Old

For all his power, Aang felt useless for far more often than was fair.

He had thought, when his new Earthbender friends saved him and Katara from the collapsed tunnel, that he'd be able to rush into the Fire Nation's sinkhole immediately to help Mai and Sokka. But the Tiankeng Fortress hadn't gotten any less dangerous in the time Aang spent trapped, and his rescuers asked to try infiltrating the fortress secretly on their own, and as a point in their favor, they hadn’t caused any cave-ins recently. So Aang agreed, and kept himself busy helping Katara see to Mother Malu, Appa, and Momo. He had spent the last few hours making sure that the old Airbender woman still slept comfortably, that Appa was calm and ready to fly, and that Momo didn't eat too much before what could be a quick getaway.

He had tried to wait patiently, watching as the leader of the Earthbenders got reports from his 'agents. ' They all wore dark robes and cone-hats with a golden spike at the top, and always maintained a calm demeanor, even when the ground shook and they’d coming hurrying up to give whispered reports. Aang had tried to distract himself by brushing out Appa's fur, but the shaking was getting worse, and loud sounds were starting to carry through the Earth.

Finally, Aang put the brush down and went over to talk to Long Feng.

The man was having another quiet conversation with a pair of his people when Aang walked up and said, "Is there anything I can do to help? If anyone's in trouble- youknowlikeSokkaorMai- I can bring Appa and we'll fly them out-"

"Oh no, Avatar." Long Feng turned smoothly from his subordinates, the long queue of hair that fell down from the back of his balding head barely swaying from the movement, and his voice was a soothing purr. "I wouldn't dream of asking you to risk yourself in such a dangerous situation. My people are handling the difficulties-"

"Difficulties?" The word stuck out to Aang like a lifeline. "What difficulties? What's going on down there? You said before that you had a plan."

Long Feng's smile faded. He turned to his subordinates, whispered a few words, and sent them away with a wave of his hand before turning back to Aang. "Walk with me, Avatar. As you discovered with your attempt to dig into the sinkhole, this region is unstable enough that most Earthbenders risk destabilizing the entire area. Just finding a way to safely displace the underground water is a difficult task. You rather resourcefully found a way to use that for your benefit, and even that didn't go very well."

Aang winced. "I'm really glad you found me and Katara."

"I am, too, Avatar. In any event, my people use a style of Earthbending more precise and subtle than
most, which we were going to use to infiltrate the fortress, retrieve the information we were looking for- along with your friends, now that we know about them- and then sabotage the fortress." Long Feng brought his hands together within his wide sleeves, a stance that Aang had seen Mai take with habitual frequency. In fact, Aang was starting to notice that Long Feng controlled his face a lot like Mai, keeping it blank as he continued, "Unfortunately, the fortress has suffered a major equipment failure of some kind. The Fire Nation's strange machinery has exploded. The work of my Earthbenders has started collapsing, and the sinkhole is growing deeper and larger. The fortress is being evacuated."

Aang blinked. Sokka and Mai! They were in there! "Sokka and Mai! They're-"

"Being hunted by my people even as we speak," Long Feng broke in. He laid a hand on Aang's shoulder. "My Earthbenders are accustomed to combat and danger. Their top priority right now is safely retrieving your friends and getting them out as fast as possible through the last tunnels being kept open."

Aang nodded his gratitude. "Right, good, but I can help!"

"In evacuating, the Fire Nation's soldiers are clustered on the surface around the fortress. Their defenses still extend far from the sinkhole itself, including the siege weaponry, so if you try to fly your sky bison near them, they'll shoot you out of the sky. And since you are not yet an Earthbender, I cannot in good conscience allow you to go underground in this situation."

"But what about the Airbender prisoners?!"

Long Feng offered a smile. "The Fire Nation is likely to evacuate such valuable prisoners along with its own people. And if not, I have my men searching for them, too. We are doing everything we can, Avatar. Please, let us work. Besides, it looks like you might be needed here." Long Feng pointed, and Aang turned to see what was going on.

Katara was running over, Momo flying behind her, and she was smiling for the first time since the cave-in. "Aang!"

"Katara?" She didn't slow down enough as she got close to him, and Aang was forced to catch her to keep her from crashing into him. "What is it? Is Appa okay?"

"He's fine, but Mother Malu woke up! She wants to see you!"

It took Aang a moment to realize what she was saying, but as soon as he did, he took off in a run that kicked up a trail of dust. He zoomed straight into the little camp he and the others had set up before their attempt to break into Tiankeng Fortress. They had left Mother Malu in Aang's own tent, and as he burst in, he saw that she was sitting up on her mat and blinking slowly in the dim light. "Mother Malu? Are you feeling okay?"

"Avatar, is that you? So you're real, not a dream."

Aang nodded. "I'm really glad you're up. We tried to heal your mind, but-"

"Thank you for the attempt. Being alone for so long in that cursed ashland did not leave me in a healthy state." She smiled. "But now I can think clearly. You have saved me, Avatar."

Aang could only sigh with relief as Katara and Long Feng came into the tent behind him. "And you're- you're really- you know, an Airbender?"

By way of answering, Mother Malu raised her hands, brought them together, and pushed outward as
she exhaled. A light breeze filled the tent, causing the sides to ripple.

It was true.

She was an Airbender.

Aang blinked back tears that threatened to overtake him and smiled. "We're trying to save the others right now. We're just outside Tiankeng Fortress, and a team of Earthbender rebels are looking to free them. A couple of my friends are in there, too."

Mother Malu's face pinched, and she leaned forward. "My memories of our meeting are- they seem unreliable. Did I warn you about the traitor?"

Aang's stomach sank. "You mentioned it, but-"

"A noblewoman of the Fire Nation. And, apparently, one of their assassins." Mother Malu looked down, and her fists clenched at her blanket. "She came into our abbey as a traveler. A circus performer, of all things. We sheltered her and her companions against the flames, and then later against the ashes. She helped us care for the dead and injured, and even volunteered to stay behind at the abbey when I decided to send some of the girls to retrieve supplies and request help from- from some old friends of mine. I don't know how, but before that help arrived, the Firebenders came and put us in chains. They weren't simply searching the ashes, they knew exactly where to find us and knew that we could Airbend. When they broke into the abbey, the traitor addressed them with her formal title, and while we were chained, she was removed from our midst and treated with honor by the soldiers. She had to have betrayed our location to them." Mother Malu let go of the blanket, and reached out to grab Aang's hands, startling him. "And- and she has The Gift. She received Airbending with the rest of us, after the fires. I worry that she's in that fortress, turning the gift to the Fire Nation's use."

Long Feng hissed. "A Fire Nation spy from the nobility with the power of Airbending?"

Katara moaned. "That's- That's- it's like a sick joke!"

Aang tried to summon words to add the chorus, but couldn't. He knew the Fire Nation still had goodness in it. Mai was proof enough of that, even though she struggled with it and had trouble finding her way. Yet, to have the power of his people- the art that defined them from the time before time- emerge in one of those helping to take over the world, one of those leading and planning how to crush everyone beneath their boots?

Finally, Aang found the words he needed. "I'll deal with the traitor. Long Feng, I need to find a way into the fortress. Mother Malu, I need you tell me everything about your abbey and how you got Airbending. Please. This is my responsibility, as the Avatar, and the last Air Nomad."

Mother Malu nodded, and at her motion, Aang helped her to her feet, and together they stumbled into the light.

Mai couldn't find the strength to move. Her limbs weighed her down and her spine was as stiff as rock. She was like another piece of wreckage at the bottom of the sinkhole, another fallen piece of debris from whatever disaster had befallen Tiankeng Fortress. A part of her mind, the cold analytical part that picked out targets amidst the chaos of battle, noted that her reaction was understandable, given that she had just nearly fallen to her death after essentially fighting a guerilla war all night.

And then there was the matter of her best friend being a secret Airbender.
Mai blinked, but it was a struggle to lift her eyelids again. "How-" Her voice had all the volume of a distant echo, and she had to stop and take a deep breath just to gasp, "How could you?"

"It's not my fault," Ty Lee squeaked. "I didn't try to become an Airbender! And I had nothing to do with the attack on the abbey! Things just keep- keep happening to me!"

Matagi, standing at the head of her gathered fellow nuns and holding their lone torch above her head, snorted. "I don't know if you actually brought your countrymen to our abbey, but you can't deny your responsibility for your own life. You're a noble of your awful nation, living in the capital itself and rubbing elbows with royalty. But what did you ever do about the war?" She stepped over to stand towering over Ty Lee. "What did you ever do about all the killing your nation has been doing? Your kind wiped out the Air Nomads, and did you ever care? Did you fight to prevent our being taken? Whether or not you ever tried to hurt anyone- and those fighting skills of yours would be an odd pairing with a pacifist- you're a traitor to the Airbending gift you've been given. You'll always shame your Bending. You'll always shame us."

Ty Lee had been shrinking the whole time Matagi was talking, and by the end, she was crouched on the floor. Mai was now eye-level with her oldest friend, but she still couldn't make herself move. Just lifting her hands seemed to be a task akin to holding the whole sky up.

Ty Lee looked at her and said, "You hate me, too."

Mai tried to shake her head and failed. "Not really."

"But-" Ty Lee's lip quivered. "Then why is your aura so- so black?"

Mai blinked again, and this time she lacked the strength to keep her eyes open. To the darkness of her own eyelids, she said, "Because you just made me hate myself."

"Y- yourself?"

Mai sighed, and managed to open her eyes enough to see Ty Lee's confused face in the torchlight. "You thought I'd consider you a monster. You thought you had to hide yourself from me. I know everything about you, but this you wanted to hide. Why?"

"Because- because-" Ty Lee's eyes narrowed. "We- the Fire Nation- and- and the nuns-"

Mai snorted. "You thought I'd hate you. After getting you back from the dead, after hugging you- having spent my whole life avoiding physical contact- you thought I'd hate you over this. Aang- the Avatar and all his friends already hate me. Now I see what you really think of me."

"No!" Ty Lee grabbed Mai's shoulders and leaned forward until their noses were almost touching. Mai's whole world was filled with Ty Lee's goldish-gray eyes. "You're my best friend! My only friend! If Azula ever found out-" Ty Lee shuddered. "Please don't tell Azula."

Tell Azula?! That had to be the final blow to their friendship. To tell Azula would be to kill Ty Lee. As if Mai would ever do such a thing.

But she was too tired to even bother being hurt anymore. She breathed in, letting the cool air fill her lungs, and let the feel of the damp stone against her hands guide her mind. She would be cold, and she would be stone. There would be no fire in her, just the fleeting air.

When Mai breathed out again, she was in a state beyond fatigue. A state where the world was just a collection of targets, and the only thing that mattered was hitting the one at the top of the sinkhole with her presence. "Come on, let's keep moving. I'd really hate to die in this kind of mood."

pushed Ty Lee away, and only the other girl's complete lack of resistance could have explained why the weak attack actually moved her.

Standing alone again, Mai stumbled into the darkness.

The Airbenders- nuns and runaway acrobats all- followed her in silence.

Sokka woke up to find that, in addition to his broken rib, he had somehow managed to pick up a skull-splitting headache. He couldn't bring himself to open his eyes, but he could hear whispers that seemed to echo like thunder, crunchy echoes that rang with an unpleasant sharpness, and the grinding of distant machinery that seemed to resonate on the exact frequency required to make his teeth ache. He immediately opened his mouth to complain about this, except his mouth didn't actually open like it was supposed to, and after a moment of panic he realized that a band of smooth stone covered the entire lower half of his face.

He had a painful feeling that a headache was the least of his problems.

He tried to reach for the covering, but found that his arms wouldn't obey his commands. He seemed to have more stone around each wrist, binding them together in a pair of prisoner's cuffs. When he tried to lift his arms together, he felt a tug around his waist, and realized that he had also been equipped with a stone belt that was somehow attached to the cuffs.

It was exactly how he would expect an Earthbender to secure a prisoner.

Sokka made himself open his eyes into a minimal squint and look around without otherwise moving. It was still dark, but as he peered through the pounding of his head, he saw that there was a dim green glow shading in the shape of rocks and wooden beams and a metal floor. He was lying on that floor- yeah, it looked and felt like one of the platforms spiraling down the walls of the Fire Nation's sinkhole. So he was still stuck here. Great.

Then he saw two pairs of booted feet not far from where he was laying, and the pair of dark robes that hung over them.

Despite the jagged feel of his skull, he forced himself to concentrate on the whispers:

"-have cover up there?"

"You'll have enough, Agent Laotao. Just dim your lamp and stick close to the wall, and no one will see you. The last tunnel is stable enough that we can keep it open until you arrive or get spotted. Whichever comes first."

"Very well, Agent Zhuang. Has Long Feng been notified of the captive?"

"He has. He expressed an interest in the possibilities."

"Ah, good. Then would you care to help me transport said prisoner, Agent Zhuang?"

"I'm sorry, Agent Laotao, but I have other duties required to make sure that the way is safe for you. You know, fixing ramps, arranging cover for you, spying on the Airbenders, that kind of thing. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, of course."

Agents? Well, at least he had confirmation that he was no longer a prisoner of the Fire Nation. But
mysterious agents weren't necessarily an improvement. This 'Long Feng' might make Zhao look like diplomat.

Hands covered in stone-hard gloves grabbed Sokka's shirt and hauled him off the floor, making his head throb even worse and the darkened world to spin around him. It was an effort not to vomit, which would have been a disaster in his stone mask, but the night (morning, by now?) was young yet.

It still had the potential to get a lot worse.

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Zhao was out of the hole, but he had a feeling he had left his tattered career back at its bottom.

The sky was shifting from the pink of dawn to the grayish blue of a cloudy day. Zhao didn't even have the benefit of a strong sun as he looked over the soldiers who had evacuated from Tiankeng Fortress. They were all working, some moving whatever equipment and supplies were recoverable to safe locations, all the rest preparing for combat in case anyone- the Avatar, rebels, or even bandits- tried to take advantage of the loss of the sinkhole base. Defensible positions had been constructed out of whatever materials were handy (mostly junk from the fortress) and weapons ranging from the installed siege launchers to personal arms were ready. The outer defenses of the fortress were also all intact, from the outer wall to the massive anti-boulder spikes set into the ground. The whole fleet of tanks was also undamaged and ready to fight.

If Zhao had been in proper command, he supposed he might have felt some pride at the efficiency of the recovery. But the fortress wasn't his; it belonged to the regular base commanders who were even now directing things. No, Zhao was here on special assignment, using the fortress as a base for his search for the Avatar and a secure location in which to store his special prisoners. Except now he no longer had any prisoners, and the Avatar's compatriots were responsible for all the damage to the fortress. So Zhao was indirectly responsible for all of the failures and none of the successes.

But at least his enemies were still stuck in the sinkhole, and the armored lid that had been deployed at his command over the top was still intact.

And Zhao still had direct command of the soldiers provided to him by Prince Iroh.

If he managed to recover his losses, Iroh was more than capable of protecting him from the fallout of losing an over-expensive fortress in the middle of nowhere.

An aide approached, one of those under Zhao's command. "Sir, what orders?"

Zhao motioned to the sprawl of interlocking metal platforms that covered the sinkhole. "The contents of the sinkhole have been left to us. I want my soldiers divided up. One group over there at the exit, one over there where the plates are damaged, and the last here where the crumbling ground has created a gap. If an Airbender or a Water Tribe rebel tries to emerge, it is imperative that they be captured. If a rogue Weapon of the Fire Nation shows her face-" Zhao considered that possibility. Stumbling across Lady Ty Lee amongst the Airbenders was one thing, but now she was complicit in destroying the fortress. "I think it's appropriate that they be buried in the sinkhole they're bringing down, don't you?"

Without waiting for a response, he started to walk away to see if he could successfully wheedle the use of a tank out of the one of the base commanders, but then stopped and turned back to the aide. "And have someone watching the skies. If the Avatar shows up, the other soldiers will try to kill him, but I need him driven away unharmed. We might need to take special action to guarantee the Avatar's continued survival. Those are Prince-Admiral Iroh's orders, and if I am forced to disobey
them, I will have the hides of the soldiers responsible to present to the Prince as recompense.”

Zhao considered his options as he stalked away. He was becoming far too dependent on Iroh for protection. He needed to complete this odd mission and find a way to win his freedom—preferably without being stabbed by Piandao Clanless or executed on the Fire Lord’s orders.

For now, he needed to be patient, and wait for his enemies to come to him.

Mai had half-expected to die on her way up to the surface, and was almost disappointed when nobody tried to kill her.

The long walk up the sinkhole’s ramps had been surprisingly boring. Sure, the whole place shook frequently, with distant crashes of rockslides making the sinkhole’s remaining time in this world seem dubious, but there was little Mai could do about that, so she ignored it. There had been enough damage that some of the platforms were hanging by only a single bolt, while others had fallen away completely to leave Mai and the Airbenders to climb or jump the gaps, but it was manageable with everyone working together. And if there was one thing Airbenders could do, it was jump.

Then there was the random debris blocking their way; about three-quarters of the way up the sinkhole, Mai thought she recognized a gas meter from the ground floor of the fortress now lying upside-down amidst some collapsed scaffolding. Whatever had exploded after her sabotage of the gas lines had been pretty big.

They encountered no living people. There were bodies of soldiers along the path, and the sight of them lying there in the torchlight made Mai realize that if her sabotage was indeed the cause of all the damage, then she was finally responsible for confirmed Fire Nation deaths.

She was surprised at her lack of reaction. But then, she had no Fire left in her.

That they encountered no living people, though, didn't mean that there were none around. At several points, Mai thought she spotted something, distant glows that could have just been the after-image of Matagi's torch, but maybe were the lanterns of enemies setting up an ambush. And there were sounds, whispers that flitted to Mai's ears beneath the louder noises of the dying sinkhole, which might have been the steps of light feet or the rustle of dark fabrics. Perhaps those sounds were spies or scouts watching for any random escapees who might be making their way up.

Or maybe the lights and the sounds were just the ghosts of the people who had died in here.

After time beyond Mai's measure, the group reached upper ramps. She had gone first, depending only on the ambient light from the three shafts of sunlight stabbing down through the segmented metal ceiling that covered the whole sinkhole. When she was satisfied that the Fire Nation had completely abandoned the area, she motioned for Matagi to lead the others up.

When everyone arrived, Mai pointed at one of the gaps in the ceiling. "That looks like the regular exit. It has double doors and some solid stairs leading up to it."

Ty Lee looked up at it silently, while the nuns chattered. Matagi shushed them and said, "We can go out that way?"

"Of course not. A whole army is probably sitting up there waiting for us. The same for that one over there at the top of that wall." Mai shifted to point at the last shaft of sunlight, the centermost of the three, which stabbed down right through the center of the sinkhole, far from any platform. There might have been some crane equipment that would have normally occupied that space, but if so it was all gone now. "We're going out that one, because no one will expect it. Ty Lee can go first with
some rope, and then the rest of us can climb or fly or whatever. It's a shame we have to come out in daylight, but I don't think we can stay here much longer."

Ty Lee turned to face her. "And we can get away once we're through?"

Mai actually took a moment to think of the most delicate way to phrase her answer, a task she hoped to never have to repeat: "I think it's our best chance."

One of the nuns stepped forward with a large coil of rope. "I found this? Is it sufficient length?"

Ty Lee stepped over to check it out, and the nun took a reflexive step back. Mai saw Ty Lee cringe briefly before she forced one of her smiles back on her face and said, "That's fine, Manoa. Thanks."

Matagi took the rope from the nun's- Manoa's- hands and turned her own glare on Ty Lee. "I will go with you. We will affix the rope together and make sure everyone gets out."

Mai resisted the urge groan. "We really don't have time for trust issues right now. Ty Lee was an acrobat even before she got Airbending. You weren't."

Matagi stood tall against the criticism. "Maybe not, but I have had the gift of Airbending since the war ended, and learned how to use it. I can even fly, on a windy day with the use of a small sail. I can certainly climb well enough to reach that gap."

Mai had no energy left for arguing. She looked at Ty Lee, who just shrugged. With a sigh, Mai said, "Whatever. Just be careful not to stick your head through the hole until we're all ready to make a break for it."

Matagi nodded as if it was worthwhile advice and lifted the coil of rope over her head so that it hung on her like a sash. Then she jumped up to grab onto some of the wrecked scaffolding above, her leap leaving behind winds that whipped Mai's hair free of its bun.

Mai sighed again as she tilted her head and reached to re-tie it, but the new angle of her vision gave her a view of some of the spiraling ramps several levels below, and she thought she saw another of those ghost lights making its way slowly across the structure.

Or was it just a trick of the eyes? Imagination born of exhaustion.

Mai was tired and didn't want to investigate strange lights, but the situation was too dangerous. A single attacker who struck while everyone was climbing the rope could kill them all. And as tired as Mai was, she wasn't about to let the new Air Nation die through her own laziness.

Mai looked up to see Ty Lee and Matagi still climbing up to the ceiling, where they could use the seams and hinges between each plate to go hand-over-hand to the gap. They seemed to be making good but slow progress. Satisfied, she turned to the nun who had found the rope originally. What was her name? Ah, that's right- "Hey, Manoa. I'm going to check something out. Get everyone started on climbing the rope if it's set up before I get back."

"What are you-"

But Mai didn't have time if she was going to do this. She walked off before Manoa could finish her question, trying to move as fast as she could but not even managing a weak jog. Whatever Mai found, she hoped it didn't require a fight.

It was surprisingly hard to track the ghost glow. The sunlight breaking in through the ceiling wasn't enough to actually illuminate much, but it did provide enough ambient light to keep the glow from
standing out much against the darkness. Mai wasn't even sure if the light was moving any more. She seemed to be drawing closer to it as she moved down the spiraling ramp, and she couldn't figure out if that was a good sign or not. She reached behind herself to draw her sword - her last weapon - from its sheath, and tried to step delicately as she made her final approach on the light.

Pebbles crunched under her feet as she moved into the glow of a crystal lantern and found Sokka lying propped against the wall, his arms bound by black cuffs and some kind of mask over the lower half of his face. His squinting, unfocused eyes converged on her, and she realized she had walked into a trap.

Mai had time for one action, either turn around to meet her attacker or attempt to free Sokka.

In the end, it wasn't a choice at all. She swung her sword at Sokka's cuffs even as something hard crashed into the back of her neck. Her arms stopped working and the handle of the sword spilled out of her grip just when the blade struck at the cuffs, making it bounce off harmlessly.

She had chosen and failed.

Mai fell to the ground, her body finally giving out. Her limbs were dead stone. Darkness claimed her. But then, she had known all along it would. Ty Lee would have to seek the daylight for herself, now.

Ty Lee's world was upside-down.

That was one of those metaphor things with a double-meaning. Ty Lee was hanging from the metal-plated lid of the sinkhole, her feet tucked into the seams between two of the plates while she held onto one of the hinges connecting another two with her left hand. Her right hand was putting the finishing touches on knotting the rope Sister Matagi had carried up here. Ty Lee was hanging like a tiger-monkey, looking up, with the whole sinkhole below her, and the damaged hole in the ceiling glowing impossibly bright an arms-length away from her. Escape was just a short jump away, once everyone else was ready.

That was the literal part, since she was all upside-down, physically.

The metaphor part was that everything else was wrong, upended, backwards. The worst was that Mai hated Ty Lee, now. Mai hated her. Ty Lee's best friend hated her. Ty Lee's aura was a horrible, muddy green over that alone, and then there was the way all the nuns - Ty Lee's newest former friends - hated her, too.

She had turned from a regular person into some kind of magic windy-nomad because of spirity stuff she just didn't understand, and of course the whole Fire Nation would hate her for it. Zhao had taken her captive and locked her in a tower, like a princess from one of those storybooks that had always made Azula laugh. The Air Nation had been the Fire Nation's enemies, a long time ago, and there were entire books filled with the awful things the Airbenders had done in the early days of the war. Sure, there were probably nice Airbenders, and the nuns from Mother Malu's abbey had all been wonderful and helped save Ty Lee from the fires, but there was still all that history about evil nomads stealing babies from cradles and sending storms down on beach settlements and generally keeping the Fire Nation from sharing its culture in a peaceful way. The Air Nation had forced this war into existence. History said they were monsters.

That made Ty Lee a monster, too. If anyone back home knew she could Airbend, they'd hate her. They'd hurt her. They'd kill her. And Azula would-
Ty Lee had to stop thinking about it, in case she shivered too hard and fell from her perch. Azula liked to control things, and she hadn't given Ty Lee permission to become an Airbender. Just thinking about that made her sorry for whatever she had done to take command of the winds.

But Ty Lee could almost think she deserved the whole situation. She had assumed the worst of Mai, a horrible insult. The worst insult. Mai was everyone’s unfavorite, but Ty Lee had always stuck with her. Sometimes, Ty Lee had been the only one. By not telling Mai about the Airbending, she had showed insulted the trust between them. Mai was right to hate her for it.

Just like the other new Airbenders hated Ty Lee, because of the fires that had killed so many, even some of her friends from the circus. The Fire Nation had done that, had killed its own people. They were monsters, too! Everyone was all monsters!

Ty Lee’s life was upside-down, and it was very lonely.

She finished the knot and looked over to where Sister Matagi was hanging. "All done. You can go get the others now."

Sister Matagi nodded, still looking all stern with her aura an ugly, angry red. She looped one of her long sleeves over the rope, and used a gust of wind to send herself sliding down the line to other nuns.

So Ty Lee was left upside-down and alone. Literally and metaphorically. Boo.

She watched as Sister Matagi got the all the sisters organized, and watched as Manoa was the first one to start climbing up the rope. She looked around to make sure Mai was at the back of the group, ready to escape with everyone, but couldn’t spot anyone not wearing abbey robes. That was weird. Where could-

Ty Lee swung her head from side to side, looking around the sinkhole for her friend. Ex-friend. Hopefully soon ex-ex-friend.

Not that Ty Lee deserved it.

She couldn’t spot Mai anywhere. Not on the ramps, not on the scaffolding, not dangling from a platform somewhere, not swinging from the ceiling or anything silly like that. All she could see were the nuns starting their climb to freedom, and some soldiers coming down that double-doored entrance in the ceiling.

Wait, soldiers?

Ty Lee immediately turned back to the nuns and called, "The Fire Army is here! You have to hurry!" Then she let go of the hinges and allowed her body to swing from where her feet were still wedged into the seams of the ceiling until she was bent back in the other direction and grabbed the next set of hinges while she pulled her feet free and let her swing continue on, hands to feet to hands to feet to letting go completely and crossing the whole sinkhole in a spin to fall on the soldiers with her fists ready.

They tried to fight her, going wild with their fire and swords and spears and whatever, but they were just so inflexible. Once they were moving forward, they could only keep going until they came to a stop, but Ty Lee knew how to twist and swerve and bend and make her motion turn around like a twirling top.
It was similar to how the air could shift in an instant, all that wind that filled the whole world around her suddenly changing directions and blowing the other way just because it wanted to.

So Ty Lee moved all around them like a storm. She could see their auras shift through colors and emotions, giving away the moments when resolve became anger became fear became loyalty became selfishness became acceptance became pain, telegraphing what they were about to do. She knew the human body and all its intricacies, and on each soldier she targeted a convenient Qi meridian, a place where the flows of energy that made up life itself converged and pooled, driving her fists into one unarmored spot on each enemy to turn their bodies against them. They found themselves dropping their awful weapons, losing their fire, and becoming trapped in unresponsive bodies. They looked at her with fear—looks that thrilled a little part of her that she tried to keep under control because it wasn’t a nice part—even before she swung her arms and blew them all back up through the ceiling-door with a burst of the wind that had taken so much from her.

Except more soldiers were coming down the stairs through that door, and they caught their friends and threw them aside as they all rushed at Ty Lee with more fire and swords and spears and junk.

Her heart sank. The escape was ruined. The Fire Army outside knew what she and the nuns were trying to do.

And Mai was missing.

Ty Lee threw herself at the soldiers and put her fists to work, that little part of her resolving to make sure that the pain she felt in her heart was shared amongst the people who had inflicted it. Only so many soldiers could fit on this portion of this ramp with her, and the ceiling kept any more from attacking from above. She could beat them all, maybe. It was the only way.

Over the grunts and groans and cries of pain, Ty Lee heard Sister Matagi scream, and turned to see the rope they had tied was now on fire. The nuns were falling and gliding back to a lower platform, and more soldiers were climbing down through a gap between the rim of the sinkhole and the ceiling, the one Mai had said was probably being watched.

Oh, no.

They were trapped, and no one was coming to save them.

As the clouds swirled around them, Aang patted the stone helmet covering Appa's head. "You doing okay, buddy? It's not too heavy, is it?"

Appa let out a confident bellow, but Aang could hear the straining beneath it. Appa wouldn't be able to fly all day like this, not with the stone armor covering almost every bit of his fur, stone armor that had been shaped and compressed by Long Feng and his Earthbenders to be as solid as possible. Hopefully, he'd be okay long enough for their daring rescue.

On that point, Aang turned to where Long Feng was sitting in the saddle with Katara, Mother Malu, Momo. "Are you sure this is going to work?"

Long Feng had been looking a little green since Appa had taken off, but otherwise he looked calm as he nodded. "It will take precision and a little luck, but I trust my agents' information. With their data about the current state of fortress interior, and your sky bison's ability to fly over most of the defenses, we have a chance of saving your friends."

Aang hoped so. He tugged the reins, giving Appa the signal to start, and began a breathing exercise that calmed his body and summoned a special kind of clarity. The monks back at the Southern Air
Temple had used this technique to speed up their perception, to call upon the tranquility of the sky and see the world around them as if it were in slow motion.

It was a necessary technique for surviving a freefall.

Appa gave an excited groan, tensed his body, and then twisted and flapped his tail to send himself into a shooting power-dive.

The air battered at Aang like a hurricane, but this was no wind- Appa was just falling so fast that the still air of the early morning felt like a wrathful storm. Aang held tightly onto the reins as wisps of cloud whipped past him. Soon enough, the clouds parted and the sprawl of the surface-side of Tiankeng Fortress was revealed in front of him- or rather, below him, but Appa was diving so fast that the pull of gravity was completely lost.

Most importantly, Aang saw that they were still on course. The lid over the sinkhole was directly ahead.

Aang turned briefly to check on everyone in the saddle. Katara was squinting against the wind and holding her borrowed hat down on her head. Mother Malu was holding Momo tightly against her chest, and the lemur seemed to be watching everything with wide, excited eyes. Long Feng looked like he was screaming, or least trying to, but Appa was falling so fast that all sounds were completely lost in the rushing of the air past them.

Everyone seemed to be as well as they could be.

When Aang turned back, he found that the fortress- and the ground- were a lot closer than they had been a moment ago. He could also see movement below, some small dots that seemed to be moving and growing- No, wait, they weren't growing.

The dots were flying up to meet them.

The first of the dots resolved itself into a massive ballista bolt that was upon them before Aang could even blink and smacked into Appa's left side, right between the saddle and his legs.

Appa moaned, and they flew wildly off course, but the bolt bounced off the stone armor and spun away in the air.

Aang glanced back again, and already saw Long Feng leaning over the saddle, smoothing the dent in the stone armor and melting the cracks back into solid stone.

More bolts, and even flaming stones, came up to try to knock them all out of the sky. Aang steered them back so that they were once again headed for the sinkhole’s cover, and then tried to guide Appa in some quick dodges that wouldn’t take them far. Some of the projectiles hit them anyway, striking against the stone armor and bouncing off just as the first ballista bolt had. Aang had to trust that Long Feng could keep up with repairing the damage, because he needed his entire attention on what was ahead, now.

As Appa weathered the attack, the ground got closer and closer and closer.

Aang could now see individual people and tanks moving around on the surface as he guided Appa to a the particular part of the sinkhole’s cover. The people below were trying to adjust the siege weaponry, but it was too late. There was no way they could reorient the machinery fast enough to track Appa's fall. The tanks launched streams of fire in one last attack, but Aang was ready, letting go of the reins and flinging out an arc of wind that blew the flames back just long enough to escape them.
Then Aang kicked his boots down on Appa’s helmet. That was signal for the next phase of the plan.

The sinkhole lid was almost filling Aang’s vision, now.

Appa responded immediately, curling in the air to aim his tail forward and flapping it with all his bison-strength. The rushing winds grew stronger for a moment as Appa pushed back against the ground, then the air calmed as their fall started to slow.

Right on time, Long Feng lunged forward right beside Aang, punching both of his fists in front of him and giving a roar of exertion that was audible even over the screaming of the wind.

Aang grabbed Long Feng and gave a little hop as the helmet beneath them- and all of Appa's stone armor- detached and shot forward like pebbles out of a slingshot.

All those hard, dense, solid stone pieces impacted with the sinkhole's metal lid, and they did so with all the speed of Appa's powered-dive, enhanced by the pull of gravity, and backed up by the full power of Long Feng's Earthbending. Normally, even that much stone would have just bounced off the metal armor that the Fire Nation used on all its creations.

But backed up by this kind of speed?

This kind of force?

The stones tore through the metal like it was made of paper.

Of course, Appa was still going pretty fast, too. Fast enough that if the cover was still there, they would have all been crushed to death on impact. Aang grabbed the reins again and pulled with all his might, conveying the urgency of the situation to Appa. The big guy was flapping his tail towards the ground as fast and as hard as he could, continuing to bleed off speed but not before they had plunged straight into the sinkhole.

According to Long Feng, his agents had verified that all the damage the fortress had suffered had left the center of the sinkhole clear of most of its machinery. According to the plan, Aang and Appa would have plenty of room to decelerate enough to turn their dive back into a climb out of the sinkhole.

Aang hoped it was true.

Appa roared as he fell further into the sinkhole, but Aang could make out individual platforms and ramps as they passed by, and the air no longer sounded like a hurricane. He felt himself growing heavier, and heard everyone back in the saddle cry out as they crashed together into the front of the saddle.

With one last mighty cry, Appa arched his back and swooped up, rising out the darkness of the wrecked fortress to the top levels where a battle was already in progress.

Or actually, it looked like two battles on opposite sides of the sinkhole. Aang wasn't sure what was going on with the battle on his left, because all he could see over there were Fire Nation soldiers clustering together around something, but the one on the right was much clearer. He could see soldiers surrounding a group of women in robes of white and gold cut similarly to what Mother Malu was wearing.

The Airbenders.

Aang steered in that direction, but even as he brought Appa into a hover beside the platform, men in
the robes and hats of Long Feng's agents were rushing out of the shadows of the lower platforms to spring up in Earthbending-assisted jumps to join the fight. Long Feng himself hopped out of the saddle to take command, leaving Aang free to get the nuns' attention by taking a stance on Appa's head and swirling the air around them. Their eyes all followed the movement of the breeze as it twirled and rose back up to him. When he was sure they had spotted him, Aang smiled, waved, and called out, "I'm the Avatar, and I'm here to save you! When it's clear, everyone get aboard the sky bison and we'll fly out of here!"

The nuns' cheers rose out over the sounds of the Earthbenders taking down the soldiers.

With that settled, Aang looked around for Sokka or Mai. He couldn't see them anywhere around the nuns, and got a sinking feeling when he remembered the battle on the other side of the sinkhole. He turned to see if they might be over there, worried that it was too late and they had been overwhelmed.

Instead, he saw that the soldiers on that far platform were all sprawled as though unconscious, while a lone woman in pink was standing and staring back at him.

"The traitor," Mother Malu called out. "It's her!"

The woman in pink startled, and turned to run away.

No, Aang wouldn't allow that. This woman had gotten his new nation captured, and was probably responsible for Mai and Sokka not being here. He wouldn't let her escape. He jumped off of Appa's head and over the vastness of the sinkhole, using a wind to guide him to the hanging debris from the wrecked ceiling. He touched down on some of the twisted metal only long enough to jump up into a wind again, covering the rest of the distance over to the woman in pink.

He landed in front of her and took an attack stance. "You're not getting away with any of this."

She snapped into her own stance with fists held high, and they dashed towards each other at the exact same time. The woman threw punches at Aang even as he twisted and tried to blast her with air generated by palm strikes, but she rolled with the winds and rode them to gain some distance.

Further apart than before, they stopped and stared each other down.

Then the woman turned and jumped off the platform, leaping higher and farther than any normal person should have, and at the apex she seemed to get another boost that carried her to same hanging metal debris that Aang had used to cross the gap.

So she had figured out Airbending.

She was an Airbender for the Fire Nation.

Aang leaped after her, resolved to make sure the woman in pink answered for her crimes, one way or another.

TO BE CONTINUED
Raise Up the New

Chapter Summary

The characters finally get out of the goshdarn sinkhole.

Raise Up the New

Zhao blinked.

He had just seen an armored sky bison smash straight down through the metal shutter covering the sinkhole and somehow survive the process.

Silence descended upon the soldiers around him, and he could see that all movement had stopped on the other side of the sinkhole. Tiankeng Fortress's surface-level defenses were designed to repel attackers coming from around or above the sinkhole; they had nothing up here on the surface that could now be aimed into the sinkhole's interior, where the Avatar and who-know-how-many allies were free to collect the captured Airbenders and anyone else still down there.

That brought Zhao out of his shock. He could not lose those prisoners. "Get in there," he shouted to his soldiers, "and keep those Airbenders underground!"

As they moved out, Zhao hung back and watched to see what the rest of fortress defenders were going to do. He commanded the specific marines detached by Prince Admiral Iroh for this special mission, but all the other soldiers in the fortress were free to follow other orders. They had no reason to keep the Avatar alive.

Zhao, on the hand, did- even if he only had his suspicions as to why Iroh wanted the Avatar to remain an active threat.

He grabbed one of the colonels before she could run off and hissed, "Remember our orders. If we have to attack our countrymen in order to follow those orders, then we cannot hesitate. Do you understand?"

The colonel's eyes went wide only for a moment, and then she got control of herself and nodded.

Zhao let her go and looked to see if there was a tank nearby he could commandeer. Until it came to the point where he had to order an attack on the Fire Army, he intended to help pour fire down into that sinkhole.

And if it did come to an attack, his soldiers knew what to do.

There was no reason for him to stick around and deal with the consequences.

Fire and spears and arrows and chains all rained down into the sinkhole, but Ty Lee only had eyes for her pursuer, the bald boy in saffron clothes with the big blue arrow on his head. He scowled as he flew through the air towards her, carried by winds that responded to him like music under the command of a conductor.
He was a true Airbender.

The Avatar.

And he apparently wanted to smack Ty Lee silly.

She had tried to run, but he had followed. She had jumped out to the twisted, hanging wreckage of the ceiling that used to cover the sinkhole— the edges of it still clinging to the rock but the center having been ripped open by a swooping sky bison— but he had leapt after her. He would not be denied. He had crashed into an underground fortress in order to reach his fellow Airbenders, and now he was putting his house in order.

Mother Malu had called Ty Lee a traitor, and the Avatar had responded like an attack dog. Mai had said that she was working for him against the Fire Nation, and as much as Ty Lee loved her, Mai was not a nice person. So what did the Avatar employ her to do?

Mai had said she was having a rough year. Her normal fastidiousness had been worn away by experiences that had turned her aura black, and there had been no flashes of happier colors when she mentioned her allies.

The Avatar might be Ty Lee's only chance to find a new home now that she had been gifted (cursed?) with Airbending, but so far he did not seem like a very nice person, either.

She hoped she could stop him without hurting him too much.

She hoped she could stop him at all.

The Avatar landed on the same wide metal slat as Ty Lee, and he had barely touched one foot down before he kicked out to the side with the other and flicked a steel pole into the air in front of him. As the second foot touched down he grabbed the pole with both hands and spun it like a staff into a guard position, all without fully stopping. He shifted into a light run that barely disturbed the slat beneath his feet, charging at Ty Lee and readying his makeshift staff for a strike.

She raised her arms and squeezed her hands into fists. She was a Weapon of the Fire Nation, and would prove it again today.

Ty Lee let the Avatar strike first, waiting for him to swing one end of the staff into a quick strike at her feet. She hopped over that, and as expected found he following that up with another attack, a thrust with the other end at her center line that she curled around before throwing herself into a butterfly twirl over the pole that got her clear of it. The Avatar followed without hesitation, spinning the staff in front of him before directing it into a strike at her head from the right. It moved with enough speed that she knew attempting to block with any part of her body would result in broken bone, so instead she shifted her weight and slumped so that she was no longer in the staff's direct path.

As it passed over her with an ear-splitting whistle, she smacked at its underside with her right forearm to send it arcing wildly upward. She took the opportunity to throw a left-punch in at the center line of the Avatar's chest and set up for a right, but he kept control of his weapon and used the momentum of the part that had missed her to bring the other end around to smack both punches off course with quick swipes.

Ty Lee twirled away even as the Avatar did the same, and they orbited each other for a brief moment. She tried to shove in with her left shoulder, but he leaned back and lifted his right leg high enough to catch her, and then kicked out like a coiled spring to send her sailing up into the air.
But Ty Lee was at home in the air. Maybe not as much as him, but it was still her friend. She tucked into a ball with enough force to spin herself around, and when she struck another hanging slat, it was with flat feet and tucked legs, and she jumped off with her own spring-like power, shooting back at the Avatar. He had come to a stop by then and yelped at her sudden return before lifting his staff horizontally above his head in a last-ditch defense.

She could work with that. She reached out as she came down on him and grabbed the staff with both her hands, and then swung her legs up to spin her around like she was on a trapeze bar. She spun around the staff until she landed standing back-to-back with the Avatar, and then yanked with all her strength to lift him up and throw him over her head.

He cried out and fell down into the wide empty center of the sinkhole, still holding his stick.

Ty Lee jumped right in after him.

Part of her wondered what she was doing, continuing the offensive like this, but she told that part to be quiet and go sit in the corner. She had to show her strength, if she was going to avoid persecution without end. It was what she had learned from a lifetime of being hated for seeking uniqueness: unless people knew you would hit back, they wouldn't hesitate to beat you into submission or death, whichever came first.

That's what the Fire Nation had done to the Air Nation, a century ago. No doubt that was what the Air Nation had wanted to do to the Fire Nation first.

The Avatar slowed his own fall with his Airbending, the winds making his orange shawl snap and flutter like it was a crazed animal trying to escape. Ty Lee swung her arms forward to summon her own wind, a new skill she had taught herself since becoming a Bender, speeding herself towards her opponent. She crashed into him hard enough to make them both gasp, but she grabbed onto his staff with one hand and pulled herself close enough to throw a punch with the other.

When her fist connected with his body, she realized she had made a mistake; she missed the Qi point she had been aiming at. He threw a backhand at her head, but he encountered the same problem she had. Tumbling like this, buffeted by the air and twisting around the staff, they were moving too much to fight with any precision.

So they proceeded to fight with no precision at all.

Punches and kicks and smacks and shoves and pokes and chops and elbows were exchanged in a flurry, a dozen blows going back and forth in the space of a second. They fought a whole war in the time it took them to fall three stories and land on one of the wide ramps bolted to the side of the sinkhole. They both lost their grip on the staff with the first impact and went skipping in separate directions as the staff clattered away on its own trip.

Ty Lee managed to turn her motion into a roll and came to a stop in a crouching defensive stance, but her brain hadn't caught up with the rest of her body and when she opened her eyes the world was still spinning. She shook her head, trying to make the dizzy go away and come back another day, but instead she became conscious of waves of pain sweeping in with the languid fury of the tides as her body complained about everything she had just put it through.

Owie.

Jumping after enemies she had thrown down a sinkhole was a bad idea.

Ty Lee shook her head again and the world finally stopped doing loopy-loops around her. Her eyes
focused again and she saw that the Avatar was getting to his feet a short distance away. She sprang into a leap that would cover that distance, and threw another set of punches even as she landed right in front of him. He cried out with an, "Whooooaaaaa!" as he stumbled backwards, but she followed, keeping up her attack. He jerked and twitched as he stumbled, his eyes locked on her fists the whole time, and then he clapped his hands together to produce an explosion of air.

The gust was strong enough to knock Ty Lee back, and she couldn't help but give a, "Waaaaah!" as she went flying to land on her butt.

As she got to her feet and rubbed the sore spot, she resolved to figure out how to do that one.

Then she heard a rapid movement of air, almost like the propeller of a large ventilation unit, and looked up to see the Avatar riding a spinning ball of dusty wind straight at her.

She leaped high enough to reach the next ramp above her, grabbed the edge, swung herself up to curl so that her feet were propped up against the ramp's thick side, and then jumped out across the sinkhole again. If he had to ride around the whole edge of the gap to get to her, she'd have time to figure out how to deal with his approach.

Instead, pushing herself over the vast space with a wind summoned by her outstretched arms, she looked down and saw that the Avatar's little scooter-thing was carrying him around fast enough to get to the other side ahead of her.

Ty Lee bit her lip and clenched her fists. She couldn't change her course now.

The Avatar reached the other side, executed a quick turn on his air-ball, and rode it into a leap that would take him up and out to meet her in mid-air.

Katara was in a hole in the ground, in a pit where the Fire Nation had built another of its engines of destruction, a dark place where a new nation had been locked away to wither.

She felt like she had come home.

She could leave her borrowed hat back in Appa's saddle as she leaped out to join the battle, and ignore the glimpse of the sky visible through the torn metal ceiling. It was a bright but distant thing that could have been a painting on a solid ceiling for all it mattered right now.

The Airbender nuns had been surrounded by Fire Nation soldiers when she had joined Long Feng's Earthbenders in battle. Katara’s waterskins were full of the same water that had nearly collapsed a cave on top of her, and she unleashed it in defense of the nuns before she even landed. She focused on protecting the women, dousing any fireballs flying in their direction and flinging icicles to block more solid weapons, while the Earthbenders took on the Fire Army directly. After all, they didn't need to conserve their element; they were surrounded by it.

Katara had used to watch the Earthbenders in Haru's village, had seen how they moved and sparred. What Long Feng's followers did was similar in certain ways, but very different in how it looked. In place of the grand, powerful movements were quicker, snapping gestures. Instead of boulders, these Earthbenders threw fist-sized stones. When it came to a choice between defense and offense, they went on the attack every time.

It wasn't until all the enemies within the sinkhole were defeated that Katara realized what their fighting style reminded her of- the Fire Army itself.

They fought like Firebenders.
But they were Bending Earth, and wearing green. That was what was important, what allowed Katara to differentiate in the chaos of battle.

Then that part of the fighting was over, all enemies were down, and it was time to prepare for an escape. Too bad there were more Firebenders outside the sinkhole throwing fire down through the tear in the ceiling.

Katara ran over to the nuns, now clustered together against the wall, and waved her hands. "Hey, we need to get out of here! Everyone onto the sky bison."

That caught their attention. She heard chattering, and even a gasp of, "It is a sky bison!" Some of the Earthbenders pulled protective walls out of the sides of the sinkhole while other threw rocks back up at the Fire Army, and Long Feng was directing them to form a continuous cover over to where Appa waited.

Katara turned back to the Airbenders. "This isn't going to be easy. Appa- the sky bison- can't carry too much weight, and there's only so much room in the saddle. But we have rope waiting, so we need you to use it to anchor yourselves to the holes in the saddle's side, and when we take off, you'll have to use your Airbending to make yourselves lighter. Can you all do that?"

The nuns made sounds of affirmation, and one of them stepped forward. "We can. I am Sister Matagi. You are with the Avatar?"

Katara nodded. "And we have Mother Malu in the saddle waiting for you. Now, you all need to move-"

"I saw the Avatar chase Ty Lee into the depths of the sinkhole. He needs to be stopped. Ty Lee is not a friend, but neither is she an enemy right now."

"But-" Katara looked at the nuns, and they were all nodding. "But Mother Malu said she was the traitor, the one who."

Sister Matagi cut Katara off with a wave of her hand. "I have no time for this. If you will not stop the fight, I will do so. Sisters, follow the Waterbender." Then she jumped, a leap that no normal person ever could have managed, sailing up and then swooping down the center of the sinkhole.

Katara tried to call out after her, but then shook her head. There was nothing she could do now. Aang would have to handle it. She grabbed the nearest nun and guided the older woman behind the cover that the Earthbenders were maintaining, moving towards Appa, but then the platform beneath her shook, and one of the large stone walls ahead crumbled, allowing a fireball to arc through the defenses and splash down on the platform.

The fire had not yet gone out before the platform began tilting.

"The sinkhole’s structure is collapsing," Long Feng shouted. "We have to leave now."

Katara nodded, threw her water forward to form a wall of ice that would continue to protect the escaping Airbenders, and hurried them all along.

She had no sooner reached Appa with the first wave of escapees when one whole side of the sinkhole- a shard the size of a palace- broke off and fell into the darkness.

Aang had never actually fought an Airbender before.
Sure, he had sparred against his fellow monks, and got into arguments with the other kids. He had even participated in a formal debate as part of a visit to the Northern Air Temple, something that had turned a boring lesson about some controversial bit of bison-herding history into a fun event.

But now he was locked in a brawl with the Airbender Traitor girl, and he wasn't sure he was going to win.

She was definitely a novice when it came to Airbending. Her fighting style was already heavily focused on dodging and jumping, but it lacked the fundamental circularity of the monks' Baguazhang style. Yet she was still defending against all of Aang's attacks and her punches moved with such speed and force that they made the air snap. She had an attack drive completely unlike anything he had encountered when sparring with his friends, and also a capacity for movement and retreat that no Firebender ever could have managed.

That's why he was trying to keep her up in the air.

Having cut off her latest jumping retreat with the speed of his air-scooter, Aang was now leaping up to meet her in the center of the sinkhole. He coiled his right leg, and waited until they passed each other to snap out a kick that struck with a burst of Airbending.

The Traitor used her own Bending to spin herself in midair, taking the kick with a forearm block that transformed the force of the blow into more spinning and even used the Airbending strike that came with it to gain some height on her leap.

And then Aang was sailing past her, landing on the opposite side of the sinkhole. He was as far from victory as he was from the Traitor.

And he still didn't know what she had done to Mai and Sokka.

Aang was about summon another air-scooter when everything around him shook and groaned, and the platform beneath his feet fell along with the whole wall it was attached to.

He was barely able to jump in time, instinct driving him into the center of the sinkhole again.

And of course he found the Traitor already in the middle of her own jump in pursuit of him, the surprised expression on her face revealing that she had not been expecting to see him returning to meet her for another joust, never mind find herself now heading towards a disaster area in the making instead of a safe landing.

Even so, she punched out again as Aang passed her, but he puffed out his cheeks and blew down with a burst of Airbending that popped him up and over her. As soon as Aang landed on the sinkhole's far side, he turned and watched to see if the Traitor would survive.

He hoped she did. He hated her, but he didn't want another Airbender to die ever again.

And his eyes went wide as the Traitor did indeed land on a platform just before it fell away with its supporting piece of wall, but she leaped straight up to another falling platform and then jumped again to a piece of falling stone and she was running and jumping up a collapsing wall.

Aang summoned an air-scooter and hopped on. He aimed it straight at the closest stable wall, pumping enough speed into his travel so that instead of crashing, a quick shift of weight was enough to race straight up the wall. Gravity pulled at him, slowing him, so he eased into that pull and let it guide his air-scooter into a spiral up the walls of the sinkhole, curving his path back towards the Traitor and the collapsing stone while maintaining enough speed to keep from falling.
He wasn't sure what he was trying to accomplish, whether he was going to save her or attack her, but he just knew that he needed to get close.

And even though she was busy running up a series of falling rocks no bigger than her head, feet barely touching each one before pushing off with just enough power to kick the stone downward even faster and propel herself to the next one in line, she had enough spare attention and energy to grab for Aang as soon as he reached her, clinging to him and pressing herself against his back as he sped on his way.

Whatever he had been expecting, it wasn't *that*. Panic seized him at finding her on top of him and wrapping her arms around his neck, and he twisted to try to get out of her grasp, unbalancing him atop his scooter and falling prey to that annoying gravity again so that he fell into his own tornado ball.

Aang endured a chaotic moment of being spun and tumbled along with the Traitor until he had no sense of direction whatsoever, and then the ball of wind collapsed and spat him out with speeds not unlike Appa's sneezes.

He liked to think it was his skill that made sure he wound up flying upward, but he wasn't *that* good at lying.

He and the Traitor crashed together through wrecked scaffolding and support structures, and he knew they'd find no safety here. "Push against the wall," he growled, and threw his hands in that direction to unleash all the Airbending power he could muster.

Something about that reached the Traitor clinging to him, and she let go of his neck with one arm and threw her own palm strike at the crumbling wall at the same time to let loose with a burst of wind.

And so they shot themselves out into open space, to the other side of the sinkhole, and crashed together on a stable platform.

Aang and the Traitor girl hugged each other before shoving apart and attacking again.

The Traitor tried to hit him with a left arrow fist, but this time Aang was ready for it, taking a half step that moved him out of the way *just enough* but still keeping him close enough so that he could wrap his right arm around her extended limb and trap it. She tried to use her free fist to punch at his right shoulder, but Aang slapped up with his own free hand to knock the attack out of the way—and that's when the Traitor swept at his feet with her left leg, hooking him and twisting him off balance so that he lost his grip on her and they both crashed to the floor.

As they were getting to their feet again, a woman in torn robes of white and gold—so like those of Mother Malu—appeared between them from above, her landing softened by winds that Aang knew all too well. He and the Traitor both looked to the new arrival.

And then the nun raised both of her arms to poke Aang and the Traitor hard right on their foreheads.

Aang plopped right back down the floor, and he heard the Traitor do the same. "Ow," he grunted. "Why did you do that?"

The nun looked down without a trace of sympathy. "I am Sister Matagi, helper to Mother Malu, and both of you are acting like cranky children. You are not enemies. The Avatar is the guardian of balance, and Ty Lee is many things but no ally to the Fire Nation right now. You two will *stop fighting this instant or so help me I will leave you in this sinkhole!*"
Aang blinked. "But- but Mother Malu said-"

Sister Matagi poked his head again. "Ty Lee is like family to your friend Mai. She would do nothing to hurt her." Then she turned to the Trait- to Ty Lee and delivered another forehead poke. "And you try talking things out before jumping into a fight."

Aang rubbed his forehead. For the first time in a long time, everything was making sense. Being yelled at by a strict nun was a sign that all was finally right in the world.

The guilty feeling in his chest over the enormity of his mistake was all too familiar, as well.

Ty Lee rubbed her forehead and bowed as well as she could while sprawled on the floor in a show of remorse and obedience. "I'm sorry, Sister Matagi. I guess I panicked."

The nun nodded with only the slightest trace of satisfaction. "Good. Now, we must leave. The sinkhole is collapsing, and the others should be ready to flee now."

"What," the Avatar said as he stood up, "about Mai and Sokka? I haven't seen them, and I thought- we need to take them with us!"

Sister Matagi shook her head. "Your friend Mai went to investigate something before the Fire Nation attacked us again. I have not seen her since. I know nothing of this 'Sokka' but-"

Ty Lee was up on her feet in an instant. "He got captured! He pushed me and Mai off a roof and told us to free the Airbenders and then Zhao's soldiers got him! I hope-" She shook her head, needing more than hope right now. "He had to have been taken along when the Fire Army evacuated the sinkhole." She looked over to the Avatar, and found his big eyes welling with tears. "I'm sorry. He didn't give us choice, and I don't know where he could be now. Him or Mai." Ty Lee felt her own eyes starting to water. After the insult she had given Mai by not trusting her, now she had let her friend be captured by the Fire Nation, too.

Sister Matagi's finger jammed into Ty Lee's forehead again. "No crying! We have to leave, and you can rescue your friends another day." She grabbed Ty Lee's arm with one hand and the Avatar's with the other, and leaped.

With no choice now, Ty Lee kicked downward to create her own Airbending lift, and she could feel the Avatar doing something even more complicated with motions of his free arm that swirled the air and formed a rising tornado. The three of them sped up through the sinkhole, getting closer to the sunlight spearing down through the wrecked ceiling to reveal the war that was being fought at the top levels.

Fire and rock filled the air as Sister Matagi guided their landing to one particular platform where the biggest fuzzy thing Ty Lee had ever seen waited. Easily twice the size of a Fire Army tank, it roared when it saw them with a volume that shook loose more of the sinkhole walls, and Ty Lee was ready to yank her arm free and run away again.

Except the Avatar broke free first, and he ran towards the animal, throwing his arms wide and giving a hug to the creature's massive nose.

Oh.

This must be the sky bison.

Ty Lee instantly wanted to hug it, too.
But Sister Matagi shoved her, saying, "Get aboard," and Ty Lee remembered that there was no time. She ran to the creature and flipped up to its back, where the other nuns were clustered. They were in some kind of a boat-like saddle, most of them pressed as close together as newborn camel-puppies but some hanging off the saddle's sides and even clutching the bison's tail. Ty Lee had no sooner landed on one of the bison's six shoulders than a nun—little Ata—was tying a rope around her waist.

Then the Avatar said something that sounded like, "Yip, yip," and a girl's voice shouted, "Everyone Airbend with all you have!"

And then they flew.

The sky bison rose up out of the sinkhole, riding the winds being generated by all the nuns the way a manatee-lion glides through the ocean depths. Fire and arrows zoomed past them, and Ty Lee could feel the heat of their passage, but the bison's powerful muscles kept it undulating through the air currents with power like a machine press, and the winds being created by all the nuns worked together to sweep most of the attacks off target.

Inspired, Ty Lee brought her own hands up, clenched them into her signature arrow fists, one knuckle in the center of each extended for precise application of force, and began shadow-boxing at the incoming flames and arrows. Though her fists struck nothing but empty air, that air responded to her, jabbing out in mimicry of her punches to snap arrows in half and puncture fireballs.

The flight seemed to go on forever, and it might have been the greatest experience of Ty Lee's life. It was like her performances in the circus on the tightropes, except there was no rope, and instead of being by herself above everything, she was part of a team working in tandem to survive.

Eventually, the sky bison left the ground far behind, and the attacks stopped. Ty Lee was free to look down at the world without fear, watching Tiankeng Fortress pass away beneath her. The ugly fortress gave way to rocky landscapes brought to life by luscious green plant-life. It all glowed in the sunlight, and she was so transfixed by this unique perspective on the world that she only noticed that the sky bison was moving through clouds when the moist wisps brushed her skin.

Ty Lee had often wondered what clouds felt like, thinking them like pillows or feathers, but discovering now that they were actually bright mists willing to welcome her with a refreshing embrace almost made her faint from the shock of happiness.

By the time the sky bison landed again, Ty Lee was a sobbing mess. She had gained the sky, but in exchange she had been forced to give up Mai.

The sky bison had no sooner been lost to sight in the sky before Zhao was ordering his soldiers away from Tiankeng Fortress and away from this failure. The Avatar was gone, alive, but the Airbender prisoners had escaped.

Zhao needed to report this to Prince Iroh, needed to deflect blame as much as he could, and get new orders. By the time anyone else identified him as being at fault, he would hopefully have more victories to make up for everything that had happened here.

After all, he certainly hadn’t designed the defenses in the fortress. If two Weapons of the Fire Nation could survive them, then that was hardly his fault. Who kept losing these Weapons, anyway?

Well, Prince Ozai was a good candidate.

It wasn't until they had gotten away from Tiankeng Fortress and landed in a sheltering valley that
Katara had been able to ask Aang where her brother was, and his explanation had frozen her blood in her veins. "What do you mean, he was captured?"

Aang looked over to the girl in pink, the supposed Airbender traitor (who turned out actually wasn't or something) where she was curled up on the ground crying. Some of the nuns were trying to console her, but she wasn't responding to any of them.

Aang looked back to Katara. "I'm not sure of the details, but the Tr- Ty Lee said he gave himself up to buy her and Mai time to free the Airbenders. She thinks he's their captive somewhere."

Katara shook her head. That didn't make any sense! "Then why did we leave?!

"Because- Aang gave a slow, heavy shrug. "Because we couldn't stay."

Katara reached out and shoved him. He looked at her with wide, surprised eyes as he stumbled back, but she pulled her hat low and refused to accept his lies. "Sure, we had to stay and fly into that hole to save your Airbenders, but when it's my brother, then it's too dangerous!"

He blinked and rubbed his eyes. "That's not how it is. You know that."

"Do I?!"

"I left Mai behind, too. Do you think I don't care about either one?" He blinked again, and a pair of tears ran down his cheeks. "That'd I'd replace any of you?"

And with that, the ice on her heart shattered into wet snow. "Oh, Aang." She let him draw her into a hug, and kept murmuring, "I'm sorry," until she thought he might believe it.

As they waited for Long Feng and his Earthbenders to meet them- there hadn't been room on Appa for everyone, and it made sense for Earthbenders to be the ones to make their way through the tunnels- they took care of the survivors. Appa was relieved of his saddle and allowed to nap, after all the weighed-down flying he had done. As Momo flew around and hunted bugs, Katara and Aang tried to make the Airbender nuns comfortable. Katara healed any injuries they had, and all the camping supplies and blankets were laid out for everyone to rest on.

Mother Malu had laughed and greeted each of her sisters one by one.

Meanwhile, Katara was the first to approach Ty Lee.

The Airbender 'traitor' was probably really cute, Katara decided, when her face wasn't smeared with tears and snot and mud, and her hair wasn't a tangled wet mess hanging in a half-escaped ponytail. "Are you okay? Do you have any injuries?"

Ty Lee had stopped crying a while ago, but she still blinked at Katara's question as if she only had one ear in reality. "What?"

"Are you hurt? I'm a Waterbender healer. I can help you."

Ty Lee shook her head and then lowered it into her hands.

Katara sat down next to the other girl. "Sister Matagi told us all about what happened in the sinkhole. That you helped everyone, and what good friends you are with Mai." She left out how Matagi had also shared her views of Ty Lee's past. Katara didn't exactly approve of all of Ty Lee's life choices, but neither had she approved of Mai's. What was important to her right now was the decision and ability to change. "We're not clear on some of the details. What really happened after Zhao's troops
came for you all?"

Ty Lee raised her head just enough to look at Katara with wet eyes. "I tried to stop him. I really did. I
told the soldiers who I was and tried to intimidate them. You know, how royalty would do it, or
those other girls from the Academy? But it didn't work. They didn't hurt me, but they took me and
brought me to Zhao. He was worried about politics stuff because of my family and me being a
Weapon, but he still locked me up. I thought if I hid my Airbending, then maybe Princess Azula
would get me freed, and I could maybe ask for the nuns to be set free, too, but- but-" She lowered
her head again, and her next words were muffled. "But I'm a stupid airhead who doesn't understand
how anything works. I just get my friends hurt and killed. Like the circus. Like- Like M- M-" Ty
Lee's next breath came out like a sob.

Katara leaned over, put an arm around the other girl, and said, "Hey, you might not be the brightest,
but that's no call for using slurs."

Ty Lee looked up again, confusion evident on her face. "Huh?"

"You know, 'airhead?' And you're an Airbender. No need to be like that."

Ty Lee blinked.

Katara smiled.

Ty Lee blinked again. "That was terrible."

"I know. My brother is really the one who makes the jokes. I hope we get him back soon."

Finally, Ty Lee smiled back. "I'll help you save him. He's one of the most generous people I've ever
met. I don't think he even really liked Mai or me, but he risked himself to save us. And if he's funny,
too, then I definitely want him around." Her smiled turned a little sharp.

Katara put on an expression of mock sternness. "Hey, my brother is off-limits to circus acrobats. He
deserves a girl with a much more boring job."

Ty Lee giggled.

Katara angled her hat back a little, satisfied. She might not be able to help Sokka right now, but she
could at least make people feel a little better.

And if that resulted in another Weapon of the Fire Nation on their side, and a new team capable of
rescuing Sokka and Mai and then saving the world, then that was great, too.

Aang quickly gathered everyone once Long Feng and the other Earthbenders arrived at their little
sanctuary, but the word was not good.

"We found no one else in the sinkhole," Long Feng said, sitting down on a stone he had raised from
the ground, "so we finished collapsing it and retreated. The Fire Army was already pulling back
when that first wall went down, so they escaped with few casualties beyond what they suffered
during our battle. So I consider it likely that your friends are still out there, somewhere, safe but
captive."

Aang supposed that was good news. "Then how do we find them? Once Appa is rested, we could
go back and try to sneak into whatever camps they have set up, and-"
"Avatar," Long Feng interrupted, "you have to understand the reality of how this works. With their fortress gone, the Fire Nation will be angry and cautious. They'll expect you to come back, and they'll already have moved the prisoners to safe locations. Even now, reinforcements are probably on their way, and news of the loss of the fortress is already spreading across the world on the Army's telegraph lines. I'm sorry, but there is no easy solution to this."

Aang looked to Katara, and then to Ty Lee. He saw similar hurt expressions on both their faces, hurt that echoed the twisting in his own gut. "So you're saying we can do nothing."

And then Long Feng actually smiled. "Now might be a good time to become better acquainted, Avatar. My Earthbenders and I aren't just unusually capable rebels. We were once the elite protectors of Ba Sing Se's culture. When the city fell, we escaped, and we took all of our skills and intelligence with us. Our secondary objective today was to destroy Tiankeng Fortress, but our primary goal was the acquisition of certain intelligence. Finding things out, you might say, is our specialty. We are the Dai Li."

Aang felt a slow grin creeping up on his face. "So you're saying you can find out what happened to Mai and Sokka."

Long Feng nodded. "The Fire Nation will be sloppy, after the loss of their fortress. My people will be listening, and hunting down the specific information you want. However, this will take some time. The Dai Li do not rush things, and that is why we have survived and thrived. That's how we maintained order in Ba Sing Se throughout the war. So I want you and your friends to rest, to figure out what you can do while we wait for news. And on that note, I am hoping that you can help me with a little project."

That sounded reasonable. Just camping out would get boring fast, and Sokka and Mai would want them to keep trying to make the world a better place, he was sure. "What project?"

Long Feng leaned forward, and spoke in an intense whisper. "I'm sure you've felt how wrong the world has gone, since the war ended. Ashlands filled with ghosts, reports of monsters from legend, sickness amongst people forced to leave their ancestral homes- the world is suffering for the Fire Nation's greed."

Aang nodded. This was exactly what Roku had told him about, what he had been trying to find ways to fix. Guru Pathik had tried to teach him how, but that had just ended in tragedy. And sure, it was great that there were more Airbenders in the world, but Aang wasn't sure how that was supposed to actually fix stuff like evil ghosts.

Long Feng said, "Amongst the culture of Ba Sing Se were writings, the old lore of the Avatars and the Earth Kingdom's greatest shamans. The Dai Li rescued those writings from the city's fall, and I think I've found a way to restore things."

"Restore?"

"To take the haunted ashland that Ba Sing Se has become and save it. To free the ghosts back to the reincarnation cycle, or maybe even restore them to life! After all, the ash is just another form for their lost bodies. Who knows what heights we can achieve with the right materials and the rituals I have found?"

Aang blinked. Restore ghosts to life? That sounded impossible, sounded bizarre. But Long Feng was saying it was only one possibility; he was just speculating, really. Putting the ghosts in the ashlands to rest sounded more manageable, and exactly what Aang was trying to do. "What kind of materials do you need?"
"The reason I came to Tiankeng Fortress was because of that Commander Zhao who has given you repeated trouble. He oversaw the mining of platinum at the South Pole, and even as he's chased you, he's received regular reports about the Fire Nation's platinum assets. One of my agents recovered a report about deliveries to a certain storehouse, and a significant amount of platinum that we can liberate for our own purposes. You see, the metal is-"

"I know how special platinum is," Aang interrupted. "It does strange things to spirit energy. The Fire Nation is using it to hunt spirit creatures, and my friend Mai used a platinum knife to fight-" He couldn't stop a wince from overtaking him as he remembered the Airbender undead they had encountered at the Southern Air Temple. "She fought unnatural enemies."

Long Feng leaned back and nodded. "Exactly, Avatar. So will you help me, while I help you find and rescue your friends?"

Aang looked to Katara. She nodded and said, "When we bring Sokka back, I want to show him a better world. I'm in."

Aang was going to agree and pledge himself to Long Feng, but then he remembered the other person standing nearby. The Airbender from the Fire Nation. The girl he had almost hurt. A stranger who might be a powerful ally, or might be a profound disappointment. He looked over to Ty Lee and said, "What about you?"

Ty Lee startled, as if she had thought no one knew she was there. "You want me to help steal this platinum metal? To fix the ashlands?"

Aang nodded. "You see, the Fire Nation-"

"I'm in."

Aang paused before he could explain anything. "You are? Just like that?"

Ty Lee hugged herself and nodded. "I lived with the nuns in an ashland for a while, remember? I want to help you bring peace to those voices. For so long I've just been concerned about- about bringing balance to myself. I didn't care about anything else. I just ignored the war. But I've always known that the Fire Nation has some things wrong. It's why the other Airbenders all hate me." She blinked, and blushed. "I think it's why you hate me, Avatar. I don't want to hurt the people of the Fire Nation, but I want to start doing what I can to help the ones they've hurt."

Aang was going to say that of course he didn't hate anyone, but opened his mouth to speak and then stopped. He had kind of hated Ty Lee when he saw her in the sinkhole. And that hate had nearly made him hurt this confused girl who now wanted to help him. "Okay," he said at last. "I think that will be good for all of us."

Long Feng eyed Ty Lee for a moment, and then shrugged. "I thank you all for your help. Now, it's time for us to rest, and then we'll have to see about relocating. I have a base that we can use as shelter. It has room enough for the nuns, and it's close enough to our platinum target."

That sounded good to Aang. It just showed how the world worked- they had lost Mai and Sokka in that sinkhole, had suffered and nearly died, but they had emerged with both the beginnings of a revived Air Nation and capable new friends who could help Aang in his quest. The world never took without giving, never gave without taking.

And the Air Nomads had taught how to both receive and let go.

But that didn't mean he couldn't find his friends again someday.
Sokka was becoming an expert on waking up in dark caves after a beating, and he was not happy about it.

Nor was he happy about the chains around his wrists and ankles, or the fact that when he followed those chains with his hands, he found them sunk deep into stone floor as though they had been dunked into liquid, and then the liquid hardened into stone.

Nor did he have any affection for the fact that when he called out, "Hellooooooo," his voice echoed in a way that told him the walls and ceiling formed little more than a closet around him.

He was almost happy when a light appeared in front of him, revealing a small barred window in the door of what was apparently his prison cell. But then a man's face appeared in that light on the other side of the bars, the face of the man who had knocked Sokka out in Zhao's office rather than providing a normal rescue like normal people did. The man wore a cone hat with a gold spike at the top, and the man's hands were encased in what looked like segmented stone gloves.

"Hello," the man said. "You just make yourself comfortable. You have a long stay ahead of you, and a busy schedule. You and the Fire Nation trash have lots to learn before the two of you can go back to the Avatar."

Sokka was definitely not happy to hear that.

Not one slushing bit.

TO BE CONTINUED
Platinum Raiders

Chapter Summary

The heroes commit an act of piracy, and Sokka makes a new friend.

Platinum Raiders

It had been a week since Katara had lost her brother in the sinkhole, and the pain was still sharp in her heart.

She stood now beside a babbling river in a densely-canopied forest, seeking solace in the Waterbending arts but finding nothing. The movements, the philosophy, the stances- all of it was knowledge given to her by Master Hama in the scorching bowels of Crescent Island, whispered from cage to cage and demonstrated when they weren't watched. Katara had trained in Waterbending for years without ever manipulating so much as a drop of liquid, until the day when she at last escaped her imprisonment-

-until the day when Sokka came to rescue her, bringing her a gift of full waterskins and freedom.

Becoming one with the water of this river now, moving it and fighting with it, just reminded Katara of her missing brother all the more.

It didn't help that there was little to distract her, here in this forest. Long Feng had stressed the dangers of this mission, of the desperate need for diligence and timing, but his briefing had utterly failed to prepare her for all the waiting that seemed be necessary before the Dai Li went into action. She had been forced to find her own distractions, but it never pushed away the aching emptiness for long.

Sighing, Katara turned back to her sparring partner. "So how many are there?"

Ty Lee shrugged. "Too many to count. Here, I'll show you."

The two girls had been filling the time by becoming familiar with each other's fighting styles. They might be fighting as allies soon, and needed to be prepared. Just past this obscuring forest, past Katara's vision where the river met the ocean, a Fire Nation settlement belched smoke and radiated heat. According to Long Feng, it was to that settlement that the Fire Nation was shipping its raw ore from the South Pole and other nearby mines to be melted and cast into ingots. Thankfully, Long Feng's plan didn't require Katara or her friends to infiltrate the settlement or even the forge; she'd had more than enough of Fire Nation installations for a long time, after Tiankeng Fortress.

She had lost more than enough to Fire Nation fortresses already.

But until word came that it was time to put Long Feng's plan into action, there was nothing for Katara to do but wait, practice her Waterbending, be reminded of the brother she had failed, and learn something about the newest Weapon of the Fire Nation to join the Avatar's quest.

Ty Lee stepped over to Katara and grabbed her left arm, and then began tapping spots all up and down the limb. "Here, here, here, and here." She leaned over and moved down to Katara's leg.
"Here and here, too. This one is a really good one. And then there's this one, this one, this one, and this one on this side." She stood up again, moved so that she was standing behind Katara, and began tapping up and down her back. "There's lots more spots starting here, here, here, here-"

"Okay, I get the idea" Katara said, hopping away. With each spot Ty Lee had pointed out, she had tapped Katara's skin to illustrate it, and just that much contact had sent shivers racing up through Katara's bones. She couldn't help shuddering, imagining how it would feel to be punched on one of those spots with the kind of strength in Ty Lee's deceptively lean arms. "I never realized there were so many Qi meridians in a body. Can my Waterbending heal the blockage?"

Ty Lee's eyebrows furrowed. "I'm not sure? Your healing works by using a person's Qi to promote the healing right?"

"More or less."

"Then probably not." Ty Lee gave a shrug. "The Qi itself would be disturbed after I hit a meridian, so I don't think your healing could even make use of it until it's restored."

Katara bit her lip. This 'Dim Mak' was a seriously powerful fighting style. It was a good thing it was such a hard skill to learn, or else the Fire Nation wouldn't have needed a hundred years and a comet to conquer the world. "How did you learn to fight like this, anyway?" She moved to the edge of the river and took a Waterbending stance, summoning a small stream to fly up and hover over her outstretched arms, just like she had tried when Sokka first gave her the waterskins.

Ty Lee took her own fighting stance, but didn't close the distance. She was giving Katara a chance to attack first. "Well, there's this hidden temple in the Poison Jungles on Souhou Island that can only be found by the pure-hearted."

"Sure," Katara grunted as she shifted her body and flung her right arm into a slash. The water hovering above the limb snapped forward like the tongue of a turtle-frog, whipping at Ty Lee's feet. But the acrobat was already dodging with a series of butterfly kicks, chattering the whole time. "A mute master lives in the temple who will give visitors a quest to prove their strength."

"Make sense." Katara rolled forward and crossed her outstretched arms, creating a pincer attack with both ends of her water supply.

"Once you satisfy the quest," Ty Lee said as she crouched under the reaching tentacles and then sprang up in a forward-flipping jump, "the master's teaches by movement alone, since he can't talk."

Katara found Ty Lee landing right in front of her, and tried to summon her water back to form some kind of defense, but it was no use. Katara's belly got an idle poke- no Qi-blocking punch, but just a normal poke like one would use in a tickle attack- that sent her tripping backwards to fall into the river.

When Katara resurfaced, Ty Lee was stretching on the riverbank and immediately returned to her explanation with, "It took me about a whole summer to learn the basics from the master, but he gave me some scrolls to take home with forms to practice. Of course, the writing on the scrolls is only visible after meditating on the swirl of the cosmos for about an hour."

"Of course." Katara spat out some water and climbed back up to dry land. "So how many people have managed to do all that?"

Ty Lee paused in her stretching, and her face pinched into a frown. "Just me and one other person that I know of, another Weapon of the Fire Nation. But not everyone would go out of their way to
tell people about those kinds of skills, you know?"

Katara was going to ask about this other Weapon of the Fire Nation, but she was distracted by Aang's sudden arrival. He burst from the thick foliage of the forest to skid to a stop just at the edge of the river.

His gaze was drawn to Ty Lee first, and the excitement on his face faded for a moment. Katara had been training with Ty Lee all week, but Aang had yet to so much as spar with her. And he certainly hadn't trained her to make better use of her Airbending.

But Katara knew all too well the kind of pain Aang had to be feeling around Ty Lee, who was supposed to be Mai's most beloved friend. It wouldn't be all that different from what she felt about Sokka every time she used her Waterbending.

Aang quickly recovered once he turned his gaze to Katara, and the excited light returned to his eyes. "Time to get dressed," he said. "Agent Zhuang says the ship is here."

Katara grinned as she used a quick bit of Waterbending to remove all the dripping water from her skin and wrappings and fling it back into the river. It was time to strike back at the Fire Nation after they took her brother and Mai from her.

They would learn the vengeance of the Water Tribe.

Mai knew what was being done to her. Keeping her in darkness, denying her all contact with other people, not giving her enough food and water to satisfy her hunger, waking her up with loud noises whenever she fell asleep, even keeping her in an underground cell with no access to any timekeeping devices or methods - it was all straight out the handbook for preparing a prisoner for interrogation. Azula had discussed such tactics, and Mai had remembered them in case she ever wound up on the receiving end. The Fire Nation wasn't the only group out there in the business of breaking people.

Unfortunately, it turned out that knowing what was happening didn't stop it from happening, and didn't stop it from driving her crazy.

That thought made Mai laugh, maybe a little too loudly, her body shaking enough to rattle the chains that connected her wrists to the floor. Now she knew how Mother Malu felt. Maybe Katara could restore Mai's sanity, too, with a little helpful Waterbending.

If she ever saw Katara again.

If she ever saw Ty Lee, or Aang, or even Sokka again.

Not for the first time, she found herself suddenly breaking out into sobs. This rattled the chains, too.

When the door opened with a loud scraping sound, Mai was so startled that she screamed. Her heart hammered in her chest so powerfully that she was afraid it was going to burst, and she was left gasping on the floor of her cell as dull, eye-searing green light shone in through the opening, and a man in a spiked cone hat and black robes walked in.

"Who-" Mai panted for more breath before she could continue her question. "Who are you?"

The man said nothing. None of them ever did. He simply leaned over, grabbed Mai's chains where they were sunk into the floor, and lifted them out as if the stone ground itself had suddenly liquefied. Her chains turned out to be a single set of links joining her wrists together, the center having been buried in the floor by an Earthbender.
The man then turned and walked straight out of the cell, never having said a word. The door remained open behind him.

Another tactic: the man wanted Mai to follow him of her own free will, to choose to play his game and submit to his authority. And she knew it was only the illusion of choice, that to remain sitting in her cell until she died wasn’t really an option, and the door would remain open for as long as it took her to run out of patience.

Just because she knew what was being done to her didn’t mean she could do anything about it.

Mai rose with the clanking of her chains and walked out of her cell.

The man was waiting just outside. The corridor around him was made of the same dark stone as the cell, but out here there were green crystal torches lining the walls at intervals, leading off into the distance. Without a word, the man began walking down the corridor, not even looking back at Mai.

She followed, knowing she had no choice.

The man took a deliberate path through the underground complex, turning with confidence down certain hallways. Mai found all the other paths blocked by other men in the stupid hats and robes, all standing silently and denying her ability to do anything but follow their compatriot. Eventually, her guide came to a stop in a room that seemed to be nothing more than a larger copy of her empty cell in construction. A stone chair rose up out of the ground in the back, and some kind of circular metal rigging stood waist-high in the center. No doubt her hosts wanted Mai to sit in the chair and watch a show.

Instead she spun and whipped her chains to her guide’s face.

But he was ready for that, no expression on his face as he caught the chains with a single hand covered in segmented black stone, and then the ground itself was moving beneath Mai’s feet to spin her around, the speed of it whipping her own chains to wrap around her.

She continued to struggle, but in short order was made to sit in the chair. The man used his Earthbending to turn the segments of his gloves into binding for Mai’s arms and head, and then he took a position at the center of the metal rigging.

Another goofball in the robes and hat brought a lantern with old-fashioned, warm candlelight inside of it. The lantern fit neatly into the metal track, and then her guide set it into motion with a wave of his hands. The light moved around him as his friend left, the motion steady and boring.

It went on like that for a while, and Mai grew sleepy. She knew she needed to stay awake, that this was probably part of some kind of crazy Earth Kingdom interrogation, and her mental health was in great danger in this room, perhaps more than even in her cell.

"You ash-lickers," she growled as loudly as she could to chase away the eerie silence, "are all going to die. Someone is going to come for me, and then I’m going to cut my way through every single one of you and mix your blood together."

Her guide didn’t react, and the circling lantern didn’t stop.

Maybe he knew she was lying.

By the time he began asking questions, she was beyond the ability to hear them clearly, but she nevertheless found herself giving detailed answers.
Aang felt a little weird, working with a complete plan and even some contingency scenarios. But the fact that he had just lost two friends showed the need for that level of preparation. Sokka and Mai had been captured by the Fire Nation while he had been stuck underground as the result of a poorly thought-out plan. They were the first two people he had met in this strange new world, two people who he-
-he-
-he cared about. Sokka had been Aang's dedicated friend since they left the South Pole, always loyal and always looking out for everyone. And Mai-

Aang just knew that it hurt to think about her being in the clutches of the nation she betrayed for him. Long Feng had said that Mai was too valuable to the Royal Family to kill, but how could he really know for sure? How could he even be certain that Mai hadn't decided to go down fighting?

But those were questions Aang didn't want answered, so he focused on the here and now, on the wind battering at his face, on the reins in his hands and the sky bison beneath him. He glanced back at Appa's saddle, confirming that the Dai Li agents were all settled. Katara hung over the saddle's side, ready to drop down when they were in position, holding her hat down over her eyes.

And beside Aang on Appa's head, Ty Lee sat waiting.

He looked over at her, and her own gold-ish gray eyes shifted to meet his gaze. There was caution in her gaze, but whether it was for the mission they were about to embark on for Long Feng or something to do with Aang himself was a mystery he wasn't sure he wanted to solve. She was Mai's friend, according to what Aang had been told, and wanted to help his cause now that she was a fellow Airbender. She had been on the receiving end of the Fire Nation's awfulness and, like Mai, wanted to combat its worst elements.

But Aang still couldn't be comfortable around her. He had fought her, thinking her an enemy, and found a foe he couldn't beat. If even Mai could betray him, what could this girl do? Had his initial bad assumptions about her planted the seeds for future betrayal? And what did it mean that one of the Fire Nation's greatest warriors had been given the gift of Airbending?

What did it even mean that Airbending had returned to the world?

Most importantly, what was Aang supposed to do about it?

But he kept those questions in the same place where he kept his worries about Mai, and tried to smile at Ty Lee. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, and leaned down to rub the fur on Appa's head. "This is going to be a dream-come-true, up until we get to the part where I have to fight my countrymen. That part isn't going to be as much fun."

Aang decided to accept that at face value and looked to the waters below.

Appa was flying out over the bay, leaving behind both the forest where they had been hiding for the last week and the settlement they had been hiding from. The bay was a natural formation taking advantage of by the Fire Nation for its defensibility; large stone cliffs circled the bay, leaving one lone entrance just large enough for a cargo ship to sail through safely. One such cargo ship bobbed just outside the entrance now, waiting for the tug boat that would guide it through the walled passage.
The cargo ship's arrival had been what spurred Aang and the Dai Li into action. Their objective, as described by Long Feng, was fairly simple- to steal the whole ship and the platinum in its belly.

The execution would be a little more complex.

"There they are," he said, spotting the two Fire Nation destroyers that guarded this bay from pirates and rebels. Those warships were much faster than any cargo vessel, and so had to be stopped from interfering or giving chase. That part was Aang and Katara's job. He handed the reins to Ty Lee, added a quick, "Good luck," and then jumped straight off of Appa's head.

Behind him, Katara did the same.

Rather than using his Airbending to slow his fall, Aang moved into the same Waterbending form that he knew Katara would be using right now. He focused on the bay water below, calling it to him with gathering motions of his arm, and as a wave rose to catch him, he threw his arms out wide. The water, rather than stopping his fall, embraced it, and Aang straightened his entire body to become like an arrow in flight. He sped through the water, angling so that his plunge would turn into a climb, and he popped back out of the bay with enough speed and force to land skidding on the deck of one of the Fire Nation destroyers.

Katara, he trusted, was having a similar experience. Aang had worked with her to develop this plan, planning out everything they would have to do and refining it with some practice in a lake before they came to the area to wait. Now, they each just had to take out an entire Fire Nation destroyer.

It wasn't even going to be a challenge.

Before the sailors and soldiers on the deck even registered who he really was, Aang was launching himself into an Airbending-assisted run, his right hand stretched out to the edge of the deck as he moved. He couldn't see it, but he could feel the water of the bay responding to that beckoning arm, splashing up to follow even as he plunged into the entrance to tower that held the ship's bridge. People gasped at his movement, and some were quick enough to even try to grab at him, but Aang kept pouring on the speed, knowing exactly where he was going and unafraid get there as fast as possible. The wind of his passage buffeted at everyone who tried to get close, and the spray of water following him cut off any attempt to Firebend at his back. He reached the bridge before the crew even had time to sound an alarm, still trailing an arm's length of bay water.

The bridge crew turned to him in surprise, but they weren't ready for a fight. Aang transformed the momentum of his run into an offensive assault, using fists and feet and bursts of wind to knock everyone out of the fight they didn't even know was already over.

Then he got down to the important part. He pulled the last of water he had brought with him up off the floor, and swung his whole body in a movement like the blow of an ax. The water responded, thinning and taking on his strength, serving as his blade as he hacked apart all of the bridge controls. In just a few minutes, the whole bridge was reduced to a storage room for scrap.

By that time, the alarm was not only sounding, but going crazy. Aang could see, through the front viewports, a stream of soldiers towards the tower, and he heard frantic boot-steps on the stairs leading up to the bridge. They thought they had him trapped, and that he wouldn't be able to fight alone against the numbers they were bringing to bear against him.

They were right about the last part. The first part? Not so much.

Aang took a running leap straight through the wide viewport at the front of the bridge, landing in the
comforting embrace of the winds to be carried safely on the deck. Two more hops were all that he needed to jump over the ship's side back to the waters of the bay, but this time he didn't let himself sink into them. After all, he had to get over to the cargo ship that Ty Lee and the Dai Li would be stealing right now, and without his glider, the fastest method of travel available right now was a wind-enhanced run.

The water of the bay shot up behind him as he dashed across its surface, and as he moved close to the bay's exit, he saw Katara coming to meet him, speeding away from the other destroyer (which now had some ugly smoke coming from its engine) on a surfboard of ice.

Aang hoped the rest of the mission was going this well.

Ty Lee got to fly the skin bison! Ty Lee got to fly the skin bison!

It was just for a short distance, taking over for Aang after he and Katara jumped off to go sabotage the destroyers, and doing nothing more but keeping Appa steady and then signaling him to land on the cargo ship's main deck. Yet Ty Lee still couldn't hold back a joyful laugh as the wind pulled at her braided hair and rustled her clothes and Appa mooed (or whatever) beneath her and she felt the power of their dive in her stomach. She didn't know what the future held for her right now, but she dearly hoped she'd be able to get her own sky bison. Then she could spend whole days flying around!

But for now, the joy faded as she brought Appa down into a warzone.

The Dai Li agents leaped from the saddle even before the sky bison's feet had touched the deck, throwing punches that sent fist-like constellations of stone flying out at the sailors who were still gaping at the arrival. Ty Lee could see that these were no warriors, no soldiers; they wore simple red tunics and the only things hanging from their belts were tools. Their postures were the experienced solidity of sea-legs, not the loose stances of trained fighters.

The stones of the Dai Li struck them, and then they didn't get up again.

Ty Lee could feel her aura becoming streaked with tarnished silver.

When Long Feng had first formulated the plan with them, back in the large cave the Dai Li were using as a base in this region, Ty Lee had piped up with, "What's going to happen to the sailors on the cargo ship? Are you going to take them prisoner?"

Long Feng had looked at her with an unreadable expression, but she could see that his aura swirl with deep black and painfully bright yellow. "In situations demanding speed and exact timing, taking unnecessary prisoners is not a viable option."

Which was fancy talk for killing everyone.

Ty Lee was about to object when Aang had actually beaten her to it, saying, "You're not going to slaughter those people. They're not warriors, they're people trying to survive and feed their families."

"Avatar, I do not seek to murder anyone." Ty Lee had watched Long Feng's aura for the muddy pink of dishonesty, but instead it was the deep red of strong will and practicality. "I will have no problems taking prisoners if any of the sailors surrender, nor will we cull the wounded. But the fighting forms of the Dai Li are about efficiency and effectiveness, and the results can be fatal. Asking my agents to specifically fight to wound in complicated combat situations will put them in danger and jeopardize the mission."
Katara had put a reassuring hand on Aang's shoulder at that point. "I understand what you're saying—Water Tribe warriors don't hold back, either—but why would the protectors of a city's culture be trained like soldiers?"

Long Feng had offered a shrug that was the most artificial thing Ty Lee had ever seen. "You'd have to ask Avatar Kyoshi. She was the one who established the Dai Li and trained the first generation. Everything we are has been passed down directly from her."

"Avatar Kyoshi?!" Aang had pulled away from Katara to turn his back on the gathering, and Ty Lee could see his aura becoming tainted with a muddy gold shade. "I thought—I was always taught—"

"Avatar," Long Feng had interrupted, "I'd be happy to give you a history lesson on the Dai Li, but I'm afraid it's not a quick story, and we don't know when exactly the cargo ship will be arriving at its destination. If you're going to take it before it enters the protection of the bay and after it has passed beyond the protection of its military escort, then you'll need to be on station and ready to go as soon as possible. This plan has many factors, and you'll need to practice some of it before you'll be ready. Now, if I may continue?"

Aang had sighed and faced them all again, but Ty Lee could see that his aura was still troubled. His gaze found Long Feng as he said, "I understand that not everyone has the respect for life that I do, and I try to accommodate the differences of other cultures. But I'm going to be watching to make sure your agents keep to your word."

"As you say, Avatar." Long Feng had bowed low. "Discipline is the primary weapon of the Dai Li, and I have every confidence that you will have no cause for disappointment."

Except now Ty Lee was standing on the deck of the cargo ship looking at the bodies of some of the sailors while the Dai Li agents moved ahead of her to continue their piracy, and she knew that no one had actually made any out-loud offer of surrender. Long Feng's agents were keeping to his word, all right, but that still didn't seem to be leaving much room for life.

Ty Lee wondered if this was what Aang's people had been like. He seemed like a good person, but he couldn't control Long Feng. He wouldn't have been able to control his elders in the Air Nation, either, as they prepared to invade the Fire Nation.

Ty Lee took a deep breath and moved into a run. She raced ahead of the Dai Li, dancing right across the vectors through which they were launching the small black panels of stone they were wearing under their robes like armor, and threw herself in amongst the sailors who were trying to mount some kind of defense of their ship. She threw her fists out and found weak, yielding flesh. Each person she struck cried out first in pain and then in panic, horrified when their limbs would not respond to their commands. Then it was a simple matter to shove or trip them to take them out of the fight. She struck hard and didn't hold back.

If the Dai Li creeps were going to be all rough and mean about this, then was going to see how many of the 'enemy' she could disable before the Earthbenders had a chance to kill them. After all, Long Feng had promised that no one who was unable to fight would be executed, and Ty Lee's fists were really good at taking the fight out of people.

She raced down into the bowels of the cargo ship, ready to personally capture even nook and corridor if she had to.

Aang reached the ship just ahead of Katara and summoned a tornado ball to sit on while he waited for her. He watched as she surfed in a circle right in front of the ship's bow, crouching and rising
again on her ice-board with arms outstretched, and the water at the center of her motion began coiling and pulsing. When she rode out into the center of it, Aang hopped over and grabbed onto her back, giving a quick, "Hi," that earned him a blue-eyed smile.

Then the water exploded like a spring and shot them both up into the air.

The sailed up parallel to the massive cargo ship's hull, and Aang used his Airbending to make sure their angle kept them going straight up, rather than smacking into the ship like a bug against a flying bison's teeth. They soared up and over the deck of the ship, and Aang shifted as they reached their apex so that he was now carrying Katara, and it was his winds and legs that took the brunt on the landing.

As soon as he set Katara down, Dai Li Agent Zhuang marched over. "Avatar, we've captured the ship. My people are establishing a skeleton crew right now, and as soon as we've confirmed that no vital equipment has been sabotaged, we can be on our way."

Aang reached out a hand, Katara smacked it in triumph. He looked back to Zhuang and said, "Great! Katara and I took care of the destroyers. They'll have to completely replace the bridge equipment before mine can run again."

Katara nodded. "I flooded the engines on mine. I think one of the boilers exploded."

Zhuang didn't smile, but the tension around his eyes loosened a bit as he nodded. "Good work, kids. Now we just have to sail this thing to the rendezvous. The Fire Nation shouldn't have any assets nearby that they can redirect to pursue us before we're gone, but diligence is the key to survival. If you're up to it, I'd like you to take your sky bison up and keep a watch for any threats."

Aang was going to agree and get going, but then a shout of, "Avatar!" echoed across the deck.

Aang turned to see Ty Lee stalking over. The bounce he could usually see in her step was gone, and her face was twisted in a serious expression.

He bit back on his nervousness and tried to smile at her. "Yes?"

Ty Lee threw a look at Agent Zhuang, and then she put her arms around Aang's shoulders and guided him away. "I wanted to talk to you about these Dai Li. They're meanies."

Meanies? Even after they helped capture this ship with such finely tuned plan? He wondered if one of the agents had been harassing her about her Fire Nation blood. "Ty Lee, is this something important? We still have some work before we can get away."

She started to say, "I-"

"Incoming!" came Katara's shout.

In an instant, Aang was beside her at the rail, looking back at the bay. The destroyers he and Katara had sabotaged were still floating there, seemingly helpless, but as he followed her pointing finger, he spotted a line of foam across the water, and spotted a speedboat at its head. It was heading straight for the cargo ship, and was definitely of Fire Nation manufacture.

Agent Zhuang was came over to take his own look. "Get rid of it. It's an attack of some kind."

Katara nodded and extended her arms in front of her, and then swung them up to her right as she shifted from standing straight into a reverse-arrow stance. The ocean rose up with something like an explosion at her command right in front of the speedboat, but the craft swerved and avoided the
Katara tried again and again, but failed to stop this strangely small attack. "I can't get it," she gasped, pounding fists lightly against the rail. "It's too fast, and I'm too far away."

That's when Aang realized something. "It's not slowing down. Even if it cuts its engine, it's not going to be able to stop in time. It must not be coming for us after all."

Ty Lee said, "You mean it's just going to go around us?"

"No." Agent Zhuang's voice had gone cold. "It's going to ram us."

There was a moment of silent horror amongst the group as the craft drew close enough to be lost from their view.

Then the speedboat slammed into the cargo ship and exploded.

It wasn't a large explosion, but Aang distinctly felt the force of it traveling up through the ship's hull. "Was that enough to sink us?"

Agent Zhuang shook his head. "Not immediately, but there's a good chance we're taking on water down there. I'm not sure what level that would be on, but-

"On it," Katara said, turning and running across the deck. She called back, "I'll keep it iced up," as she plunged down the stairs and was lost to sight. Agent Zhuang followed her.

That left Aang alone with Ty Lee. Should he go down and help with the damage, or was this a good time to talk to Ty Lee about whatever it was that was bothering her? The whole matter of the speedboat was still bothering him, but it seemed to be over now.

On the other side of the deck, Appa let out a roar. The sky bison seemed just as uneasy as Aang, and Momo flapping above his horns in an agitated state. They must not have liked that explosion.

That got Aang wondering about the boat. Someone must have been steering it, if it avoided Katara's attacks. Had the pilot been on a suicide mission?

Or was this not about punching a hole in the hull after all?

Aang stepped back over to the railing and looked over-

-and jumped back just in time to avoid the plume of blue fire that heralded the flying arrival of a girl in black armor. She flipped in midair and landed on the deck of the ship, and Aang spotted smoke coming from the bottom of her boots (had she used Firebending to fly?) just before she kicked a leg out to shoot more blue fire to arc around Aang and cut him off from the rest of the deck. In the distance, he heard Appa roar in fear.

Wait, what had happened to Ty Lee?

Aang looked around and found himself alone with the Firebender girl. She stared back with shining golden eyes, but she didn't seem to be talking to him when she said, "Come on up, Zuzu. I've found your little friend."

Beside the girl, a hand came up to grasp at the rail. A second followed it, and then their owner pulled himself up into view.

The scarred face of Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation looked straight at Aang and scowled.
Aang took a defensive stance, missing Mai more than ever.

There was no transition. One moment Ty Lee was seeing the blue fire flaring through the air in front of Aang, and the next she was below deck, crouched under the staircase leading outside and holding her head in her hands. She was struggling to breathe, trembling all over, and her heart was hammering in her chest so hard that it was almost painful. She wondered if she was dying, if her fear was about to kill her, and the new terror brought on by that thought made her dizzy enough to fall over.

Azula was here.

Azula was here.

Azula was here.

Ty Lee loved Azula because they were friends and the princess had offered so many opportunities and she was such a perfect, beautiful person.

Ty Lee also feared Azula more than anything else because she would do anything and there was no force on this planet that could stop her from getting what she wanted.

And now Ty Lee was an Airbender and had sided with Mai and now was helping the Avatar and she hadn't gotten Azula's permission for any of it.

Azula was here.

Azula was here.

Ty Lee curled up on the floor, crippled by fear, of no use whatsoever to her new friends and allies. She had failed them, as she was always destined.

Sokka listened with his ear to the cold stone ground, unmoving so as to avoid rattling his chains, eyes closed pointlessly against the darkness of his cell. All of his concentration was on detecting the sounds carried through the stone.

He could detect the irregular beat of stumbling footsteps, the whispery sound of a swinging door, and the louder and unmistakable sound of rattling chains. Another prisoner was being brought back from one of the Earthbenders' crazy "interrogation sessions." Sokka winced in sympathy, remembering- or mostly not remembering in a way that made him feel sick- his own sessions, of being bound in the chair in the darkness to watch that moving light for hours on end. He had steeled himself to resist like a true Water Tribe warrior, but that hadn't gone well at all. It wasn’t until the second session that he discovered his best defense was not resistance, but distraction. Letting his mind wander to thoughts of chemistry and physics and other abstract matters was the best antidote to moving lights and droning voices, but even that only worked for so long.

It was with no malice that he assumed Mai would be especially vulnerable to the whole ordeal. She was a person of fierce attacks and defensive walls, exactly what the hypnosis was designed to combat.

And he knew Mai was here, somewhere. He had seen the weird Earthbenders capture her, using him as bait.

He was thoroughly offended by that.
He put those thoughts out of his head, though, and focused once again on what he could hear through the ground. As enjoyably guilt-ridden as the sounds of what was probably Mai's return were, that wasn't what he was trying to hear.

He was more curious about the *vrssssshhhhhhh* sound he had heard while trying to sleep earlier. It had gone away when the prisoner-who-was-probably-Mai was brought back, and now was starting up again. That indicated that whatever was causing the sound was trying to avoid the attention of the guards here, which meant it was either a skittish subterranean animal of some kind of enemy action.

Sokka was hoping for enemy action.

But he still wasn't prepared when the ground beneath his ear opened up and someone's nose poked up into it.

Hissing in surprise, Sokka scrambled back as far as his chains would let him, and then a burst of green glare exploded in his face. His poor, light-deprived eyes took a while to adjust, but he eventually realized he was being spotlit by a shuttered lantern, and the light was being generated by those green crystals the Earth Kingdom liked so much.

And the lamp was being held by the first of three strangers who were climbing into his cell.

Well, this was either very good or a disaster in the making.

They had to be Earthbenders, given their mode of entry, but not the same kind of Earthbenders who had captured Sokka and Mai. These people- two men and a woman- wore simple green tunics. Returning the inquisitive glare they were giving him, Sokka noticed that they all had a cloth tied somewhere to their body- hanging from a belt, or tied around one arm- that bore the circular symbol of the Earth Kingdom, the same one it used for the shape of its coins.

Rebels?

Sokka decided to cut to the chase and whisper, "Who are you guys?"

The one with the lantern (the one who Sokka suspected had given his ear a nose-poke) scowled. "The Earth King will be the ones asking the questions, boy."

The who now?

Wasn't the Earth King supposed to be dead, burned along with Ba Sing Se on the day of Sozin's Comet?

Then one last shape climbed up out of the hole in the center of Sokka's cell. It was a small form, almost child-like, and when it stepped into the light of the lantern, Sokka couldn't immediately tell if it was a boy or a girl. More concentrated examination revealed what he thought was a slightly feminine outline to the body and chin, but the savage grin the newcomer was displaying was a bit distracting.

Then he noticed the newcomer's eyes.

They were dull and unfocused. This girl was blind.

He started to say, "What-"

The girl immediately cut him off with, "You are in the presence of Earth King Toph Bei Fong, first of her royal line and incarnate goddess of the earth itself. I order to tell me, right this instant, who the
mud you are and what you're doing in Old Man Long Feng's basement. If your explanation satisfies me, I might not leave you here to rot in your own stinking breath."

Oh, really?

Sokka put on his most ingratiating smile.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Fear and Friendship

Chapter Summary

Friendships are forged in the fires of fear.

Fear and Friendship

Air Nomads weren't supposed to hate. Part of their respect for life was finding beauty and worth in everything. Certainly, it was okay to be sad, sickened, and even angered by things that some creatures do, but long-burning hate was an emotion that would inevitably hurt the hater most of all. Sorrow could lead to empathy, affliction could lead to healing, and fury could lead to strength, but hate was just poison. A good monk existed beyond a place of hate.

Except Aang was pretty sure that he was starting to hate the ugly, one-eyed face of Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation.

Facing each other on the front deck of a captured Fire Nation cargo ship, surrounded by a ring of blue fire being controlled by the other Firebender to have boarded, Aang could see the same hate reflected in Zuko's expression.

"Avatar," the prince growled.

"Zuko," Aang said back.

They were both in fighting stances, but for the moment neither felt the need to move.

Zuko's hands tightened into fists. "Where's Mai?"

Aang felt his hate blaze up within his stomach, remembering how Mai had been working for Zuko during the whole search for Katara- remembering the pain of her betrayal. "You tell me. She was captured by the Fire Nation."

Zuko blanched momentarily, but then he schooled his expression back into a combat-ready scowl. He stared at Aang, and Aang stared back. The fight was inevitable, but Aang was content to delay it as long as possible in the hopes that his allies would come to his aid.

"Come on, Zuzu," the other Firebender, the girl, said. "We didn't come all this way to exchange pleasantries. Beat him into submission so we can all go home."

"Zuzu?" For a moment, Aang's hate was washed away by a brief giggle that erupted from within him. "So, little sister or girlfriend?"

Zuko roared and punched out a plume of flame.

Even without his glider staff, it was all too easy to dodge such a wild attack. Aang sidestepped in a spin that let him build up enough momentum that his subsequent palm strike unleashed a good gale, but Zuko crossed his arms and leaned into, enduring the force without losing his footing. As soon as the wind died, Zuko charged forward again with a flurry of punches and kicks that sent out waves of fire, but Aang was ready, giving ground using short crosswinds to sweeping away any flames that
It was his usual strategy for dealing with a head-on attack, and it nearly got him killed.

Aang felt heat at his back and stopped his retreat short, realizing that he had come up against the border created by the Blue Fire Girl. He turned and decided to risk a jump, but before he could take action on that, a stream of blue fire shot out right over his head. He glanced at Blue Fire Girl, and found her in an arrow stance with two smoking fingers still extended and a smirk on her face.

"No, no," she cooed in a voice like thorns covered in honey. "You and my brother have business to complete."

She was somehow maintaining a thick wall of fire at the same time she could still unleash precision attacks?

Who was this girl?

But it didn't matter. He already had a date.

Aang decided to dodge another wave of Zuko's plain orange flames by throwing himself into a forward roll that carried him under the attack. He had a brief glimpse of Zuko's surprised face before Aang came up again for a solid tackle. Together, they crashed to the deck, and Aang made sure that Zuko was flat on the ground before flipping up again to land on his feet. Zuko himself was quick to recover and scrambled back to his own feet, but by then Aang was behind him, completely out of sight. Zuko tried to turn, but Aang circled towards the prince's blind side, staying functionally invisible.

The trick had worked pretty well back on Crescent Island. There was no reason it wouldn't work just as well right now.

Except Aang must not have spent enough time thinking of reasons, because Zuko suddenly bowed at the waist and snapped his right leg back for a fully-extended rear kick. Aang backpedaled from the boot that nearly buried itself in his stomach, but couldn't move fast enough to keep the resulting fireball from exploding in his face.

Reality became a burst of blinding light and a crack like the sky shattering.

When it came back, Aang found himself face up on the ship's deck of the ship with the skin on his face and hands flaring with pinching pain. He heard a roaring, and it took him a moment to realize that he wasn't the one making the sound. It was too loud, too deep, too vibrant.

Appa had decided to enter the fight.

But when Aang cautiously cracked open his eyes to see what was going on, he spotted Blue Fire Girl making a stand between Zuko and Appa's flying approach, taking a strange stance and moving her arms in wide arcs.

Electricity began to crackle between her hands and the deck of the ship.

Aang shrieked in denial and lurched to his feet as the girl unleashed the power of lightning at Appa.

Mai emerged from the darkness of her own numbed mind when she felt a thin finger poking her face. She opened her mouth to tell Tom-Tom to knock it off and go annoy Mother when she remembered that they were both probably dead, executed by the Royal Family in retaliation for her betrayal of
Zuko.

But wait, hadn't Mai also maybe gotten Zuko killed when Aang's Avatar State had blown Crescent Island's volcano?

Confused at whose deaths, exactly, she was responsible for, she opened her eyes. She was chained once again to a dark stone floor, back in the cell where the place the weird Earthbenders had been keeping her in between those odd questioning sessions.

Just remembering the lantern and the droning voices made Mai shudder and shut her eyes again.

But the finger kept poking her face, so Mai opened her eyes and sat up. There was a girl in her cell - a petite teenager with a helmet of hair and clothes that might have green and yellow at some point in a distant age- standing and grinning like she was this was a pleasant day at the park. Mai started to say, "Who-

But the girl shoved a hand over Mai's mouth, whispered, "Don't scream," and then stomped the floor to turn it into a steep slide that started right beneath Mai's butt.

She didn't scream, but she did forget to breathe for the duration of the trip.

Mai skidded to a stop into the dull but still eye-searing green light of a crystal lantern. She raised a hand to shield her eyes as the petite Earthbender let go, but didn't get a chance to acclimate before she was attacked with a crushing hug. She squeaked with pain even as the mad hugger did the same thing in a voice that she recognized. "Sokka?"

Mai blinked her eyes rapidly to make them adjust to the light, and sure enough, the image of a stupid Water Tribe boy holding the side resolved itself in her vision. "Ahhhhhhhhh," he gasped. "I keep forgetting about my broken rib." Straightening, moved gently to pat Mai's shoulders, and she noticed that he didn't seem to be wearing chains like she was. "Still, I'm glad you're okay. You took a pretty bad hit when they got you. And I- you know, I saw how you- you made the choice to try to save me- you know, instead of properly defending yourself, and that really just got us both captured by freaky evil Earthbenders, but- well, it's the thought that counts, and I appreciate it."

Mai blinked at him. "Um, you're welcome?" She wasn't quite sure how to deal with this, considering that not long before they had been captured, she had actually tried to pull a sword on him as a result of a stupid argument. The whole thing just made her feel embarrassed, so she shoved his hands off her shoulders, making her chains clink annoyingly. "Us broken down warriors have to stick together, I guess?" She decided that was about all that needed to be said about the matter, so she turned to look around at the rest of the gathering.

They were a ragtag bunch, men and women in dirt-stained clothes that made them seem like the spawn of the tunnel walls around them. Yet Mai could see that their bodies were hard and strong, and they stood in ways that projected the appearance of relaxation but really were just a shift of weight away from solid attack stances. Their bare feet gave them all away as Earthbenders, and the symbols of the Earth Kingdom they all displayed somewhere on their clothes gave them away as rebels.

The only one Mai couldn't peg was the girl who had freed her. That one also had the bare feet of an Earthbender, but she stood with hands on her hips, presenting herself as a target without fear, and she didn't have the circular Earth sigil anywhere on her.

She was also staring at nothing, and yet was also clearly paying attention to Sokka's gushing.
He noticed where Mai was looking, and whispered, "She says she's the Earth King. Play along."

"Play along? Play along?" The girl grinned in a way that reminded Mai all too much of Azula, and twisted her right foot in place. A shaft of stone rose up out of the ground to strike at Sokka's left shin, making him bark with pain and hop backwards, which made his bark become a hiss as he shifted to favor the side with the broken rib. The girl laughed and added, "I am the Earth King, by right of blood and combat. And don't you forget it, Dunderhead!"

Mai was suddenly very aware of her complete lack of weapons. She stood up and bowed low at the waist with enough smoothness that her chains didn't even rattle. "Your Majesty, I apologize for my rube of a companion. I am Lady Caldera Yu Mai, and you have our gratitude for freeing us from our captivity."

The girl claiming to be the Earth King stuck her nose in the air. "Your manners please us," she said in sarcastic mockery of a formal tone. "Perhaps we won't order you fed to our Royal Badgermoles."

Well, she certainly had a better sense of humor than Azula. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. "Your Majesty, may I ask who you were before taking your station? I was under the impression that all of the Earth Kingdom royalty had been purged by the Fire Nation."

"Then you were clearly misinformed. The Bei Fong clan shares some distant blood with the Kings and Queens of Ba Sing Se, as formally recognized by all of the living Earth Sages after I beat them up. You may address me as 'King Toph,' or 'Your Royal Super-Strongness,' or-

"Or maybe you'd like a kick in the teeth, you stuck-up child," Mai drawled. She knew of the Bei Fongs, of course, and given the oddness surrounding the victory at Gaoling, she could even accept that this petite girl was one of the family's survivors. However, they had no relation to the Earth King's line, just their own substantial money and history. And Mai had the feeling that this kid was a kindred spirit when it came to the ways of Fancy. She put on a smile that she usually reserved for joking with Ty Lee. "I hope my boots are worthy of bloodying royalty."

'King Toph' barked a laugh, walked over to Mai, and punched her in the shoulder. It wasn't a soft punch, either, and Mai had to bite back a hiss of pain. "I like you, Lady." Toph shoved Mai back against the wall of the tunnel with one hand, and then placed the other flat on the stone beside Mai's head. "Just answer me one question, and I'll let you sass me to your dark heart's content. Your Water Tribe buddy there told me this great story about the Avatar and epic quests and all that mud, including the part where you lied to everyone like a heelsucker and wound up betraying everyone who gave two shakes of badgermole's butt about you. So who are you loyal to now?" Toph moved her face so that her strange, milky eyes filled Mai's whole field of vision.

Fortunately, she didn't even need to think about the answer. "Aang. I'm loyal to Avatar Aang and how he wants to fix everything for everyone."

Toph tilted her head a fraction of a degree. Then she moved back and smiled. "Glad to hear it, Lady Caldera Yu Mai." The faux-formal tone was back again.

Mai stepped away from the tunnel wall and brushed her clothes off. Of course, her robes were all completely filthy past the point of ever getting the stains out, but it gave her chained hands something to do. "So what was all that about? You're satisfied with my word of honor?"

"Nah. As the incarnate goddess of the earth itself, I can taste the difference between truth and lies." Toph stuck her tongue out at Mai and wiggled it. "Right, my loyal subjects?"

All of the other Earthbenders fell to their knees and bowed, saying simultaneously, "The Earth King
separates the truth from the lies and guides us!"

"That's right! Go me!" Toph pumped a fist in the air and sauntered off down the tunnel. "Someone get those chains off of her, and then the last one to the badgermoles is a hog-monkey!"

Mai couldn't bring herself to do anything but stand there blinking as one of the Earthbenders began picking the locks on her wrist manacles while the rest trotted off after their supposed monarch. She was only prodded back into sanity when Sokka tapped her shoulder. "You okay?"

Mai shook herself. "Other than wondering if I lost my mind after that last interrogation session, sure, I'm just keen."

"Well, if you've lost your mind, I've lost mine in the same way. The Earth King girl is- she's a bit much, huh?"

"Could she really have some kind of spirit power that lets her see lies? Her eyes are pretty weird."

He hissed and motioned for her to lower her voice. "She's blind, not magic. Slush, and here I thought Aang could say some embarrassing things."

Blind? "Seriously?"

It took Ty Lee an eternity to uncurl herself on the floor and climb the metal stairs back up to the cargo ship's main deck. At several points, her limbs shook too hard to support her weight, and she collapsed on the cold, sharp steps, fighting the urge to barf.

At those times, she would remember all those little incidents from her childhood, when she or Mai would do something that Azula didn't like. Sometimes, it would be as simple as doing a cartwheel better than her princess, and getting shoved to the ground for it. Other times, it would be loving something that Azula didn't have under her complete control, like a nice teacher or sparkleberry pudding; in those cases, she would make it her mission to poison any feelings about those things with bad experiences.

And Azula could make experiences very bad.

Ty Lee knew Azula did those things because she was insecure and dependent on her friends. She felt sorry for the princess, what with her mom all disappeared and having the pressures of being royalty and stuff. She had liked being Azula's friend and getting all the perks and uniqueness that came with it.

But that didn't mean she couldn't be terrified of Azula.

Eventually, she managed to make it to the top step, and poked her head out just enough to see what was happening on the main deck.

The first thing she saw was blue fire, and she reflexively ducked back out of the view and whimpered.

When Ty Lee realized that she couldn't feel heat and so the fire couldn't be anywhere near her, she tried taking another look. This time, she got a better view of the situation. There was lots of blue fire, but most of it was at the far end of the ship, at the front or the bow or whatever, cutting it off from the rest of the main deck. Ty Lee caught a quick glimpse of the tattooed top of Aang's head popping up over the top of the flames, but then he was lost to sight again.
Then Ty Lee spotted Azula herself.

She was wearing black armor with gold trim, just like Prince Admiral Iroh had the few times Ty Lee saw him, and she fighting with all the grace and efficiency expected of royalty. Dai Li agents were attacking her, shooting those hard black panels of stone out from under their robes, but even Ty Lee could see that they were running out of rock. Those meanies probably shouldn't have thrown so much of their supply at simple sailors. Azula knocked the rocks aside with the vambraces on her forearms, only dodging when she needed a new angle on a target.

As Ty Lee watched, several of the Dai Li attacked in quick succession, firing stones in a pattern to try to box Azula in against the ship's rail. Ty Lee shook her head at the pointlessness of it, and sure enough she saw Azula move in an unexpected direction, punching through one of the stone projectiles with a fist covered in flame and following that up with a series of kicks that sent waves of flame toward her attackers.

Several of the Dai Li agents fell to the fire, joining the rest of the bodies scattered across the deck.

There was no small number of them. Quite a few Dai Li agents had fallen, and although some of them still showed signs of life and motion, none seemed to be in a condition to rejoin the fight. The one that hurt Ty Lee the most was Appa's still form, all the way over by the wall of fire that had Aang trapped. The sky bison was lying on his side, a line of fur above his legs blackened and smoldering.

Ty Lee wasn't sure if Appa was breathing.

She ducked back down on the stairs and let out a sob. Azula was here to destroy everything, to kill everyone. And it was all because Ty Lee had been bad and somehow became an Airbender.

It was all her fault!

Which meant it was up to her to do something.

She reached for the top stair again, intent on pulling herself up to join the fight, but her hand was shaking too much to get a grip on the metal.

That was when Ty Lee heard steps on the stairway behind her, and she turned to find Katara rushing up to the main deck.

"Ty Lee!" Katara blanched and moved to uncork one of her waterskins. "Where are you hurt?"

Ty Lee shook her head. "Not-" A sob threatened to escape her throat, but she forced it back down. "Not hurt. A- a- afraid."

Katara blinked.

Ty Lee nodded. "P- Princess Azula is- is out there." Then she cringed, ready to be screamed at for her cowardice.

Instead, she felt Katara's soft hands on her back.

Ty Lee looked up into blue eyes beneath a dark hat, and Katara said, "I understand. I'm afraid, too. Every time I- I go outside and- and look up, I-" She shook her head. "I'm afraid of the sky. It's the stupidest thing. But I am. And I need to go out there wearing my dumb hat. I'm going to do that now, because they need my help. Please, if you can, come out and help us. I think we're going to need your help, too."
Then Katara was gone, and Ty Lee was alone.

The body of another Dai Li agent fell near the stairs, one more casualty of her cowardice.

Aang knew why he was losing.

He was filled with anger, sickness, and sorrow, but instead of being able to deal with those feelings, being able to turn them into portals to serenity, they were anchored in his body by the sheer hate that was poisoning him after Appa's fall. Blue Fire Girl had somehow harnessed the power of lightning itself in her hands, and unleashed it at Appa as he flew towards her.

It was a miracle that Appa hadn't been turned to ash on the spot. Instead, he had used a twitch of his massive tail to slip out of the Blue Fire Girl's line of sight, escaping the actual bolt of lightning.

The problem was that lightning wasn't content to simply pass its victims by.

Electricity had crackled between the sky bison and the near miss, setting a patch of Appa's fur on fire and knocking him twitching out of the air with a pop. His body had fallen behind the wall of blue flames, beyond Aang's sight. With nothing else to go on, Aang couldn't stop the fear from flooding in, from letting him picture the lifeless body of the last sky bison lying charred on the deck.

And it was all Zuko's fault, all the result of his insane quest. First it had cost Mai's friendship, and now maybe Appa's life.

That's why Aang hated Zuko so much.

That's why he was losing.

He could feel how sloppy his Airbending forms were. He knew that he needed some kind of strategy even as he simply pressed a straightforward offensive, but couldn't bring himself to focus long enough to make one. He even knew that Blue Fire Girl was the more dangerous of the two, and that she should be his main target, but never quite found an opportunity to go after her.

Aang could do nothing but stupidly attack Zuko.

He was losing, and he had the burns to prove it.

Distantly, as Aang hammered at Zuko's crossed arms with a stream of wind that didn't seem to be accomplishing anything, he could hear the sounds of whipping and surging water that always followed Katara into battle. And yet he couldn't see her, so she must have brought the fight to Blue Fire Girl.

More fear struck at his heart, and more hate filled his mind.

Aang's wind died, and Zuko surged forward with flaming fists. Aang dodged each one, but he moved by instinct and found himself tripping over a foot that had been placed into his path. He had no sooner smacked into the deck then Zuko's weight was on top of him, twisting his arms behind him and hooking his legs.

Aang was caught.

Caught in his hate.

"It's over," Zuko growled, and Aang couldn't disagree, even if Katara won her duel. Aang just didn't have any more worthwhile fight in him.
That's when the arrival of a newcomer eclipsed the sun in the sky.

Aang angled his head to look up, and could vaguely see Zuko doing the same at the edge of his vision, but he couldn't quite make out the details of who was falling towards him. The silhouette was almost like that of a Dai Li agent, with the same hat and flowing robes, but the shape wasn't quite the same, and rather than long, wide sleeves, this newcomer had thin, feminine arms.

The she landed just beside him, standing tall, and Aang had a glimpse of gray-ish gold eyes- mostly gray in this sunlight- before she slammed a fist right into Zuko's face.

Wearing the remnants of a Dai Li uniform- the spiked cone hat, a shirt that she had torn and tied up to fit her, half an outer robe turned into billowing pants, and a mask over the bottom half of her face made from a strip of leftover fabric- Ty Lee flew into battle with the power of the winds and her fists. She knew she couldn't fight like she usually did, targeting Qi-meridians and striking to disable. Azula would recognize that. So Ty Lee did something she had never let herself do before.

She struck to hurt.

She punched Zuko right in his nose and followed it up with a pair of chops to his ears. He cried out and raised his arms reflexively, so Ty lee shoved him. He swung back, falling off of Aang and crashing down on his back. Ty Lee never would have done anything to him while he was down, not the nervous boy she remembered, so for the sake of her disguise she proceeded to kick him repeatedly. She kicked his thighs, kicked at the arms that protected his head, kicked anywhere he wasn't wearing armor.

Zuko was always tough, though, and weathered it as he fought his way to his feet.

So Ty Lee grabbed the front of his armor, spun around once, and threw him-right over the ship's railing.

Bye-bye, Zuko!

Time to deal with Azula.

Ty Lee left the same way she came, getting a running leap at the walls of blue fire and then summoning a wind to slam into her and carry her body as far as it could. She wasn't a very good Airbender yet, so she still wound up passing through the tips of the flames and picking up some burns. But no one who had a problem with pain could become a Weapon of the Fire Nation.

She landed in a run and went straight for Azula.

Ty Lee could hear her princess's laughter, could hear the sneering taunt of, "You're good, Waterbender, but it's obvious your training was lacking. You're as much a stranger to your element as you are to the sky."

She hated that taunt, hated Azula's cruelty, hated that it was something she could hear herself saying with different and less sophisticated wording. She hated that she would have enjoyed the hurt in Katara's eyes.

But it took too much work to worry about hate. Instead, Ty Lee focused on not throwing up in her mask as she charged at her princess.

Azula heard her coming, of course, and even as she was dodging a wave of icicles from Katara she
turned to Ty Lee and flung a wave of flames. Ty Lee leaped over the them in a forward-flip and kicked out with both legs, slamming into Azula on her armored chest and then somersaulting off for an easy landing.

Then she was charging forward again, raising her fists to Azula.

Her princess was fast, but Ty Lee had fought faster back in that sinkhole, when she was locked in combat with Aang. Azula was still reeling from the kick when Ty Lee was back in and attacking, chaining together punches to the face and an elbow-smash to the throat and knee-strikes to thighs and kicks to the knees and a shove with both arms and Ty Lee realized that she was screaming herself hoarse. Only about a third of Ty Lee's blows got through Azula's frantic attempts to defend herself, but at the speed she was hammering away at her princess, a third was still enough to send Azula into a panic.

Ty Lee didn't even stop when Azula stumbled backwards against the ship's rail. She just increased the speed of her blows, screaming all the while.

She wasn't sure how long the fight had been going on when Azula dropped any attempt at defense and let the hits land home. Ty Lee's fist slammed into Azula's cheekbone hard enough to hurt her knuckles, and it was so startling that she froze for a second.

That's when Azula reared her head back and took a breath, and Ty Lee realized what was about to happen just in time to flip backwards and avoid the fireball that her princess spat at her.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! She shouldn't have hesitated like that! Now Azula was going to kill her! She'd lost her chance to stop the fighting!

Then a small river slammed into Azula and knocked her straight over the railing.

Ty Lee stood there, blinking, and heard a distant splash.

She stood there, blinking, as Katara called for the Dai Li to get the ship moving again.

She stood there, blinking, as Aang came over and crushed her in a nuzzling hug, followed by Katara joining in, followed by Aang asking Katara to come look at Appa, followed by both of them running off.

She stood there, blinking, until she burst into tears.

Zuko's life was saved only because Suki hadn't double-knotted the ties of his armor. When he had been thrown off the ship by that terrifying berserker-girl assassin, he had still been dazed by her attacks, and it wasn't until he plunged into the water that he came to his senses. He tried to swim back to the surface, but had too much weight on him. He yanked at the knots as he sank beneath the waves, tearing off each piece of armor until he could swim back up to the surface.

The cargo ship was in motion by that point, and although Zuko had tried to paddle after it, ready to cross an ocean if needed, he wasn't a strong enough swimmer to fight against the waves that emanated from the ship's passage. He was carried back into the bay to either swim to the port or wait to be rescued.

He was just starting to wonder if Azula was going to have to complete his quest for him when her head broke the surface a distance away from, coughing and sputtering. Zuko could see that she had shed her armor as well, and most of her hair had escaped from her topknot.
"Azula?" Zuko started swimming over to her, but she ignored him. She treded water at the same time she tried to raise an arm and throw a fireball at the retreating ship, but the only result was a burst of heavy steam and another dip beneath the waves. Zuko reached her as she popped back up and hooked an arm around her. "Just concentrate on staying afloat. There's nothing we can do, now." He shut his mouth as Azula's floundering gave him a brief dunking again, and then once he kicked himself back up he added, "June still has the Avatar's staff, and we're on his trail now. The ship can't go fast enough to lose us."

Azula glared at him, but she stopped her struggling and began treading water properly. Able to get a good look at her now, Zuko could see that the berserker girl must have gotten a few really good hits in; his sister's face was split and bleeding, and bruises were already starting to show.

"Wow," he found himself saying.

Azula's glare darkened. "I will kill that girl. I will have every bone in her body broken one by one and I will make her scream the name of her every loved one so that I can have them killed in front of her and then I'll make her drink the- argrrgrgrgrgrgl!!" Azula had stopped swimming for a moment, and Zuko struggled as she dipped underwater again. She was soon back, spitting. "Keep me afloat you moron!"

Zuko sighed as he treded water.

Then he spotted the tug boat making its way across the bay towards them.

Zuko waved as much as he could while keeping himself and Azula afloat, and was gratified to see that the tug stayed on course. Soon, it was bobbing alongside them, and a rope was thrown over the side. Zuko let Azula climb up first, and only after she was aboard did he get himself to safety, hoisting himself up and over the side to stand beside his sister on the small deck.

He wiped away at the water dripping down his face, and found that he had lost his eyepatch at some point.

His stomach flipped when he saw Suki staring at him from across the deck. She had never seen his empty eye socket before. Her face was blank, hiding whatever she was thinking, but Zuko couldn't help but feel that she had be disgusted on some level.

Azula interrupted his shame by stomping forward to the bridge, sending water spraying everywhere. "Well, what are you waiting for? Get us back to land! We're losing time." She was already steaming, drying herself with her Firebending, when she disappeared into the wheelhouse.

Suki gave Zuko a brief smile. "I better go. I kind of stole this tug, and I'd be embarrassed to return it with scorch marks on it." She hurried off after Azula, leaving him standing alone on the deck.

Zuko watched her go, and then looked over to the bay's far side, where the cargo ship had passed from view beyond the parallel cliffs that formed the only exit. He couldn't help but wonder what the Avatar wanted with a Fire Nation cargo ship filled with Southern metals. It had something to do with Earth rebels, no doubt, but such a raid seemed to be a waste of the Avatar's power.

Unless, of course, there was something going on that he wasn't aware of.

Zuko shivered in the wind, and summoned the flame in his heart to keep him warm and dry him off. With any luck, he'd be fighting the Avatar again soon.

Sokka had to admit that traveling by badgermole was better than he expected.
The giant beasts seemed scary at first, but King Toph or whatever she called herself had a good rapport with them, so they allowed passengers to step off the rock platforms she created and onto their backs. They were even bigger than Appa, so with the smoothness of their Earthbending-powered passage through the underground, it was like riding one of the Fire Nation's big motorized tread-vehicles, only with a different kind of stink than engine oil.

He and Mai were sharing a badgermole with one of the Earthbenders, leaving enough room on the furry back for the pair of them to find some privacy and exchange information. He filled her in on his conversations with Commander Zhao, his almost-escape after the fortress had exploded, and his subsequent capture by one of the creepy Earthbenders in the hats. She in turn told him a great story about freeing Mother Malu's Airbenders before she got taken by the same creeps.

"So," he said when she finished, "you never found out if Katara and Aang are okay?"

She gave a single shake of her head. "I don't even know what happened to Ty Lee and the nuns. We could be all that's left."

Sokka thought about that. "I don't think so. King Toph said we were the only prisoners in this 'Long Feng' guy's basement. And as much as I'd like to think otherwise, there's no way I'm as valuable a prisoner as Fire Nation Weapon girls or brand new Airbenders."

Mai's expression didn't change as she said, "Maybe we were the only ones they could take alive."

Sokka crossed his arms and stared at her. "You said there were about thirty nuns, and all or most of them had no fighting experience whatsoever. Do you really think it would be that hard to take at least one of them prisoner?"

Mai broke eye contact first. "No, I guess not. But then what does that mean for Aang and your sister?"

Now that was a good point. Sokka let out a heavy breath and shrugged. "I don't know. That's a big unknown right now, and if we're going to deal with whatever it is we're going to have to deal with, then we should leave it that way."

Mai was silent for a moment, and then leaned forward and spoke in a softer voice. "So how much do we trust The Girl Who Would Be King? The Bei Fong family isn't royalty, but she wasn't giving me the impression that she cared if anyone believed it."

Sokka thought back to the quiet conversation he'd had with the girl in his cell, and then the continued conversation in the deeper tunnels where he'd convinced the rebels to rescue Mai as well. "I'm not sure. We seem to have stumbled on some kind of Earthbender civil war. She told me that this 'Long Feng' guy used to be an important rebel, but he got offended when she crowned herself and took his toys and left. She wouldn't tell me anything about her own rebels, though. Said she wanted to keep it a surprise."

Mai brought her hands together, awkwardly intertwining the fingers. "I wish I had a knife."

"I wish you had a hundred knives." Something like a smile flickered across Mai's face, and Sokka decided that to take this moment as a successful reestablishment of peace after the argument that led to him demanding she be completely disarmed when they weren't going into battle. "One thing I do know, though, is that King Toph isn't lying about knowing when we're lying. She gave me the same treatment as you, backing me up against a wall and putting her hands on the stone. So it's not 'magic eyes' or whatever, it's probably an Earthbender trick of some kind. Because she did catch some of the little lies I threw in. Nothing that got me killed, thankfully, but it annoyed her enough that she's had
no problem kicking a rock at me whenever she feels like."

Mai did a good job pretending she wasn't thoroughly amused by that; he appreciated the effort. "I'll watch what I say, then."

"Speaking of my injuries, I don't suppose you know any of that acupuncture that Ty Lee used to make my rib feel better?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Even if I did, weren't we saying a second ago that I'm out of weapons? Including needles?"

Oh, right. "Well, I guess I'll just suffer in silence, then."

"That should make for a nice change of pace."

He had to admit, he'd missed Mai-flavored banter.

Mai wasn't sure how long the trip took, beneath the earth where she only had her breathing, Sokka's complaining, and the undulations of the badgermole beneath her to mark the time, but she had passed beyond boredom into complete brain-numbness by the time they arrived at their destination.

At least it was worth seeing. The cavern into which the badgermoles emerged was easily the biggest underground space Mai had ever seen. The smoothly curving domed ceiling stretched up farther than she could throw a knife, leading up to a distant hole through which a dark pink sky was visible. The furthest side of the ceiling danced with light reflected off of some kind of body of water, but the stone walls that rose up out of the ground halfway across the cavern blocked Mai's view of it. That far side of the dome had a vertical crack in it wide enough for an entire cargo ship to sail through, and past the gap, Mai could see another stretch of pink sky and a massive body of water. She didn't smell saltwater, so it couldn't be the ocean, but it had to be the next best thing.

At the base of the wall that bisected the cavern was a whole settlement- bigger than the Tyro and Haru's secret village in the mountain ravine- that stretched and pulsed with life. Mai spotted torches and campfires illuminating a mix of sturdy buildings and what seemed to be skin huts, and even a few Fire Nation tanks parked in a line at the settlement's edge.

Mai kept her eyes on the view as she stepped off of her badgermole and onto an earth platform with Sokka, and continued to stare as it lowered her to the ground under the command of one of the Earthbenders. She didn't shift her gaze as 'King' Toph went to join a welcome-wagon coming from the settlement, although she did note out of the corner of her eye that most of the newcomers were carrying weapons, and some even wore armor.

She wouldn't give them her attention until they asked politely for it.

That moment came when Toph said, "Okay, newbies! You guys have one more test to pass before I show you all my Royal Earth Secrets."

Mai looked over at the self-proclaimed monarch. "Your magic truth powers weren't enough?"

Toph closed her eyes and waved a limp hand. "Naturally, I have many things occupying my attention, and can hardly be bothered to keep track of every stupid rumor my loyal subjects hear. I have people for things like that."

Sokka stepped up to stand beside Mai. "You mean a Spymaster."
"Sure, sure. Anyway, Jet, come on out and tell me if either of these losers are famous assassins or something that represent a danger to my Royal Person."

Jet?!!

As Mai's jaw dropped, the wild-haired miscreant himself stepped out of the group of warriors to leer at her.

She didn't realize she was stepping forward with clenched fists until one of the Earthbenders grabbed her arms and brought her to a halt.

Jet had the gall to wink at her. "Lady Mai, I'd almost think you weren't glad to see me."

"Lick ash and choke on it!"

Behind her, she heard Sokka groan and say, "Jet, why aren't you dead? Not that I wished you dead, but seriously, why aren't you dead?"

Jet approached until he was just out of Mai's punching range. (She thought about spitting at him, but spitting was gross, so she decided against it.) He finally moved his gaze off of her and looked to where Sokka was stepping forward. "I was rescued from Fire Nation captivity. Thank you for asking. I needed some time to recover before I could tussle like I used to with our Fire Nation beauty here, so I was sent by my 'friends' to aid the Earth King by sharing our knowledge. Lucky for you, because I can vouch for you and even arrange a reunion I'm sure you'll enjoy. Not so lucky for the cutest Fire Nation girl to ever lie to the Avatar."

Mai's arms were still being held, but her hands were free, so she held up a pair of gestures that told Jet exactly what he could do with himself and the kinds of curses he could expect to suffer as a result.

Sokka just sighed. "Yeah, we know already. You missed all the drama, but we found out that Mai was working for the Fire Nation. She's working for us now, for real this time."

Jet laughed, but Toph reached over and shoved him off his feet. "The Water Tribe guy is telling the truth. I already did my thing both with his story and Lady Caldera Yu Mai's claims of loyalty. I just want your confirmation that at least one of these hobos is worth my time and resources."

Jet got up and dusted off his pants. "Yes, your Highness. I can confirm that these are two of the most important people in the world right now, and the Avatar will be very grateful for their safe return."

Even though she hated the guy, Mai found herself saying, "Have you had knews of him? Aang? Is he okay?"

Jet looked at her with no trace of teasing on his face, but didn't say anything.

Beside her, Sokka nodded. "We got separated during an attack on a Fire Nation fortress. We're not-it looked pretty bad, but- we don't know-

Jet nodded. "The Avatar is alive. I haven't had any specific news, but I have 'friends' in the Great Temples. We'd know if the Avatar Spirit passed through the cycle again."

Mai deflated in the arms of her captors, unable to believe her luck. Both Ty Lee and Aang had survived their dangers?

She didn't deserve that.
But she would still happily take it.

Beside her, Sokka was inhaling loudly enough to create echoes through the cavern. "So Katara is probably alive, too!"

Jet's eyes narrowed. "It sounds like a story I need to hear."

Toph shoved him to the ground again. "Soon enough, my loyal Spymaster. I bet our special refugees are going to want to hear this guy's story, too, and we might as well get it all done at once. Break out the food, get a bonfire going, and we'll have a Story Time! I know it will be disappointing not to hear about one of my epic victories, but I'm sure you'll all survive."

Both Mai and Sokka said at the same time, "Special refugees?"

Toph blinked innocently while not looking anywhere near them. "Did I forget to mention that earlier? I don't suppose either of you know an old bag named Kanna?"

Once again, Mai and Sokka spoke simultaneously: "Gran-Gran?!"

Aang spent most of the voyage sitting numbly at Appa's side. His friend was alive. He would be okay.

It was enough to bring tears of gratitude to his eyes.

Katara had gone to work without hesitation, Waterbending up enormous quantities of water from the ocean and using her healing powers on Appa's wound. "His heart will be okay," she eventually said, tossing the spent water back over the side of the ship and then wiping sweat from her brow. "But from what you told me, his body absorbed lots of energy from that lightning bolt. I can heal the flesh and muscle that was burned, but his Qi flow is weak. I don't think he should fly or move much for a while."

That had worried Aang. "He will be able to fly again, right?"

Katara had looked especially tired as she answered, "I don't know anything for certain, Aang. I'm just doing my best."

So he bowed low before giving her a hug and saying, "Thank you." Only after that would he let her heal his own burns, and then she'd gone to see what she could do for the rest of the survivors.

He sought out Ty Lee, asking if she knew anything about how to survive Lightningbending. That had just made her start crying again, so he hugged her and left her to recover. What she had done was amazing, and he wanted her to know what it meant, even though the shame of his original thoughts about her had choked most of his words in his throat.

They sailed all through the night, Aang staying awake beside Appa and petting his nose to let him know that he wasn't alone. Momo had mimicked the gesture for a while, before curling up and going to sleep some time before dawn.

Aang hadn't been able to sleep.

The sun was rising when Agent Zhuang and the surviving Dai Li scuttled the cargo ship on a beach with a view of an ashland on the horizon. Long Feng and even more of the Dai Li were waiting for them, as planned, and they raised ramps out of the sand leading up to the main deck.
Aang wanted to stay with Appa, to make sure that his big friend was unloaded from the ship gently, but a Dai Li agent he didn't recognize right away came up to him and said, "I am Agent Laotao, Avatar. Long Feng asked me to bring you to join his breakfast."

Aang was about to refuse, but Katara came up to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "It's okay, Aang. I'll look out for Appa. And if anyone gives us trouble, I'll send Ty Lee after them. Between the two of us, we'll keep him safe." Momo fluttered up to curl around her neck, and she gave a soft laugh. "Momo will help us, too."

So Aang let Agent Laotao lead him down to the beach, where Long Feng was sitting on a throne of sand, eating fish and rice from an earthen bowl. "Avatar! I see that the operation was a success."

"Barely." Another Dai Li he didn't recognize handed Aang a bowl of rice and vegetables, and a quick glance confirmed there was no meat in it. He nodded his thanks and continued, "We ran into a pair of Firebenders who gave us trouble before. They hurt Appa so much he can't fly, and a lot of your agents were hurt or killed. I'm sorry."

Long Feng nodded heavily. "I got a report from Agent Zhuang, yes. I mourn for my comrades, but their service has given us a great victory. Once we unload the platinum, we'll have what we need to restore the ashland that used to be my city."

"Ba Sing Se." Aang looked over at the brown smear on the horizon as he chewed. "Do you really think this will work?"

"I think it could, enough to be worth trying." Long Feng stood up, and moved stand at Aang's side. "And I've taken great pains to give us every possible chance at success. If this doesn't work, then there's no hope left for our world."

All of a sudden, Aang wasn't hungry anymore. "When are we going to do this?"

"No reason to delay, is there? As soon as we have the platinum ready for transport, we might as well head straight into the ashland. I've prepared all the other components, and if you are being pursued by hunters, then the sooner the better, yes?"

Aang wished he could agree with that. But he couldn't disagree, so he said nothing, and continued to stare at the ashland that marked the grave of the great city of Ba Sing Se.

TO BE CONTINUED
Everyone converges on Ba Sing Se, and find something unexpected at its center.

It was possibly the most surreal thing Sokka had ever encountered. There was a little Water Tribe village underground in King Toph's cathedral to off-the-map living. The refugees living under the protection of the Earth Rebels called it 'The Middle Pole' and its inhabitants were known for both their blue clothes and being able to really serve up some tasty seafood. The 'Middle Polers' favored skin huts instead of the stone boxes everyone else was living in, freshly made from the local wildlife aboveground. Sokka passed into the little neighborhood and saw the people in blue beginning their day, slowing as he recognized each face, finally coming to a stop when he saw one particular wrinkly visage as familiar as his own.

He had flown all over the world on the back of a giant fluff monster with a boy from a dead civilization and a girl from Evil Land, and none of it compared to unexpectedly finding his people again. Thus, he didn't really think he could be blamed for greeting his Gran-Gran with, "Is it really you?"

Gran-Gran squinted at him. "What, you don't recognize your grandmother anymore? You haven't been away that long. Now come here and give your Gran-Gran a hug."

Yup, that was Gran-Gran! He wrapped her in an embrace that wouldn't stress his broken rib, and didn't even get a chance to say how good it was to see her before he was being assaulted by a coordinated convergence of mini-hugs that very much did stress his bad rib and sent him screaming in pain as he crumbled to the ground.

It was so familiar he couldn't help but grin through the pain.

Clustered on top of him (how they managed to land on top of him when they were the ones tripping him, he would never figure out) were Shila and Naklin and Quinyaya and Tliyel and Shlim. Shila seemed like she had grown a full hand-span and her yellow eyes sparkled in a way they never had before. Naklin's hair was long enough now to tie it in a small Warrior's Wolf Tail that looked good despite the baby fat still on his face. Quinyaya's arms had gained some muscle, and he had a new balance to his movements that gave away the training he must have started. Tliyel, who had always shivered in the South Pole, now wore a dress with no sleeves and was laughing without reservation. Shlim had gotten his ears pierced, and a pair of shiny blue hoops proclaimed his allegiance to the Moon Spirit.

Despite the growth, their cacophony as Sokka tried to push them away from his rib was unchanged in tone or content:

"Sokka! He found us!"
"He's taller! Right, he's taller? Maybe not?"

"Yay, it's Sokka!"

"Didja bring us anything?"

"Your clothes smell funny!"

"Is King Toph your friend?"

"Did you come back to live with us?"

"Did you come back because you beat the Fire Nation?"

"Did you come back because you're hungry?"

"Want some of my jerky?"

It was just like coming home from an extended shift back at the South Pole Mining Colony's research and development laboratory, except now he was free of the crushing need to do something. He used to resent these kids, abandoned half-breeds and living runny-nosed symbols of the Fire Nation's occupation of his people's home, but now he felt tears in his eyes at the chance to hold them again, and it wasn't just because Shila had buried her face in his bad side. It was amazing what destroying a few Fire Nation fortresses and causing massive loss of enemy life could do for a guy's outlook.

He was back to not knowing what happened to his sister, though. He had a pretty bad track record on that score.

That reminded him. Pushing Naklin and Tliyel off of his head, he looked up at Gran-Gran. "I found her, Gran. Katara was alive, and the greatest Waterbender in the world!" Ignoring the resulting gasp, a response of wonder and surprise that he didn't deserve, he plunged on with, "I- I lost her again, I wasn't thinking about what the water would do the structural support, but I just found out that there's a good chance she's still alive- and- and I'm sorry, so-"

And then Gran-Gran got down on her knees and joined the group hugging session, making him squeak briefly as his rib took another hit. "You did what you set out to do," she said, "and Katara sounds like the strongest person our family ever produced. I'm sure we'll all see her again." She looked at the kids, at the abandoned souls she had taken in after the deaths of Dad and Mom and Katara's capture, and said, "Thank you, Sokka. You did good." She smiled, and slapped his head. "Next time, don't lose her."

Sokka laughed.

He dimly heard King Toph saying, "He's just a big softie, isn't he?"

The only thing more humiliating was Mai's reply of, "Could have fooled me, before just now."

Mai had only met Sokka's extended family briefly before setting out on an epic and very messy adventure, and at the time she had been too cranky about the whole 'running away from home to be a double-agent' thing to bother getting to know anyone. She remembered Gran-Gran as a tough old lady willing to walk through a snowstorm to escape the Fire Nation, but her only memories of the kids who were apparently Sokka's self-appointed younger siblings was their size and number.

It was only now that she realized the kids were all only half Water Tribe. Some were more obvious
than others, but there was no mistaking any of them.

And they were living here in Toph's domain alongside a little Water Tribe and plenty of Earth Kingdom refugees.

She turned away from Sokka's efforts to extract himself from the pile of kids and said to Toph, "Where are we?"

It was Jet who answered first. He had run off while Toph was leading everyone over to the Water Tribe settlement, but now he was walking over with his infuriating smirk back on his face. "Officially, this is Full Moon Bay. There used to be a port here where refugees could buy passage to Ba Sing Se. Right across the water is the ashland where the city used to be."

"Now, this is my kingdom!" Toph flung her hands out to encompass the whole settlement. "It's perfect! It has secret entrances that only Earthbenders can open, but anyone can retreat out onto the sea by taking one of the boats. There's lots of space, so we can sprawl out with enough left over for the badgermoles to play, and the ceiling is so high that none of the wussies get claustrophobic! And Ba Sing Se used to be right over there, so when the Avatar kills the Fire Lord, we'll already be ready to become the new capital of the Earth Kingdom!"

Mai had to admit, this girl may have been blind, but she certainly had vision. "And anyone who will bow to you is welcome?"

"That's right! I'll be friends with anyone who recognizes how great I am, and I'm the best kind of friend you can have!" Toph brought her hands down and stomped her left foot, making the ground beneath her rise up like a platform so that she stood taller than both Mai and Jet. "I'm the greatest Earthbender who ever lived! While other people look for enemies with their eyes, I can feel the pulse of every heart right through the ground. Move a speck of dust around me and I'll feel you coming from your exact position! I've fought my way free of Gaoling while it was burning, whipped the survivors of the war back into fighting shape, and protected people who couldn't find a home anywhere else! I even discovered this bay after its old owners had given up on it!"

"Then why haven't you kicked the Fire Nation out of your country already?" Mai felt herself at the center of a lot of gazes, and she was glad she was still wearing green clothes. "You know, if you're so great and all."

Toph tensed visibly, but of course she didn't need to look at Mai. "Are you saying I can't?"

"That's right. You're just one Earthbender, and even all the people here could be wiped out by the Fire Army in a single battle."

There was a brittle silence for a moment, and then Toph grinned. "You're sassy and smart. I like you, Lady. But yeah, you're right. We can't win the way we are now. So I'm waiting, bringing in all different kinds of people who can make the rest of us stronger. When the time is right, we'll hit the Fire Nation where it hurts the most, and they'll realize they've never had control of this country. Not as long as I've been free." She stomped a foot again to lower her platform back to the ground, and reached over to throw an arm around Mai's waist. "And now I'm good friends with two of the Avatar's best buddies. I wonder if that will help me and the Airbender kid get acquainted. He's the only important person left who hasn't officially recognized my Kingship."

That's when Jet broke in with, "If we can get him away from Long Feng."

Mai remembered the dark prison where she had spent a time she couldn't measure, and those interrogations sessions that had faded into her mind like nightmares she could only partially forget.
"Who is this Long Feng guy? I owe him a blade between the ribs."

Jet nodded. "He's not very well known, but he's a major player. He was some kind of minister in Ba Sing Se, and ran a secret police force that helped keep the city strong all throughout the war. There's a lot that's still a mystery about him, but he was somehow able to survive the rest of the city's destruction. He preserved a lot of resources and was making like he was going to start his own rebellion, but then Her Majesty set up shop here in Full Moon Bay."

Toph squeezed Mai's waist tighter, constricting her airflow. "I tried to be a good neighbor, sharing my stuff and letting him lend me soldiers for important raids, but then he got all huffy when I took in the Water Tribe and defectors from the Fire Nation. So I started getting the Sages and Shamans to declare me the new Earth King, and that really got him muddy. Said that girls have to be Queens and the Royal Lineage was sacred blah blah blah. Then he insisted he should be the one giving orders for stupid reasons I didn't listen to. So I punched him."

Mai let herself grin as she pushed Toph off of her. In the Fire Nation, such a dispute would be settled by Agni Kai; according to the Way of the Flame, truth would be expressed through superior fighting and Firebending. Mai, quiet heretic that she was, thought it sounded like an excuse for bullies to get their way, and she only supported such a practice when it was her own bullying that was carrying the day. Mai didn't know if Toph was as strong as claimed, but she liked the idea of a little girl punching a grown man because he insisted she couldn't call herself a king if she wanted. "So what's Long Feng's link to Aang?"

Jet frowned. "We're not sure. We've had scouts watching Long Feng's activities, since he's been too busy lately for our liking, and we've gotten reports of Dai Li agents- those are Long Feng's soldiers- seen with a sky bison and a boy in dawn colors. In fact, I just heard that the Avatar and a group of Dai Li were doing something at the edge of the Ba Sing Se ashland this morning." He turned to Toph. "A runner came here to warn us while the rest of the scouts stayed to observe. Do you want them to make a move? It will take a few hours for our fastest runner to carry word back across the Serpent’s Pass."

Toph went still, and she pointed her face at nothing in particular. It was even hard to tell she was breathing. The only movement across her entire body was the wiggling of her toes against the rocky ground.

Then she swung so that her face was directly pointed at Mai's, those dull and unfocused eyes staring at something that wasn't there. "No! We're not going to send a runner. We're going to check out Long Feng's agenda ourselves, wave the Avatar's girlfriend here like a flag in front of him, and tell him that all the best people are hanging out with Earth King Toph! Someone get Lady here a sword, just in case. Jet, you're in charge until I get back. Knuckle Squad comes with me. The Water Tribe dunderhead with the broken rib stays here. And lookouts should be watching the ashland until I get back in case the Avatar slips out between my muscular little fingers."

Mai nodded as Sokka squawked and finally crawled his way out from his family. There was a whine in his voice as he said, "I should go with you! My sister might be out there!"

Toph snapped her arm out and pointed at him without so much as turning to face him. "No! Lady Caldera Yu Mai can make the introductions, and in case there's a fight, I don't want you bumbling around with your injury making things all muddy. You stay here and catch up with your Grandma. Eat some soup and take a nap. We'll bring your sister to come and kiss your booboo later." She stomped her right foot, making the whole ground shake, and shouted, "So Says Earth King Toph!"

No Jet, no having to worry about Sokka, and a chance to find Aang again? Mai winked at Sokka and then made a sarcastically elaborate bow to the self-proclaimed monarch.
Katara's bad feeling began when she watched the emptied Fire Nation cargo ship be set adrift. It was carried out into deep waters by the waves generated by the Dai Li's Sandbending, a ghost ship left to bob on empty seas until it would be taken by a storm.

Emptying the ship had been a quick and efficient process. The Dai Li had used their Earthbending to raise and move large stone tubs onto the ship, and the ore in the cargo hold was simply shifted into the tubs and carried back out to the beach. They used the same process to move Appa off the ship. Katara and Ty Lee had ridden alongside the injured sky bison, and Katara found the ride to be smoother than sledding across a field of ice. Momo had slept the whole process away in her arms, waking up only when he smelled the food Long Feng's welcoming crew was handing out on the beach.

Of course, Aang had been there to greet them. "How's Appa doing?"

Letting Momo go find something to eat, Katara reached out to rub the bison's nose. Appa sniffed, and she could see his eyes moving beneath their closed lids, but he didn't otherwise acknowledge any of the activity around him. "Still weak, I guess. There's supposed to be a full moon soon, and I'd like to give him a full-immersion healing session before it's over. That might help him. The moon is very important to Waterbenders, and might provide something that my normal healing can't."

Aang's eyes lit up a bit. "Wow, that sounds worth a try. Thanks, Katara! You're really smart with this stuff."

Katara felt her cheeks heating up at the praise. She wanted to deny it, since it was really just a guess and her Waterbending has so far been of little help to the ailing sky bison, but if the idea gave Aang a little hope, she didn't want to take that away from him.

Ty Lee had shifted on her feet at that point, leaning over and hissing, "Incoming jerk!"

Katara looked to see what that meant, and found Long Feng approaching them. He had a perfectly polite smile on his face as he said, "Yes, I heard your sky bison was injured during the fight. I hope it makes a full recovery."

Ty Lee immediately stepped forward. "Don't try to distract us! Your Dai Li were being meanies on the ship and killing everyone! They just- they didn't stop for even a second to give anyone a chance to surrender! All those people got hurt!"

Katara had blinked at the outburst. She hadn't been on the ship during the fight to take control, but she didn't have any reason to distrust Ty Lee. Aang's own eyes were wide, and he looked to Long Feng and said, "Is that true?"

Long Feng lost his smile. "Of course. I said that my people would need to fight efficiently and to preserve their own safety. And certainly, the first wave of sailors might not have had a chance to surrender, but the rest of the ship must have soon heard the fighting. Those people had a chance to refuse to join the defense, but they chose to fight for the ore they stole from Water Tribe lands, ore mined by Water Tribe slaves forced to submit or be wiped out. Those sailors feed their families with the profits of slavery and theft, and our little Fire Nation traitor here thinks they should have been given formal terms of surrender."

Ty Lee bristled visibly, but Long Feng continued, "I wish I could say I was surprised, but this kind of attitude is all too common in Fire Nation defectors. They say they've seen the truth, but they're still so blind to what their people are doing to us."
Aang had looked uncertain, so Katara said to Ty Lee, "Were any of the injured later killed? Or anyone who had stopped fighting?"

Ty Lee deflated before answering, "No."

"Well, then." Long Feng turned back to Aang. "We should be leaving soon, Avatar. We're about an hour away from the ashland, and then we'll still have a long journey to the center."

Aang had given Ty Lee an apologetic look, but she was already wandering away to watch over the disembarking of the small group of prisoners. They were chained up and taken away to Long Feng's base by a squad, and soon afterward the whole group of Dai Li was moving out, standing on the sides of the ore-filled tubs and using their Earthbending to turn the stone beneath their feet into vehicles that slid across the earth as though on wheels.

Katara rode with her friends in Appa's transport, looking back at the cargo ship as it drifted away and wondering about the lump of ice in her stomach.

It took an hour to get to the edge of the ashland, just like Long Feng promised, and the air took on a terrible taste long before that. When Katara had previously visited an ashland, it was by descending from above on Appa, with Aang going ahead to settle the winds. This time, Aang was saving his strength for when the ash became thick enough to be dangerous, so that he would have the energy for this ritual of Long Feng's. Instead, they all made use of scarves over their faces to filter the air.

The procession came to a stop when ash was starting to lay like drifts of snow on the ground.

Aang gave one last nose-rub to Appa. "Stay safe, buddy. I have to go help the Dai Li now. When I get back, Katara and I will give you a new healing session. Does that sound good?"

Appa rumbled with less resonance than he usually had, but he shifted his head to lean into Aang's hand.

Momo came over as well and landed on Aang's head, eliciting a pat and a, "Okay, you stay safe here, too." Aang turned to Katara. "Will you stay with Appa? Take care of him?"

Katara took a steadying breath before she spoke. "No."

"No?" Aang blinked at her.

Katara shook her head. "I'm coming with you. I want to help Appa, but you're important, too, Aang. You'll need a friend out there," She glanced at Ty Lee. "You can stay with Appa, right?"

Ty Lee nodded eagerly. "I wasn't crazy about going back in- in one of those places. The nuns and I were stuck in one for a long time, and it- it- sometimes I dream about it." She leaned her body on Appa's head. "We'll stay here and rest up. Won't that be fun, you big fuzzy buddy, you?"

Katara looked back to Aang. "Well?"

"I guess that's okay, then." He took a step towards her, stopped suddenly- and then continued on to give her a hug. "Thanks for coming."

She hugged him back, relieved that he was going to let her protect him.

She had already lost Sokka. Lost Mai. She didn't want to lose Aang, too.

Aang trotted off to go join Long Feng, and Katara was about to follow when she remembered
something. Her waterskins were full, but something told her she might need an extra edge. She went to Appa's saddle, lying beside him in the transport, and dug around in the supplies until she found Mai's space sword.

The *platinum* sword.

Katara strapped the sheathed weapon to her belt and then ran after Aang.

---

Zuko felt his inner fire flicker when he realized they were following the Avatar's scent straight into an ashland.

He, Azula, Suki, and June had been riding all night, three ostrich-horses following the shirshu underneath the light of the nearly-full moon like the Eternal Riders from the old legends. Although they couldn't follow the Avatar's path directly on the ocean waters, June's shirshu was capable of detecting the remnants of his scent on the winds. They had paralleled the coast eastward even as the sun rose up ahead of them.

Zuko wasn't sure how he could have been the first to realize they were heading towards the Ba Sing Se ashland. The shirshu's nose should have picked up on the smell before any human, and yet they were all still riding when Zuko felt the shadow fall upon his spirit. Maybe he had been unconsciously aware of the city's position, or he had some kind of supernatural connection with ashlands after his previous-

-encounter.

Either way, when the group had stopped for a brief break while the shirshu sniffed around to confirm their trail, Zuko looked into the distance and announced, "We're heading towards Ba Sing Se's pyre."

Azula had been in the process of stretching and immediately froze in position. Suki gasped from atop her ostrich-horse. June just went still for a moment, and then said, "Well, it's time for a decision. We either wait for the Avatar to come back out and try to pick up the scent again, or I'm done with this job right here and now."

Azula's voice was as clear as the chopping gesture she made. "We wait."

Suki looked to Zuko. "Why wait? Will the ash interfere with scent?"

Before Zuko could enter, June cut in with, "Yes, but that's not the real reason. The royal siblings and I have been in an ashland together before, and we found out that the stories are true. They're haunted. And *dangerous*. I'm not being paid enough to risk my life against something I can't even fight. Not like that."

Azula nodded. "There are supernatural forces at work in there. It would be stupid, tactically speaking, to attempt to capture the Avatar while such interference is in play."

Suki's eyes never left Zuko. He could feel the weight of her gaze, and it was almost a relief when she said, "Zuko wants to go in."

June snorted.

Azula's eyes went wide and her nostrils flared. "No! Didn't I just use the word 'stupid'? To reiterate, it would be *stupid*."
Zuko supposed there was no avoiding an argument. "Why would the Avatar willingly go into an ashland? He's up to something."

"Of course he's up to something!" Azula threw her hands into the air. "Everyone is up to something! We have no reason to go shove our faces into this particular something."

Zuko shook his head. "He knows we're chasing him, now, and something about this feels- it feels *important.* He had to think about how to put it into words, how to describe the apprehension he was feeling not just at the ashland ahead of them, but at the idea that the Avatar was going *in* with all his power and strange abilities. "We can't turn away from this. The Avatar in the center of the world's biggest ashland is something that can only be a disaster for the world. Remember what he did to the volcano out in the middle of the ocean? Imagine that. With whatever it is that lives in ashlands. *Here.* Believe me, I'm scared, too."

Azula's face twisted in a snarl, and before Zuko could even register it, she was in his face, shoving him to the ground and twisting his arms and screaming, "I am not scared! Nothing scares me! I am beyond fear! *I am Azula, Daughter of Ozai and Heir to the Lightning!*" Saliva flew from her mouth as she screamed to splatter on Zuko's face.

He could only weather the storm until she stopped to catch her breath. Then he looked into her eyes and said, "I'm going in there. I understand if you have obligations that prevent you from coming with me."

She let go of one his arms to slap him. There was enough force in the blow to make his head ring and his jaw ache, and when he could see straight again, he realized she had knocked his eyepatch right off his face. "And what would you have me tell Father," she whispered, "about why I couldn't bring you home as ordered?"

He lowered his eye. "You won't have to tell him anything. I came out of the last ashland. I will come out of this one, and I will have the Avatar as my prisoner. The only way I will allow myself to fail is if there's no world outside the ashland to come back to."

"Well." Azula's eyes narrowed and she stared at him as the wind picked up and a cloud passed in front of the sun. When the light came back, she stood up and folded her arms. "I can hardly let you show more backbone than me. I'm coming."

June groaned. "Can I ask you both to sign a paper attesting that you're both doing this against my advice, and I have no responsibility for your deaths?"

"Gladly." Azula walked over to June as if they were going to discuss travel expenses.

Zuko got up off the ground to find Suki waiting beside him. She leaned forward and whispered, "Zuko, please, don't do this." He shook his head, not intending to get in to the argument again, but she continued, "I believe you when you say you'll survive. But going into something that even has your sister wetting herself, to drag out the Avatar- I'm afraid of what this will do to you."

"Do to me?"

She nodded. "I understand why you're doing this all. After our talk in the stables that time- about family- and their holds on us-" Her voice trembled, and her gaze fell to the ground for a moment, no doubt thinking about the sister who used to beat her as a child.

All of a sudden, Zuko remembered that he wasn't wearing his eyepatch, and his empty eye-socket was visible to her. He snatched it off the ground and yanked it back on.
Suki didn't acknowledge his actions, but did find her voice to say, "We can't stop loving them, but we can't destroy ourselves, either. We can't let them change us into something worse than we already are."

Zuko didn't want to think what 'worse than he already was' could be. "Isn't that what you're already doing? Helping us find the Avatar?"

She sniffled. "I'm already a traitor, Zuko. Why do you think my sister hit me in the first place? I did what I thought I had to, not what she told me."

Zuko considered that, looking over to where Azula was painting her mark on several papers for June. They finished, and June began leading the shirshu back in the opposite direction of where they had been traveling. "And what do you think I am now, that going into this ashland might destroy?"

"An honorable man."

His gaze snapped back to her. "Why would say that?!"

"Because only someone with honor would work this hard out of love, and would give that love to people who might not deserve it." She pushed a weak smile onto her face.

Zuko couldn't keep looking at her. He turned his eye elsewhere- anywhere else. He looked at the sky, at the ground, at Azula, at his ostrich-horse. He looked at the vague smear on the horizon that might be the ashland.

Only then did he turn back to Suki. "That's why I have to keep going. My honor demands it."

She sighed, and nodded. "Put in danger of losing what you are, by what you are. You're like a Prince out of an ancient legend, Zuko. I consider it a privilege to know you. And that's why I'm coming with you."

He knew better than to take the bait. He nodded to acknowledge her bravery, and then went to get ready for what might be the most harrowing experience of his life.

---

Aang's previous foray into an ashland led to a conversation with a friendly ghost. He wasn't expecting this new visit to be as benign, but he was still surprised when, between one step and the next, he went from dirty air and fields of soot to an entire crowded neighborhood of apartment buildings made of ash.

The buildings rose up around him, and for all that they were made of gray clumps of cinders, the level of detail was amazing. He could see ragged awnings undulating in the wind, buildings with cracks and worn walls sagging against each other, little piles of garbage and animal droppings scattered throughout the streets.

It was like a monument to a city that was no more, made from the city's own remains.

The most unnerving part was the people.

They were all mixed together: crowds of refugees wailing that they needed a place to stay, soldiers thrusting spears at rock-throwing revolutionaries, chanting shamans sanctifying land against disease by throwing handfuls of salt. They all wore clothes from distinct eras, but when two figures collided with each other, their ash forms would merge and twist and writhe and finally rip apart, having exchanged pieces of clothing and maybe a body part or two.
Aang found himself frozen in horror at the sight of it all. Katara gasped beside him and snapped into a defensive stance.

He didn't even hear Long Feng come up from behind until he spoke. "I lived in Ba Sing Se all of my life. I was born in the Lower Ring, and worked my way up through the ranks until I was a minister to the King himself. Truly, it was the greatest city in the world."

Aang watched as a woman made of ash crawled past his boots, clutching a screaming ash-baby and begging for food. "Yeah. Great."

Katara reached down to touch the baby, but pulled her hand back at the last moment, shuddering. "This is what the ashland always shows those who set foot within. What we're seeing is the exact neighborhood that used to be here, before the Fire Nation burned it down and killed the residents. The ghosts, though, are from throughout Ba Sing Se's history. The very earth itself must contain echoes of the spirits of all the people who lived their lives, here. The rebellion the soldiers are putting down over there happened in the era of Avatar Kyoshi."

Aang had to step back as the fighting from that rebellion spilled over close enough that he was well within spear-range. "This is what we have to fix? Giving peace to the remnants of these spirits?"

"Exactly." Long Feng reached out and touched the shoulder of one of the chanting shamans, knocking some of the ash loose to swirl in the air. "I know I'm not a good person, Avatar. I've done dark things for my city, and your Fire Nation friend, Ty Lee, is right. I'm ruthless at times when perhaps I could be kinder. Life is complicated, and it is hard to know when we're making the wrong choices. But if ever someone was to doubt my mission, doubt what I'm trying to do, I would only have to point that person to all of this." He motioned at the ghost-neighborhood around them, and the cacophonous spirits locked in parodies of their lives. "This is what the Fire Nation chose, what the Fire Nation stands for. Even when I make the wrong choices, could I ever produce something like this? The very idea turns my stomach."

Aang could say nothing. He was never fond of the concept of shades of gray, and here in this world of ash, he could find no other color.

The journey didn't get any better after that. Aang let Long Feng steer the platform he and Katara were sharing deeper in the ashland, followed by the other Dai Li and their own moving tubs of platinum. He noticed that whenever one of the ghosts stumbled into contact with the glistening ore, the whole construct would lose its power, crumbling to a pile of soot. Even the fake city seemed to loathe the metal, losing cohesion around the moving tubs to fall back into biting, filthy winds.

Aang wasn't sure how many hours it took to reach the center. It seemed like they were riding for days, but the ash blocked out all view of the sun above. Katara even removed her borrowed hat, saying, "It feels like I'm back in a prison."

Aang wasn't sure if that was supposed to be a good thing or a bad thing.

Still, the light eventually began noticeably dimming, and Long Feng called for everyone to make camp for the night. The Dai Li used their Earthbending to dig holes in the ground, scattering the ash with bursts of stone, and then tarps were nailed to the ground over the shelters to keep the cinders out. Food was dried rations, and neither Aang nor Katara found it satisfying.

Still, it was more satisfying than sleep. In the 'morning' when Long Feng called for them to get up and resume their journey, Aang rubbed bleary eyes to find Katara grimacing. He said, "Didn't sleep well?"
"No. Bad dreams, but I don't remember them. You?"

Aang didn't try too hard to remember his own dreams, this once. "Yeah."

They rode for the whole day again. Long Feng pointed out the University of Ba Sing Se during the lunch break, and Aang saw students made of ash hurrying to class while ancient astronomers argued against star-worshippers with shouts so strong that soot flew from their mouths. In another spot, Kings made gifts of ancient books while small dog-like animals carried tomes away in their mouths.

The light was dimming again when they finally reached the rendezvous.

"There's something up ahead," Katara called, pointing ahead of the procession. The ground here was flat, the neighborhoods having grown less cramped as they moved deeper into the ghost city. The Upper Ring came with lots of empty space that Long Feng had said were public gardens, river-like aqueducts, and uninhabited estates belonging to wealthy families who maintained property in the capital even though they lived elsewhere. Aang turned away from the sight of an Earth Palace made of ash, and sure enough, a long metal pole stood in the distance with a black flag fluttering in the tainted wind.

"It's our rendezvous!" Even Long Feng sounded relieved. "This is where we'll enact the ritual. I sent a part of my agents ahead to mark the spot and prepare the ground. All we need to do is set up the platinum."

The procession hurried forward, and they were indeed met by a squad of Dai Li. Aang spotted a small building, a squat bunker made from the stone of the ground beneath the ash, nearby. Ahead, a circle of stone pillars stood like something ancient and arcane.

Long Feng finished talking with his agents, and hurried over to Aang. "We can begin whenever you're ready, Avatar. If you'd prefer to rest, the bunker has space for us, but I'd personally prefer not to spend another night in here."

"Yeah." Aang looked over to Katara, and her fervent nod confirmed his own feelings. "Let's get this done."

Long Feng gave a hand signal, and the Dai Li went into action. The stone tubs carrying the platinum pieces crumbled, spilling the chunks of ore across the ground, but their tumbles barely came to a stop before the rock of the ground was rising up to grab each piece. The entire cadre of Dai Li moved in sequence. They couldn't bend the metal itself, but with the chunks wrapped in earth, they could move it as they willed, stacking the pieces up and aligning them to form shapes.

Aang watched as strange characters were written on the ground in pieces of platinum around the circle of pillars, while the pillars themselves were attacked by other stone-wrapped metal-bits like spider-ants over picnic food. The pillars grew shining, misshapen talons that reached up into the sky and curved together to meet at the center of the circle. The stone wrappers then crumbled, leaving a balanced structure of platinum chunks.

Aang dodged around some more pieces being maneuvered across the ground, forming paths around the strange characters, and hurried over to Long Feng's side to ask, "Where do you need me? At the center of the pillars?"

Long Feng shook his head. "That's where the energies are going to be funneled for purification. We'll keep some of the Dai Li at the bunker as guards and in case we need substitutes. Most of them will be placed at points throughout our little arrangement to guide the energies. They'll be moving like they're Bending, but not any form that has ever moved Earth. You, Avatar, will be at the head
the formation, not far from the bunker. I was originally going to take your job, but I think you're much more qualified. You'll be where the purified energies will be exiting the formation, meditating on life to show the energies the proper way of being. It might be overwhelming, having that much energy flow through and over you, but once we begin, we cannot stop."

Katara had trotted beside them, and Aang didn't miss the way she kept a hand on the sword she had taken from Mai's supplies. "How long will Aang and the Dai Li be at this? This place is so- so massive!"

Long Feng nodded. "It is, but I have no intention of doing everything all at once. This is where the Earth King died, the center of Ba Sing Se. If we can purify as much as we can here, I think that should settle the ashland. The rest will have to be treated, of course, but we or some proper sages can do that at later times. The importance is to free this place of the twisting that is hurting it."

It made sense to Aang. He looked to Katara and smiled. "Keep an eye out for me, okay? I'll be busy, so I'm counting on you."

She looked back at him with hard eyes. "I can feel the full moon above us. I'll be more than ready for any kind of trouble. And then we'll get back to Appa and heal him, too."

Aang took a deep breath, but then remembered where he was and fought against a coughing fit. He sneezed out the ash on the air, and then shrugged. "I guess we're ready, then. Let's save Ba Sing Se!"

Long Feng stood tall and looked out over the constructions of his Dai Li. "Yes. Let's."

A full twenty-four hours after leaving June behind and plunging on into the ashland, Zuko was prepared to admit that he had perhaps made a mistake.

The ostrich-horses had been skittish as soon as the ash was visible in the air, and they had a tendency to randomly stop and shake the cinders from their feathers. The group also had to stop every so often so that Azula could consult her navigation tools and figure out where they were and where they should be heading. Zuko remained convinced that the Avatar was heading towards the center of the ashland, but that was a difficult thing to define without landmarks.

And there was the pressure.

The pounding, overwhelming pressure.

It wasn't a physical thing, nothing that seemed to affect the bird-steeds, or even Suki. Zuko and Azula alone were left at the center of what felt like the angry attention of an entire nation. Zuko felt like he was being watched constantly, every movement being judged, his name on the lips of billions of billions of people, and all it would take was one wrong move for all that to transform into an unending wave of violence.

It was like being back home in Father's care.

Azula hadn't spoken of it, of course. When Zuko asked, she simply said through her scarf, "I can handle anything you can." But he noticed how pale her skin was, the way her eyes twitched, the shake in her hands as she squeezed her ostrich-horse's reins.

When the city of ash rose up around them, and the cinder-ghosts began walking around, Azula had fallen out of her saddle.

Zuko hadn't been much better; he only kept his seat because his bird-steed had been sitting down at
that point and refused to get up.

What was truly strange was that the cinder-ghosts always stopped to bow to Suki as they crossed her path.

Azula had hissed, "Why? I'm royalty, not you!"

Suki just shook her head. "I grew up on the streets of a Southern Island. My family has lived on Kyoshi's lands since the day she split them off from the mainland. I have no idea why anyone would bow to me."

They kept going, letting Suki lead the way in case any of the ghosts weren't as apathetic to the Fire Royalty passing through their lands.

Even so, the pressure alone was giving Zuko a splitting headache.

But they kept going, fighting through the ash, through the streets that weren't really there, under the watch of spirits that could just be leading them to a slaughter. They went on through the night, and beneath the sickly, invisible sun.

Katara didn't like any of this.

Not. One. Bit.

On the face of it, this was all fine. Long Feng wanted to heal the grounds of his old city and set the spirits of the dead to rest. Aang would be doing his Avatar job, helping fix a small part of the damage done by the war.

But none of this looked right to her.

She had been very little when her people had been forced by the Fire Nation to abandon their village, to cram into the ghetto at the base of the Azulon Mines, but she had memories of the old days. She remembered when her tribe had been able to live according to their culture. She remembered the festivals and the dances. She remembered how her people honored the spirits of their ancestors, and respected the spirits of the lands. She remembered what that looked like, and the feeling of peace that came from it. She had connected those memories to the lessons of Master Hama, back in the heart of Crescent Island, detailing not just the movements of Waterbending but the culture and meaning behind it.

None of what Long Feng was doing felt right at all.

These strange characters written on the ground, the paths swirling through the area, and this ring of pillars with such horrible claw-like platinum arches built on top of them to meet in the middle.

It was unsettling.

It wasn't like what Katara remembered, nor was it of the Earth.

So she had paced around Aang for a while as the Dai Li started their dance-like motions. She paced as Aang sank into a meditation and his eyes started glowing. She paced as the winds picked up and the ash began pelting everyone. She paced (and tugged her robe up to cover her nose and mouth) as
Long Feng’s eyes brightened and he grinned at the whole display. She paced as the howling of the wind became something more like the howling of a crowd in pain. She paced as the Dai Li standing guard around the bunker watched in fascination.

She began wishing she was wearing a hat again.

To that end, she made sure no one was looking at her and then trotted over to the bunker to pick out one of the spares that Dai Li had brought. (They were big on proper uniforms.) And if that gave her a moment of relief from the strange display and maybe let her check out what Long Feng had set up before she and Aang got here—

Well, Sokka would approve of her efficiency, she was sure.

The inside of the bunker was very plain, just a single big room with supplies stacked in one side and bed-rolls laid out in even rows across most of the space. Katara grabbed a hat, looking around in the light of the crystal lantern hanging from the center of the ceiling, and almost missed the straight-lined gap in the floor running out from beneath one of the food barrels.

She moved the barrel to reveal a trap door.

She opened the trap door to reveal a basement.

She grabbed the lantern off its line and shined it down into the basement to reveal the Airbender nuns tied up and gagged in the secret room, a secret room with walls covered in more of the strange characters from outside. They shined in the light of her lantern, and she saw that they were formed from platinum pebbles pressed into the stone.

She freed the Airbender nuns to stage her first jailbreak.

Aang had never felt such pressure.

The energies that the Dai Li were channeling to him, the energies being stripped out from the ash-heavy winds, the energies that had once been the lives and emotions and dreams of the people of Ba Sing Se- those energies were flooding on such a scale that even the Avatar Spirit seemed tiny in comparison.

How many Avatars had lived and died since the dawn of the world? It was beyond count, Aang knew, beyond even the oldest records of history. (Of course, the oldest record of history was probably that statue room in the Southern Air Temple, and Sokka and Mai had done a lot of damage while saving his life. He didn't blame them, but it was very unfortunate.) All of those Avatars, thousands- maybe thousands of thousands-

It was nothing compared to the number of people who died in Ba Sing Se on the day of the return of Sozin's Comet.

As Aang meditated, trying to be an oasis of peace in the midst of the ashstorm, he realized it wasn't just about those millions who had died on that day, either. Ba Sing Se was a city that might very well be as old as humanity, and the full scale of its history- all of those people who had lived in it and shaped it throughout the ages- had its own energy. That had been murdered by the Fire Nation, as well.

And now it was being driven towards Aang.

Even so, he knew he could do it. He could feel the strength of the Avatars behind him, bolstering
him, helping him. The energies of Ba Sing Se were also being regulated, being ordered by the control of the Dai Li and their ceremony. And Aang had been through this trauma before, when he managed to recover his Airbending back on Crescent Island after Mai's betrayal, when he had directed the energies of the Spirit Festival to save Aunt Wu, when he had healed Mother Malu in the heart of that wilderness ashland. He knew he could do it, centered by the needs of the world and the training of the Air Nomads.

He could feel those spirits settling, could feel the winds settling, could feel the ash coming to rest on the ground, could feel the ash rising again to form bodies and housings for the energies that Aang was settling and-

Wait.

Wait!

This wasn't supposed to be what was happening!

The ash wasn't supposed to be coming to life again!

But Aang was trapped in the wash of the tide of the energies, and his thoughts were being hammered by voices speaking the sounds of the unknown characters written by the Dai Li on the ground. He wanted to stop this, wanted to tell Long Feng that this wasn't the way, that Ba Sing Se couldn't live again, but the pressure was too much, and opening his eyes was like trying to hold up the entire world.

But as he struggled, he heard Katara's shouts, heard the calls of Mother Malu and Sister Matagi and the other nuns he had saved from Tiankeng Fortress, heard Long Feng's angry snarl: "The sacrifices!"

The flow was disrupted as some of the Dai Li stepped out of their dance, as Katara and the nuns became the center of a fight. The spirits here didn't like further violence, Aang could tell; the winds howled with the cries of, "There is no war in Ba Sing Se," and those words were a crushing spirit all their own.

That's when the spirits of Ba Sing Se's ashland got mad.

He didn't need to open his eyes to see the way the ash was responding now.

He could feel it.

He could feel it driving, could feel it rising, could feel it swirling, could feel it compressing, could feel it screaming.

It was the scream that finally let Aang open his eyes. The screams brought all of the Dai Li, all of the Airbender nuns, all of the living things in the ashland to their knees.

It was the sound of ten million people screaming.

Ten million people, but one mad spirit.

Aang looked up over the stone pillars, over the platinum arches, to see a single creature forming out of the ash as big as the sky and twice as wide. It was one massive city-sized creature, with a head and four limbs like most animals, but its makeup was all of the ash figures that Aang had passed over the last two days. Their screaming faces peered out from the mass, all of Ba Sing Se's dead screaming, their movements giving an awful texture to the monster. They writhed and struggled and
wrestled, never stopping their screaming, as the monster lowered its legs and arms to the ground to stand upon the grounds of Ba Sing Se.

It filled the whole sky above Aang, and kept growing until all the ash in the entire vista been absorbed.

Then the creature looked down with a head shaped like the ancient Earth Palace and roared a sound like the material world itself cracking within a fire.

Aang struggled to his feet, knowing he had to fight this thing-

-but having no idea how.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Life for the Dead

Chapter Summary

Everyone faces the big monster, and their own personal little ones.

Life for the Dead

On the second day of his trek through the ashland that used to be Ba Sing Se, Zuko finally found relief from his pounding headache, from the pressure that threatened to make his eardrums burst, from the simulacrums of murdered citizens that glared at him as he passed.

It came with a wind, an instantaneous hurricane, a scourging air that blasted Zuko with cinders rendered as sharp as glass by their speed and forcibly ripped every trapped grain of ash from his body, the joints of his armor, his nose and lungs—everywhere. He was proud of himself for enduring it stoically, but then his ostrich-horse mount screeched in panic and jumped up beneath him, panicked by what was going on. It seemed to try to actually take flight for a moment before crashing back down and dumping Zuko and the saddlebags on the ground.

It was unexpectedly hard. The ash was gone, the cinder-formed images of a street long gone, leaving just dry and cracked rock.

Zuko hit his tailbone, of course.

When he forced his way through the wince of pain, he found Azula and Suki on the ground as well. He spotted their birdsteeds all running off in the same direction, back the way they had come. He looked to the girls to see if they had any ideas about how to proceed, but found Azula staring in a different direction completely.

His sister, ever the tactician, had immediately looked to see what their mounts were running from.

Zuko finally looked as well.

That's when he saw the monster.

He thought at first that it must have been approaching faster than a charging rhino, but by the time he scrambled to his feet and took a defensive stance, he realized that the monster wasn't moving at all. Rather, it was growing, drawing the ash unto itself, and it wasn't at all close enough to represent an imminent danger.

It was just-

That.

Big.

The horrified silence was broken, of course, by Azula: "Well, Zuzu, I have to give you credit. When you said the Avatar might be creating a disaster for the world, you were right." Most others might have missed the quavering undertone in her voice, but Zuko didn't. "I don't suppose you'd care to retreat at this point and come back with artillery? It's the only tactically sound choice."
He looked to Suki, who was getting to her own feet. Suki checked her sheathed katana, and then nodded back to him.

Zuko, rather than answering Azula, went to the luggage that was dumped by his ostrich horse. He grabbed a waterskin and the Avatar's staff, stolen and carried all the way from Crescent Island. June might have abandoned them with her scent-tracking shirshu, but Zuko had no doubt that the staff might still prove to be an asset.

Then he began jogging towards the growing ash-monster.

Suki ran at his side, and after a moment, he heard Azula following them. Zuko knew he would need them.

He had to save the world from the Avatar's profane creation, and in doing so, earn the right to return home.

Katara stood in front of the monster made from Ba Sing Se's ash and couldn't stop herself from shaking with terror.

It wasn't the screaming faces that covered the surface of the beast, nor was it the roaring head shaped like a palace. It wasn't how all the noises crumbled into the hoarse groans of a crowd clamoring for everything from food for the famished to gold for the King; the most consist moaning was, “There is no war in Ba Sing Se” and Katara wasn't inclined to argue. It wasn't even that the monster was made from cinders that clung together in defiance of gravity, four twisted legs supporting a bulbous body like a storm cloud.

The thing that made her fall to her knees was the open sky above the monster, the blue expanse revealed by ash's gathering, and the way the massive cinder-creature loomed so far into the air. It was massive beyond her comprehension, and all her mind could focus on was that the sky was still above it. The emptiness that surrounded the monster was every bit as intimidating as the monster itself.

Katara normally retreated from the sky, lowering her gaze and shielding herself with a hat. A Dai Li hat was hanging on her back now, and she could pull it up to block the sky from view.

But that would mean tearing her eyes from the monster, and she couldn't find the will to do that.

So the sky stretched above her and tears streamed from her eyes and her whole body was shaking but this was all wrong and no one was doing anything so she bit down and ground her teeth together and forced herself to get up.

Once she was on her feet, the rest was easy. Her body knew what to do in the face of danger, knew the exact Waterbending stance to take. She let her terror fuel her awareness as she reached her mind out to her water and found an unexpected strength. Although the land around her was a desert, she felt the call of water deep beneath the ground, a flowing source not unlike what she had used to cut a path into that sinkhole weeks ago.

What worked on solid stone should work just fine on ash monsters, right?

Katara began moving, began the Waterbending form that would summon that liquid from beneath the earth. It was some distance away, but the ground was porous and cracked, and water could find a way through even the smallest path. Katara's eyes were locked on the monster as it roared and swung its palace-head towards the gathering of Dai Li and Airbenders, but her body moved smoothly through the form as she bent her knees and lowered her outstretched arms to the ground before rising up and reaching to the sky (so empty) before repeating the motion. She could feel the water
answering her, but the monster was moving like a stormhead on the horizon and lowering its head towards them.

Her fear of being too late momentarily eclipsed her fear of the sky.

Then the water began flowing up through the cracks in the ground.

It was no surge, no dramatic splash, but the water rose all the same, covering the ground around her in a thick puddle and flowing out with just enough force to turn a ripple into a small wave.

The water spread and flowed and soon its darkness touched the first foot of the monster and kept going.

The monster-

-this horrid, impossibly massive creature of ash and death-

-a monster almost as big as the sky itself-

-stumbled.

Even through her shock, Katara didn't stop her Waterbending. She needed more water, needed everything the earth here could give her. She could see that the puddle, her shallow and spreading puddle, was washing away the ash that made up the front of monster's foot. It was doing so only a thumb's length at a time, but it was doing so at the lowest level, stealing the monster's balance.

She could do this!

She could conquer this!

Then the monster turned its palace head to her and spat a glob of ash straight at her.

It smacked into her with enough force to knock her off her feet, but even before she hit the ground she felt the cinders clustering and becoming solid and forming hands that grabbed at her limbs and twisted. The ashes became bodies that wrestled with her and shoved skull-like visages in her face. They began screaming, just like the faces on the surface of the monster's body, admonishing her that there was no war in Ba Sing Se, and a light began shining in their mouths and-

-and then the sky was the only thing in Katara's reality.

She had no body. There was no ground beneath her. There was nothing else within her vision. She could hear nothing, feel nothing, taste nothing, smell nothing. There was only the sky, the sky of the whole world, shaped so that its entirety was visible to her. The infinite was curved so that she could see it all, could experience it all, could know it all.

The whole sky.

All at once.

In comparison to it, she was nothing.

Nothing.

How could one fight against the entire sky?

And yet she struggled enough to find the memory of having a body, worked up the will to move an
arm that was frozen like stone, found the grit to wrap freezing fingers around the hilt of her sword-the platinum weapon that Mai had stolen from the Fire Nation and Katara had worn on this outing just in case.

Even against the entire sky, she managed to draw a blade of shining light.

It took all her energy, her entire life-force.

Everything went black even as the sky faded, the monster turned away from her, and the sword tumbled from her grip.

Katara’s last thought was that this would be a good death, worthy of her Tribe.

It was the sight of the monster flinching away from the shining metal in Katara's hand and the ash-corpsesthat held her melting away from the blade's glare that finally allowed Aang to move again.

All at once, his fear faded and he could see that fighting back was possible. Katara had raised the water to wash away the ash, and the platinum scared the monster. It could be hurt. It was vulnerable to the elements.

And if there was one benefit to being an Airbender, it was that there was always a lot of your element around.

Aang ran over to where the Airbender nuns- the sacrifices Long Feng was going to feed to his ceremony and Aang couldn't let himself think about that now if he didn't want to start glowing to create a new volcano where he stood- had clustered during the fight between Katara and the Dai Li. They were cowering from the monster, too, but Aang found where Mother Malu and Sister Matagi were clutching each other and skidded to a halt in front of them. "We need to make lots of wind!"

It was Mother Malu whose eyes found their focus first. "What? Wind?"

"Yeah! Katara washed away the bottoms of that thing's feet, and it got mad at her!" Aang pointed at the massive animated remains of Ba Sing Se helpfully. "If all of us work together, I bet we can blow away a nice chunk of ash monster!"

Sister Matagi's eyes turned to him and stopped trembling. "But then won't the monster come after us like it came after Katara?"

Aang hadn't considered that. "It's a good point. But! Um, maybe I can find a way to use my Avatar powers to stop it while it's distracted?"

Mother Malu frowned. "Are you asking or telling?"

"Telling?"

"Ugh." Mother Malu shook her head, let go of Sister Matagi, and stood up. "Sister, we need to rally the other girls to help the Avatar. Please assist me. Aang, we're counting on you."

Right. He nodded, and took an Airbending stance as Sister Matagi shouted, "Everyone, master yourselves and get ready to use The Gift you've been given! This might be the moment that Destiny has chosen us for! We are the new Air Nation, and we have to fight for our survival right now! Everyone who won't contribute will have to scrub the floor of the abbey as soon as we get a new abbey!"
Aang began moving through an Airbending form as the nuns slowly shook themselves and separated. He used wide motions of his arms to swirl the air in front of him and give movement to the general atmosphere. Mother Malu was the first to join him, adding her own motions to the effort, combing her power with his own. Sister Matagi came next, and Aang could feel a surprising strength in her arms just by the way the winds responded to her motions. (No doubt from lots of floor-scrubbing.) One by one, the nuns joined the effort, and soon Aang's robes were snapping with the force of the moving air around them. There was no spare ash to provide visible form to the winds, but Aang had lots of experience with them, and he figured they were getting a tight, powerful tornado going.

He waited for it to get nice spin on it, and then shoved out towards the monster. The nuns did the same, and their invisible tornado followed the motion.

As soon as the swirling air hit the monster's writhing skin, the tornado snapped into view.

The creature shook as the tornado ate into its side like a saw, and it stumbled on legs the size of the entire Southern Air Temple, shaking the ground not unlike an earthquake. Aang jumped from the shuddering ground even as he continued the motions needed to build another tornado, and the nuns followed suit, fluttering slowly the ground with their flapping robes even as they worked the winds around them.

Aang heard Long Feng shouting, "Look! The Waterbender stood against it! The Airbenders stand against it! Can the last children of Ba Sing Se then refuse to stand against the remains of our city? Fight back!"

As Aang led the way in unleashing another tornado, he saw rocks torn from the earth rising up to join the attack. They impacted against the creature's writhing form with massive plumes of ash at each impact site, and some of the chorus of screaming ghosts cut off with each impact. Some of the calls of, "There is no war in Ba Sing Se," faded from hearing.

They were all fighting back!

And-

And it was utterly pointless.

The tornados tore at the monster's being and the crashing rocks sent plumes rising up like steam from wounds, but the damage was so small. Tornadoes and boulders could do damage on a scale that could wipe out small towns, but the monster's massive body and four limbs were still there. The head like the Earth Palace still swung to regard them, and its roar was not lacking in strength. When that roar was followed by an emerging tongue as large as the Eastern Air Temple's Dawn Spire, Aang realized that while they might be fighting back, they were almost certainly losing this particular fight.

The tongue lashed at the ground where the Dai Li had formed up, ravaging the earth into clouds of dust and scattering bodies in black and green robes. Aang briefly heard Long Feng's scream before another strike of the tongue cut it off.

"Run," Aang said.

Mother Malu stopped her Airbending. "What?"

"Run!" He demonstrated by grabbed a wind and throwing it at the gathering of nuns, blowing them all out of range of the whipping tongue. It struck the ground where they had been forging their tornadoes, shattering the rocky surface. The nuns took control of their tumbling and dived back
down to the ground in a run that would take them away from the monster, and Aang was glad to follow.

"This way," Mother Malu called, motioning from the head of the group. "I can smell water on the wind! There's water in this direction, a lot of it!" It was a good idea; if Katara's attack had inconvenienced the monster, a beach might be the only safe haven in the world. The other nuns followed their Mother, but Aang looked back to see if he could find Katara. He couldn't leave her behind to suffer the same fate of the Dai Li. She was his friend- no, his family- and she had been the one to realize Long Feng's treachery and save his new nation again.

He spotted her still lying where she had fallen, the gleaming platinum sword stuck blade-first in the ground beside her.

He turned and ran back for her even as the monster began chasing after the nuns.

It didn't need to run. It didn't even need to hurry. It moved with the slow majesty of the rising sun, but every step carried it a day's march and every footfall hammered the earth hard enough to send shockwaves out to the horizon. Aang could feel the nuns running with hurricane winds at their backs but it was still barely enough to keep them ahead of their pursuer.

But his eyes were locked on Katara as one of the monster's feet came down carelessly towards her, covering her in a shadow the size of a whole mega-herd of sky bison-so he put on speed enough to make typhoon winds sit down and respect their elders and whisked Katara out from under the pillar of ash just before it smashed down.

She gasped in his arms but didn’t open her eyes.

Aang figured that as long as he was going this fast already, he might as well aim himself right at the next ash-leg in line and begin thinking more vertically. Running up a giant pillar of solid ash covered in screaming imitations of faces was a lot more unsettling than running up a wall, but it was no more physically difficult, even with Katara unconscious in his arms. He ran up the limb to the main body, never decreasing his speed no matter how much gravity insisted, leaving geysers of cinders trailing after him from the force of his steps. Maybe he could run this creature to death, circle it bit by bit until it dissipated back into the cloud of ash it had been before Long Feng's crooked ceremony.

Then something tangled his legs, yanking him to a stop that nearly ripped the teeth from his gums by sheer momentum and did jerk Katara's body right out of his arms. Aang didn't even have time to scream before he was falling through the monster's body into a whole world of soot.

He couldn't tell how long he plummeted in that world of torment, but when he emerged from the monster's underside to fall to the earth, he realized he wasn't alone. Bodies were grappling all over him, hardened forms of ash that pinned his arms and legs and climbed up to stare into his face with screaming skull-like visages that insisted there was no war in Ba Sing Se even as a light began shining out through their mouths.

Aang didn't even have time to be horrified before everything went away to be replaced by the Sanctuary Hall of the Southern Air Temple. The statues of the past Avatars were all there, just as Aang had left them months and months ago, but the rest of the room was not as he had left it at all.

He, Sokka, and Mai had cleaned the Sanctuary out, removing the pale dust and bones that were the remains of his people after he had been forced to destroy the undead creatures they had become.

Now, the dust was back, thicker than ever. Bones and faded robes stuck out of it, and as Aang
looked over everything, the Sanctuary warped in his vision to stretch as far as he could see. The dust continued on from horizon to horizon, the remains of every Airbender who ever lived. He could even see the rotting robes of Mother Malu, Sister Matagi, and the other nuns flapping like flags from collapsed skeletons.

He was all alone.

The last Airbender.

Everything went dark, just like his future.

It wasn't until Zuko arrived at the site of the battle that he began having flashbacks to his previous visit to Ba Sing Se.

Part of the denial up to know was how different the landscape was. When he arrived those years ago, barely more than a boy but given command of one of the armies assigned to bring down the Outer Walls, the landscape had been completely different. It had been alive where the actions of the Fire Army hadn't torn the earth and rendered it into the killing fields of mud and slime. Now, everything was dead, and the dry and cracked ground had been warped beyond all recognition. Ba Sing Se itself had been the anchoring landmark against which everything had been situated, and with the city turned into the vague smear of an ashland, the memory of the area was adrift in Zuko's mind.

Now, the monster made of ash was landmark enough to dredge those memories back up from the depths of Zuko's mind.

It didn't help that his most recent experience with a battle in this area had been the Spirit Vision he experienced in another ashland, an offensive hallucination designed by a vengeful Spirit to break him.

Nor did it help that he had only freed himself from that vision- a vision in which he had seen a boy not unlike himself attacked by his own father- by burning the whole vision away.

Burning the vision-

-and the boy.

Burning himself.

Zuko shook himself free of the memory. Where there had once been a city was now a monster so massive it was beyond comprehension. Where once the Fire Army had uselessly thrown itself against the Outer Walls, a group of women in white and gold robes rode the winds out of reach of a lash tongue of cinders. Where Father had commanded his honor guard in an assault on the Outer Walls, broken bodies in black and green robes were now scattered across the torn earth.

And where Zuko had fallen with his face on fire in what was officially a friendly-fire incident but could have been something else, skin being eaten by the flames of his own father that may have been aimed or may have been accident, the Avatar was laying in the arms of skeletal bodies made of old cinders.

"Well," Azula's voice broke into his daze, "we're here. Now what?"

Zuko made himself look at her and found that her act of nonchalance didn't quite extend to her trembling eyes. "You're our tactician. What do you recommend?"
She breathed in and out, nostrils flaring. "I have no strategy for you. There are too many unknown factors. I'm not even clear on our objective. Can we simply remove the Avatar from the situation? Do we need to confront that creature? You're the one that got us out of the ashland that time; do you have insights to share?"

Zuko thought about it. "I think we win by conquering ourselves. If that helps."

Azula's eyes briefly stopped trembling as she threw a scowl at him. Then she inhaled sharply, and looked over at the third member of their little group. "The ash-ghosts we passed on the way here all bowed to Suki. Perhaps she can go and pull the Avatar out of this mess for us. At the very least, she's the most sensible choice for gathering more information."

Zuko looked to Suki as well, and found her standing very still with her gaze fixed on the ground at her feet. "Well, Suki? Will you investigate for us?"

She took a deep breath and then looked up at Zuko with steady blue eyes. "No, Prince Zuko. I won't."

Azula moved all at once, coming up behind Suki in an ambush. It took no more than a second of grappling for Azula to use one hand to lock Suki's arms behind the back, and then bring her other hand to hold a blade of blue flame at Suki's throat.

"Traitor," Azula hissed musically.

Zuko felt the impact of the word in his gut. After everything he and Suki had shared, the personal pain they exposed to each other, still she failed him at the critical moment. "Just like Mai," he found himself muttering.

"No!" Suki's eyes were pleading, and she seemed to have no care for the azure fire at her throat. "I'm not betraying you! I'm doing this for you!"

Azula barked a laugh.

Zuko wanted to be as dismissive, but the pain of betrayal was still radiating from his gut, and he truly didn't think he could survive much more. Mother, Father, Mai, Azula (well, Azula hadn't betrayed him yet, but he was sure it was only a matter of time)- how many people in his life would turn their back on him? "Explain, then."

Suki kept hold of his gaze with either the conviction of truth or the audacity of an expert liar. "Zuko, look at this situation. Do you think the Avatar is the one doing this?"

Zuko blinked. The Avatar had to be in control of it, didn't he? Who else could raise all the cinders in an ashland and make a monster out of them? Who else had that kind of power? That much power? Zuko would be doing the world a favor by destroying the boy-

"Zuko, look at it. Don't see what you want to see. See what's really there. Those women in danger are commanding the winds. Aang is being held captive. And the monster is hurting them all. I know you can tell when someone is being hurt. The reason why is there if you just look at it."

Zuko forced himself not to look. This was traitorous talk, a strike at his weakest points. Suki had just been learning about him like the spy she had claimed to be, setting him up to strike at the most critical moment. "Then what do you want me to do?!" He motioned over at the battle in front of him, fire bursting from his hand as he moved. "Run away from my duty?!"

Suki didn't so much as flinch as tongues of flame wafted on the winds near her face. "No, Zuko. I
"want you to be who you really are. Not who you think you have to be. Show me your true face, not the face you think you need to turn to the world."

"Is that what you were doing when you sold your people out for your sister's safety?"

Suki's lips quirked into a smile. "Everything I've done has been with a true heart. If I'm lucky, people will someday realize exactly what I've done and why. But if I die here, now, then it will be with my own honor intact. My honor, and my friendship to you."

Azula snorted. "Zuzu, if you want, you can look away while I kill her. I promise I'll make it quick for her. Well, quick enough that she won't make any noise."

Zuko ignored his sister. He met Suki's gaze, and then, straining all of himself, he made himself look over at the battle.

The day-long journey from Earth King Toph's base to the ground where Ba Sing Se used to sprawl was quiet and tense. Toph didn't like boats, even though her rebels kept a small supply at Full Moon Bay, so the only way to walk to where Aang and this Long Feng were supposed to be without spending several weeks on the journey was a path known as the Serpent's Pass.

So named because it was guarded by a giant sea serpent, according to Toph. Mai was all set to laugh, but then she saw the faces of the Earthebenders coming along on the trip, and remembered the Unagi back on Kyoshi Island. So instead she shut up and followed Toph's advice to complete the journey as quietly as possible.

It took a day and a night to travel the whole Pass. It was nothing more than a narrow path that rose up like a fin made of stone from a lake the size of an ocean, becoming so narrow at places that Mai had to press herself up against a wall and shuffle her feet to the side. At one point, the path fell down into the waters, and the only way to cross was a series of small stone platforms that Toph's people had raised in the past, allowing them to leap across one at a time. If the Fire Army ever tried to come this way, it would have to leave its tanks and heavy machinery behind, or else find a way to make them waterproof.

By the time the group reached the mainland again, the ashland had been replaced by clear skies, solid ground, and a giant black monster the size of the whole Capital Caldera that seemed to be attacking something at its feet.

"Ash," Mai cursed.

"What?" Toph put her hands on her hips. "What's going on? I feel tremors coming from where the city used to be."

"That would be the giant monster that's replaced the ashland." Mai tried to stop looking at it, and failed. "I think this Long Feng guy has been very, very bad."

"Oh." Toph snickered. "I get it. You said 'ash' and there's a monster made of ash. Heh."

The dumb joke finally jolted Mai from her shock. "Aang must be over there. We have to go help him!"

Toph nodded. "And we will. But Long Feng's camp is nearby, and I'm not about to go chasing after monsters without knowing what's really going on. Besides, how far away do you figure that thing is?"
Mai blinked. Her knife-throwing training had given her a better head for judging size and distance than most people, and she had immediately pegged the monster as being city-sized. That meant, given how small it was on the horizon, that the distance must be-

-must be-

Toph nodded again. "Even at my fastest Earth-running, we won't be able to get over there before nightfall. We'll probably arrive too late no matter what, so the best thing we can do know is take a little extra time and make ourselves smart. The key to Earthbending is waiting and listening before striking. And I'm the greatest Earthbender who ever lived."

Mai had a number of profanities and insults ready to describe someone who sat around while a friend was in danger, but the part of her that was so good at hitting moving objects with little bits of metal interceded on Toph's behalf. The little blind Earth King was right, and Mai herself usually fought the same way.

The only reason she was so eager to go against that wisdom now was because she knew Aang was out there, and probably needed her help.

He needed her help because she had failed to return to him.

But this wasn't the first time she had failed him. She had been working to make up for that by being patient and strong, and doing what had to be done.

No reason to stop now.

"Let's go, Your Majesty," she hissed.

Fortunately, the Dai Li camp wasn't far away, and when they arrived, they found its guards all staring at the monster on the horizon with slack jaws. When Toph and her own group of elite Earthbender warriors attacked, the Dai Li didn't even notice until it was time to raise their hands and beg for mercy.

Mai stayed back, letting the professionals handle things until she noticed a big white furry blob in the center of the camp and a girl in pink standing beside it. "Ty Lee!"

"Mai!" Ty Lee ran over and Mai ran to meet her, and they collided hard enough to bounce off each other if they hadn't wrapped their arms around each other's bodies at first contact. "Oh, Mai," Ty Lee sobbed, "it's been awful! I thought you were dead and we met these meanie Dai Li and Azula showed up and I punched her in the face and every time I think about it now I almost throw up and Appa got hurt and Aang went into the ashland with Katara and now there's a monster and I'm pretty sure we're all gonna die!"

Mai wanted to focus on what was important, but one part of that couldn't pass without comment. "You punched Azula in the face?"

Ty Lee whimpered.

Mai couldn't help but agree. "Well, I guess you're never going back to the Fire Nation. Ever."

Ty Lee whimpered again.

"Okay, enough frivolity." Mai pulled out of the hug and looked her friend in the eyes. "We need to know what's going on if we're going to try to save Aang and Katara. Who's in charge, here?"
Ty Lee finally let go of Mai and pointed at a pair of Dai Li agents kneeling on the ground with hands on their heads. "Agent Zhuang is in command, and Agent Laotao is always hanging out with him. I think they're buddies."

Mai turned to where Toph had been spying on them. "You hear that?"

Toph's only answer was a grin. Then she stomped her right foot on the ground, raised her forearms in front of her face, and then twisted them horizontally while she slid her foot in the same direction. A second later, the ground beneath Agent Zhuang and Agent Laotao carried them over so that they were kneeling right in front of Toph.

Agent Zhuang's face twisted into a grimace. "You."

Agent Laotao nodded. "It's her, all right."

Toph clasped her hands behind her back and raised her chin regally. "Hello again, boys. I'm glad to see you in good health. When my people told me that a monster made of ash was doing a jig on Ba Sing Se's grave, I figured all you Dai Li stooges were having your bones ground to dust. Now, I need to speak to your boss, so you go ahead and tell me where Long Feng is, okay?"

The two Dai Li exchanged glances. "He's, uh, not here," Agent Zhuang said.

"What Agent Zhuang means," Agent Laotao added, "is that he was last seen headed in the direction of where the, uh, monster made of ash is currently, uh, jigging."

"Thank you, Agent Laotao."

"My pleasure, Agent Zhuang."

Toph just nodded. "I understand. Since you've both been so polite and helpful, I'm offering my assistance in rescuing your boss."

"That's very nice of you. It's nice of her, isn't it, Agent Laotao?"

"Quite accommodating, Agent Zhuang."

"Thank you, boys. Before I can be of any help, though, I need to know what in the name of the primordial mud your lichen-sucker of a boss was doing over there!"

Even Mai had to cringe at the volume of Toph's shout. Both Zhuang and Laotao paled visibly.

"We found information on the nature of spirit energy," Agent Laotao added, "is that he was last seen headed in the direction of where the, uh, monster made of ash is currently, uh, jigging."

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"Thank you, boys. Before I can be of any help, though, I need to know what in the name of the primordial mud your lichen-sucker of a boss was doing over there!"

Even Mai had to cringe at the volume of Toph's shout. Both Zhuang and Laotao paled visibly.

"We found information on the nature of spirit energy," Agent Laotao said. "Yes, some of the books Avatar Kyoshi charged the organization to hide from mortal eyes back when she founded the Dai Li."

"In retrospect, that probably applied to the boss as well, wouldn't you say, Agent Zhuang?"

"It's hard to come to any other conclusion right now, Agent Laotao."

"And the boss thought we could use the information to devise a ceremony that would fix the ashland and maybe bring our people back to life. I'm a bit unclear on that last point."

"It was very, very complicated. Had something to do with the white gold the Fire Nation is shipping,
a special kind of Earthbending that affects spirit energy, writing from a forbidden language, and a human sacrifice."

"Further retrospect is revealing that none of this sounds particularly safe, does it, Agent Zhuang?"

"I'm abashed about the whole thing, Agent Laotao. I gather that the Avatar feels the same."

"Oh, no doubt, no doubt."

That's when Mai stepped forward. "So Aang is over there. With the monster."

"Er, yes."

"Quite right, quite right."

Mai turned and headed straight for Appa.

"Wait," Ty Lee called. She came trotting up beside Mai. "I told you, Appa was hurt. Azula got him with her lightning. Katara healed the wounds, but he's still very sick. He can't fly. His heart- his Qi is weak and isn't flowing right."

Mai came to a halt beside the bison. Momo fluttered over from Appa's head and landed on her shoulder to lick her neck. A part of her recognized that she would normally have been grossed out by something like this, but the rest of her was too focused on finding solutions to worry about it. She needed to get to Aang, and a sky bison was the only way to get there before he was likely to die.

Qi problems, huh? Mai looked at Ty Lee. Then she looked at Toph, who was trotting over. Then she looked at Appa.

Appa stared back at her with dull eyes.

Mai stepped forward and patted his nose. "Hey, big guy."

Appa gave a low sniffle.

She crouched beside his head and leaned against him. "Aang needs you. I know you're sick, but Aang needs our help right now."

Appa's eyes shifted.

Mai nodded, and hoped she was guessing right about this. "I know you can't fly. But I have an idea about how to fix that. Fix it enough to maybe save Aang, at least. But it might not work, and even if it does, I think there's a good chance it might kill you."

Appa blinked.

Mai reached over to pat his nose again. "If it makes you feel better, we're probably all going to be killed by an ash-monster anyway. You know things are bad if people are relying on me for plans, right?"

Appa snorted.

"So, will you risk it? Aang would be mad if I did this without your permission." Mai could hardly believe she was having this conversation with a pack animal, even an unusually intelligent one, but she didn't make the rules; she just worked here.
Appa closed his eyes, shifted his head, and opened his mouth to give Mai a weak lick.

Yuck.

But she could take that as a 'yes.'

She stood up again and looked to the other girls. "Ty Lee, do you think you can figure out how to do acupuncture on a sky bison? Like you did when Sokka broke his rib?"

Ty Lee blinked. "Um, maybe?"

"Great. Toph, are you a skilled enough Earthbender to make a set of very fine, very pointed sky-bison-sized needles out of rock?"

Toph grinned and put her fists on her hips. "Even if I didn't think so, I'd say yes anyway."

"Okay." Mai sighed. "Sounds like we have the beginning of a terrible, dangerous plan. So, whenever you ladies want to get started?"

---

Aang was alone.

Alone in all the world.

Alone in an empty temple full of nothing but the dust of his people's remains.

Dimly, he was aware of a voice wafting on the dead air of the Southern Temple's Inner Sanctuary. It was a voice he was pretty sure he didn't like, but he could find no meaning in its repeated questioning of, "Why?"

"Just leave me alone," Aang sobbed. His heart stung at the irony of his request. He would never be anything but alone, now.

"Why did you have to ruin everything?" The voice grew in strength, revealing the sorrow within. "I was going to restore my city. Bring back the people who relied on me for safety and order. Why couldn't you people just go along with it?"

Long Feng. Aang recognized the voice now. Unable to look away from the skeletons of Mother Malu's nuns, half-buried in the corpse-dust of the Sanctuary, Aang snarled, "You're insane! No one can raise the dead again! And you were going to sacrifice my people to do it! If Katara hadn't-"

"It was the only way!" Anger now colored Long Feng's pleas. "A nation for a nation! Ba Sing Se was everything important about the Earth Kingdom, and without it we're all nothing more than human debris! The only way I could find the energy to bring back my city was to have you offer the last of your people in exchange!"

Aang groaned. "I wish I had died with my people." He wasn't sure how the nuns had died even after Katara had rescued them, how their bodies had gotten to the Southern Air Temple, but he was looking at their bones right now. "There's no bringing the dead back. There's just waiting to go back to them."

"I refuse!" Long Feng's voice was so sharp that it jolted Aang, made him jump in place only to discover that he was immobile. But wasn't he in the Sanctuary with the Avatar Statues? Then why did it feel like gravelly hands held him in place? Ignoring Aang's confusion, Long Feng continued, "When the Fire Nation burned Ba Sing Se, I made sure the Dai Li survived! It was my duty! Without
us, all the knowledge of the city would have died with it! We survived so that the archives, the university's library, and royal secrets could survive! And I found a way to use it! Without me, Ba Sing Se will remain an ashland until the end of time! I found a way back! And I'll see the city brought back, yet! No matter what it takes! Any sacrifice!"

Aang was losing focus on the dust that was the remains of the monks who had raised him. He felt the pull of that horror, the urge to cling to what he had already lost, but Long Feng's rantings pulled at him, too. The insane words dragged his mind from the Southern Air Temple to another place, a place with open air and a trembling ground and strange restraints that felt like hands made of ash.

"Maybe," Aang said, "we need to let go."

"Never!" Long Feng's scream was ragged, and Aang's throat ached in sympathy. "I am Ba Sing Se's protector, and my whole life has been devoted to peace and order! Without the city, there is no Earth Kingdom! Without the city, there is no order! Order is what separates us from the animals, what creates civilization! I'd sacrifice everything else- a new Air Nation, even the rest of the Earth Kingdom- to bring back the order of my city! If we can't restore order here, how can we bring order- bring peace - to the rest of the world?"


Long Feng snarled, and pushed himself to his feet. His robes were torn and his right arm was twisted at an odd angle, but he forced himself to walk, stumbling forward to Aang. Bits of the stony ground clung to Long Feng's left fist, and he raised it above his head as he lurched forward.

Aang tried to move, to get out of the way, but he found himself held in place by strength even beyond that of chains. He glanced around to find himself being grappled by gaunt figures made of ash, gasping monsters, humanoid beasts whispering that there is no war in Ba Sing Se, creatures that clung to him and kept him from moving forward.

Long Feng swung his fist down towards Aang's face-

-and the end of a well-maintained glider staff swung out of nowhere to smack into the back of Long Feng's head. He dropped like a bag of rocks.

Aang blinked.

And then Prince Zuko stepped into view, glaring at Aang with one eye. In his right hand, the side opposite his scarred face and eye-patch, he held Aang's glider staff. Aang braced for another attack-

Zuko nodded. "Suki, get him out of there."

It took Aang a second to remember that name, remember the rebel woman from Kyoshi Island who had helped them find the location of Katara's prison, and then he was being pulled free of the monsters holding him. He stumbled into Suki's arms, and looked back at the creatures that had been holding him to find them melting into piles of cinders with whispers that sounded like, "Kyoshi's Chosen..."

Aang blinked again. He was having a hard time making sense of any of this. "What's going on?"

Suki shrugged and helped him stand on his own. "Just go with it. We can figure it out when we're safe."

"Safe?" Aang looked back at Zuko, but the Fire Prince was simply standing there. There was no sign
of the other Firebender, the one who had hurt Appa. "No, really, what's going on?"

Zuko's face held no expression. "Avatar, make no mistake. I will bring you to the Fire Nation and fulfill the terms of my banishment. Nothing will stop me. Nothing." He angled the glider-staff so that he was holding it out for Aang to take. "But I will do so honorably, and the dangers here take priority. I won't destroy myself for my mission." He turned away for a moment, and mumbled, "Not again."

Aang hesitated. This was the man who had compelled Mai to trick and betray him, the man who masterminded the attack on the cargo ship that had nearly killed Appa. Zuko was not, clearly, a good person.

But he was better than Long Feng, and if he really wanted to try to make amends, then Aang was happy to let the guy join the fight against the undead city-sized monster made of ash.

Aang reached out and took the staff. "Thanks."

"Thank me by telling me how to set this- this- this whatever right." Zuko motioned above as the last of the ash-monster's rear legs passed over them and stomped down a horizon away.

"Oh." Aang peered into the distance, and beyond the monster's palace-shaped snout, he thought he saw some flickers of motion that might have been Airbender nuns launching wind attacks at the lashing tongue of ash. "Well, Suki seems to have some kind of power over these things, so maybe if I fly her up to the head, we can-" He trailed off as he spotted something else in the distance beyond the monster.

The sky had been cloudless before, but now he thought he saw one little puff moving visibly across the expanse of blue.

Moving against the wind.

"No way," he laughed. The cloud was traveling swiftly, sailing directly on a line that would take it straight to the ash monster. "I don't believe it!" New possibilities occurred to him, and he turned back to Zuko and Suki. "Quick, did you find Katara anywhere? A Water Tribe girl."

"With her hair in little loopies that hang in front of her face?" Suki pointed off to the side. "We found her being grabbed by the same creatures that had you, and dragged her to safety. That's how we knew I could get you out of your predicament."

"Gotcha! Thanks!" Aang flicked his staff open and leaped into the air. "I'll be back with help! Don't get killed!" He used his Airbending to push the wind into the glider wings, his heart soaring at having his people's most important tool back. He flew low and fast over the ground, not wanting to catch the ash-monster's attention again, heading towards where Katara was laying. He dipped his wings as he flew, making sure that the bright orange color would be visible to the cloud that was now close enough for him to make out as the flying sky-bison it really was.

He flew over Katara and her shining sword, swooping back and forth over her to mark her location, and when he looked back at Appa, he spotted a figure in pink sitting on the bison's head waving frantically.

And beside her, a figure in green with dark flowing hair was waving with more restraint.

Mai!

The joy bubbled out of him with a laugh as Appa swooped beneath him and touched down beside
Katara. Aang swooped around again to cover his friends from the air, and saw a whole group of people in green jumping out of Appa's saddle even as Ty Lee and Mai were carrying Katara aboard. The shortest of the newcomers conferred briefly with one of the others and then shouted, "Hey, Avatar, they tell me you're flying but I'm Earth King Toph and I'm here to kick butt and make friends! We'll talk after I take out the big creepy thing that's shaking the ground! Oh, and I'm taking care of your Water Tribe friends so don't worry and get back in the fight!"

Aang felt himself grinning as Appa rose again and the green newcomers started running towards the monster. The visions he had suffered from were wrong.

He wasn't alone.

Not even close.

He swooped over the shouter- a girl if he wasn't mistaken from this angle- and called back, "There's a Firebenders in an eyepatch who can help, too! Talk with him to find out what to watch out for!"

The girl laughed at the word 'watch,' although Aang couldn't guess why. He figured he could worry about it after all the fighting was done.

As he climbed up into the air alongside Appa, Aang could see Katara in Ty Lee's hands, and the platinum sword in Mai's.

"I have an idea," Mai said as Aang spiraled around Appa on his glider like he was showing off. She turned her attention to Ty Lee. "I've had this sword made of a metal that kills spirit monsters for months now, and I haven't had a chance to use it yet. What do you say we give it a try?"

Ty Lee looked back at Mai, then at the giant creature stomping around like it owned the place. "Um, Mai, I think you're going to need a bigger sword."

"You'd be surprised at the kind of damage that can be done with a relatively small blade. For example, what do you suppose would happen if I pointed this thing forward while you flew Appa right into the base of that gross tongue-thing trying to smash Mother Malu?"

Ty Lee tilted her head from side to side. "Is this one of those science experiment things?"

"Sure, let's go with that. I hypothesize that we're going to do of damage and feel great as a result."

Aang peeled off as Ty Lee steered Appa towards the creature's head. Mai studied her target, noting the gross faces that covered the surface of the massive monster. Was that where the creepy screaming sounds were coming from, the strange groans that there is no war in Ba Sing Se? This was why she would always favor a good, reliable machine over more natural things like perverted twistings of unlife. The only part of it that had any kind of visible logic to it was the head itself, which seemed to be shaped like the Earth Palace, if the drawings she had seen back in the Royal Fire Academy for Girls were at all accurate.

Mai wondered if that was supposed to be symbolic.

Eh, if it was, then she'd have to worry about the symbolism of cutting out its tongue, and she had been more than happy to leave that kind of analysis behind with her school days.

Instead, she climbed forward on Appa's head, held her big, shiny sword out so that the point guided their flight path, and prepared to dive.
Mai normally hated flying, but she couldn't help smirking as Ty Lee steered Appa straight for the base of the tongue. It wasn't every day she got to stab something the size of a city at the speed of free fall.

Then they were passing through the ash for a brief moment that left her coughing, and when she looked back to see what kind of damage she had done, she saw a cloud of cinders wafting on the breeze where the tongue had been connected to the palace-head, and the tongue itself flying through the air and disintegrating as it tumbled to the ground.

Well, she'd call that a successful experiment. She wondered what would happen if they tried the same trick on the monster's big ugly backside-

That's when it swung the palace-head with a squeal like the sky itself shattering, and Mai had to press her hands over her ears to block out the sound of Aang and Zuko and Mother and Father and Tom-Tom and Ty Lee and Sokka and Katara and the whole population of the world accusing her of getting them killed with her poor life choices.

Mai was dimly aware of Ty Lee screaming beside her, shouting something about not being lost forever in a crowd, and even Appa was bellowing so hard that his body was rattling beneath her. As they began sinking from the sky, Mai looked down over the scene below to see everyone else- Aang and the Earthbender rebels and the Airbender nuns and a lone figure in red- all falling to their knees in similar agony.

Distantly, she heard another animal roar, and turned towards the lake- towards the Serpent's Pass she had traveled this morning to come save her friends- to see something snake-like disappear below the waves with a disturbingly large splash.

She hoped that wouldn't come back to bite them.

Literally.

Sokka had been doing the math all morning and still couldn't get an answer he liked.

He had come out at dawn with a borrowed telescope to climb the wall dividing the waters of Full Moon Bay from King Toph's main rebel settlement. He hadn't expected to be able to see anything across the gigantic lake that separated his position from the ashland that used to be Ba Sing Se, but couldn't dismiss the chance without trying.

He wound up seeing not an unhelpful brown smear, but an animal-like form moving across the distant landscape.

Except that made no sense, because when he worked out the magnification power of the telescope against the distance to the opposite shores and tried to balance that against the size of the creature in his enhanced vision, the math said he was looking at something the size of the city of Ba Sing Se itself, and that just wasn't possible.

Even Avatar powers that could control the Everstorm and unleash the explosive energy of a volcano weren't enough to animate something that big.

Right?

As he worked through the numbers for the tenth time, trying to find where he could have made a mistake, he looked up briefly to give his eyes a rest, and saw something else that was curious.
Straight ahead, on a direct line towards the entrance to the giant cave that covered Full Moon Bay, a long line of foam and mist was cutting across the lake. It was hard to tell from this angle, having no opportunity to triangulate, but Sokka had the distinct impression that something very large was moving very fast from the very far side of the lake in this very direction through the water.

He was sure that if he did the math, that wouldn't make any sense, either. But he had a bad feeling all the same.

TO BE CONTINUED
Life for All

Chapter Summary

The end of the battle, the end of the monster, and the end of the Act.

Life for All

It made sense to Aang, on a certain level. When this comet came that everyone talked about, the Fire Nation had used its power to destroy the last remnants of resistance. The largest, most powerful city in the world- Ba Sing Se- had been completely wiped from existence, including all its people. The last thing so many millions must have felt before the pain of the fire was sheer terror as they saw their homes burning around them.

The ash that was the only thing left of Ba Sing Se must have still contained the echoes of that fear.

So when the monster that was made up of all those cinders sounded its voice and projected its power against its enemies, it shared that fear with everyone who could hear it.

Except Aang had already been a victim of this little trick, and wasn’t going to be lost in his fear again.

He had been afraid of plenty of things throughout his life, but he found a new definition of the emotion back when he learned he was to be taken away from Monk Gyatso. Being named as the Avatar had isolated Aang from his friends, had taken away his chance to find his place in the world and replaced it with a duty to make war. Only Monk Gyatso, only the man who had been both mentor and hero to Aang, still saw him as a person.

Monk Gyatso had been the last person in the world who still cared about making Aang laugh.

And then Aang learned that he was to be taken away by the Elder Monks, sent away to where Gyatso could no longer be a part of his life. That was the first time he felt real fear.

The second time was when he returned to the Southern Air Temple over a century later, having run away and fallen asleep for a hundred and one years while the Fire Nation ruined the world. He had encountered his people's spirits reborn as hungry Di Fu Ling ghosts. The worst fears of the Elder Monks had come true, all because Aang couldn't handle his own fear over a century ago. And so now, whenever the ash monster stoked the fear in Aang's heart, he found himself back in the Sanctuary Hall, the place where his people's ghosts rose every night to terrorize the living.

But the ash monster wasn't intelligent; it could use the fear Aang already had, but it didn't have the wit to actually trick him. He had been fooled once by this vision already, but emerged from the illusion to find that there were still people willing to support him.

Mother Malu, Sister Matagi, and all the other nuns who had become Airbenders still survived; his nation was born anew. Appa and Mai had arrived to join the battle, the most and least loyal of his friends uniting to light this dark hour. Even Zuko- the prince who nearly turned Mai against Aang, the Firebender who had chased and terrorized him across the lands and oceans- was now pledging to help set this one bit of the world right.
With every adventure, Aang was discovering more people who wanted him to succeed.

So when the illusion came upon him and he saw that dark chamber full of dust and bones again, that fear the monster of ash wanted him to get lost in, he remembered the people counting on him and shook away the lie.

And he even managed to do it in enough time realize that he was flying his glider straight at the ground and pull out of the dive before dying! Yeah!

Holding onto his glider, Aang unwrapped his legs from around the shaft and kicked down towards the ground, sending a gust of Airbending to splatter against the rocky surface and bounce back up. The paper wings of his glider caught the ricocheting winds and rode them, sending Aang back up into the sky.

Except now a ten-ton sky bison was falling towards him. Appa had been in midair, too, when the ash-monster sang the song of fear.

But that wouldn't be a problem, either.

Aang twisted his body as he retracted the wings of his glider, changing it back into an easy-to-swing staff. Gravity quickly turned his upward momentum into a freefall back to the ground, but in the moment of transition where he hung motionless in the sky, he swung that staff up towards Appa and flicked the wings open again. Held this way, the glider was nothing more than a really big, really effective fan.

In the hands of an Airbender, that effectiveness rose like warm air on a cold day.

Aang swung the big fan with enough force to throw a hurricane wind up at Appa. He had no idea if sky bison could be victims of magic fear attacks in the same way as humans, but the Air Nomads had been herding the animals for centuries beyond count, so one thing he was knew for certain was the exact instinctual reaction a sky bison would have when it found itself unexpectedly riding that kind of wind.

Appa roared, extended all six of his feet out to the side like crude wings, and flapped his big flat tail to stabilize himself. A second later, he was making a rough but safe landing on the ground.

Aang came in for a landing beside Appa's head, and was being licked by a tongue the size of his whole body before he could even retract the wings of his glider. Aang laughed and rubbed Appa's nose. "I'm glad you're safe, buddy. Thanks for coming and bringing Mai."

Appa huffed heavily and lowered himself to lie down. Apparently, he was in no mood to do any more flying.

It was time to see to the passengers, anyway.

Mai and Ty Lee were curled up against each other back in Appa's saddle, both of them staring with unfocused gazes into the sky above. Between and under them, Katara was unconscious in the more ordinary way with her eyes closed and her body limp. Aang reached for Mai first, shaking one of her shoulders and whispering, "Mai? It's me, Aang. You're safe, now."

"Aang is dead." She shook her head, sending her loose hair swaying. "I listened to Zuko and Azula and got him killed. I got everyone killed!"

That was what she saw in her greatest fears? Her pain hurt Aang too much for him to smile, but he felt a pleasant warmth in his chest at the thought that she could care so much. "Mai, it's okay. I'm
alive!" He grabbed her hand, so that she could feel his warmth. "Everyone is alive! I think? Well, there's that big monster who wants to kill us, but the last I saw everyone around here was still alive. So please wake up and help us? If you wake up you can- uh- well, I guess you can help us by stabbing it. Please, Mai. I need you."

Mai finally blinked. "I can stab it." She let go of Ty Lee and shook herself. "I can stab it." She blinked again, and her gaze focused on Aang, and then on their clasped hands. "I can stab it. Hey, Aang, how's it going?"

At last, he could smile. "Not bad, considering. I'm really glad you're okay."

"I-" Her eyes fell. "I was pleased to hear that you didn't die in that cave-in."

"Thanks. Can I hug you?"

"Yeah." She didn't even sigh when she said it. "Sure."

And so Aang did.

When the hug ended, he looked down at Ty Lee. "Now we need to wake her up."

Ty Lee was muttering, "All the same, all the same, all the same..."

Mai nodded. "I got this." She leaned over Ty Lee, smacked her backside, and screamed, "Classes started five minutes ago! Why are you still sleeping, student?"

Ty Lee bolted upright. "I wasn't sleeping I was just resting my eyes please don't send me for a flogging!" She blinked once and then looked around. "Oh, hi, Mai. What's up? Ooh, Aang's here, too! And we held onto Katara! We're all alive! That's so nice. Are we still fighting on the big ugly thing?"

Aang's smile fell away and he looked back at the battle behind him. The monster was still there, eclipsing the sky and raining cinders from its body to darken the air around it. It had lost none of its massiveness, its legs still looming like ancient towers out of a legend, its roiling body still seemingly bending the very light of day away from it. The surface of the creature was still in constant motion with the faces of the dead of Ba Sing Se who all babbled a grating symphony of sibilant words. The creature's head was still the sharp lines and imposing walls of the Earth Palace, a monument that profaned what it honored.

And yet Aang felt no fear.

The creature was shuddering, quaking with such force that when Aang dropped back down from Appa's saddle to the parched ground, he could feel the vibrations through the soles of his boots. And now that he really listened, he realized that the voices of the ash-faces were all in conflict, a buzzing with no meaning, different from the previous chanting of, "There is no war in Ba Sing Se."

The monster had been hurt when Mai attacked it with the platinum sword like a jouster on her sky bison mount.

It was still confused, now.

Okay.

"Everyone else probably got hit by that fear-scream, too," he said to the girls. "We need to wake them up before the monster really gets moving again. How's Katara? She wouldn't wake up for me,
before."

Up in the saddle, Ty Lee shook her head as she took Katara in her arms. "I can't get her to open her eyes. Her aura is muddy blue with swirls of black. She's locked inside herself until she can find her way back." Ty Lee then leaned over the edge of the saddle and extended a hand to rub Appa's fur. "This big guy isn't doing too well, either. His aura is a filthy gray. I don't think flying over here was very good for him, and then the shock when the monster-thing screamed and made us all afraid." She shook her head. "I don't think he can fly right now."

Aang's stomach lurched. His friends were alive, but they were wearing themselves out trying to help him. He had to- he had to-

Mai's arms wrapped around his shoulders and she said, "We'll make sure they're okay. But to do that, we need to kill some monsters."

Aang nodded, and fortified himself with a deep breath. "Yeah. And now we need to see about the others. Ty Lee, can you lead Appa away from here? And make sure Katara is okay?"

"Sure! It's not like I can punch a monster the size of a city, anyway. And it doesn't have any aura that I can put into words. At least not any words that don't sound crazy."

Aang nodded his thanks, and then looked up at Mai's face above his own. "Prince Zuko is over there with the Earthbenders. He saved me from Long Feng, and promised to help us against the monster. We're going to have to save him, too."

He felt Mai's body go stiff, and her arms fell away from him. "He's alive?" She made a sound that was half-laugh and half-sigh, and looked to Aang with watery eyes. "I didn't kill him." She took a deep breath, and then her thoughts and emotions were once again hidden behind a blank expression. "I don't suppose you saw his sister? An evil-looking girl with a face like a puma-shark-"

"Who shoots blue fire and lightning," Aang interrupted. "She's the one who hurt Appa. But I didn't see her here."

Mai nodded. "All right, let's go save everyone. How are we doing this?"

Aang felt the urge to grin again. He gave Mai just enough time to start to repeat her question before he put an arm around her waist, yanked her close to him, and used his other hand to flick his glider open.

She did no more than gasp as they launched into the sky with a roar of Airbending, but it was still a sound that made Aang's heart flip.

His heart hadn't flipped like that for her in a long time.

---

Zhao watched from the deck of his flagship as a giant green sea-serpent with a head like a dragon launched itself through the waters towards the cave-like indentation that his mission intelligence claimed was Full Moon Bay.

It was just as the recruitment posters said- you could see all kinds of new things in the navy.

If the local group of Earth Rebels as indeed using the cover bay as a base like Prince Iroh's written briefing claimed, then they were about to have a very bad day. It would be so easy for Zhao to claim that he had arrived too late to do anything about the situation. He could let the serpent and the rebels fight until one or the other lost, and then sweep in to wipe out the winner.
But orders were orders, he was being observed by 'allies' he could not intimidate, and he had to protect Iroh's assets.

Zhao turned to one of his aides. "Detach the cruisers to defend the bay against the serpent. They are to protect it and the people within against all dangers. If the rebels themselves attack either cruiser, all crewmen are to surrender and pass on the message that we're here to deliver. Otherwise, they are to maintain position await my further orders." Those weren't orders he would trust most soldiers to obey, but Iroh's chosen had proven themselves to be especially dutiful. Perhaps they would even kill themselves at his command.

The aide, another of those dutiful half-wits, simply nodded and began waving the signal-flags to convey the orders to the pair of vessels riding alongside the flagship. Zhao left the man to the task and began making his way back to the bridge.

He was halfway across the deck when the battle between the cruisers and the sea serpent commenced in earnest with the first volley of flaming tar-balls. It would no doubt be a grand battle for all those involved, but for Zhao it was merely a sideline to the day's historic events.

He hadn't expected his report about the losses of Tiankeng Fortress to be taken well, but Prince Admiral Iroh had completely surprised him by simply sending orders to take command of a task-force being assembled at one of the northern naval bases and make his way to Zhongxin Lake in the heart of the Earth Kingdom to find the Avatar. The ships were fast and heavily armed, and would have looked like one of the small pirate-hunter fleets from the early years of the war if not for some of the 'special warriors' assigned to them. Zhao had looked over the mongrel force and wondered exactly what Iroh expected him to find in the waters beside Ba Sing Se.

He hadn't wondered long, though. It was good to be in command of a fleet again, and he wasn't going to look a freely-given rhino in its mouth after the disaster at Tiankeng. He had the task-force sail up from the inlet at Chameleon Bay, and they made their way for days up to Zhongxin Lake. It was a pleasant cruise, up until the massive black creature appeared on the distant horizon.

Now, Zhao only had to follow the most difficult orders of his life in order to keep from being killed for his failures.

When he arrived on the flagship's bridge, he barked out, "Accelerate to full speed. The cruisers will handle things here, but I'm certain the Avatar will be found where that- that thing is stomping all over the former site of Ba Sing Se. Prepare all weapons, and have the marines and 'special' forces ready for immediate deployment."

At least he knew that if he succeeded at this task, he'd go down in history.

Hopefully, it wouldn't as a traitor.

Zuko woke up to the sight of a woman's face above him, a woman with red-rimmed eyes, tangled hair, and dark smears of ash on her face. Her green robes were the worse for wear, and she held a sword of shining metal. For one horrible second, he feared that she was his mother.

Then she said, "You okay? You're the last one to wake up." The voice was the same smoky tone that told him to lick ash back on Crescent Island, and the artificial blankness of her face was visible once he knew to look beyond the surface.

Mai.

Zuko scrambled to his feet, and he noticed Mai's lips compressing in a subtle grimace. So she hadn't
forgotten how she had betrayed him.

No doubt she was here to serve the Avatar. But did she know that they were temporary allies now?

He barely finished the thought when she snapped into motion and stabbed out at him with her sword.

He sidestepped and brought his arms up for some Firebending, wondering briefly if he could actually bring himself to set her aflame despite everything, but she followed through with her thrust even though his body was no longer in her path.

Out of the corner of his eye, Zuko caught a brief glimpse of a figure that was dark and grainy and skeletal, a figure that groped for him even as Mai’s shining blade sliced through its stomach and it melted into filthy dust.

Oh, right. Those things. He turned to find out what he had missed while he was unconscious.

The last Zuko remembered, the Avatar had gone off to meet his sky bison, which had dropped off some reinforcements in green, and then the whole group attacked the ash monster together. They had destroyed the creature's tongue, causing it to roar with the force of an earthquake, and then-

Zuko felt no need to ruminate on the dream he had been having, of once again reliving the day those years ago when he raced to help his Father against the walls of Ba Sing Se and got a fireball in the face for his trouble. If that was all these spirits could throw at him once again, they had no hope of stopping him.

He looked back to Mai and relaxed his guard. “We seem to be on the same side again.”

She lowered her sword so that it no longer angled between them. “Yeah. Is that a problem?”

“You were trying to stop me from going back home.” He hated the way his voice cracked as he said the last word. “I trusted you. I thought you cared about me.”

Her face twitched before returning to its blank state. “I- I seem to have come to care for more people than I ever wanted. But when one of you makes me choose- Aang was more of a friend to me than I deserved. And what you were doing to him, even if it was so that you could go home, was wrong.”

Her could hear the same sentiment behind the words that Suki had said to him when she showed him that the Avatar and the ash monster weren’t on the same said. The difference, though, was that Suki’s intervention had been focused on Zuko. Mai’s was focused on the Avatar- on ‘Aang.’

Was betrayal simply a matter of luck? Of who one happened to get to know first, rather than the call of true spiritual loyalty?

Zuko doubted he’d ever truly know.

He nodded to Mai- an acknowledgement that he heard her words, even if he didn’t truly understand them- and together they turned back to the battle at hand.

The first thing that drew Zuko’s eye was the ash monster looming over him like the Heavenly Dome that the ancients thought covered the flat earth. It took an effort of will to yank his gaze from the gravity of darkness, but when he did, he found the jumble of chaos raging beneath the sky of cinders, a bizarre echo of the battle that had cost him his birthright and an eye.

Mai ran forward to meet it.
The Earthbenders who had been brought on the sky bison were tearing up the terrain in a furious assault, undermining the vast swaths of ground upon which the monster was standing. They took the pieces of rock and, under the direction of an especially short soldier, were launching them at the parts of the monster’s legs that would be supporting the greatest portion of its weight.

Of course, it was barely an inconvenience to a creature the size of a mountain, even one made of gathered ashes. A single massive footstep was enough to move the planet itself, and Zuko's sense of scale was shredded when one of those legs moved the length of a village to come down a mere fireball's throw from him. As he struggled to stay upright against the impact tremor, the surface of the massive leg was revealed to be a collection of screaming faces bulging from the ash. The ground still hadn't stilled when the visages ripped free of the rest of the mass, wriggling in all directions on tails that slowly stretched and bulged into bipedal bodies- more of the skeletal seekers.

Mai and Suki came together to protect the Earthbenders, the former fighting with her strange glistening blade and the latter using nothing but her fists. Both methods proved equally effective at dispelling the seekers.

Flitting across the battlefield were women in robes of white and gold. As Zuko watched they came together and began moving as one through a Bending form in a style he didn't recognize. He only realized that they were Airbending- when the Airbenders were supposed to be gone- when a filthy tornado suddenly grew out of the ash monster's skin above.

And above it all the Avatar flew, a shape like an arrow, twisting and arcing and throwing sharp crescents of slicing wind.

At the very least they were all keeping the monster busy.

Zuko wanted to do more than keep it busy.

Could the creature be more vulnerable further up, where no one but the Avatar could reach? Perhaps in the palace that served as the head?

Zuko decided to go up there and take a look.

He ran into the thick of the battle, flinging his fists out to send explosive bursts of concussive flame at any skeletal seekers in his path. He ran past Mai and Suki, ran under the group of women Airbenders as they changed positions again, ran out amidst the rising rocks of the Earthbenders. Here, the longer he stayed, the more impossible it would be to avoid getting his head taken off by an errant flying boulder.

So he went ahead and threw himself on top of a big one as it passed by.

He struggled not to close his one good eye as the boulder flew through the air with him on top of it. It spun slowly as it rose towards the monster's belly like a bird rose into the sky, and Zuko had to stay calm and angle his head to keep track of his flight path. His imagination allowed him to picture in detail what would happen if he lost his grip, splattering and smearing on the ground below. But if he was judging the arc correctly- and with only one eye there was a good chance he was completely wrong- and managed to hold on, he and the rock would smash into a body of ash right where one of the front legs met the main form.

Good.

It was tough ripping off the shoulder-plates of his armor with one hand while hanging onto a flying, spinning rock with the other, but he had gotten practice at it recently, when the Avatar's berserker...
companion had thrown him off the stolen cargo ship days ago. Zuko had been forced to quickly shuck his armor or drown, and so he now he knew exactly how to get the shoulder-plates off with enough time to curl his legs beneath him and jump off the rock right before the impact against the ash monster.

The shoulder-plates were sharp enough to dig into the monster's body, slicing through the bulging faces and sinking until the density of the ash stopped them solidly.

The bisected faces kept screaming.

Zuko made himself ignore them as he began climbing, ripping one plate out at a time and using them to ascend.

Why did Spirits always have to be so macabre, anyway?

It was no answer, but something like a response to the thought came when one of the faces above him stretched out from amidst the rest and started growing arms. Zuko had been hoping that he was too insignificant to merit attention, compared to the battle down below.

That might have been a miscalculation.

The bone-like arms of ash snapped down at Zuko and grabbed him. He expected to be thrown out into the air to fall to his death, but instead his attacker simply fell on top of him, pouring down as a surge of cinders that didn't stop. Zuko felt like he was stuck under a waterfall, constantly being battered by the flow of char. He felt his grip on the shoulder-plates weakening, and almost missed the moment when his fingers gave out.

He realized too late that he was falling. He was tumbling down the cliff-side that was the monster's leg in a river of flowing ash, but his perception of it was fading, being replaced instead by memories of the last time he had seen the Fire Lord's throne room.

No, this wasn't real! This was the monster reaching down into his fears and yanking them back up!

Yet the taste of ash in his mouth and the sensation of falling faded, and Zuko was once again looking up at his grandfather on the Burning Throne, one of the very first sights he had taken in with his newly monocular vision. He heard the words proclaiming his shame, of glossing over the source of the fire that had struck his face at Ba Sing Se-

And then there was an impact and Zuko was yanked back into the real world to find himself face-first on the rock ground.

He pushed himself up, feeling new bruises all over his body. He must have tumbled all the way down the monster's tower-like leg, but shouldn't the smaller ash-defenders have come with him, keeping him in those dreams?

Then he noticed the glistening rocks beneath him.

They were brighter than silver, beneath the dust and ash that had accumulated on them. Whiter. And when the spare bits of daylight that managed to make it past the massive monster's body struck the surface of the rocks, they shined like they were pieces of the sun themselves.

He had seen such a metal before.

Mai was fighting with a sword made of it right now-
-a sword that disintegrated the skeletal ash-creatures with a mere touch.

Zuko was starting to understand how he had been freed from his latest nightmare.

He was gathering as much of the metal as he could fit in his arms when the small Earthbender- the one who had been directing the others- came over and said, "What are you doing, Brighteye?"

Zuko didn't know if that was supposed to be an insult, so he ignored it. "This can hurt the monster! We need to get it to all the fighters! Maybe they can throw it. Or we could make some slings!"

The girl (he was pretty sure she was a girl) started smirking at him. "Brighteye, I have a squad of the toughest, most maliciously creative Earthbenders who still haven't given up on the war. I think we can do better than just throwing this stuff."

Zuko gave his own tight little angry smile. "All right. Get them over here and prove yourself right."

If she did, she could insult him all she wanted. And if not, then they were all probably going to die, anyway.

Azula watched as a pathetic little army of humans struggled futilely against the power of the Spirits, and found herself considering how best to disobey her father.

She felt dirty just for considering it.

The disobedience in question was against one of the wisdoms he had shared during an idle moment. Since Zuko's banishment, Father had started making time every day to just to be in Azula's company for a while and talk about whatever topics came up. At first she feared she was being punished in some way, or prepared for a punishment, but as time went on, she had realized that it was genuine.

It had been nice.

During one of those interactions, Father had said, "I hope you understand that you can't fight everything, Azula." He had softened the seemingly insulting words with a smile. "I'd hate for you to get hurt when you could just come home to me."

Those words had been eating Azula since she had allowed Zuko to lead them into this adventure. In the first ashland they had visited, all those months ago, Azula had fallen prey to the Spirits supposedly stalking the place. She had learned that Spirits could not be fought the way she knew, and if she were to be an obedient daughter, then she would simply have to avoid coming into conflict with them.

It was not fear, she had told herself when Zuko was looking to follow the Avatar to Ba Sing Se. It was just healthy caution and pure obedience.

But she had come along, anyway. Zuko thought she was afraid, and she couldn't show less bravery than him. He had gone on to make an alliance with the Avatar, to forgive and accept that traitor Suki, to throw himself into battle against a Spirit of ash so big it could have buried the whole Caldera.

And Azula had stayed behind to watch.

She told herself that it was caution and obedience.

She told herself that it wasn't fear. It couldn't be. She had no fear within her. She was incapable of fear.
But, watching from a safe distance, she couldn't help but think that if this was a foe beyond even her abilities, then what would it do to Zuzu?

Father had told her to bring her brother back, safe and sound.

But Father also told her not to fight things that she couldn't beat.

So Azula watched and considered which disobedience she could best tolerate.

In the distance, at the site of the battle, Azula saw the Earthbenders working together to raise a pointed spire from the stony ground. The Airbenders and mundane warriors surrounded them, forming a defensive wall against the smaller spooks. As the battle closed in around the formation, the Earthbenders all moved in unison, raising the spire even higher to stab up into the belly of the monster above them.

How worthless. This foe couldn't be defeated by blunt trauma, as they had been proving continuously throughout the whole battle.

And yet as Azula watched, the ash monster writhed in what seemed to be pain, its belly exploding into falling dead ash right where the spire had stabbed it.

What had they done? How were they fighting it?

And then some of the ash cleared, and she saw the Earthbenders lowering the stone spire back into the ground. And this time, there was enough sunlight getting through that she could see the tip of the spire shining.

Was that-

Was that *platinum*?

Where had they gotten platinum?

Azula stood alone, watching this battle from afar as the Earthbenders raised their spire- their improvised giant spear- up towards the ash monster again.

They were fighting it. They were actually fighting back against a Spirit.

The massive monster danced out of the way of the next attack with the grace of a receding tide, but the tides took hours to fully abandon a beach, and so the spear still caught a part of its body for another char-bleeding puncture. Yet it barely seemed to notice as its movements shook the earth and scattered the whole gathering of enemies beneath it. It looked as though the smaller ash-creatures were taking advantage of the opening, and both Airbenders and Earthbenders fell to their fell touch.

It wasn't a victory yet, it seemed.

But they were fighting it.

Azula considered which of her father's orders she would honor, and also how fast she could get to the battle if she used her Firebending to rocket across the ground.

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It was amazing for Aang to see, flying above the battle on his glider. Prince Zuko, a Firebender and an enemy of life, was working with the last rebels of the fallen Earth Kingdom to combine the Fire Nation's platinum with the natural bones of the earth, and together they were battling an undead abomination.
It was also terrible for Aang to see, because every time their giant platinum-tipped rock spike stabbed into the monster, it roared a sound that was pure pain while all the fake faces across its body screamed to a new height of cacophonous torment.

With every stab into the monster's form, Aang could feel reality itself wincing in sympathy.

The platinum wasn't just hurting the monster; it was ripping it apart at the most fundamental level. Aang hadn't felt anything like that before, when Mai was using her platinum sword to fight the smaller monsters, but now he wondered if that was simply because he wasn't sensitive enough to notice a single instance of spirit energy being snuffed out.

He could certainly feel it now.

Every time that giant spike stabbed into the monster's belly, the leftover energy- the Línghún, as Guru Pathik had called it- was being destroyed. And that energy just so happened to be the remaining spirits of hundreds of dead Ba Sing Se residents.

Hundreds destroyed with every stab.

At least, it felt like the Línghún was being destroyed. Aang's whole body ached every time it happened, almost like the spear was tearing into his own form, parting flesh and puncturing his stomach and pulling on every single muscle that radiated from his center. With each of the monster's pained roars, Aang's heart rang like a cracked bell, and he could feel the energy shredding and disappearing. Left behind was nothing less than a gap in the very fabric of the universe itself. There was no movement or transformation; it was just an absence. Aang couldn't help but think that losing a hand would feel the same way.

But could spirit energy- could Línghún- be destroyed? Even by platinum?

Aang shifted his weight to aim his glider towards the monster's head. The ash-reconstruction of the Earth Palace soon filled his vision, and even as the creature hammered at the ground again with its legs in panicked fury, Aang dived down past the fake palace walls. He aimed himself straight for the center of the complex, straight for the roof, and put himself into a corkscrew as he increased his acceleration. The winds responded to him, twirling around with him and becoming an invisible, person-sized drill around his body that cut straight through the ash-roof.

Then he was dropping into a world of cinders, retracting his glider's wings to land in a throne room as black as night. It was like being in a land of the dead, a place where no color felt the need to reach out to his eyes because eyes so rarely gazed on this land.

The only light here came in through the hole Aang had drilled, shining down in a stark, harsh shaft that revealed the master of this domain.

Or rather, its prisoner.

Of course, it was yet another being seemingly made from black sands. Its body was lumpen and irregular, and it seemed to have more than its share of limbs. In fact, it had more than its share of heads. Aang pushed back against a queasy feeling as he made himself look at the faces.

One was a person, an unlined face that might have been a young man in life, and the other was animalistic, almost ursine in the shape of its snout and jaw.

"My people," the human head groaned with a voice of rock scraping on sand.

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se," the bear-like head roared with the echo an old horn.
Aang fell to his knees on the floor made of cinders. "Please, stop fighting! My friends are going to destroy you all if you don't stop fighting!"

"My people are dying," the human head wailed.

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se," the bear-like head growled.

"Please!" Aang felt tears well up in his eyes as his body tensed up again in a clear sign of another strike of the spear, and the tears fell to mix with the ash of the floor as he felt more Línhún shred into nothingness.

"My people!"

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se!"

Azula's stomach felt like she had swallowed a small dragon and it was trying to swim its way to freedom, but a princess accepts difficult with honor. She bit down on her own tongue and refused to raise her eyes to the monstrosity of ash that blocked out the whole sky above her head.

She maintained a ready posture, and watched the Earthbenders in the distance.

She had gotten closer while the battle raged on, but still maintained enough separation that none of the others should notice her. No reason to make herself vulnerable to people who would be enemies as soon as this battle was over, after all.

She maintained a ready posture, and continued to watch the Earthbenders.

The little one was rallying some of the others. They had been scattered by the monster's latest stomp of its foot, and many were being grappled by the small ash-skeletons that hadn't stopped coming. The little Earthbender had only been able to summon five of her associates to help her raise the platinum-tipped spire again, and with this few, they were slow to lift it with enough structural integrity not to collapse in on itself.

Azula maintained a ready posture, and watched the tip of the spire rise up towards the monster.

Some of the spire's base collapsed as one of the Earthbenders was taken by ash-grapplers. The spire swayed, but the little Earthbender shifted her stance, and the ground swelled on that side to shore up the foundation.

Azula maintained a ready posture, and tracked the platinum point as it approached the ash above.

She began moving just before it shot upward.

Electricity danced around her body as it plunged in.

Lightning left her fingers as another part of the monster's belly exploded into dead cinders.

The 'cold fire' struck the platinum as reached up into the creature's form.

And that's when the whole monster started lighting up with Azula's electricity.

It was like a storm cloud, a black mass in the sky illuminated by random lights that snaked through the form with enough speed and force to shatter the air itself. Everywhere the lightning traveled, the monster's body turned to black sand in the air and began falling. An unholy chorus of shrieking sounded as the disturbing faces all over the surface of the monster popped like an overripe volcano.
plum. Ash bled into the air on the wind-currents created by the monster's ponderous thrashing.

This creature, this unholy abomination, this enemy of a vastness beyond comprehension, was dying.

And Azula had been the one to strike the fatal blow.

She couldn't wait to tell Father!

Aang knew it was over when light returned to the world of ash.

It didn't help that he recognized the same kind of electricity that had nearly killed Appa.

It danced up the walls of the macabre throne room, melting them back into the black sands they originally were. It skittered across the floor, making Aang's skin tingle, erasing the facsimile of marble and carpets beneath him. It snaked up to the black throne and wracked the disturbing body that sat upon it, melting the creature with one last mixed cry of, "My people," and, "There is no war in Ba Sing Se!"

And when that would-be King died, the world went with it.

The last thing Aang knew was an explosion of ash, a wave of light that made every Avatar within him shudder in grief, and the sensation of falling through an empty sky.

The last thing Zuko knew was the sight of his sister's lightning, a billion cries that reminded him of the sound he had made when his face was lit on fire in this very spot years ago, and a rain of cinders that drowned the world.

The last thing Mai knew was a dancing light above that reminded her of childhood days spent in the Fire Palace, a crack in the air that was the signature sound of Princess Azula's unique talent for destruction, and a terror that her most dangerous enemy in the world had found her.

The last thing Azula knew was the sight of an incoming wave of sand, and the fear that she had miscalculated and disobeyed her father in two different ways at once.

Earth King Toph didn't see anything, of course, but she could feel the earth's disappointment through her feet just before her mind and body shut down.

Sokka had seen some crazy things since joining up with Aang, but today's sights were no doubt he weirdest yet.

The dark, gigantic monster that was visible through a telescope on the far shores? There was no way it could be as big as Sokka's math said it was, but it was still just an unnatural beast trying to rip the life from the living. Sokka had already seen stuff like that in the Southern Air Temple. And once the thing had melted in the mid-afternoon, it was impossible to tell that it had ever been there at all.

The sea serpent that had fled said Ripping Unnatural Beast to attack Full Moon Bay? Also not unique, since Kyoshi Island had a giant sea creature that behaved in much the same way. When it came down to it, even sea monsters were just big animals that had to eat, and Sokka's people used to hunt such things. Not that he would want to hunt this one, not without a million warriors and some
really big spears.

No, the weirdness came when the Fire Navy ships chugged into view to fight the sea monster and protect Full Moon Bay.

Not that the Fire Navy ships themselves were the weirdness. Theoretically, no one on those ships knew they were protecting Earth Rebels.

It was the Waterbender Warriors on the decks that were the weird part-
-weird enough that Sokka willingly went to find Jet to get his opinion.

After a quick detour to the little refugee Water Tribe village to warn Gran-Gran to keep everyone in their huts, Sokka was dragging Jet up to the top of the lookout wall and pointing to where flaming catapults and spears of ice were battering away at the sea monster. "That's not a common sight around here, is it?"

Jet's jaw dropped. "Um, the sea serpent isn't exactly uncommon, but the rest of it is new."

"Oh, good." Sokka tried to take his eyes off the spectacle and couldn't. "It isn't just me."

They watched for a while together, taking turns with the telescope to get better looks, and then Jet said, "I recognize the way those Waterbenders are dressed. They're from the Northern Tribe."

Sokka blinked. "You've been to the North Pole?"

"Just the opposite. My- well, you remember my organization?"

Sokka did indeed. Whatever the mysterious group actually was, he had seen that they liked to wear spooky blue goblin masks and do all kinds of crazy and dangerous and outright stupid things in supposed service to Aang. Instead of saying that in the appropriate withering tone, Sokka just nodded.

"Well, we've had dealings with Northern Waterbenders. But why they would be helping the Fire Navy- unless..."

"Unless?"

"The Northern Water Tribe is under the control of Prince Iroh, the crown heir of the Fire Lord. Maybe not all of the Northern Water Tribe is able to resist him."

Sokka's stomach felt hollow. "I'm so glad I brought you up here. You've made me feel so much better about all this weirdness."

Jet snorted.

Eventually, the fight ended and the serpent collapsed back into the now bloody water. Its long body floated lifelessly while the two Fire Navy ships pulled into what looked like a guard position at the mouth of the bay cavern.

Jet had already gotten all the able-bodied rebels ready by then, but they were left waiting for a while. No Firey invaders came in, not even to ask if they could use a bathroom, and certainly no Waterbenders swam over to explain what was going on.

It wasn't until a larger ship arrived, sailing from what seemed to be the far shores where Ba Sing Se used to be, that it was time to receive visitors.
Of course, that was weird, too.

The new ship had a white flag of surrender on top of its bridge tower.

Sokka wondered what else would turn out weird.

For Mai, waking up was like crawling her way up out of a deep hole in the ground and just as exhausting. She had barely opened her eyes to the dim interior of a rustic hut before she felt the need to close them again. Yet, there was a nagging thought that wouldn’t let her give in to that fatigue, and when she focused enough on it, she snapped to full wakefulness.

She remembered the battle against the living ashland of Ba Sing Se, and the fact that her friends and allies might very well all be dead.

Mai sat up on her bedroll to find Sokka's Gran-Gran sitting next to her, tending a small fire over which a teapot boiled.

Gran-Gran nodded. "Have some tea. It will help you gather your mind."

Well, that was both a good and a bad sign. If Sokka's Gran-Gran was here, Mai was safe and the world hadn't ended. On the other hand, she was being warned to 'gather her mind,’ and that was usually the kind of thing you did before hearing about some tragedy.

Mai kept quiet and accepted the teacup when it was handed to her.

Once Mai had finished, Gran-Gran took the cup back and stood up. "Get dressed." She pointed to a pile of clothes—red clothes, retrieved from the depths of Mai's luggage in Appa's saddle. "Everyone is waiting for you." Then Gran-Gran left the hut.

Stranger and stranger.

Mai dressed in her old red clothes but didn't bother doing her hair up in a formal style. It would take too long, and she still wasn’t in the mood to make herself into the ideal Fire Nation heiress. Instead, she tied her hair into a simple knot that gathered it in a tail over her back.

Beneath the clothes were her remaining knives, not even enough to fill half her holsters, and her platinum sword.

Ah, so this was going to be a formal event, then.

She emerged from the hut looking elegant and armed and found everyone was indeed alive.

The night sky and stars were visible through the big hole in the top of the bay cavern, but bonfires lit up the refugee village. People danced around them, or sat around and talked animatedly. Mai saw Earthbenders and warriors and Airbender nuns and Water Tribe refugees all moving around and having what seemed to be a celebration.

She noticed, though, that some of the rebels and Earthbenders were acting as guards, staying aloof from the festivities and holding onto weapons.

Aang, Sokka, and Ty Lee were sitting around the nearest fire with Gran-Gran and the half-breed Water Tribe kids. Appa was lying on his stomach nearby, and Mai saw Momo attacking a pile of fruit up in the saddle. Aang tossed some kind of roasted vegetable to Momo, and then made a pair of marbles spin in midair to the delight of the kids. Sokka and Ty Lee were eating some porridge while
they talked, Ty Lee leaning deeply into Sokka's personal space.

They all looked up at Mai as she approached. She hated being the center of attention, so she waved a hand in sardonic greeting. "Hi. What's going on?"

As soon as the last world left her mouth, Aang snapped his feet and was crushing her in a hug. Ty Lee followed half an instant later. Over Aang's bald head, Mai caught a glimpse of Sokka simply standing up and giving her a wave almost as sardonic as her own, but his smile was sloppy and genuine.

It seemed that she had been missed.

Why did she feel so relieved about that?

When the hug ended, Mai noticed that Aang's eyes were bloodshot, and tears were forming at the corners. "Hey," she said, "it's fine. I'm fine. Where's Katara? I need to thank her for bringing my sword."

Something flickered across Aang's expression, and she noticed Sokka outright grimacing.

It was Gran-Gran who answered: "Katara is resting. She had a harder time of it than the rest of you."

Well, that sounded ominous. "Sorry I wasn't there for her."

Everyone blinked, but it was Sokka who said, "Why?"

Mai reached into her sleeve and found a razor disc to play with. Ash, she had missed being able to do that. "Because I wasn't good enough to get back out of the sinkhole and help. I've tried my best to be a worthwhile member of this team, since Crescent Island, and I failed to live up that standard."

Aang reached out with both of his hands and stilled the razor disc she was playing with. "It's okay. The fact that you've been trying- that you've wanted to make up for what you did before- is why we're happy to have you. We like you. You're our friend!"

Mai found that she didn't know what to say.

Now that she had what she wanted, she had no idea what to do with it.

Fortunately, she was spared having to use her brain by the arrival of Earth King Toph. "Hey, Lady Caldera Yu Mai is finally done with her beauty sleep? We ready to get to the meeting, now?" Jet and some of her Earthbenders shuffled into view behind her.

Mai looked to Aang. "Meeting?"

He sighed. "Remember the ash-monster?"

Mai nodded her confirmation. She remembered it. She remembered fighting it. She remembered saving Zuko and the terribly awkward conversation he wanted to have before rejoining the fight. She remembered the last-ditch strategy to stab at it with a giant platinum spear. She remembered defeating it before everything went dark.

She remembered Azula's lightning charging the platinum for the killing blow.

Mai looked to Ty Lee, and saw her own worry reflected in her friend's big gray eyes.

Aang went back to the campfire and retrieved his staff from where he had been sitting. "We were-
well, rescued and brought back here by a Fire Navy force. In exchange for their help, the commander wants to meet with us for some kind of discussion. With all of us. Including you. As soon as possible. They didn't tell us what it was about. The only thing we know is who the commander is."

Mai kept her face blank. "It doesn't sound like a piece of information that's making you happy."

Sokka snorted.

A ghost of smile flickered across Aang's face. "Not really. It's Commander Zhao."

Ah.

Well, that explained why she was going to this meeting armed.

Toph stomped a foot that rattled the earth and motioned. "Come on, let's go see what this Zhao Jerk wants so we can kill him and throw his body in the bay."

Well, that sounded like a plan. Mai shook herself loose and fell into step behind the tiny Earth-tyrant. The group walked in silence for a while, and Mai could see the fatigue in everyone's bodies. It wasn't just her, then.

As they made their way through the celebrations, she said to Aang, "I don't suppose you know what happened to Z- Prince Zuko?"

His eyes flickered to her. "Zhao has him, Suki, and someone he called Princess Azula in 'protective custody.' I'm not sure what that really means."

"Me, neither," Mai mumbled. At least Azula wouldn't be at this meeting. But what was going on?

Toph led them through a portal in the lookout wall to the Full Moon Bay itself and the dock that used to be where newcomers to Ba Sing Se would board the ferries.

Now, a Fire Navy command ship was the only craft moored there.

Zhao was on the stone shore, the stars reflected in the waters behind him, standing stiffly at attention with a full honor guard. Mai regretted not sleeping longer if he had been on his feet waiting for her all this time.

Aang caught her small smile and returned the expression before putting on his own blank expression and stepping forward to Zhao. "We're all here. Now what did you want?"

Zhao lowered his gaze and sank to his knees. "Avatar." His voice was stiff and biting, but perfectly polite. "It is my duty to speak in the name of my nation, as directed personally by Prince Admiral Iroh, heir to the throne and Warlord of the North Pole. I- I offer my personal surrender to you, so that we can begin negotiating the cessation of hostilities between the Avatar and my country's military, the end of the Fire Nation's occupation of the Colonial Continent once known as the Earth Kingdom, and the unconditional surrender of the Fire Lord."

Mai couldn't stop herself from swinging to look at Aang again, and found him doing the same. She could only wonder if her own face betrayed the same surprise as his did.

Had she woken up in a new world, or could she possibly still be dreaming?

And how would she ever know the difference?
END OF ACT 2: Fallen to Earth

TO BE CONTINUED SPRING 2017 IN ACT 3: "Baptism By Fire"
The Offer

Chapter Summary

Aang and Zuko get an offer they can't refuse. Meanwhile, Katara glows in the dark.

The Offer

The fire was supposed to be for meditative purposes, but Iroh was grateful for its warmth nonetheless.

He had been living at the North Pole for years now, and while as a Master Firebender he was better able to keep himself comfortable than most people, the cold still wore on his old bones. The cure was simple - spending time in front of a comforting blaze, or taking a long bath in steaming water - but he often found himself too busy for such simple pleasures. He had too many responsibilities, and not enough time to just stop and enjoy life. That was too bad. Hopefully, he would be able to retire soon, and focus on the important things.

For now, he leaned towards the fire, and enjoyed the warmth.

No sooner had he closed his eyes than there was a knock on his chamber's door.

Iroh held back a sigh. "You may enter."

The door creaked open with the sound of metal grinding against metal, and then a voice like the warm glow of moonlight on ice said, "My apologies, your highness, but Lu Ten is having another..." Her voice choked off as she tried to evoke the trouble and failed.

Iroh turned to look at her. As ever, Princess Yue was the picture of royal grace, striving admirably to cover the anguish he knew was in her heart. The matter of Lu Ten was a burden on them all, but for the sake of her people and the world as a whole, she constantly found new supplies of strength and endurance within herself.

She was more than worthy of the bond she shared with Lu Ten, but that didn't stop Iroh from regretting it. Still, what was done was done, and if he was to make it right, he had to remain focused.

He wanted to go to Lu Ten, but he knew what would truly help his son, and it could only be found in front of this fire. "I have an important meeting that could start any minute now. Could you see to my son for the time being? I will be along as soon as I can."

Yue said nothing, merely bowing and closing the door.

Iroh knew he could trust her to do what was best.

Alone once more with the fire, Iroh sought a meditative state in which he could purge his worry for his son. It was difficult, for he liked to consider himself a doting father, and that kind of stress would only impede him in this latest task.

It took a clear mind to reach the Spirit World, and for all his visits, Iroh never found the journey to be an easy one.
Aang believed that the world naturally sought a kind of balance, but this was just ridiculous! "Hold on, did I hear that right? You're just giving up and ending the whole war just like that?"

He looked over to Mai, once again dressed in red but with her dark hair hanging behind her in a simple knot. Her eyes were wide, but in an instant she took control of her expression again and put on that blank face she preferred. She nodded to Aang, answering his question for him.

Next Aang looked to 'King' Toph. She was only a year older than Aang, and from what he could figure wasn't actually royalty, but the Earth rebels living with her in Full Moon Bay all regarded her as their leader with something like worshipful loyalty. Being blind, she let her head hang so that she seemed to be staring at the ground, her body tense and her toes digging into the dirt. She must have been using her advanced Earthbending to monitor everyone's bodies, sensing the difference between truths and lies. That must have also let her know that Aang was staring at her, because she swung her head towards him, giving him her unfocused gaze, and offered her own nod.

Lastly, Aang looked to Sokka. Sokka just shrugged.

So Aang stepped forward and planted his staff against the ground in a show of authority. "Then I accept your surrender. So, uh, what now?"

Captain Zhao grimaced and got up off his knees. "Now the negotiations begin. Make no mistake, Avatar; all you've done is accept my surrender, and that of the forces under my command. I have no authority over anything else, and certainly not the Fire Nation as a whole. Not even my- my commanding officer, Prince Iroh, can claim that. But his highness wants to make a deal with you, and he does command a great deal of political and military power."

Mai snorted. "In other words, Prince Iroh really is the traitor the rumors say. But he wants to be a traitor in our favor."

"Close enough," Zhao sneered. 

Well, that wasn't as great as the Fire Nation giving up right now, but it was a lot better than Aang had this morning. "So, what now?"

Zhao motioned to the warship docked behind him, along the pier that Aang had been told once hosted ferries that would take refugees to Ba Sing Se during the war. "Prince Iroh wishes to finalize the details of the agreement as soon as possible. He bid me take you aboard my ship, where you can meet him."

King Toph stepped up so that she was right next to Aang. "Hold on! If Prince Iroh is here, why isn't he the one making the sales pitch? And if you think I'm going to march right onto your little bath-toy where you can launch an ambush as soon as you work up the nerve, you can go soak your head in the latrines."

Well, she wasn't wrong. Aang shifted so that he was standing shoulder to shoulder with the rebel leader. "King Toph makes a good point. I can meet with Prince Iroh here in the camp where we'll all be safe."

Zhao's eyebrows rose, but there was none of his usual scowl on his face. "You question my honor?"

While Aang was trying to figure out how to word his reply, Mai went ahead and said, "Absolutely."

Zhao smirked. "Well, it makes no difference. Prince Iroh is still up at the North Pole, but he has his own methods. Perhaps the Avatar is familiar with them? My instructions say that Prince Iroh will
meet you at a neutral location in the Spirit World. Aboard my ship is a room maintained by my Northern Water Tribe allies that offers an enhanced spiritual presence. Within, you can make the journey to the Spirit World under the guidance of a Water Sage and find Prince Iroh."

A Fire Nation prince was using the Spirit World as a conference room? "And this- this meditation room on your ship is big enough for all of us?"

"Oh, no, not at all. The only ones invited to this meeting are you, Avatar, and your Fire Nation consultant." Zhao's gaze went unquestionably to Mai, and Aang caught a quick glimpse in those eyes of the hatred the captain felt for her. "Also invited are Prince Zuko and Princess Azula. Their participation is necessary for Prince Iroh's plans, and so they will have to support any agreement you all reach."

"Hey," Toph screeched, "what about me? I'm the Earth King!"

Zhao turned a cool gaze on her. "The Fire Nation recognizes no one by that title."

"I'll recognize your face you-"

Aang grabbed her to stop her advance and said, "As the Avatar, I, uh, require the participation of, uh, representatives of the Earth Kingdom?"

Sokka grunted. "And what about the Water Tribes? I totally don't recognize Fire Nation authority over my people and lands and stuff!"

Zhao brought a hand up to his forehead. He took a deep breath and once again looked to Aang. "This is not anything official. Prince Iroh wants to speak with you, Avatar. You can tell everyone about the details later and get their agreement, if you want. But how many of you can meditate deeply enough to enter the Spirit World?"

Aang looked around. Everyone was silent.

Then Mai said, "I'm sure I can't."

Zhao obviously wasn't making an attempt to keep the satisfaction out of his voice. "Then I suppose there's no reason for you to be aboard my ship, despite Iroh's instructions."

Aang reached out and took Mai's hand. "But you can come along as my bodyguard, right? After all, Prince Iroh invited you, and my body would be vulnerable. I trust you to keep me safe."

It saddened him, a little, to see the flicker of surprise in Mai's eyes at his words. But then she squeezed his hand, and his heart fluttered. He really liked how she looked with her dark hair loose like this.

With that settled, Aang looked back to Zhao. "Then I'll meet the prince with my bodyguard to hear his offer and carry it back to my friends. Let's go!"

Zhao didn't look pleased, but he dipped his head and then led the way past the formation of his soldiers and up the ramp to his ship.

Aang hoped he'd be able to handle this.

Mai hoped that she'd worthy of Aang's faith in her.

Yes, she was a Weapon of the Fire Nation, one of nine warriors of the Homeland deemed as
effective as a whole army, given privilege and status in exchange for a lifetime of compulsory service to the Fire Lord. However, Mai's skill was with throwing blades, and her style mandated that she have access to plenty of them. After the long night in the Tiankeng Fortress sinkhole, her capture by Long Feng's Dai Li, and then the battle against the ash-monster, she was down to less than a single set. The remains of her *Liu Shui* Flowing Water steel blades were all she had left, and if she had to fight an entire warship worth of soldiers, she'd run out quickly.

Then all she'd be left with was her platinum sword and a sour attitude. And neither one would be much good against Firebender armor.

She remained a step behind Aang, easily stepping back into the role of servant and guard, as Zhao and his soldiers guided them to this very spiritual place he promised. As they passed into the interior of the ship, into the cramped metal corridors that echoed with their footsteps, she kept an eye out for threats and catalogued the vulnerabilities she might need to exploit. If anyone tried to hurt Aang, she would already have a path mapped to a debilitating blow.

Nevertheless, she was taken by surprise when they turned a corner to reveal Zuko and Azula approaching from the opposite side of the hallway with their own set of guards.

Mai froze as Azula's eyes focused on her.

She had a single moment in which to experience a wave of nerve-numbing fear before Azula snarled and burst into a run.

Mai stumbled backwards and went for a weapon. Straight knife? Too easy for Azula to dodge. Razor disc? Azula used to like to catch those for practice. Sword? Useless until Azula got close, and then there'd be no defense against Firebending. Nothing would work and Azula was getting close and Mai had to do *something* and those golden eyes were promising *murder* and throw a blade *any* blade hurry hurry hurry hurry-

Zuko's cries of, "No, wait," echoed through the hall as some of Zhao's soldiers tried to step into Azula's path and Zhao himself backed away, but there was a blur or motion and a blast of blue light and the soldiers were down and Azula was still approaching.

"Mai," she hissed. "Traitor."

Mai shoved Aang to the ground, pulled a razor disc with each hand, and tried not to lose bladder control.

Azula's hands were burning now, blue flames dancing up the armor on her arms. She growled, raised her fists-

Mai got ready to throw-

Just a little closer-

Azula tensed-

Mai inhaled-

The air was so hot-

Azula moved-

And then a wave of water came in through a doorway on the right to smash into Azula, slamming
her into the left wall with enough force to bounce. Instead of obeying gravity, though, the water rose again to surge up into Azula's face like an uppercut, sending the princess reeling backwards, and then it fell back down like a bunch of sandbags to collapse her.

When Azula fell, an old man in blue stepped into the hallway through the door. He was in a Waterbending stance, and it was with a thoroughly withering expression on his bearded face that he said, "Stay down, little girl."

Of course, that was the worst possible thing to say to Azula. She snapped into motion and Mai stumbled backwards again and-

She didn't even see the Waterbender move. One moment he was still, and then the next Mai's view of the fight was obscured by a deluge that wouldn't keep still. The only clues were the sounds of splashing and body armor clanging against the hall and Azula's gurgling cries.

When it was over, Azula was sprawled on the floor, dripping wet and, judging from the blinking, struggling to stay conscious.

Then she dropped motionless.

Mai finally exhaled.

Zhao grunted and said, "If Princess Azula cannot behave herself around the other guests, then I suppose we'll have to host her elsewhere. I trust you have no objections, Prince Zuko?"

Still at the far end of the hall, Zuko sighed and shook his head.

Aang got back to his feet and grabbed Mai's shoulders. "Are you okay? That was- That was close!"

Mai delayed her response until she could muster a bored tone. "Well, I guess that worked out as well as it could have."

She made sure to keep her shaking hands hidden in her sleeves. Weapons of the Fire Nation did not show fear.

Or, at least, that was their mystique.

Zuko wasn't sure whether to be relieved by Azula's removal.

On the one hand, it was Azula.

On the other hand, it left him surrounded by enemies and lacking in allies. Zhao had imprisoned Zuko once before, after the destruction of Crescent Island, and now Zhao seemed to be in command of this strange ship manned by both the Fire Navy and Water Tribals. The Avatar and Mai were being treated as honored guests, both of them allowed to carry weapons, while Suki and now Azula were locked up.

Zuko had woken up in the ship's brig, in a cell of his own, no more than an hour ago. The last thing he remembered was the death of the ash-monster. All of the cinders remaining from the destruction of Ba Sing Se had been raised to form a being of hate destruction the size of a city, and Zuko had helped rebel Earthbenders to fight it with a giant spear of platinum. Even that hadn't been entirely effective, until a bolt of lightning came out of nowhere to electrify the spear as it struck the cloud-like body of ash, and then the force of the resulting explosion had knocked Zuko out.
Defeating the monster was good, but waking up to find himself once again in Zhao's power brought a new set of problems.

Not that he knew it was Zhao, at first. As soon as Zuko realized he was a captive again, he began shouting, demanding to know why he was being imprisoned and where Suki was. She had been there, fighting the monster, supporting Zuko.

And that's when Zhao's face had appeared in the barred viewport of the door to Zuko's cell. "Why, Prince Zuko, whatever is the problem? You haven't been jailed. You're in protective custody. There are rebels and traitors all around, and my orders are to keep you safe."

Zuko had debated whether to just try throwing a fireball right through the bars at his enemy's face, but delayed the need for a decision by saying, "Whose orders? What's going on, Zhao?"

"Things have changed since the last time we met, Prince Zuko." Zhao's smug expression faded. "Your antics left me in a dangerous position, but I've found new allies. Perhaps you're unaware that Prince Iroh has taken an interest in the matter of the Avatar?"

"Uncle?!" Zuko's anger deflated, leaving him cold. "You've communicated with my uncle? What does he want with the Avatar?"

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough. I meant what I said, that you're in protective custody. Soon, you and your sister will get a chance for a family reunion with Prince Iroh. The Avatar and Lady Mai will be there, too."

"And what about Suki?"

Zhao's eyes had narrowed dangerously at the sound of her name. "Consider her part of your incentive to behave. You can imagine how surprised I was to learn that she survived your little prison break. You must have become quite attached to her during your time together." Zhao sniffed. "Officially, she's charged with the assassination of Admiral Yon Rha. Prince Iroh certainly has no interest in a failed spy, so her fate is entirely in my hands. But if you don't make trouble for me, then perhaps I can overlook the transgressions of so petty a player."

Zuko had clenched his fists together hard enough to feel his nails digging into his palms. He spun away from Zhao, but found the walls of his tiny cell looming over him claustrophobically. He was trapped, in more ways than one, and Suki was being used as a weakness.

Did he care that much about her, that he would go along with Zhao's games?

He still wasn't fully convinced that she was truly on his side, after all. She had stopped him from attacking the Avatar during the ash-monster's rampage, but her logic made sense and she claimed to be doing it for his own good. But then, she was also an effective liar, by her own admission.

In the end, Zuko had decided it didn't matter. There was no point in making a decision about Suki until he knew more about whatever Uncle Iroh intended. So he had compliantly but proudly let Zhao's guards escort him from his cell when the time came, meeting up with Azula to find her under a similar watch.

A short time later, they had caught their first sight of the Avatar and Mai.

And now thanks to Azula's hatred for her former friend, Zuko was once again alone.

At least there was one advantage to Azula's failure to kill the traitor. Although Zuko was fairly sure he would regret it later, he wanted a chance to talk to Mai again. She claimed, in their brief exchange
during the battle against the massive ash-monster, that she had betrayed him more out of a desire to protect 'Aang' than to hurt Zuko in any way. He was interested in seeing if she had told the truth, and if she even understood what the truth really was.

Zuko let the guards escort him into the Old Waterbender's room, just behind the Avatar and Mai. He had expected it to be filled with Tribal fetishes and barbarian decorations, yet he found himself walking into the light of blazing fire pans carved into coiling dragons. The smell of cleansing incense filled the room, reminding Zuko of the Great Temple back home in the Fire Nation's capital. In center of the room, a low table covered in candles sat surrounded by flat pillows.

Something hung from the ceiling above the table, a collection of hollow wooden tubes suspended on strings that shifted in the warm air generated by the candle flames so that they clunked together to generate a hollow cascade of soothing background noise.

"Wow," the Avatar breathed, dashing past his guards to reach up and give the clunking thing a brush with his fingers. "A Lungta chime! I haven't heard one of those since- well, I guess it's been over a hundred years."

The old Waterbender came over and bowed at the waist to the Avatar. "I had one of my students carve it according to Prince Iroh's instructions. You may keep it once we're done here, if you like."

Zuko squared his shoulders and looked to the Waterbender. "And who are you, that my Uncle gives you such tasks?"

"I am Pakku, Master Waterbender of the Northern Water Tribe." His face tightened into a scowl that filled the lines of his face with ease. "And I'm here to make sure that you all have your meeting with Prince Iroh. So behave, child."

Zuko felt his inner fire flare at being patronized like that. But he had fought a tiring war against a giant monster yesterday, and today this Pakku had beaten Azula unconscious. Zuko decided he wasn't in the mood for real a fight.

Mai said, "You serve Iroh?"

"I do, young lady, what is necessary. Maybe you should try to understand that, because right now anything you have to say is a waste of everyone's time." Pakku turned to the guards, and Zuko caught a glimpse of Mai holding up a obscene gesture in retaliation. It reminded him of a little girl who would give a rare smile at how such crude antics would upset her own mother. Pakku must not have seen the display, because he simply said to the guards, "You can leave, now."

If Zuko was any judge of body language as conveyed through full Firebender armor, the guards weren't any more thrilled with the old Waterbender than Mai was. Still, they obeyed him and left the room.

"Finally." Pakku went over to the table and sat down on one of the mats. "Go ahead and take your places. I shall be guiding you in your transition to the Spirit World."

Zuko took a kneeling posture on a mat, while on the other side of the table, the Avatar settled into a lotus position.

Mai remained standing.

Pakku shifted his gaze from Zuko to Aang and back again. "I hope you both understand the basics of meditation. Otherwise we'll be here all night."
Zuko just glared at the man, but the Avatar raised his hand and said, "Yessir!"

"Good. This is basically that." Pakku looked back and forth at them. "Well? Are you just going to sit there like lumps on an ice flow, or do you intend to get on with it anytime soon?"

Zuko heard Mai's annoyed snort, but he didn't feel bothered much himself. This was just how teachers worked. It actually made him less worried about Pakku's qualifications. So he closed his eyes and steadied his breathing, inhaling deeply through his nose. The air tickled his nostrils and the smell of the incense filled his perception.

"Good," Pakku's voice came. "Focus on the energies in this room. I have purified it, washing away the detritus of life and leaving it full of clean spiritual energy. Feel the heat of the fires around us. They pulse with the same energy that fills this room. The fires warm the air, transferring energy, and the air in turn moves around us and through us. It moves the chimes above our heads." Pakku's speech had achieved a kind of rhythm, like a spoken song, growing quieter until he was whispering. "Breathe in the air. Let it fill you. You contain the energies, and as your body converts the heat and air into life, you become one with the energies. You are the energies."

Zuko was also one with the flames. He could not see them with his eyes closed, but he could feel them pulsing in time with his breathing, emanating the same warmth as his blood.

"I feel," the Avatar said, "connected."

"Yes." Pakku's voice had lost all its hardness, honeyed with real satisfaction. "We are all connected. Connected to things we cannot even perceive. We three are connected now, and I am beginning my journey to the Spirit World. Focus on the energies around you, and I will show the path along them to another plane of existence. Breathe. Focus. Feel the energies around you, within you. Feel the Spirit World around you, within you."

Zuko had never been lighter. For the first time in five years, he did not feel his scar pulling at the skin of his face. His body had faded, leaving just his heat and his energies flowing in a shape that might have been human, if the concept of 'human' still had meaning to him. Something was drawing him, leading his energies into a flow like a river, a river of such vastness that it could have washed away the entire world.

Then there was a flare like he had been struck by lightning, but since he had no body, there was no pain. There was just energy, charging him and powering him and making him greater than he had ever been before.

So charged, Zuko opened his eyes, and found himself kneeling not in a room on a battleship, but on a waxy green surface that stretched out to his left. He looked around, and found that he was on something the size of the deck of a Fire Nation warship.

And where the green surface ended, clouds and empty sky beckoned.

Zuko started to stand, but an old, familiar voice said, "Relax, nephew. We are quite safe here. My apologies for the drama of the view, but I felt that an elevated perspective would help with our discussions."

Zuko turned to his right, and found his Uncle Iroh sitting comfortably and smiling, completing the diamond formation Pakku and the Avatar, with himself at the head.

For Katara, there was little difference between sleep and wakefulness.
When she was awake, she sat in an unlit hut, surrounded by round walls and a low ceiling, covered in complete darkness. Outside, the Water Tribe village of the 'Middle Pole' was having a late night celebration, judging from the sounds, but that might as well have been happening in the Spirit World as far as Katara was concerned. She sat in the center of her borrowed hut, hugging her legs to her body, listening to the echoes of her own breathing in the small space.

When she was asleep, she had no dreams. There was just darkness, nothingness.

And when she awoke again, the darkness was still there.

It was comforting in its consistency. There was no sky here, no chance of being forced to confront that massive emptiness above. Normally, she was content when indoors, even in larger rooms. As long as there was a roof over her head, like in that horrible Fire Nation prison where she had grown up, her anxiety remained dormant. Outside, her large cone-hat was enough to let her get by, as long as she kept the brim low in her vision and didn't look up.

Now, Katara wasn't sure if she'd ever be able to leave this hut again.

She had been the first to stand against that ash-monster, mustering all her courage against its massive size that reminded her how large the sky must be to cover such a thing. But then the monster had attacked in an unexpected way, assaulting her not with physical power, but with pure fear. It had revealed the true vastness, the true emptiness, of the sky that covered an entire world, and her mind just wasn't large enough, wasn't strong enough, to handle it.

She didn't think she'd ever be able to handle it.

She might have been drifting off to sleep again, or perhaps just floating through the nothingness that was her current waking world, when she heard a sound behind her. The cloth that hung over the hut's entrance was shifting, and there were footsteps on the hut's wooden floor.

A warm hand came to rest on Katara's back, and Ty Lee said, "Hey, are you hungry?"

Katara didn't reply.

Of course, that was no problem for Ty Lee. "I brought you some stew. I don't know what's in it but it's pretty good. You can actually chew the meat, which isn't always possible with a lot of the stews out there. When I was with the circus, traveling around, I had some pretty bad stews. But this one is good. No kick to it, but good."

Katara sighed.

Ty Lee's hand moved over Katara's back, rubbing it gently. "Your grandma is outside. She's been waiting for you. She'll wait some more, if you don't want to talk to anyone yet, but I just thought you should know that she's still waiting."

Katara winced in the dark. Gran-Gran had been there when Katara woke up again after the ash-monster was defeated, the grandmother she lost as a child when the Fire Nation imprisoned her, but the vision of that super-sky was still fresh in her mind, and she had screamed until the lights had been put out and she was left alone in the hut.

Katara had called out her apologies, later, but she wasn't sure if anyone heard her.

Ty Lee said, "Your stew is getting cold."

Katara squeezed her eyes shut as if that could somehow block out the sound of that sweet voice.
"Why did you come in here?"

"Oh, wow, you're talking!" Katara felt Ty Lee's hand patting her back. "I didn't think you'd talk to me!"

"Then why did you come in?"

"To bring you stew and talk to you. I just didn't think you'd say anything back. Mai doesn't always like to say things back to me, and she loves me. (She's never said it but I know it's true.) So, are you feeling better?"

Katara started to shake her head, before she remembered the darkness. "No."

"Oh." Ty Lee shifted so that she was sitting beside Katara, their legs touching, and then a warm bowl came to rest in Katara's lap. It must have been the stew. "Well, while you eat, I'll tell you what things are like outside so that you won't be surprised when you're ready. Okay?"

Katara said nothing. But with the bowl of stew right in front of her, smelling like a childhood memory, she decided that it wouldn't hurt to let Ty Lee keep talking. The darkness was still here, as well as the walls and the ceiling.

"Okay," Ty Lee decided. "Well, the really noticeable thing is that we're underground. We're in this big cave that has its own bay! The water goes out to a giant lake, and on the other side is Ba Sing Se. The cave's ceiling is really high, high enough that there isn't any echo, but it's still kind of creepy to me. There's an opening in the center of it, though, and you can see some of the stars through it, but not the moon." Ty Lee suddenly gasped. "I don't even know if the moon is out tonight!"

Katara smiled in the darkness.

Ty Lee continued, "So that Fire Nation ship that rescued us turned out to have Captain Zhao on it. I hate him. But he says he's surrendering and Prince Iroh sent him to figure out how to end the war or something, so Aang and Mai went aboard to talk. I was afraid for them, but I left because Zhao said that Zuko and Azula are aboard, too."

Katara raised her head. "They're the Firebenders who attacked us. When we stole the platinum shipment and you—" Katara felt the smile come back. "And you saved Aang and me and threw them both overboard."

Ty Lee was quiet for a while after that. "Yeah. Thinking about it still scares me. Azula still scares me. But— but what you said on that ship, about how you keeping going even though you're afraid of the sky, that helped me get up and fight. Even if it was in disguise."

"Is that what you really came in here to tell me?" Katara sighed. "That I've lost my courage?"

"No. We're just talking. And I don't think you lost your courage at all. But if you wanted to step outside and yell 'I'm not afraid of you!' at the sky, and it was because you were inspired by how I punched Azula in the face instead of shivering and throwing up, then that would make me happy."

Katara lifted the bowl of stew and sipped at it. It tasted just like she remembered, back when she was a little girl living with her family in their ancestral lands. "Well, you didn't see me out there. I got so scared I just shut down."

"No," Ty Lee drawled. "But I can see you now."

"No you can't."
"No, I can't. But I can see your aura. (Yes, even in the dark.) You have a lot of silver and fear, but that's not your only color. There's blue, too. And even dark red."

"What do those mean?" Katara finished the last of the stew, and put the bowl down on the floor.

"That you're a caring person, and that you're a lot stronger than you think." There was the sound of the bowl scraping on the floor; Ty Lee must have taken it. "You're going to be okay, Katara. And it will make a lot of people very happy."

Katara could hear Ty Lee get up, and then the sound of the cloth over the hut's entrance shifting. She was alone in the dark again.

But, it seemed, she was shining with her own colored light.

It took Aang a long moment to realize where he was.

He knew from the start that it was the Spirit World. Master Pakku had helped bring them all here, and it was amazing! The air was alive in ways that even the winds floating down off the Axis Mundi into the Southern Air Temple weren't. That was the first clue, the air so bright and singing that they could only be deep in the sky. But the amazing part was that they weren't on a tower, or a mountain, or even flying on a dragon or sky bison.

No, the waxy green surface they were sitting on was the giveaway. It reminded Aang of the fronds of the dalmods in the tropic regions, when he used to visit his friend Kuzon in the Fire Nation.

They were seated on a giant leaf, stiff and strong enough to hold them up even as it extended out across a vast sky. Aang looked around when he reached this revelation, and discovered that the gray smear that extended behind Zuko was not a cloud, as he originally thought, but the trunk of a massive tree.

Aang couldn't stop smiling about it. "This place is great!"

The old man who Aang could only assume was Iroh smiled back. "It is one of my favorite places to visit. But beware, Avatar! I see you straining to remain sitting, but this is no place for running around, or even flying. We cannot bend in the Spirit World. Our bodies are not present, and it's debatable whether there are even elements to command! Things are different here, but special in their own way."

Aang was going to ask further questions about that, but Master Pakku spoke up with, "If you don't need me, Grand Lotus, there are things I need to see to back in the material world. I trust you're capable of handling this by yourself?"

"Yes, that is fine. Thank you for your efforts, Pakku."

"Oh, sure, whatever my prince commands." And on that sour note, Pakku faded like a dream.

Aang blinked. "I guess you guys aren't friends, then."

"Well, I conquered his home. I have tried to do right by Northern Water Tribe, but even my greatest efforts can only accomplish so much."

Zuko burst out with, "Is that what you've been doing all this time? Playing with the Tribals? You've been out of touch for years, except to break Lu Ten's engagement to Mai!"
Aang cleared his throat. "They don't like to be called that. Tribals, I mean."

Zuko looked to him, a one-eyed glare crinkled with confusion. Then Zuko shook his head and turned back to Iroh. "Uncle, please, what is this all about? Why didn't you come home when you were called? Why are you working with Zhao?"

So Zuko didn't know? Aang took a deep breath and prepared to find out exactly how cranky this particular Firebender could get. "Zhao surrendered to me, and said that Prince Iroh wanted to end the war and free the other nations."

Zuko's one eye went wide, and he whipped around to give his uncle a pleading look. "That can't be true!"

Iroh inclined his head towards Aang. "He is right. That is indeed my offer. I've tried to discuss this with you before, Avatar Aang, but getting in touch with you has been difficult. I am isolated at the North Pole, but have learned how to communicate with my associates here in the Spirit World, or for those who can't reach it, through dreams."

"Dreams?" Aang searched through his memory, and found an answer in the image of an old man serving tea. "Hey, I remember! I had a dream that told me how to find the secret Earthbender village! Someone served me tea and gave me a bunch of rhyming clues. That was you?!"

Iroh nodded. "I am glad I was able to assist you. Unfortunately, contacting you has proved difficult since then, or I would have coordinated more closely with you before this rather abrupt encounter. Surely, it would have made connecting you with the new Airbender nuns much easier. I'm afraid much of the difficulty was the result of miscommunications, for which I take full responsibility."

Aang leaned back, trying to make sense of it. "Miscommunication? But- Zhao! Zhao's working for you now, and- you had him capture the nuns?!! Was this guy an enemy after all? And Aang couldn't Airbend here! But if Mai could at least protect his body, maybe he could-

"No, not capture!" Iroh held up his hands as if surrendering. "That just goes to show the problem. I heard of the plight of the nuns. Their Mother Malu is a Grand Lotus of a group called the White Lotus, just as I am. I tried to send help, and then protect the Airbenders from people like this Long Feng who might try to hurt them. You, unfortunately, stumbled across the situation before I could find a solution, and the Fire Army responded with their typical hostility. Please, Avatar Aang, I never intended for anyone to get hurt. The nuns were safe and unharmed when you found them, were they not?"

Aang had to admit that it was true. Even from Ty Lee's description, the prison was standard enough until the attack on the sinkhole fortress created danger. It wasn't like how Katara and the Southern Waterbenders were kept imprisoned.

On the other hand, it was an underground fortress that almost killed Aang and his friends.

While Aang was silent, Zuko stood up and stomped away from the gathering, shaking the giant leaf beneath them. "I can't believe this, Uncle! You've been committing treason! Making a deal with the Avatar? He's our enemy! He's trying to destroy everything we've built!"

Iroh, amazingly, nodded. "There are greater concerns than the Fire Nation's glory, nephew. We are destroying the world, and it is in everyone's best interest to help restore it."

Zuko dropped his head into his hands. Aang could sympathize, finding this all just as confusing. Eventually, Zuko looked up and said, "I'm not a fool. I know that many colonists suffer. I've walked
the Earth Kingdom. We were taught that the Fire Nation is bringing civilization and prosperity to the savages of the world, but I've learned how that's come with violence. But to give it all up, now- what would be left to fix? The best course is to improve the Fire Nation's rule, make it more generous and less violent!"

Hearing those excuses, Aang found himself grateful for his friendship with Mai. He hadn't quite realized it at the time, but when she was lying to him, pretending to be his friend even as she tried to serve Zuko, she was also learning how wrong she had been about the Fire Nation, and unconsciously teaching Aang how to deal with it. "Prince Zuko, that sounds good when you say it, but is it even possible? Do you know what soldiers do when they think they're better than the people they've conquered? This isn't something that can be fixed by ordering people to be nicer to each other.”

Zuko's glare hardened again. "The Fire Nation has more honor than you give it credit for! Maybe- maybe there are people- important people who lack honor- but there are good people, too!"

Aang nodded. "I know. I'm friends with Mai. That's how I've learned that a lot of people struggle with what's honorable to them. She's like family to me now, but she's not perfect. None of us are. And the Fire Nation created the ashlands."

Zuko flinched at that last word.

"The Avatar's wisdom is far greater than the appearance of his age," Iroh intoned. "You've reached right to the heart of the matter, Avatar Aang. Thank you! The ashlands are proof that the Fire Nation's evil has gone beyond how it treats the people it claims to rule. We have hurt the world itself, and the consequences for that are dire. Zhao told me about what you fought on the remains of Ba Sing Se. Yes, that was the work of this Long Feng, but the darkness was already there for him to use. The Fire Nation cannot settle spirits with generous rule, or restore the balance by training our soldiers to be nicer. We broke things, perhaps irrevocably, and all we can do now is step away and hope that by focusing on our own balance, we can help the rest of the world heal."

Zuko shook his head. "Uncle, where is this coming from? You've been up at the North Pole all this time? Are these things the Tr- the Water Tribe people have told you?"

"They tried." Iroh sighed and seemed to deflate where he sat. "I failed to listen, at first. Like you, nephew, I could not reconcile everything I thought I knew with this wisdom. But-" Iroh took a deep, shuddering breath. "But I have come to believe that the only way to save my son is to heal the world. To restore the kind of balance I refused to believe in."

Aang felt the pain in those words like a physical force emanating from Iroh. The grief in his voice was a cold, wrenching thing.

Zuko must have felt it, too, for he lost his defensive posture and leaned towards his uncle. "Lu Ten? What's happened to him?"

Pakku opened his eyes to find himself back in the material world, in the meditation room aboard that blowhard Zhao's ship, being stared at by the sallow-faced knife-girl from the Fire Nation. "It's not a woman's place to eye people like that."

She showed no expression, but Pakku had experience enough to see the tenseness in the way she stood there, pretending to be so proper. It was a tenseness that could easily transform into violence.

But Pakku wasn't worried, because he knew that transformation was far too slow to be a danger to
him.

Remembering that this Mai wasn't worth the time or annoyance, he stood up and straightened his coat. "I have things to see to. Your friends will wake up when their conference with Prince Iroh is at an end. Don't touch them."

To his retreating back, he heard the girl mutter, "Don't hurry back on my account."

Hmph. Whatever.

Pakku left the room, noted the Firebender guards at the door as expected, and brushed past them to head to the main deck. Despite the amount of time he had spent on this metal monstrosity of a boat, sailing all the way down from the North Pole on Iroh's orders, he still wasn't used to the way his footsteps echoed in the metal halls. At least, as long as the ship was docked, the unholy thrum of the engine was silenced. That had been the most off-putting part.

No, scratch that. As Pakku emerged out onto the ship's deck and found Commander Zhao conferring with some of his officers, he realized that the true worst part was dealing with racist conquering monsters like Sideburns over there.

Still, Pakku knew what he had to do. Not letting his disgust show on his face, he went over to Zhao, waited to be acknowledged, and said, "I'm going ashore to inspect the refugees from the Southern Water Tribe."

Zhao nodded. "If you wish."

Pakku started to move.

"But before you do-"

Of course.

Pakku stopped and looked back.

Zhao continued, "Our unplanned prisoner is awake now. Did you want to see to him before going ashore?"

Pakku grinded his teeth together, a bad habit he intended to break one of these days when the world stopped aggravating him so much. (In other words: never.) "Of course, Commander. Thank you for informing me."

Fortunately, Pakku wasn't required to bow to Zhao before turning his back.

Pakku himself had informed Iroh of the unplanned prisoner, and alone had received the specific instructions on what was required. Zhao, for all his posturing, was still just Iroh's lackey in the Fire Navy, and only knew that the prisoner had to be kept secret from the other guests.

It didn't bear thinking about, what a person such as Zhao would do with more information.

As he left the main deck, Pakku looked around and spotted one of his more skilled students, Kinto, on guard duty. Pakku didn't like the young man at all, but he was a powerful Waterbender, and his specific flaws would come in use with this task. Pakku waved Kinto over, and led his student back into the ship's interior. "Kinto, I have a job for you. Stand up straight and listen for instructions, okay?"
"Of course, Master Pakku."

They passed through hallways lit by depressing red lanterns, dodging around Firebenders in their disgusting armor. No one stopped Pakku as he made his way to the brig, past the general holding cells, past the more secure rooms where the Fire Princess was sleeping off her stupidity and the so-called 'Kyoshi Warrior' was stewing in her ineffectiveness.

There was a lone cell at the end of the row, separated from the others, and the viewport in the door had a sliding cover so that all sound from within could be cut off.

Pakku waited while the guards unlatched the door, and then went in with Kinto.

Sitting in a corner of the cell, hunched pathetically, the man called Long Feng failed to look up at his visitors.

Pakku clasped his hands behind his back. "This is your situation. You are trapped on a Fire Navy vessel. Your men have been captured by this Queen Toph Bei Fong or whatever she calls herself, and I'm told that she's already dispatched some of her people to seize your bases and any books they find. The Airbender women are under Bei Fong's protection, as well. The Avatar is meeting now with Prince Iroh to forge an alliance. Put simply, your life is a disaster."

Long Feng finally looked up.

Pakku nodded at him. "No one off this ship knows that you're alive. No one on this ship cares. And so you will tell me all you know about the ceremony and mysticism that allowed you turn the ash of Ba Sing Se into an autonomous creature. All the information in those books you smuggled out of Ba Sing Se. All the lore Avatar Kyoshi had forbidden people from reading."

Long Feng snorted. "Or?"

Pakku stepped forward and leaned over to look Long Feng directly in the eyes. "I am not without sympathy for your situation. My homeland is under occupation of the Fire Nation, too. But resistance is not an option for me. I'm not going to try to trick you into confiding with me. You're probably a better liar than I'll ever be. So this is going to be simple. Kinto here is one of my best students, capable of such fine Waterbending that he can manipulate the fluids in a person's stomach. You can imagine the types of sensations he's capable of inflicting."

Long Feng's lips pressed together. He seemed to know what he was in for.

Pakku stepped back to the far side of the cell. "Go ahead and start talking whenever you want. Kinto, practice your worst skills until he tells me what I want to know."

Kinto, the degenerate, actually grinned as he stepped forward.

Pakku bit back on a sigh. It was depressing, becoming a man that disgusted himself.

Zuko stood tall on a giant leaf in the Spirit World while Uncle Iroh sat at his feet and blinked away tears.

He had never felt more lost.

Uncle wanted to give up everything the Fire Nation had achieved, and now Lu Ten might be sick? Zuko had hoped that he could maybe find his home again, if he managed to end his exile. But this-
This was change. Change, it seemed, could not be denied.

Uncle Iroh finally calmed enough to say. "Something terrible has happened to your cousin. He has an affliction, one of a spiritual nature. I've tried everything to save him! I've researched the obscure knowledge of all the nations on earth, to no avail! That is why I haven't come home, nephew, even after the Fire Lord commanded it. I could not bring Lu Ten home with me, and I will not abandon my son."

Avatar Aang ran a hand over his tattooed head. "Maybe I can help with that? I've been learning about fixing spiritual energies and."

"Thank you, Avatar, but let us be frank - you are a novice, yet. There is no shame in that! But you still have much to learn. The White Lotus group I spoke of is a kind of philosophy club. It began, ages ago, with a devotion to the game of Pai Sho, connecting players across the world, but it has since become a network devoted to the free exchange of ideas and philosophy. I used it to communicate with sages and shamans and wise men across the world! If they could not help me, who can?"

Zuko started to say, "Grandf-" Then he remembered his place. "The Fire Lord and his Sages-"

"The Fire Lord would not help, nephew even if he knew." Uncle gave a bitter laugh that sounded alien in his voice. "My father has grown bitter and unloving. I know, in my heart, that he would have me abandon Lu Ten. That is why I have no compunctions about opposing him to set everything right." Uncle turned to look at the Avatar with a hardness that made his earlier tears almost seem like a dream. "That is why I have reached out to you. You know what drives me, now. You and I both need my father, Fire Lord Azulon, removed from the Flaming Throne. Help me do it, and I will take up the crown and end all hostilities with the rest of the world. I will give back the Earth Kingdom and the Water Tribes. I will provide what resources and gold are needed to help the healing.

"And in doing so, I will save the life of my son."

The Avatar rose to his feet and started hopping from foot to foot. It made him look even more like a child in Zuko's eyes. "I'm in! Where do we start?"

Uncle Iroh smiled. "We let my nephew drag you back to the Fire Nation to fulfill the terms of his banishment. Then you just need to organize a coup amongst the entire Homeland's leadership!"

What?

Zuko spun to face the Avatar.

The Avatar blinked back at him.

Zuko looked back to his uncle, who grinned with that mischievous look in his eyes that could herald either a silly magic trick or a devastating tactical maneuver.

Zuko blinked.

Then he and the Avatar both said, "Come again?"

TO BE CONTINUED
Gatherings and Scatterings

Chapter Summary

Iroh continues his pitch, and everyone sorts out their new paths.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gatherings and Scatterings

Azula returned to consciousness, slowly and painfully, to find the Kyoshi Warrior girl leaning over her.

Her first thought was to go ahead and kill Suki right there for the crime of gazing upon a Princess of the Fire Nation without permission, but before she could work up the energy for a good heart-boiling flame, she remembered what had happened.

Mai.

Mai was on Zhao's ship!

With the Avatar.

Azula groaned as it came back- her attempt to kill Mai right there in the ship's corridors, the delicious look of terror in the traitor's eyes, and then the short and soggy battle with the mysterious Waterbender who had come out of nowhere to deny Azula her vengeance.

Azula squeezed her eyes shut. She had failed. She had failed to kill Mai, and failed to be aware enough of her surroundings to avoid the Waterbender's ambush. That he had gone on to beat her unconscious without her being able to so much as attempt a counterattack spoke to his skill, but he should have never gotten that first shot.

Less than perfect was less than acceptable.

And Azula had just proven herself less than perfect.

She wondered what Father would think when he found out, but quickly shut that line of thought down. She needed to be able to function, to make up for her mistake. She couldn't do that while directing her thoughts along such a dangerous road.

Azula sat up and opened her eyes again. Suki was crouching nearby, just out of reach. (Smart of her.) They were in a cell in the ship's brig, just like the one Azula had woken up in after the victory against the Ash Monster of Ba Sing Se, but before she had been. "Why are you here?"

Suki's gave a one-shoulder shrug. "The guards wanted to make sure you were okay after that beating, but didn't care to risk their lives to make sure. I guess I'm considered expendable."

Hm. "And where's Zuko?"
"Still wherever they were taking you both. I haven't been told much."

No, Suki wouldn't have been. And Azula herself was now dis-invited from whatever this 'reunion' with Uncle was. How convenient that Zuzu was the only one there besides enemies and traitors.

Azula was not very familiar with Father's brother. He had been away for much of her life, pursuing his campaigns against the Tribals. During his visits, he had been a charming and charismatic presence in Grandfather’s court and quite beloved by Mother and Zuko, but Father had never seemed pleased with Iroh, so Azula kept her distance even though she liked his jokes. She had been looking forward to Mai's marriage to Lu Ten if just to get a spy close to that branch of the family and see what information came to light.

But then Uncle had planted his flag at the North Pole and stayed there for years, eventually canceling the betrothal.

Now he was back, and taking an interest in the matter of the Avatar.

Yes, it had been a mistake for Azula to throw herself into an attack on Mai. But a single mistake didn't mean she was going to lose what might be a new war. Not when Father's greatest rival was involved.

Aang couldn't deny the feeling that he had been in conversations like this before.

Monk Gyatso had always had a great sense of humor, along with a really clever mind, and when he got in a mood, he could turn conversation itself into an exciting game! Those times, Aang would never know what Gyatso would say next, what outlandish assertion would come from a seemingly innocuous lead-in. It was lots of fun, especially when one of the stuffy monks like Tashi got roped in. Aang saw it as another sign of Gyatso's specific wisdom of a sense of humor combined with knowing people.

Iroh's suggestion, though, left Aang wondering if the old prince might not be all there. "If I let Zuko throw me in jail, how am I supposed to convince anyone to launch a coup against the Fire Lord?"

Next to Aang, Zuko crossed his arms. "Good question."

"Yes, perhaps there has been a misunderstanding." The glint in Iroh's eyes was a perfect match for the look Gyatso had whenever he was being clever. He remained sitting, completely comfortable on the giant leaf high in the sky that was his chosen meeting place. "I didn't mean that Zuko should throw anyone in a prison. That would indeed be quite unpleasant! I've reviewed the proclamation about your banishment, Zuko, and the terms only say that you need to 'capture' the Avatar and bring him back to the Fire Nation. Avatar Aang, if you surrender to Zuko, just as Zhao did to you, there will be no need for violence or imprisonment. In fact, Zuko can grant your parole so that you will not be uncomfortable."

He turned to his nephew and continued, "Certainly, Zuko, it would be no dishonor to you if, instead of bringing the Avatar back in chains, you arrived in the Homeland with him in peace, both of you ready to discuss how the Fire Nation can begin healing the world. Zhao will arrange things, and you both can safely set foot on Fire Nation soil within a week!"

Aang smiled as the Gyatso-like playfulness of the plan became clear. "Yeah, it's all just about words, right? We use the right words and behave, and they won't be able to do anything about it!"

Zuko made a disgusted sound from the back of his throat. "That's foolishness! Do you two really think that word games will stop Grandfather from having the Avatar tossed into the Caldera's Prison"
"Yes, nephew, I do." With a grunt, Iroh stood up and walked past both Zuko and Aang near to the edge of the leaf-platform. He looked out over the blue sky, the wind tousling some of the stray hairs in his beard. "And the reason is politics. That's where the coup comes in. According to my contacts back in the Homeland, there is a growing discontent with my father's rule. The military leadership knows about the rampaging spirits in the Earth Kingdom and the platinum weapons that are coming too slowly to deal with the problem. The generals worry that the Fire Lord will blame them for the failures."

Aang nodded. He had stopped a team of Fire Nation hunters using platinum weapons to hunt a peaceful spirit. It had been difficult, and it had resulted in the death of Guru Pathik, but even that had taken the Fire Nation three train-tanks and an elite squad. (He was glad his friends had wrecked those tanks.)

Iroh continued, "Meanwhile, the governors are resentful of the way my father continues to consolidate power in the Capital. They find themselves in competition for less and less influence, and are aware that working together would get them more than fighting each other. Both parties are looking for a chance to stand against the Fire Lord, and will be more than happy to let our ruse play out, especially if the most deadly force in the world is siding with them."

Aang kept nodding along until Iroh stopped talking and turned around. Aang waited for the next part, to hear what deadly force he would have to deal with, but instead the old prince just looked at him.

Then Aang realized that Zuko was looking at him, too.

They were both looking at 'the Avatar.'

"Wait, me? I'm the deadly force?"

Iroh chuckled. "You are obviously a gentle soul, young Avatar, but news of the South Pole and Crescent Island has traveled far."

"That didn't stop all the Firebenders I've met from trying to roast me!"

Zuko nodded. "I've grown up hearing about how Avatar Roku was weak and a traitor, and the Air Nomads honorless opportunists who tried to force their weak ways on the rest of the world."

What?! "That's what they say about us? All because we don't want to run around hurting people and taking whatever looks good?"

Iroh sighed. "That's better than what is taught in our schools, that the Fire Nation was forced to strike preemptively to protect ourselves from a rampaging Air Nation Army."

Aang's stomach started hurting. "You teach kids that?! No wonder everything is so messed up!"

Zuko shook his head. "I didn't know that about the schools. We're lying to our own children now?"

"Now you see, nephew, why fixing the state of the world is not simply a matter of holding our soldiers to a higher standard. And yes, Avatar Aang, you will need to earn your full rightful authority. But fear is a kind of respect, or close enough for our purposes, and the Fire Nation fears you. If you come in peace, offering both solutions and a strength that can be shared, then you have a chance of convincing the leadership to withdraw their support from Azulon and transfer it to me."
Especially with a victorious Prince of the Fire Nation from the Ozai faction on your side, and a Weapon of the Fire Nation behind you both."

Aang thought about it. Iroh made it sound so logical, but he'd have to walk into the Fire Nation and meet with these politicians before he'd know whether it was all true. But if it wasn't, did it matter? Was there any other way for him to start working on the damage that had been done in his hundred-year absence?

He'd saved the Southern Waterbenders when he helped rescue Katara, protected a pixiu spirit, found new Airbenders, and put a stop to Long Feng's desecrations. Those were all good things, things that improved the world.

But was it enough? He couldn't keep protecting all those people while going on to help everyone else. Even the Airbender nuns had been hurt again while he was distracted.

Aang was ready to agree to Iroh's plan.

Then Zuko said, "Uncle, are you out of your mind?!"

After his 'interrogation' session with Long Feng, Pakku needed some air.

Not that any amount of breathing would make this whole mess of a situation into something acceptable.

But at least now Pakku was free to pursue his more personal mission. He made his way out of the brig of Zhao's ship, leaving Kinto to clean up Long Feng's cell. Rather than heading back up to the main deck, where he would almost certainly run into Zhao and those ridiculous sideburns again, Pakku instead headed to the rear deck, nodded an acknowledgement to the Firebender guard stationed there, and then sent the man into a panic by heaving himself over the rail.

As he fell, Pakku summoned the waters of the bay to come up and meet him, freezing beneath his feet and turning his fall into a pleasant surfing. He rode the ice board over to the pier, where he came ashore and passed through dock facilities and emerged into a village of tents and skin huts.

So this was where the fugitives of the Southern Tribe were living, eh? It looked like a dump.

Torches lit up the darkness, and there were more people about than Pakku would have expected this many hours past midnight, considering that there were no Waterbenders in the South, but whatever event had been going on seemed to be dying down. Some men were putting away musical instruments and cleaning up the remains of bonfires, while women gathered up the detritus of a feast and the children who had fallen asleep right there on the ground.

How rustic.

Two figures made their way down the lane towards Pakku, attempting to sneak around in that universal way that children thought would render them invisible but did no such thing. Pakku didn't have offspring of his own, but he had students, which was almost as bad. As they tried to sneak past him, he stepped into their path. "You two."

They halted in the light of the torches, stiffening.

The taller one was a girl, and having lived under Fire Nation rule for years now, Pakku recognized what her pale yellow eyes signified. The shorter one was a boy with skin as light as the Knife Woman's and hair tied up in something that aspired to be a Warrior's Wolf Tail.
Hm.

Still, whatever their origins, they might be able to answer Pakku's question. "You two. Maybe you can help me. I'm searching for someone." He looked to the boy. "Do you know Kanna?"

The boy blinked up at him.

The girl said, "Hello, sir. Are you one of the Waterbenders who came from the North on the Fire Nation ship? My name is Shila, and this is Naklin."

Hm. Water Tribe names. Pakku kept his gaze on the boy. "Well, child, are you going to answer my question? Do you know Kanna? Did she live at the South Pole? Eh?" The boy was quiet. "Is she still there? Do you talk at all?"

The girl- Shila- said, "Who's asking?"

So this was what the Southern Tribe was coming to. "I am Pakku, High Master of the Northern Waterbenders. Are you going to answer my question or do you just like making trouble for your betters?"

"Some of the people are saying you Northerners are traitors for working with the Fire Nation." Shila gave him a smile that was a little too sweet. "Why are you asking about Kanna?"

Ah, a clever one. Yugoda, the Healing Master, was clever, too. Pakku didn't much like Yugoda. "Kanna is- an old friend of mine. She left the North Pole a long time ago. According to Fire Nation census data, someone by that name was living at the South Pole. I want to see if it's the same Kanna I used to know."

He also wanted to verify the data in the Fire Nation's census records, that when the Southern Tribe were consolidated in the mining ghetto, a Kanna was part of a household with her married offspring and grandchildren. But he was hardly going to tell that to a yellow-eyed, impertinent girl.

Shila tapped her chin as she made a show of thinking. "And how do I know Kanna wants you to know about her?"

Okay, that was it. "Listen, you little-"

"Shila! Naklin! It's past your bedtime! Why are you still running around?"

The children stiffened at the sound of their names, but Pakku barely noticed. His joints had locked up, too, upon hearing that voice. It had aged, quite a bit, and it had been something like sixty years since he had last heard it, but there was a core tone and manner of speaking that he would always recognize.

After all, he had been in love with that voice.

He might still be.

An old woman shuffled into the light of the torches, and Pakku saw his betrothed for the first time since she ran away from him, sixty years ago. Kanna. Here. Now.

She still wore her hair in loops.

He stood there, having no idea what to say or what to do, as she sent the children back to her hut. They called her "Gran-Gran." The boy and girl ran off, leaving Kanna there alone. With him.
She turned in the torchlight and looked at him. "Pakku."

She recognized him. The only thing he could think to do in reply was nod.

"So." She smiled in that special way of hers, a smile that didn't convey any happiness, but rather proclaimed her defiance in the face of something both exasperating and well within her ability to handle. "You found me."

Pakku nodded. Finally, he thought to say, "How are you?"

Well, that was a spectacularly stupid opening.

Zuko hadn't meant to shout quite so loud and- well, furiously, but Uncle Iroh barely even blinked as he replied, "You have an objection, nephew?"

Zuko breathed in and out, trying to find his center, but still ending up feeling a bit cockeyed. "How can you expect me to stand next to the Avatar and- and cheer him on as he talks about deposing Grandfather? This is treason! I'll be exiled again!"

Uncle reached out and put his hands on Zuko's shoulders. It was something he had done before, but back then, Uncle Iroh had to crouch. Now, Zuko had to look down to meet his uncle's gaze.

"Zuko, I know this might be difficult to accept, but you never should have been exiled in the first place. You acted honorably at Ba Sing Se, and served as well as anyone could be expected in the situation. It is not your fault."

Zuko tried to pull away, but Uncle Iroh held firmly onto his shoulders. He didn't even know why he was trying to retreat! After his vision in that ashland, when he walked through a living recollection of his failure at Ba Sing Se and saw what might have been his father deliberately throwing fire at his face, Zuko had finally acknowledged his doubts about the official ruling of accidental friendly fire. But to have Uncle just- just say it like that-

"Zuko, the Fire Lord was wrong to banish you. He cast you out when you were at your lowest, knowingly giving you an impossible task as the condition for your return. He should have embraced you after your injury, but instead he considered you a sign of his own failure to raise two victorious children. He blamed you for Ozai's failings, which he knew also belonged to him. Yes, it would be treason to work against the man. But if you do not commit treason, you will never be safe under his rule."

"But- but Father wants me back!" Zuko closed his good eye, shutting away the pleading face of his uncle. "He even sent Azula to help me, and she has. In her own way. If it wasn't safe for me, why would Father- why would he-" Zuko, for some reason, couldn't find a way to ask the question.

Uncle Iroh let go of him. "I do not know what my brother has planned. All my contacts claim that Ozai has changed since your banishment, keeping to himself in his chambers and acting through a Weapon of the Fire Nation to protect his interests. Zhao theorized that Ozai was committing treason himself, working with the Fire Nation's enemies, including the Avatar."

The Avatar squeaked, "Me?!" Zuko opened his eye to look at the boy, and found surprise all over his face. "But I don't know any of those people!"

Uncle nodded. "It's clearly not true, but Ozai's actions were mysterious enough that Zhao was able to convince military High Command that it was likely to be true. Zuko, you may have to help overthrow the Fire Lord just to save your father."
Zuko had to sit down. He sank roughly to the ground, forgetting that he only had a giant leaf between him and the empty sky until his hands were laying on the waxy surface.

How was he supposed to sort this out? He had seen the signs, when Azula rescued him from Zhao's high seas prison, that the Fire Nation was at war with itself, but he had never considered that the problem was so pervasive. Father and Uncle might both be separately plotting to bring down Grandfather? The military was plotting to bring down Father? Zhao could switch sides at will and find power and influence?

What had happened to the Fire Nation while he was gone?

Or was it always like this, and he had never noticed?

Could this be why Mai had betrayed him? She had seen the destructive in-fighting, and how Zuko had landed at the center of it? Is that why the Avatar, in his youthful innocence, meant more to her?

Zuko also recalled how Suki wouldn't let him attack the Avatar, during the rampage of the ash monster, because he had failed to see that it wasn't Aang's doing. She had been trying to prevent him from making a mistake, in pursuing the task Grandfather had given him, and she had been right.

Zuko looked up to his Uncle. "I'm going to need to convince Azula of this, too."

Uncle smiled.

Beside him, the Avatar blinked. "Does this mean that you're in? You'll help me?"

Zuko stood up. "If you help me end my exile, and give me your word of honor that you will deal fairly with my family and people, then yes, I will help you."

"Sweet!"

Uncle raised his arms and put one hand on Zuko's back and the other on the Avatar's. "You two will have the opportunity to get to know each other quite well as you work. I think it will be good for you both!"

Zuko let his silence speak for him.

Pakku perhaps did not think this all the way through.

He knew, when he decided to go looking for Kanna, that the odds of finding her were low. She could have died, with all the troubles down at the South Pole, and even if she hadn't, only a small portion of the Southern Tribe had escaped from the Fire Nation to be here with the Earth Rebels. He had expected to merely find news of Kanna, or something more like rumors.

Now he was walking beside her in the moonlight. Or the reflection of the moonlight in a filthy cave.

"The Southern ways were agreeable," she was saying, finishing the tale of her journey down from the North Pole, "and so I decided to stay. It was a familiar life, but I had more freedom than I ever would have back home."

Pakku could only nod. "And that freedom was to choose your own marriage." Sixty years ago, he had decided that Kanna was the woman he wanted as his wife. Their friendship had made it seem a natural choice, he had thought, and so put in his request to the Council and their families, and began carving the betrothal necklace.
In retrospect, he supposed he should have asked her, first. Or at some point. Any point.

Definitely before she left.

Kanna said, "I made friends with a Waterbender woman, too. A warrior. The first of many friends. People down there were more- more interesting, I suppose. Happier. They didn't just live life in stolen moments."

Before Iroh had come along, Pakku doubted that he would have understood that. Now, he was all too familiar with it. He did his duty, lived the life that was assigned to him, for a greater good that was sometimes hard to see.

Years ago, he might have been offended by that Waterbender warrior woman who befriended Kanna.

Now, he envied her.

Still, Pakku was man enough to not want to talk about it. "And that g- uh, Shila? She is your granddaughter?"

Kanna glanced at him, a small smile on her lips. "Not by blood, no. But I take care of her, and she has learned some things from me. How to talk to arrogant old men, for one."

Pakku laughed. "I should have known."

"I do have a blood granddaughter, though. She's a Waterbender. She was- was taken from us, as a child. The rest of my family was killed, and I was left only with my sad little grandson. But he tracked his sister down, dragging the Avatar along with him, and saved her. All of this- leaving the tribe, settling here with the Earth King girl- came from my grandchildren's actions." Kanna stopped beside a hut, where a girl in pink was standing on her hands beside curtain-covered entrance in what seemed to be some kind of meditation. "Katara, my granddaughter, is inside. She fought in the battle today, and has not come out since she woke up. I think the battle wearied her of life."

Hm. More damage by the Fire Nation. True, it was that degenerate Long Feng who had summoned the monster, but it always came back to the Fire Nation. The Firebenders had burned down Ba Sing Se, and the Firebenders had taken this Katara from her home in the first place.

But trying to trace the fault back too far could be dangerous. Pakku had been the one to drive Kanna away, long before the Fire Nation had done any of that.

Kanna was saying, "I must remain here in case she comes out. I only left to find the other children. I'm sorry, Pakku, that I can't spend more time with you, but I need to-"

"Perhaps I can help," he found himself saying. "I have been training Waterbender warriors for decades, and fought the Fire Nation before they hammered us down. I know a little something about warriors who grow weary of life. I expect there's little difference whether the warrior is a man or a woman."

Kanna just blinked at him.

He said, "With your permission, of course."

She gave a slow nod.

While the girl in pink righted herself and watched, Pakku went over to the hut's entrance and kneeled
front of the curtained entrance. "Hello, Katara. I am Pakku, the High Waterbending Master of the Northern Tribe. It is my honor to meet you. I think I might be able to offer you some helpful knowledge. Do you know the 'Refreshing Drink' meditation?"

He waited.

Eventually, a voice from within the hut- the voice of a girl who couldn't have even been as old as Princess Yue- responded with a, "No."

"Well, then, would you like to learn? I can teach it from right out here."

"Okay."

"Excellent. The 'Refreshing Drink' is a way of centering the mind that restores the part of our spirit that has been strained by the trials of life. We begin, as with all meditations, with the proper breathing...

Mai missed the moment when Aang and Zuko both returned to the material world. She had been too worried about them to be bored, but she was still left with nothing to do while watching over their bodies, so she wound up pacing the fire-lit room's perimeter, thinking about what would happen to her if the Colonial Continent was handed over to King Toph. Would Mai stay an exile? Would she be expected to return? What did post-war life look like for an Avatar, anyway?

Lost in thought, she had no idea that the boys had woken up until Aang suddenly said, "Wow!"

Fortunately, no one saw her startle at the noise. Azula must have left her jumpy. "Are you both okay?"

Zuko said nothing.

Aang, though, grinned at her like Tom-Tom did the time he figured out how to get the lid off the cookie jar open by himself. "I'm better than okay! Prince Iroh figured it all out for us! With his help, we're really going to do it! We're going to go to the Fire Nation, all together, and make him a good Fire Lord who will help us fix everything."

Mai looked at Zuko.

He nodded, although he wouldn't meet her gaze with his good eye.

Mai wasn't quite sure how to react. Go back to the Fire Nation and dive straight into a succession struggle?

Well, whatever it was, it certainly wouldn't be boring.

As she considered this new information, she knocked on the chamber’s door to summon a guard. The armored Firebenders led them back through the corridors of the ship up to the main deck.

Of course, Zhao was waiting for them. "Avatar, Prince Zuko, I hope your meeting with Prince Iroh was productive."

Aang was about to pipe up again, but Mai cut him off with, "The Avatar has been given things to think about. We'll be taking our leave, now."

Zhao shrugged in his armor. "Of course, you need to discuss the matter with your rebel allies. Take as long as you need. I have orders to wait until your party is healed and rested to take you back to the
Fire Nation. It will take some weeks to fully arrange your homecoming, anyway."

Aang took a step back, bringing him so close to Mai that they were almost touching. "You're coming with us?"

"Of course. Prince Iroh has tasked me with guarding and transporting you for the duration of your time in the Homeland. I will also be able to serve as your military consultant, if your pet Weapon isn't up to the task."

Well, this deal just got better all the time, didn't it?

Zhao turned to Zuko. "As for you, your highness, your safety is still at risk around these rebels. I'll have you taken back to your sister and servant girl. Perhaps we can find some nicer accommodations than those cells, now that we've all on the same side."

Zuko glared, but followed as one of the guards led him away.

As Mai and Aang fell in behind their own escort, she leaned forward and whispered to him, "Are you sure about all of this? That we can trust Iroh if he's using people like Zhao?"

Aang looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "His plan sounds better than I could have ever hoped for. Even Zuko agreed. And Iroh seemed like such a nice guy. Very wise! He reminded me of Monk Gyatso. I think we can trust him."

Mai thought back to her own family's dealing with Iroh. "I had a betrothal agreement with his son, and he didn't have a problem breaking it."

"But he said his son was sick. That's part of why he wants to help me save the Fire Nation!"

"Well," Mai said as they left their guards behind and stepped off the gangplank, watching their friends rush over to them, "just remember that people can change their minds."

But then, wasn’t she the ultimate reminder of that?

Katara had been alone in the dark.

Now, she was alone in her own in her very own river.

She was deep in this Master Pakku's meditation, having followed his words to a place of peace. The first time she had reached it, she had been so surprised that she lost her tranquility and had to start over. It wasn't that she had never felt such peace before; she had touched it every time she used Healing to help her friends, taking the essence of their Qi and strengthening it to fix wounds and troubled minds.

She realized now that those experiences had been a shadow of something else- the sensation of healing her own troubles, deep within herself.

And it had all been done without water.

It turned out that the true water- the spirit of water- was inside of her heart and veins and mind and body. Master Hama had taught her of the water that existed throughout the external world, even the air, but Master Pakku had showed her that water existed beyond the world as well.

This was the true path to mastery, she could feel.
It was like the Firebender girl had said, during the fight on the cargo ship: "You're as much a stranger to your element as you are to the sky." Katara had trained in a cage in a place where water couldn't exist. She had copied the movements of a master who could only rely on the memory of being a Waterbender. But this meditation had found a place where she and Water were one, a place every bit as large as the sky, but providing strength instead of fear.

Katara opened her eyes and stood up in the dark hut.

It was time to leave.

She emerged from the darkness of the hut and out in the light of stars and torches. Ty Lee was there, squealing with pleasure and bouncing on her feet. Gran-Gran was there, too, looking at Katara with warm eyes straight out of the memories that provided strength in the heart of Crescent Island. Standing beside Gran-Gran were two adorable children who looked at Katara like she was the Moon Spirit itself stepping down from the sky.

And in the center of them all was an old man who could only be Pakku.

Katara bowed low. "Thank you."

Pakku acknowledged her with a nod. "It's my pleasure to assist anyone who fought against that abomination today. That Long Feng has only started getting what he deserves."

Katara decided to push past that point. "You're obviously a great Waterbending Master."

"Yes, well, I-"

"What else can you teach me?"

Pakku blinked. "Teach you? But I- well, I've only taught men, but- I'm leaving tomorrow on another errand for Prince Iroh."

Katara looked at Ty Lee, and saw nothing but unconditional support. She looked to Gran-Gran, who gave a nod and a smile that Katara recognized from looking at her own reflection in water. She looked back to Pakku and said, "I can work with that."

Aang finished his explanation with, "And so as soon as Zuko's 'capture' of me is acknowledged, we'll go to the Fire Nation to confirm it, and then we'll just start subverting the government and deposing the Fire Lord and stuff. Once that's done, Iroh will do everything he's promised."

No one spoke.

Aang looked around the little space, which he had been told used to be a filing office back when Full Moon Bay was working ferry service. Now, it was Earth King Toph's 'throne room,' and she was holding court from atop a crate with the sigil of the Earth Kingdom painted on it.

Around her, torches illuminated the faces of the other rebels she had gathered, including Jet (who apparently was not only alive, but working for King Toph. Sokka had sympathized with Aang’s surprise). Sokka, his old friend Bato, and several other Water Tribe men were also present. None of them looked particularly pleased.

Mai stood at Aang's side, silent but steady. He was really glad she was here.

Finally, Jet snorted. "You really believe all that mud, don't you?"
"He does." King Toph patted her feet against the ground.

Jet stepped forward into the center of the 'court,' just out of reach of Aang. "This is obviously a trap. Surrounding the Avatar with the enemy is dangerous enough, but then sending the group straight into the Fire Nation? This Prince Iroh clearly doesn't think too much of our intelligence."

Aang shook his head. "But he's wise enough to travel to the Spirit World, and Mai confirmed that he's been considered a problem in the Fire Nation for years now. If it's a trap, he would have had to be planning it since before I returned."

Bato said, "Or he could simply be clever enough to make use of the situation at hand."

"I understand everyone's caution, but come on; can we just walk away from this?" Aang stepped forward so that he was standing ahead of Jet and held his staff out so that everyone could see the Air Nomad craftsmanship. He was so glad to have it back, like a piece of him had been restored to life. "I didn't agree to put myself completely in danger. Zhao's just our escort, so I'm not going to be traveling in a jail or anything. And even in the Fire Nation itself, I can fly away whenever I want on Appa and be back in the Earth Kingdom in a day. Yeah, it's probably really dangerous, but what's our other option? Say no thanks and then keep on fighting a war that was already lost?"

Sokka nodded. "This is crazy and stupid and probably a trap, but on the other hand, things have been crazy and stupid since Aang showed up. And I don't trust Aang to know when to cut the fishing line on this, but if I go with him, I can keep an eye out and be the practical part of the group."

"Excuse me?" Mai quirked and eyebrow and put a hand on her hip. "You're the practical one?"

"And Mai can check my work because she's practical, too," Sokka amended. "I think it's worth a shot, because otherwise I'm all out of ideas about how to liberate the rest of the Southern Water Tribe and stuff. And I'm not too proud to admit that I'm curious about what's going on here. I only got a glimpse when I was Zhao's prisoner in Tiankeng, but the Fire Nation does seem to have some internal factions slapping at each other. Even if we just walk away with a better look at that, it's probably worth giving things a shot."

Aang couldn't stop from grinning. He had expected Sokka to be a lot more negative about this. Getting the other boy's support meant a lot.

Mai and Sokka both were back to helping Aang together, and it felt like coming home again.

King Toph stood up from her crate-throne. "No matter what, this whole thing has put a serious crimp in my style. I had this whole hidden base and a sweet rebellion going on, but now there's a Fire Nation warship in my bay and apparently some Prince Admiral at the top of the world knows all about it."

Aang noticed Jet's gaze go down to his feet.

Toph inclined her head towards Jet for a moment, and then straightened and put her hands on her hips. "It sounds like the Avatar is going to do this. I don't know about Master and Lady Practicality over there, but I do know I can tell when anyone is lying. Plus, if this Prince Iroh really is playing by the rules, then the Earth King should definitely be a part of whatever talking is going to happen. I need to make sure that the Earth Kingdom is liberated in my name, after all. So while the rest of you set up a new base and get ready to make life hard for Fire Nation occupiers again, I'll go along on the Avatar's field trip and add my own considerable wisdom and general greatness to the proceedings."

Jet gaped at her. "You're seriously going to go along with this? Just like that?"
"Yup, just like that!" Aang laughed as Toph grinned in Jet's general direction. "Besides, I fought alongside that Prince Zuko guy out there against the ash monster. I like the tempo of his heart. As long as he's involved, I think keeping my feet on him will be very educational."

Mai snorted. "I'm sure Zuko will love that."

"See, Lady Caldera Yu Mai knows that's up! So, anyone have anything smart to say before I get stubborn about this?"

The Earth rebels- except for Jet- all fell to their knees and began bowing to their king. Jet let his shoulders slump and didn't say anything.

Aang looked over at the Water Tribe group, and caught Bato and Sokka exchanging glances. Finally, Bato said, "Then the Southern Water Tribe will support the Avatar, as well. Perhaps by working with Iroh we will learn more about our brothers in the North. Of course, we'll need to get Kanna's approval as well."

Sokka groaned. "I'm the only delegate person here who has to get permission from his Gran-Gran, aren't I?"

Aang walked over and put an arm around Sokka's shoulders. "Don't worry. Zuko needs to get his little sister's permission before he can do anything."

---

Zuko had finished his account of the meeting with Uncle several minutes ago.

Azula still hadn't said anything.

They, along with Suki, were in a cabin now, having been let out of the brig by Zhao. It wasn't a very large room and had no furnishings, but it offered more space than a cell and certainly smelled better. Zuko and Azula were kneeling in the cabin's center, while Suki leaned next to the door, almost as if she was serving as a guard.

Zuko leaned forward. "Azula-"

"I'll have to go along with whoever Zhao is sending to make the report, of course," she interrupted. She stood up, turned to face on the blank walls, and tapped her chin. "I'll verify that everything is correct, and then go on ahead of you to give a direct explanation to Father. Before I leave, I'll need the full itinerary for you and the Avatar. That way, I'll know where I can meet you even if we aren't able to get in contact with you again."

Zuko blinked. "Wait, you're just going along with this? No arguments? No calling me stupid for trusting Uncle?"

Azula turned to regard him with something like surprise. "What good would that do? Whatever game Uncle is playing, this will still get us what we want. Father sent me to help end your banishment and bring you back, and this will accomplish that. The very first step of this plan accomplishes it, and then it doesn't matter what else happens."

Suki said, "So you trust Zhao to ferry your brother to victory?"

Azula's lip curved into a smile. "Good question, but yes, I do. According to the reports from home, Zhao was very much in disgrace in the aftermath of our little jailbreak. Finding haven in Uncle's service accounts for how he still lives, and he won't jeopardize that. He'll have no friends left if he does. As for Zhao's competence, well, that's why I'm going along to make sure the report of Zuzu's
"triumph' is filed correctly."

Zuko let out a heavy breath. It was a relief not to have to argue with Azula. Even when he was right, he tended to lose debates with her, although some of that was due to her resorting to physical violence when she couldn't otherwise convince him. It also made him feel better about the whole situation, but he still felt compelled to ask, "And what about deposing Grandfather and giving back the Earth Kingdom? You will accept that?"

The look Azula gave him was void of expression. "That's why I need to talk with Father as soon as possible. Grandfather is a weak old fool who is clinging to power only because no one has tried to take it from him. And as for the Colonial Continent, I've had unpleasant encounters with two of the ashlands. If the whole place is descending into ruin, better to cut our losses after we've taken everything of value. But Father will know best about it. I will explain everything to him, and then do what he commands. I always do everything that he commands."

Zuko frowned at her words. So he was really going back to the Fire Nation. His banishment was really coming to an end. He would have to face Father- have to find out the truth of what happened between them at Ba Sing Se.

And in doing so, he might find himself in the middle of a war between all the factions of the Royal Family.

Zuko had come to hate the whole concept of 'factions.'

Still, he stood up and said, "Thank you, Azula. We don't always get along, but without your help I never would have gotten back home."

She eyed him as if he was speaking a foreign language, and then turned to point to Suki. "You."

Suki blinked. "Me?"

"Yes, you. While I'm gone, Zuzu is your responsibility. I don't expect any trouble, but I'm giving you the task of doing whatever is necessary to get Zuko back to the Fire Nation in accordance with Uncle's plan. Hurt who must, destroy who you must, and give Zuzu all the hugs he needs to keep his spirits up long enough to finish this task. You will also guard him alone back in the Homeland. Don't trust any other security, unless I provide introductions. If anything goes wrong, I will personally burn your sister alive over the course of a full day, and then I will make it my whole purpose in life to hunt you down and do the same to you. Are we clear?"

Suki actually bowed. "Always."

Zuko couldn't believe this.

"Yes, you. While I'm gone, Zuzu is your responsibility. I don't expect any trouble, but I'm giving you the task of doing whatever is necessary to get Zuko back to the Fire Nation in accordance with Uncle's plan. Hurt who must, destroy who you must, and give Zuzu all the hugs he needs to keep his spirits up long enough to finish this task. You will also guard him alone back in the Homeland. Don't trust any other security, unless I provide introductions. If anything goes wrong, I will personally burn your sister alive over the course of a full day, and then I will make it my whole purpose in life to hunt you down and do the same to you. Are we clear?"

Zuko actually bowed. "Always."

No, wait, he could. His sister's default attitude was a mix of patronizing and threatening. "Azula, you're repeating yourself. Suki has served us loyally, and will hardly do anything to endanger the chance to free her homeland."

The smile Suki turned on him was positively brilliant. "Thanks, Zuko."

"Oh, uh, you're welcome."

Azula threw her hands up in the air and rolled her eyes. "Yes, fine, being nice to the servants is a wonderful thing. You two can keep grinning at each other if you want, but I'm retiring for the night. I have much to plan before Zhao sends out the runners with his report in the morning, and I would like to think I'm entitled to a few hours of healthy sleep before the sun rises." She went over to the door.
and grabbed the handle, but then hesitated for a moment. "I also need to figure out how to kill Mai somewhere in all of this."

Before Zuko could respond, his sister wrenched the door open and walked out.

"Sokka was the only member of the group who hadn't enjoyed a spirit-energy-explosion-induced nap the day before, but he nevertheless got himself up at dawn to watch Aang formally surrender himself to Prince Zuko.

They did it on the pier beside Zhao's ship, in the dim light of the morning sun filtered down through the hole in the cavern's ceiling. As soon as the formal words were spoken (Sokka didn't really listen to them), Zhao sent a signal to one of the ships in his task force to start the journey to the nearest Fire Nation dispatch outpost. There, it would be reported that Prince Zuko had fulfilled the terms of his banishment and was bringing the Avatar back to the Fire Nation.

Sokka fought back a yawn. Nothing to do now but let his broken rib heal and get ready to march right into the nest of the worst predators the world had ever produced. Maybe he'd go back to bed and get in a few hours of sleep. He needed his rest, after all, if his rib was going to mend itself back together. He ambled back into the Middle Pole, enjoying the sight of his people starting their day with all the chores they used to do before the Fire Nation forced them into that ghetto-

And as he came up on a particular tent, he saw Katara and Ty Lee stretching in the glow of the morning sun.

"Katara! You're okay!"

She looked over at his exclamation, and smiled as he ran over and wrapped her in a (gentle, so as not to irritate his broken rib) hug. The squeeze she gave him back was both strong and also mindful of his injury, just as a little sister's hug should be.

He put a hand on her head and said, "I knew you wouldn't down for long. You're stronger than any stupid city-sized abomination of unlife!"

"Thanks, Sokka. I can tell you really mean that." Katara let go of him, and threw a glance at her stretching partner. "Ty Lee, could you give us a minute?"

"Sure!"

"Thanks." Katara linked her arm into Sokka's and began leading him down the lane. "I can't take all the credit for myself. Ty Lee gave me a talk that really helped. And then Master Pakku came.

Sokka didn't like the sound of that. "Yeah, I recognize the name. He saved Mai from that Princess Azula, but he's one of the Northern Waterbenders who came with Zhao? Did you find out what their deal was?"

Katara shook her head. "We didn't talk about it. I just know that Master Pakku was an old friend of Gran-Gran's, before she left the Northern Water Tribe."

What?!! Gran-Gran wasn't born in the South? "I didn't know that! So we're half Northern? Or, wait, a quarter Northern? Does this mean we don't get to go ice-dodging someday?"

"Focus, Sokka. The point is that Master Pakku taught me a Waterbender meditation that really helped me. Master Hama was a good teacher, but Pakku showed how water is reflected in life and-"
Sokka stopped following her for a while after that, as she went into her Waterbending mumbo-jumbo. He knew there was something to it, especially if Pakku was good enough to impress even Mai with his fighting, but it wasn’t anything he ever expected to understand, or even work on him. There were lots of tricks for focusing the mind, and what Katara was talking about was the kind of thing for less rational thought processes.

When she finished, he said, "So you picked up a few tricks, then? That's good. That will help when we go with Aang. I have a feeling we're going to need every trick in the book, and a few others that the guys who wrote the books left out so that they'd have some surprises for all the people who read the books."

Katara was conspicuously quiet. They came to the end of the village, and she stopped walking and turned so that she was facing Sokka directly. "I'm not going to the Fire Nation with you guys."

Sokka wasn't even disappointed. "I understand. It's going to be dangerous, and honestly, I think it's good if you stay with Gran-Gran and help with the relocation. King Toph says she has some backup ideas for new hideouts, and-"

"No, I mean there's something else I need to do. Gran-Gran and I convinced Pakku to take me with him when he leaves, so that he can train me."

Sokka saw the hard look in his sister's eyes, and so clamped down on the outraged cry he wanted to unleash. "Okay, so, um, have you thought this through? Those guys are working for the Fire Nation-"

"For the same Prince who Aang is making a deal with to end the war!"

"-and we don't really know anything about what's going on at the North Pole-"

"And this will be a good way to find out!"

"-and this could be very dangerous-"

"So is marching into the Fire Nation to overthrow the Fire Lord!"

"-and I don't like the idea of you being all by yourself with no backup."

Katara opened her mouth to retort, but then closed it again, finally yielding to Sokka's wisdom. And then Ty Lee's voice came out of nowhere with, "I can go with her!"

Sokka spun to find the Fire Nation acrobat standing behind him.

Katara groaned. "I said I needed a minute with my brother!"

"Yeah, and we took a break from stretching for a minute so you two could talk." Ty Lee frowned. "Wait, did you mean you wanted a minute alone? Sorry! But anyway, I can come with you on your training mission and look out for you!"

Sokka shook his head. "But Mai was expecting you to go to the Fire Nation with her!"

Ty Lee practically wilted. "Yeah, um, I heard about that thing with Azula on Zhao's ship. Azula doesn't know I'm alive, and as much as I want to support Mai, I think it's better for both of us if Azula doesn't find out about me."

Katara grabbed Sokka's right hand in her both of hers. "It's not a bad idea! I want to go train so that I
can help you guys! I can't be everything you need if I'm not a proper Waterbender, but I think Pakku can help that. When I'm ready to come back and help, Ty Lee the dangerous Weapon of the Fire Nation will be there with me, right?"

"Right! I love coming back and helping people!" Ty Lee grabbed Sokka's other hand in hers and held up near her heart.

Sokka shut his eyes against the twin pairs of glistening eyes beseeching him. He hated it when people had rational answers to his objections, and the fact that Ty Lee was one of the deadliest warriors in the world didn't exactly leave him much of an argument to stand on. "The group is breaking up, isn't it?"

"Only for a little bit," Katara said. "We're not losing each other again. We're just going where we need to."

"Hn." Sokka sighed. "Ty Lee, could let go of my hand, please?"

"Oh, sure."

Freed, Sokka pulled his sister in for another hug. "Show them how strong we are in the South, okay?"

"Only if you show the Fire Nation how strong the rest of the world is."

"Of course!" Sokka could only hope that the demonstration wouldn't come from the Fire Nation figuring out what it took to finally destroy all of its enemies once and for all.

But then, he liked to consider all the possibilities.

**TO BE CONTINUED**

Chapter End Notes

**Warning:** Some of the comments contain spoilers for future chapters. Read at your own risk.
Chapter Summary

Mai and Zuko go home. Everybody else in the entire world finds this very, very troubling.

Homecoming

Mai had abandoned the color red, had forsaken status and power and in-fighting and boredom and the life she had known. She had become what her friends, what Aang and Sokka and Katara, wanted her to be. She had tried to transform into someone they could like, because she had chosen to make them her whole world.

She should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.

Mai had spent much of the voyage to the Fire Nation in her cabin, of course, letting the thrum of the ship's engine ward against sea sickness. It was a much better voyage than her last, but then, this time she wasn't planning on betraying anyone when she got to her destination. Also, there was no Jet to attack, accuse, and generally harass her. That was doing wonders for her stomach, it turned out.

On the other hand, the fact that Jet had disappeared sometime during the preparations for the journey to the Fire Nation probably wasn't a good sign.

Aang had officially surrendered to Zuko and accepted Iroh's plan weeks ago, prompting a flurry of activity for everyone as they prepared to subvert the government of the most powerful nation on the planet and also guard against possible betrayal. King Toph had overseen the relocation of her rebellion to somewhere that Iroh (hopefully) wouldn't know about. In her spare time, Toph also tried to assemble a properly kingly wardrobe so that she would actually look like royalty when she arrived in the Fire Nation. Mai, naturally, got hijacked into helping with that and wound up giving up most of her own current wardrobe, or at least the nicer bits, to turn into green robes and capes that would flow over the smaller girl. It might not have passed as the height of fashion in Ba Sing Se, but the city was now ash, and anyway Toph liked keeping a bit of roughness in her look.

Mai, for her own part, had been gifted with a brand new wardrobe of red and black silks, along with a fresh supply of the finest Yu Dao blades, by Prince Iroh care of Commander Zhao. The explanation for the gift was that she needed to look like a true Weapon of the Fire Nation when standing at Aang's side, and she knew it was true. When she was alone, she sometimes ran a hand over the new clothes and just looked at them. She had been wearing green since she betrayed Zuko and sided with Aang on Crescent Island. Was the restoration of her old colors just artifice, or symbolic of something within her?

Thinking about such a stupid thing distracted her from her sea-sickness, in any event.

With her arrival in the Fire Nation imminent, it was time to once again embrace the colors of blood and night.

She started with the blades, of course, strapping a full set to her skin. She didn't know if it was any more likely for a betrayal to happen today than other time, but polite society in the Fire Nation
expected warriors to be fully armed, so it was a fashionable as well as practical choice. Then came the clothes, fine silks that would be more breathable in the Fire Nation’s heat and humidity than the more roughly spun clothes of the Earth Kingdom peasantry. As she dressed, Mai couldn’t help brushing her fingers over the burn scar on the right side of her abdomen, a little reminder of what she had been, what she chose to become, and that Zhao packed a mean fireball.

Then, for the first time since the discovery of the new Airbenders, Mai also chose to do her hair up in her old style, with the twin tails and ox-horn buns. As she worked, though, she realized that she had let her hair grow longer than usual. Trimming it wouldn't be hard for her, not even with a razor disc in her off hand, but she hesitated. Maybe it was time to do something a bit more grown-up.

Mai repurposed a few of her needles, using them to create an intricate bun that hung tightly from the back of her head. A waterfall of hair was left to hang from the bun down to the middle of her back. In front, she braided a series of thin tails to frame her face in wisps that would catch the wind. One loose swatch of hair was left to hang down the middle as though it had escaped its original place, as diagonal and sharp as an assassin's knife, stopping just short of her eyes for what she hoped would be a dangerous look.

Mai couldn't help but wonder what her mother would think, if Mother was even still alive.

Well, time to find out.

Moving slowly so as not to risk her stomach with the ship’s bobbing, she made her way up to the main deck.

Mai had forgotten the name of the scrounged vessel that was taking her back home. No one wanted to sail with Zhao, but Toph had a solution. The Southern Water Tribe refugees had escaped the South Pole in a cargo ship stolen from the Fire Nation, and they had managed to crew it far enough to get to the Earth Kingdom. Bato eventually found a not-entirely-legitimate 'merchant' who could use such a thing, and so a trade was made for something smaller and more innocuous. Mai had recognized it as a kind of civilian steamer designed in the Earth Kingdom. The Water Tribe refugees still had the ship when they joined up with Toph's group, and the self-proclaimed Earth King had hidden it near Full Moon Bay for future use.

Mai had to admit that it made for nicer travel than a Fire Nation warship. Not as much rusty metal, for one.

She emerged onto the main deck into the light of the sun and immediately had to stop, shut her eyes, and grip the nearest railing while the ship bobbed on that stupid, annoying ocean someone had decided to put between the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom. When she decided that she wasn’t going to throw up, she opened her eyes again and found her friends gathered up at the ship's prow.

The most noticeable, of course, was Appa. The sky bison lowed happily when he saw her, and Mai gave the big guy an acknowledging wave. She hadn't seen him much over the course of the voyage, having spent most of it in her cabin cursing the tides. He seemed in good health and spirits now, but he still hadn’t flown since the battle against the ash monster at Ba Sing Se. Aang had thought it best to let Appa rest, after all the exertion of that event. Mai had been told that the big guy was struck by Azula's lightning just she had needed his help to save Aang from the ash monster, and so after a quick round of bison-sized acupuncture they had flown to the rescue. It had been a terrible strain on Appa, and even a parting healing session from Katara had merely gotten the bison on track to healing, not fully fixed his internal energies.

Hopefully, they wouldn't need a quick escape from a Fire Nation ambush any time soon.
Mai stopped just short of the reach of Appa's tongue, and realized that her other friends were unusually silent. She turned to find Aang staring at her with his jaw hanging open. "Um, you okay?"

Aang's face went red and he snapped his mouth shut.

Sokka was smirking at Aang, but Mai noticed that his eyes kept snapping over to her face. "So, you dolled yourself up for the homecoming?"

"Oh, this?" Mai brushed at the fringe of hair over her eyes and shook her head so that the tails would float on the breeze. Aang cleared his throat and even Sokka watched her carefully. So this was what it was like to be Ty Lee! "If I'm going to be executed for treason, it won't be while I'm looking like an elephant-rat fresh from the gutter. What do you think, Aang?"

It was a little mean, she knew, but his face was so red!

Besides, he probably needed to learn not to get flustered like this if he was going to convince the Fire Nation to overthrow its lord.

"You're amazing," Aang breathed, and Mai felt her own cheeks warm. There was no denying that he meant it, not with so much feeling in his voice. She had expected him to stammer and say something about her looking 'nice.' Someday she'd have to look into how to deal with this Genuine Emotion business.

For his part, Aang was no slouch, either. Instead of his usual Air Nomad duds, he was resplendent in a golden robe, another piece supplied by Prince Iroh. She looked Aang up and down, confirming that he wasn't rumpled at all for his big Fire Nation debut, and said, "Thanks." Determined to win this exchange, she reached out and brushed the fingers of her right hand over his smooth, shaved head. "You're looking pretty grown up, yourself."

Aang's back went rigid, and Sokka laughed. It was fun being Ty Lee! Mai would have to try it more often, if she survived the day's events.

A quick glance confirmed that Sokka hadn't managed to wrinkle his new clothes yet. His tribe-mates in Full Moon Bay had joined together and worked hard to sew him a wardrobe fit for an ambassador before they had to leave, and hadn't done a bad job, if you liked blue and beads. At least they hadn't given him anything with fur to wear in the Fire Nation heat.

Together, the three of them were very pretty revolutionaries, all dressed up and ready to overthrow a tyrant.

That's when Momo came in for a landing on the front of Mai's robes and stuck one of her hair-tails in his mouth. "Momo, no, that's not food!"

At least it got Aang laughing.

They watched from the prow as their ship approached Zenmatsu Island. Zhao's flagship was visible ahead of them, and Mai's sharp eyes detected another pair of observers on that deck. It was hard to tell, but judging from the heights, it might have been a certain Fire Prince and his 'bodyguard.'

Zuko couldn't take his good eye off the sight of Zenmatsu Island steadily growing larger on the horizon, even when Suki came up to join him on the deck. "I'm finally going home."

Only Suki could have understood what he was really saying. She put a hand on his shoulder, drawing his gaze, and said, "Are you feeling up to this?" She had no official status, despite serving as his bodyguard, and so was given a uniform to forestall any questions. She had passed on a full set of armor, instead taking the guise of a marine light scout, although without any insignia of rank or
allegiance. Her auburn hair was a good compliment to the dark reds of the uniform, but her blue eyes were a startling contrast. "I can sneak into the engine room and sabotage something if you want some more time?"

She was probably joking, but Zuko was still tempted to take her up on the offer.

There hadn't been time for worrying up to now. Things had been so busy since he 'captured' the Avatar. Zhao had provided, with Uncle's supervision, everything Zuko had needed, including a new set of royal gold-trimmed armor, but that didn't make it a trustworthy situation. Zuko had double-checked everything, even the clothes. He wouldn't put it past Zhao to order a thread pulled so that he lost a sleeve at a critical moment. He had also redoubled his training, having put aside his routine during the height of the Avatar Chase.

Zuko was acting paranoid, yes, but the was sure Azula would approve. He was being sent to help overthrow the Fire Lord, to work against his own family. That danger alone merited the most extreme caution, never mind what it said about the nature of the Fire Nation itself. If even Zuko could be turned against his own Grandfather, who could be turned against Zuko?

But training was all his efforts had proved to be so far. There had been no double-cross, and now he was about to return to the Fire Nation once again.

Zhao hadn't started the voyage until confirmation of his report about the Avatar's surrender was transmitted and provisional permission was given for Zuko to bring the prize back for verification. That permission was enough for the blockade around Fire Nation waters, still in place since Crescent Island's destruction, to permit Zuko entry.

Now it was time to see what the reaction would be on the soil of the Fire Nation itself.

As Zuko stared at the island, now so close, he heard footsteps on the deck behind him. "It won't be long now, Prince Zuko," Zhao's voice came. "The dock we'll be using belongs to the local Governor. There's a Navy base on this island as well, meant to resupply any of our ships that just made the crossing from the Colonial Continent, along with quite a few civilian ports, but we've been directed to bypass all of that. We're to be received in style, it seems."

Zuko wondered if that was meant to be a warning of some kind. Zenmatsu Island was one of the most eastern of the inhabited Outer Islands that formed the tail of the chain trailing Capital Island. He didn't know the governor or even much about the island other than its place on a map. He presumed that it contained mostly peasantry and the kind of light industry they were responsible for operating across the Fire Nation. Maybe it was simply the governor's duty by default to confirm Zuko's capture of the Avatar.

"Don't worry," Zhao said as he turned and marched back towards the command tower. "I plan to satisfy your esteemed uncle, and that means keeping you alive."

"See that it does, Zhao." But of course the man wasn't listening.

Suki poked Zuko in the side. "I'll be looking out for you, too. Just remember, you have to get through this to get what you really want. And you can do it."

It was a good reminder. Yes, Zuko wanted to go home again, to once again live in the heat of the sunlight in the Fire Nation, but that wasn't what had kept him alive through those years of crawling across the Earth Kingdom. 'Home' wasn't just the Fire Nation. It was the Capital, and the palace. It was the people who had once been his family.
It was Father.

Would Father be there, waiting for Zuko's arrival?

Zuko remained at the prow as the ship came in close to Zenmatsu Island, Suki at his side. It seemed to be a large, lush island from the view of its coasts, although more given to cliffs than beaches. Several large, solitary peaks rose up in the distance, emerging from what seemed to be tropical forests that sprawled over changing elevations. He watched as they passed the Navy base, as well as the civilian ports that seemed to give life to lively settlements. He didn't see any of the smoke that usually heralded the larger factories, so perhaps this was a more rural island.

However, there was nothing rural about their destination right now. The governor's mansion was built to overlook the island's largest port-city. A larger bay was given over to public docks, but the mansion itself was set on a smaller, artificially round bay where a private port was kept behind a manned gate. Zuko was able to observe it all up close as Zhao's ship steamed into the larger bay and then kept going into the smaller one as the gate opened before them.

When a tug came out to pull the ship up to the governor's dock, Zuko finally left his place and got ready to disembark. He supposed it must have taken some time for it all to happen, with the Avatar's ship having to be tugged into place as well, but time didn't seem to gain a hold on him. He thought about all the fanfare that had been assembled when he left to lay siege to Ba Sing Se, and how it had been a bright and humid day just like this one. He made himself go through a breathing exercise, but was startled out of it when Suki grabbed his right hand in both of hers.

"This is real," she said. Her blue eyes were intense as she commanded his one-eyed gaze. "You're coming home because you were strong and wise enough to make it happen. None of this would have happened if you hadn't survived things that would have killed most people, and made the right choices when it really mattered."

Well, he supposed that was one way to look at it. A way he liked, to be honest.

He kept that in mind as a wind brought the Avatar flying over on his glider. Aang landed beside Zuko and smoothed his golden robes. "Ready?"

Zuko nodded. He put his hands on the Avatar's shoulders, and guided the boy down the gangplank. And, in doing so, he set foot back in the Fire Nation proper- not an outpost or prison but a real island where people lived- for the first time in years. Perhaps he imagined the jolt of energy that ran up through his body as soon as his foot came down on the platform, a jolt that fed his Inner Fire and made his blood sing in his veins.

It was only when the jolt faded that Zuko could focus his eyes on the gathering in front of him, of the men and women wearing fine robes, of the soldiers standing in honor formation around the gathering.

One old man stepped forward. "Prince Zuko. Have you brought the Avatar to us, by your own hand?"

Zuko squared his shoulders, feeling the weight of the armor on his body. "I have."

The old man looked to Aang.

"That's me!" The kid raised a hand and waved, giving life to a breeze that tousled the old man's beard.

The man did not react. He looked back to Zuko and bowed at the waist. "Then, as was appointed to
me by order of the Fire Lord, I officially confirm the fulfillment of the terms of your banishment. *Welcome home, your highness.*

Zuko had to shut his eye, lest the tears escape.

Uh, oh. Aang didn't realize Zuko was going to *cry*. To deflect attention away from the prince, he said to the straightening old man, "So, I'm Aang! Pleased to me you!"

"Likewise, Avatar. I am Lord Zhao, the facilitator for this little gathering." He motioned to the people standing behind him. "I formerly served as-

"Wait," Aang interrupted, "Lord Zhao, as in-

"Hello, Father." Commander Zhao had come down the gangplank, and his voice seemed like it was coming from straight behind Aang. "I must say, you're leading a very active retirement."

Fortunately, Aang was able to keep himself from jumping in surprise. It tended to intimidate people when Airbenders startled by leaping clear into the sky. "Ah, so you guys are related. That's, um, great?"

"Thank you, young Avatar." Lord Zhao offered a bland kind of smile, and then looked back to the younger Zhao. "I'm pleased to see you survived your visit to the Capital, my son. There was any number of worrying rumors going around. When I heard of your successful mission to aid Prince Zuko, I knew I had to come see you and offer my congratulations. Fortunately, the Fire Palace needed a respected representative to verify the claims and organize this little gathering." He looked back to Aang. "For now, Avatar, I've arranged a proper welcome for you. Afterward, you can settle into your guest quarters in Governor Hige's estate, and then there will be a dinner reception where you can tell your story and properly get to know everyone. For now-

"For now," Aang took over, "a respectful exchange of names and exhibition of the Fire Nation's strength is enough. I've experienced a Fire Nation welcome ceremony before."

"Excellent! Then let's proceed." Lord Zhao stepped away and motioned to the soldiers who had been standing in formation around the gathering. They all wore Firebender armor, and as one, they snapped fists into the air and created a canopy of flame.

Lord Zhao called out above the roaring of the fire, "The Homeland welcomes Avatar Aang and Prince Zuko. Let us receive them with honor!"

Somewhere behind the soldiers, banners were raised bearing the sigil of the Fire Nation, and a group of singers began a chant that Aang recognized as an ancient military song about the final battle between the Agni Warrior and the Dragon Empire. When the chanting reached a crescendo, the fire roared almost in tune with the voices, and then both the song and flames faded at the same moment. The fires didn't entirely dissipate, though, merely settling down as floating globes above each soldier's fist.

At that point, the first of the nobles stepped forward. He came up to Aang and Zuko and bowed at the waist. "Avatar! And my Prince, I offer you hospitality. I am Governor Hige, and as long as you are my guests, everything that I own is yours! May the Fire Nation's power last ten thousand years!"

Aang recognized the basic sentiment from the time when Monk Gyatso first brought him to the Fire Nation and he made friends with a boy named Kuzon, but one of the words of the greeting had changed. Last time, the speaker had said, "May the Fire Nation's *people* last ten thousand years!"
Nevertheless, Aang and Zuko both bowed to the man.

It took a while to get through the whole line of people, each one offering an introduction and some sentiment of welcome. Aang did his best to memorize all the names and hoped he wouldn't be quizzed on them later.

The last three people in the line weren't like the others. There was a young man and a young woman, and an old lady behind them. The man wore a poncho that hid his arms, and seemed to Aang to be especially light on his feet as he approached. The younger woman wore a fitted tunic as black as her dull hanging hair, and Aang spotted a number of sheathed long knives and small swords strapped over her body; there wasn't as many blades as Mai wore, but these weren't for throwing. Probably.

The old lady was the most normal, with her silver hair wrapped high atop her head and held in place with thick white pins, wearing fine robes that would have fit in with the rest of the gathering if it wasn't for the large maroon blindfold tied over her eyes and nose. In the very center of the blindfold, there was a symbol painted in gold- the character for 'Dragon.'

Obviously, these three were warriors.

Before any of them could get close, Aang's view was suddenly blocked by what turned out to be Mai. She must have disembarked from King Toph's ship during the ceremony. Her body was tense, and she had allowed her sleeves to fully cover her hands in what Aang had learned was a sign she was clutching weapons.

The three warriors all stopped, but showed no sign of being offended or even disconcerted.

"Lady Caldera Yu Mai," the old woman said with a nod. "I'd recognize those cold veins anywhere. Please, introduce us to your charges. Then we have a bit of business to take care of. Non-violent business."

Mai glanced back at Aang, and although her face was blank, he thought he could see some real tenseness around her eyes. Still, she stepped aside just enough to restore Aang's view of the warriors. "Aang, Zuko, these are my colleagues. The man is Bangfei, ninety-point practitioner of Dim Mak. Next to him is Heiyaoshi, a Blademaster of Kilauea. And last is Lady Caldera Yu Gerel, known by the title 'The Seeing Dragon.' They are highly respected within the Fire Nation."

Aang wasn't sure what that meant, but thankfully, Zuko seemed to have a tendency to blurt things out loud, and said, "They're Weapons."

Oh.

Oh.

No wonder Mai was worried about them.

Aang bowed his head to them. "You three must be very accomplished. I greet you in peace."

Zuko gave his own silent nod.

The Weapons all bowed. Lady Gerel smiled beneath her blindfold. "Your blood runs warm, Avatar. I hope our weather agrees with you. Bangfei, say what you need to say. Everyone is waiting for us."

The man, Bangfei, turned to Mai and clasped his hands in front of him. "Lady Mai, I know I am very late with this, but I wanted to express my sympathies for the loss of Lady Ty Lee. Business kept me away from the Capital for a while, and then you had gone to the South Pole, but I always carried the
loss in the fires of my heart and know you must still feel the same pain. Ty Lee was such a special
girl. Truly, the world is a darker place without her. Please, if there's anything I can ever do to help
you in her memory, don't hesitate to tell me. I am at your service." He bowed from the waist again,
going low enough to demonstrate considerable flexibility, and held it for a long moment.

Zuko blurted out, "Wait, Ty Lee is dead? No one told me!"

Aang caught Mai glancing at him. Ty Lee wasn't dead, having instead become an Airbender and
helping Aang just before the battle at Ba Sing Se. She was now accompanying Katara on her
journey with the Northern Waterbender Master, Pakku. Ty Lee had asked everyone to keep her
survival a secret from Zuko and his sister Azula, out of fear of what they would do to her.

Bangfei turned a glare on Zuko that even gave Aang a chill, but then the Weapon relaxed. "She
mourned for your banishment, Prince Zuko. Her heart was so very warm, that way. I'm sure it would
have delighted her to hear of your restoration." Then he moved to return to the rest of the gathering,
Heiyaoshi falling into step behind him.

Lady Gerel did not depart with the other two. She turned her head in Mai's direction as though she
could see through the blindfold. "Your family is alive in the Capital, and under Piandao's protection.
Whatever this business was, you have safely come out of it. With luck, what comes next will not
require escalated involvement."

Aang finally saw Mai relax as she said, "Thank you. I, too, would like to avoid escalation."

Lady Gerel nodded and turned to go. Despite the blindfold, she did not seem to have any trouble
making her own way back to the rest of the assembly.

Aang suppressed a shudder. "What was that about?"

It was Zuko who answered first with, "Lady Gerel was saying that she hopes she and the other
Weapons won't have to fight anyone over what we're doing. But it was also a warning that she and
the others are here in their official capacity as Weapons and might be ordered to act. Other Weapons
are probably being recalled and placed on stand-by, too."

Mai brought her hands together within her sleeves. "Pretty much. The Fire Lord might even take
back the Weapons whose service he'd gifted to other people. Like how Piandao works for Prince
Ozai, Zuko's father, so he's the one really protecting my family. If Ozai changes his mind about me,
or the Fire Lord takes back Piandao's service, then my family is in danger from the most deadly
Weapon of them all."

Zuko started to say, "My father wouldn't-"

He let the rest of the thought die on his tongue.

Aang didn't need an explanation for what that meant. "And that bit with Bangfei talking about your
friend Ty Lee?"

Mai snorted. "Oh, he was hot for her since he first noticed girls. I heard that when he got the news of
her death, he mourned her by painting a life-size full-body portrait. Ty Lee never really liked him,
though. They both fought with the Dim Mak style, and she disagreed with his particular use of it."

"I can't believe Ty Lee is gone," Zuko said. "How did it happen?"

Aang wasn't sure how to reply.
Mai, of course, kept her face blank under Zuko's questioning gaze. "I'll tell you later. It looks like the Zhao family is coming back."

Aang looked, and sure enough, Lord Zhao and Commander Zhao were both approaching. The older man smiled when he reached them and said, "Well, I'm sure you were properly honored by everyone's attentions. Come, Governor Hige's mansion awaits us, and I'm sure you're eager to rest after your journey and standing around in this heat."

Aang shrugged. "Oh, Airbenders can regulate our own body temperatures with our breathing, so I'm fine. But I bet my friends will be glad to get off the ship and relax, like you said. Is there enough room for my sky bison Appa? He's pretty big and eats a lot, but he'll be well behaved in any stable as long as it's nice and roomy."

Aang was a bit worried about how long it took Lord Zhao to say something. "Your what?"

The younger Zhao snickered. "That's what I said. The Avatar has a sky bison, Father, and I suppose it's your duty to organize his accommodations."

The news spread. A network of metal wires that spanned the whole world, built with patience and ingenuity by the Fire Nation to spread its word across the lands it had stolen and subjugated, blazed with electric life. Across the globe, one message was given over-riding priority and passed from station to station to echo far and wide:

"AVATAR MET. ZUKO CONFIRMED."

Those four simple words heralded a major shift in the fate of the world. Some people read them and simply shrugged, thinking it just another development in Fire Nation politics, nothing that would make a difference to the common soldier. After all, weren't the royals always competing and enacting all kinds of drama? Prince Zuko's banishment hadn't affected anything important, and while the Avatar's return was certainly a bit of a game-changer, his playing politics with some young prince was hardly anything compared to the destruction of a volcano island.

Wiser minds understood, however, that major changes usually start as more innocuous maneuvers. Even something simple can have a major impact, if it occurs in the right place.

The news was that the Avatar had come to the Fire Nation and changed the dynamic of the family that currently ran the entire world.

And that news was received with the most trepidation by the Fire Palace itself.

At one time, the most important room in the palace- the figurative center of the entire world- had been the throne room. It had been there that the Fire Lords, first Sozin and then his son Azulon, held court and issued the commands that fueled the Fire Nation's war of conquest. Now, however, the throne room was dark and cold. The 'Burning Throne' was no longer lit with even the weakest flame; that was now a mere act of theater reserved for increasingly rare public spectacle. The Fire Lord currently spent most of his time in his private rooms, and his court had shrunk appropriately.

In fact, his 'court' was now limited to two people.

The old sisters Li and Lo received the wired news of Zuko's confirmation in their office. At one point, the office had been Fire Lord Azulon's receiving parlor, but he had retreated into the back rooms of his apartment years ago, and Li and Lo had converted the parlor to be their watch-house. No one could see the Fire Lord without passing through their domain.
Li put down the paper that had been carried straight from the communication hub. "So Prince Zuko indeed made good on his claim."

Lo picked the paper up, gazing at the words that she didn't really need to read. "But the question remains as to his true aim."

Li retrieved a blank form from the office's cabinet and brought it over to her desk. She kneeled over it, spread the paper out flat, and began filling it in with deft strokes of an inked brush. "That alone strengthens Ozai considerably, and if has truly forged an alliance with the Avatar, there will be no denying his will in the Homeland."

Lo kneeled on the other side of the desk, confirming her sister's work. "Yet I still cannot see Ozai's true purpose. He hides in his rooms and shows his face only when called. If he has any great plan, it is built on a foundation of sand."

"And then, of course, there is the matter of Iroh."

"Whether he has any involvement is something we cannot know."

The two sisters met each other's eyes. When they spoke again, it was only to confirm the decisions they had already made.

Li said, "We will play for the factors that neither Prince has yet won."

Lo said, "The Fire Sages and the peasantry give support only to Azulon."

"Favor will be shown to the Sages, giving them influence long lost to Iroh in a past political game."

"And further pressure will be placed on the people so that Azulon is the sole recognized royal name."

"And our Weapon at the site," they intoned simultaneously, "will continue with our plan."

The sisters nodded and rose up as one. Together, they brought the form into the private rooms of Fire Lord Azulon.

As expected, they found him propped up in his bed, staring at nothing.

"Fire Lord," the sister said.

Azulon blinked once, and then again. His eyes searched the opulent surroundings, not focusing until he found Li and Lo standing in the bedroom's doorway. He stared until he recognized them, and then sat up a little straighter. As old and weak as he might be, the sisters knew that it wasn't in his character to show weakness even in front of his most trusted agents.

And trusted agents they were. Through sheer dint of longevity, they were his most loyal servants, making his will into fact and protecting him from those with the gall to actually try to siphon power from their Fire Lord.

"My clever ones," Azulon mumbled. That was what he called them. It was possible he had forgotten their names, and they knew for a fact that he always had trouble telling them apart, but Li and Lo were satisfied with the title. In their youth they had commanded beauty that made them famous across the whole Homeland, as adults they became feared as a fighting duo who could defeat almost any opponent. (Had the title existed back then, they might have been made Weapons of the Fire Nation.) As their backs bent and their skin wrinkled, they had shifted their domain into the realm of
politics, strengthening Azulon's influence at a time when his mind and body began weakening.

Whether they used kisses, weapons, money, law, blackmail, or whispers in the right places, the consistent source of the sisters' success was their capacity for strategy and analysis. Clever ones, indeed.

There were only two minds Li and Lo feared as rivals, but Prince Iroh had holed himself up at the North Pole and Princess Azula would never see beyond her father's pettiness.

Li slipped the form she had just filled out on the tray in front of Azulon. "This just needs your mark, my lord. The end of Prince Zuko's banishment has been confirmed and requires your final approval."

Lo stepped up to the other side of Azulon's bed. "And as thanks to the Way of the Flame for strengthening and restoring a member of the Royal Family, we have prepared an edict to grant new land and funds to the Fire Sages, with which they will build glorious temples worthy of your greatness."

"Greatness," Azulon mumbled, staring blankly at the paper in front of him.

Li edged closer to him. "You are wise to strengthen the Fire Sages at this time, Fire Lord. The people should show their appreciation for your wisdom."

Lo brought her voice down to a whisper. "This edict will also create a new monthly celebration. On Azulon Day, all citizens will be required to take time off from work to visit a Fire Temple, make an offering to the flames, and meditate on your wisdom."

"Hail Fire Lord Azulon," the sisters hissed together.

Azulon continued staring at the paper. Li put an inked brush into his right hand, and Lo guided it to the proper place on the form.

"Zuko." Azulon's voice rose in volume as he said his grandson's name. "Zuko came back? It was- a sorrow- what happened. Sent him away- to hide- Ozai's shame." The Fire Lord blinked. "Zuko is back? Good." His hand moved, and he made a sloppy mark at the bottom of the form.

"Excellent, my lord," Li said. "We will have this put into effect at once."

"All hail Fire Lord Azulon," Lo added.

Azulon smiled as his eyes lost focus once more.

Princess Azula, namesake of the Fire Lord, had not even changed out of her sleeveless training tunic before going to see her father.

There was no practical reason for her choice. The delay required for her to change and wipe her face would have been minimal, but it was a delay she had decided there was no need to tolerate. The news she was delivering might be the key that prompted Father to share his latest wisdom.

Azula was always eager to receive her father's wisdom.

As always, she paused before the guarded door of the suite and waited while one of the ex-soldiers announced her presence with a knock on the door. She always tolerated the procedure, but today it only added to her anxiety. Nevertheless, she kept firm control of her impatience and made sure she showed no sign of anything but the utmost respect.
The door opened, and Father appeared before her, as delighted as ever to find her waiting for him. "Azula! Did you cut your training short to come see me?" He led the way into his rooms.

"It was no trouble, Father." Technically, she had indeed cut her training session off for this visit, but that was only because she had spent the last weeks doing nothing but training while she waited for something to happen. It had taken a week to oversee Zhao's initial report about the Avatar's 'capture' and then get back to the palace to give a direct accounting to Father.

Father, understandably, needed time to consider the news. Time that had now stretched to over a week.

It wasn't that Azula was being critical of her father. She would never do such a thing! But he had been so happy when she told him of Zuko's imminent return- he had pulled her into his arms and told her what a perfect daughter and sister she was. Father had said how proud he was of her, surviving everything she did and working so hard to keep Zuko safe.

Azula had scarcely known how to respond. She could only state her thanks for the praise over and over, and she didn't stop smiling the whole time.

Father always praised her successes, of course, but since Zuko's banishment, his acknowledgements had become so intense. Azula still hadn't quite learned how to deal with it, even after all these years. It wasn't at all like dealing with Ty Lee's shallow enthusiasm.

As they passed into the parlor, Father said, "Would you like something to drink? It's important to take care of yourself with how hard you work."

"I'm fine, Father. I bring news of Zuko. He successfully arrived on Zenmatsu Island, and Grandfather acknowledged the end of the banishment along with two concerning riders." She described the gift of land and money to the Fire Sages, as well as the establishment of Azulon Day. "Does that affect our plans?"

She watched as Father leaned back in his seat and pondered the news.

She watched as Father's expression grew concerned.

That, too, was something new since Zuko's banishment. Before, Father was not given to displays of the weaker emotions. He would show pleasure and amusement, disgust and anger, but never sadness or worry. Yet, when Azula had recounted her adventures in the Colonial Continent with Zuko and Suki, of what had happened on Crescent Island and in the Ba Sing Se ashland, she had seen his face blanch and contort in fear.

Fear for his children.

She didn't know what to think of that, didn't know how to reconcile the strength she knew her father had with such unguarded displays.

She didn't know how to feel that he cared so much, felt so deeply for her that having her safe in front of him was no balm against stories of past dangers.

Fortunately, Father finally spoke and spared Azula from her own thoughts: "I'm so happy about Zuko's return, but I'm very concerned about what has brought it about. Iroh is playing a game of some kind, and now your grandfather is pushing back against him. That's what this business with the Sages is about."

Azula leaned forward. Were they going to get involved as a third faction?
Father continued, "I would be content to let them tear each other apart, but Iroh saw fit to drag Zuko into things. Neither he nor Azulon will show any sense of boundaries as their conflict escalates."

Azula nodded. "What do you want me to do? I am yours to command."

Father blinked. "Command? No, Azula, I respect you enough to let you decide your own actions. However, if you would be so kind, there are some ways in which I could use your help. You, and our other servants..."

Sokka couldn't say he was crazy about hanging out in the Fire Nation, relying only on a promise of safety from a bunch of people who cheered for world domination, but he had to admit that the rooms in Governor Hige's mansion were pretty nice.

Aang's whole party- Mai and Toph's crew and Zuko and Suki- had all been given apartments that opened out into a shared atrium open to the summer sky. The whole complex was light and spacious with big open windows and more pillows than anyone on this planet had any right to. The atrium was even big enough for Appa to stay there, sparing Zhao the Older further work, and had a large fountain in the center where Momo was currently trying to catch the decorative fish.

Clearly, it was an evil trap to get them all to lower their guard.

"So there are three one-person armies hanging around watching us," Sokka summarized, Aang having just finished his account of meeting the Weapons. He was sprawled on a piece of furniture in Aang's quarters that he suspected was a divan, with Aang and Mai and Toph all standing around him. "Speaking of watching, I bet there are spy holes all over these rooms."

Toph went, "Hmmm." She stomped a foot against the ground and tilted her head from side to side. "There are passages between the walls where people could listen, but there's no one there, now. We should have any important discussions in the courtyard, or else get that lemur to practice its singing while you whisper."

Sokka was impressed; that was a good idea for using Momo. "See, King Toph knows what's up. Don't let these Fire Nation masterminds fool you. They're born evil."

Mai sighed. "Thanks. But except for that last part, you're not wrong. The good news, though, is that if they intended to bump us off no matter what, they wouldn't have revealed that there are other Weapons here. It's just a reminder to behave, and we don't even know from whom. Tonight at dinner, we should start feeling people out. Look to see who reacts to what, and listen for comments that aren't necessarily directed at you. In fact, we should probably do more listening than talking tonight in general. Except, of course, for our Avatar."

"Yeah," Aang said. "Lord Zhao said tonight I get to tell 'my story.' I guess that means everything that's led up to this point, except for the parts where Prince Iroh sent me here to convince everyone to overthrow the Fire Lord."

Sokka nodded and tried to sit up, and only almost fell off the divan. "Yeah, leave all the stuff about convincing people to commit treason for the third date."

Toph laughed at that, but no one else. She might be a bit pushy and had a little bit of a god-complex, but at least she had a good sense of humor.

With that, the little gathering broke up so that everyone could get ready for the dinner. Sokka headed back to his own rooms across the courtyard. As he passed the fountain, Momo held up one of the evil Fire Nation fish he had just caught- a fish that was probably a spy of some kind, come to think of
it- and Sokka waved his approval.

When he reached his rooms, he almost didn't notice Suki waiting for him. She was tucked on his own divan, just like he had been in Aang's apartment.

"Hi," she said.

Sokka stopped well short of her. She was no longer wearing that Fire Nation uniform, having changed into more casual clothes colored in neutral browns and golds, but he knew that all enemies didn't necessarily wear uniforms. "Hi, yourself."

She sat up off the divan much more gracefully than he himself had managed. "We haven't really had a chance to talk since Ba Sing Se. I was in 'protective custody' on Zhao's ship with Zuko, and-"

"Yeah," Sokka interrupted. "Apparently you've been doing a lot with Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation."

Suki nodded. "That's what I figured you'd want to talk about."

Sokka stepped fully into the room and leaned against one of the pillars. "Why me? Why not Aang or Mai?"

"I figured you'd be the one best able to understand. And honestly I've always kind of disliked Mai. She's a jerk."

Sokka shrugged. That much was true, at least. "And what is it that I'm supposed to understand? Because I'm not really sure there's a good explanation for a Kyoshi rebel to end up bodyguarding the Fire Nation prince who was trying to catch the Avatar."

"Really? I thought that would be the easiest part to get. I guess I should start by admitting that I was the double agent in the Kyoshi rebels."

Suki winced. He hadn't been expecting that. "So, it wasn't just Mai who- you-"

"Not quite. I didn't blow the operation to find your sister's records. And that's because I was also a triple agent keeping the Fire Nation from discovering anything of real use to them."

Sokka felt himself slump. It was going to be one of those stories.

Suki continued, "I got maneuvered into a corner and framed for something else by Zhao after you guys left, and playing along seemed like the best chance. It kept me alive and put me in a good position to sabotage what I could. I wound up working with Zuko after he was arrested by Zhao, too. And what better place for a servant of Kyoshi than next to the guy who was the biggest danger to the Avatar? I even convinced Zuko to help fight that monster at Ba Sing Se instead of attacking Aang."

Sokka had to admit that the logic held up. "So what are you still doing, playing his bodyguard and marching around in a Fire Nation uniform?"

Suki winced. "Yeah, that's the bit I expected to be difficult."

"And?"

"And would you believe that I'm- kind of- um, friends with Zuko?"

Sokka considered that. He didn't like the idea of Suki being friends with a Fire Nation prince, even if
they were allies for now. It felt like she was basically saying that she preferred Zuko to- to where she really belonged. "You know, Aang and Mai first ran into Zuko on Crescent Island. Where they were keeping my sister in a room so hot it burned all the moisture away. She looked half-mummified when I freed her. Zuko had been waiting there for us, and he attacked Aang. Hunted him and beat him up."

Suki stood up and put her hands on her hips. "Really? And how did Zuko know you were going to there?" She blinked an innocent, completely artificial manner.

Through gritted teeth, Sokka said, "Mai told him because she was working for the Fire Nation at the time. But you knew that."

Suki shrugged. "When I heard, it certainly didn't improve my opinion of her. But I did understand her. Lying, pretending to betray her old friends while planning to betray her new ones, constantly worrying that she'd just end up hurting everyone? I found myself relating."

"So you're saying you're Mai's- what, inverse? I'm not even sure if that's a good thing."

"No, because she betrayed Zuko, eventually. I haven't betrayed you or Aang. I won't let Zuko hurt you guys, either, because you're all my friends. And to demonstrate, I have a warning to pass on. Zuko's sister is the one you have to watch out for. She likes hurting people, and she's decided that Mai has to die for what she did at Crescent Island."

"And, what, Zuko was too busy to let his old friend know about that? Or is this his roundabout way of getting back at her?"

"I." Suki turned away. "I think he just can't deal with it." Then she raised her gaze again. "And I trust that letting you know is doing what he would really want. I do intend to tell him."

Sokka looked her in her big blue eyes. "It took me a while to forgive Mai."

"Yeah, I'd imagine."

"And it definitely changed how I think of her. Knowing that she's capable of doing those kinds of things, even if she wound up hurting herself and regretting it all."

Suki nodded, but there was no hiding the slump of her shoulders. "A liar is a difficult person to have as a friend."

"Yeah." Sokka sighed. "But I'm not picky about friends so long as they don't want to kill me. If you need any help with Zuko-"

"I know I can count on you. All of you." Suki held out a hand.

Sokka walked over and clasped his own hand over her wrist, and she gripped his in turn. By Water Tribe tradition, they were now bound by trust and friendship. "So let's make sure our buddies aren't poisoned tonight at dinner."

"I don't think the Fire Nation is very into poison."

"Have you tried their food? It's spicy enough to count."

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Katara awoke to the sound of a lazy bell.

She rolled out of the narrow bed and heard Ty Lee immediately spread out to cover the freed space, but the loss of territory was secondary to the sight outside the porthole on the opposite wall. The room was would have been spacious if not for the crates stuffed along the walls, but it had been a supply room before Master Pakku agreed to take on two female crew members. The rest of the crew, Fire Navy and Northern Waterbenders both (men all), were packed into their own long hammock-filled room, but Pakku's sexism at least made him quickly agree to give Katara and Ty Lee their own space.

They probably could have made two 'beds' out of the crates and tarps in the supply room, but neither girl trusted the lock on the door, and sharing a bed was an easy way to watch over each other while sleeping.

As Katara dodged around creates to get to the porthole, she had to admit that she also liked sleeping with Ty Lee. Having another warm body pressed against her was a gentle reminder that she wasn't still in a cage on Crescent Island. She hadn't woken up with any panic attacks since they started sharing. In fact, she was probably feeling the least amount of anxiety since the encounter with Aunt Wu.

Also, Ty Lee smelled like mountain peaches. That was nice.

But Katara still wore her hat when outside.

She looked through the porthole and her smile grew wider. Glowing with the light of the setting sun, the open ocean sprawled to the horizon.

The ship was finally on its way.

Which meant her proper training was about to begin!

Katara set about dressing and tying her hair while Ty Lee sat up in bed and yawned. Katara couldn't help saying, "What happened to that bright and peppy morning girl who was part of our group after we got you out of that sinkhole?"

Ty Lee gave a tired laugh. "She's bright and peppy when the sun is coming up and our natural energies are on the rise. Getting up like this when the sun is setting is weird."

Katara pulled her hair-loopies into place and grabbed her hat. "You could switch shifts, you know. It's okay."
Ty Lee hopped up and shook her head hard enough to send her loose hair flying. "No way! I came on this trip to watch over you and support you! I can't do that if I'm snoring and twisting and dreaming of pink elephant-rats on parade while you're out there hoisting anchors. Or whatever Pakku has you doing."

Katara had actually been doing quite a bit around the ship. Pakku’s ship— or, rather, Zhao’s ship that Pakku was in charge of— had left Toph's base at Full Moon Bay weeks ago and began making its way down the riverway across the Earth Kingdom. Pakku had directed his Waterbenders to aid the Fire Navy crew, and especially had kept Katara busy helping with all aspects of the ship's function. She had tied lines, tightened clamps in the engine room, swabbed the deck, fetched charts for the bridge crew, fried fish in the galley, and helped fix a bilge pump.

"You need to create a greater affinity for your element," Master Pakku had said, "and missed the life on the seas that is the legacy of our Tribes. I want to experience as much of crewing a ship as you can get before we reach the ocean."

Of course, this was a Fire Nation warship, and sometimes Katara's hands shook as she moved through the warm, metal, lamp-lit interior. The engine room especially reminded her of the prison on Crescent Island. While the metal ceilings cut off the view of the sky, she was not any more comfortable than she was flying on Appa.

That's why sleeping with Ty Lee was so helpful. Not waking up each morning expecting a cage around her was a great source of strength.

"Well," Katara said, "I really appreciate your being here. I know you probably would have preferred to be with Mai or the other Airbenders."

Ty Lee stepped over and pulled Katara in a hug. "I prefer to be where my aura is pinkest and I'm making a positive difference in the world." She pulled back and looked Katara right in the eyes. "My aura wouldn't be pink if I had to worry about Azula, and you're my friend. We didn't grow up together like I did with Mai, but you're still a friend and I love all my friends."

Katara could only giggle. She wasn't sure if she deserved that kind of devotion from someone she only knew for less than two months, or what to make of Ty Lee having grown up in the Fire Nation, but Ty Lee's cheer was all too contagious. "I- uh- thanks."

"Of course. Now, you go up and see Master Grumpy Pants. I'll be up for the next crew shift as soon as I have myself looking like a proper Mysterious Airbender Nun." Ty Lee winked and skipped over to where she kept her robes. Katara wasn’t sure why Ty Lee was playing up her Airbending instead of her Fire Nation upbringing, or even the circus background that she had seemed so proud of, but she had a feeling the explanation only made sense to Ty Lee.

"Yeah. Um, see you later!" Katara hurried off to her Waterbending lessons.

And it was great knowing that this room would be a safe place to return to at the end of the shift.

Katara made her way with familiarity up to the main deck, where the next shift would start. She found herself moving through the halls of the ship along with other Waterbenders, all part of Master Pakku's crew from the North Pole. The night crew shift was mostly made up of these Waterbenders, both because their Bending was more powerful at night and because anyone observing the ship was less likely to notice the strange crew without the sun shining down.

As usual, Master Pakku was already waiting on the deck when Katara and the others emerged. He stood looking out past the ship's prow at the open ocean.
Katara pulled her hat down to block out the sky and took her own look around. The ocean was compelling, but she couldn't ignore Chameleon Bay at the ship's stern or the Fire Nation base that had been built over the bay. Part of what had lengthened the journey was waiting to be allowed to sail through the checkpoint that managed the flow of traffic and shipments into the colonies.

When she reached Pakku- her sifu- she bowed low. "Good evening, Master."

"Hm." Pakku didn't even bother looking at her. "So, are you ready to do some real training?"

"Yes, sir. But I have done real training before. Master Hama taught me Waterbending forms."

Pakku acknowledged that with a nod. "And he did a good job. Your forms, aside from the lack of sophistication inherent in the Southern style, aren't completely terrible. When I said real training, I meant in comparison to the scut work you've been doing."

"Master Hama is a woman."

"-oh." Pakku finally turned to look at her. "Well, let's get on with it, yes? Come with me." He led Katara back towards the bridge tower, but not into it. He took a narrow path around the central structure to the aft deck.

Katara stopped short when she saw what was waiting there. There was a large well in the center of the deck where a trebuchet could be set up. The machinery had been emptied from the space, though, and some of Master Pakku's students were using their Waterbending to stream a ribbon of ocean into a waist-deep pool.

Katara blinked. "What is this? A bath?"

Pakku snorted. "Some of the crew could use one. But no, it's where you're going to be doing your training. You'll be Waterbending in the water. Appropriate, yes?"

"Uh, I don't have to take my clothes off, do I?"

Pakku's sour expression was a heartening answer all its own, but he also said, "I would very much prefer if you didn't. Now, come."

Without even taking off his own jacket, he hopped down into the water, sending ripples through the pool. The students finished their Waterbending, and took stances of attention all around it.

Okay, then. If this was real Waterbending training, then Katara was ready. She went over and jumped into the pool, immediately feeling the water soaking into her leggings and tunic. The water was a bit cool compared to the warmth of the twilight, but not uncomfortable.

When she waded over to Pakku, he reached into a pocket and pulled out a thick bolt of blue cloth. He soaked it in the water, saturating it, and then brought it out again and squeezed the excess liquid out, leaving it wrinkled and damp. "Tie this around your eyes."

"What?" He wanted to blindfold her? "I just close my eyes to meditate."

Pakku shook his head. "We're not meditating right now. I could teach some new mental exercises that could help you- and I will be doing that later, so don't think you're off that particular hook. For now, we're going to address the fact that while you already know Waterbending forms, you're not truly feeling your element. Working on a ship will help you grow into the lifestyle, but that's a slow process. This will be much more immediate. You won't be able to see the water, so to Bend it you will need to feel it. To sense my position and movements, you'll need to get the water that surrounds
us both to tell you. Now, does that satisfy your precocious curiosity, or are you ready to believe that a Waterbending Master might have a few tricks up his sleeve for teaching students of unusual backgrounds?"

Wow, what a cranky old man. No wonder Gran-Gran ran away from this guy. "I am ready, Master." She held up her hand.

Rather than giving her the blindfold, Pakku leaned forward and wrapped it around her head. He tied it tightly in the back, completing cutting off Katara's vision and blocking out all light.

Then he yanked her hat off.

"Hey!"

"You don't need that," his voice came. "Do you?"

Katara frowned. She couldn't see anything, never mind the sky. It was like being back in that unlit hut in King Toph's cavern base. There was just darkness all around her, and the embrace of the water up to her waist. "No, I guess I don't. Okay. Now what?"

"Now," his voice came from farther away, "find me. Splash me. Hit me with a water-whip. Anything that will demonstrate that you can sense my position in the pool."

Katara began concentrating.

Toph had long ago decided that it was good to be Earth King.

Here she was, in the Fire Nation itself, attending a fancy party of politicians and military jerks and even a few elite assassins- all people who would have cheered when her country and home and parents burned. If any of them had bumped into Toph back in the Earth Kingdom, where she had worn properly filthy clothes instead of these fancy layers of silk, they would have called her a rebel and tried to set her on fire. ('Tried' being the operative word, as all those traumatized soldiers outside of Gaoling's burning ruins would probably be all too eager to confirm.)

Now, seated at a place of honor at Governor Hige's big-butt dinner table, Toph knocked back some of the tasty fruity beverage she had been served and slammed the emptied cup down on the table.

Immediately, a servant leaned towards her. "More sparkberry juice, your majesty?"

Toph sniffed and held her head high. "More would please me."

As her cup was refilled, all the Fire Nation jerks around her whispered happily about how the Earth King herself ("King?" some asked, but others shushed them and in one amusing case smacked his friend upside the head) was enjoying a local product, about what an honor it was for them and their island.

Yep, it was good to be king.

The party was an hour in, and so far no one had died, which made it a pretty tame party as far as Toph was concerned. But this was mainly for Aang and this Prince Zuko guy, and both of them struck her as pretty tame when they weren't fighting giant ash monsters. But then, that was the whole point of this little jaunt- to turn the Fire Nation tame by way of regime change. And to do that, they had to play nice and convince all these jerks to overthrow the Fire Lord in favor of his supposedly better son.
And if that didn't work, Toph was willing to consider an act or two of regicide. After all, these people wouldn't be shy about trying to kill her in a less formal setting.

They wouldn't succeed, but they'd still try, the poor little dunderheads.

Toph shifted on her palanquin (thoughtfully provided by Governor Hige for her royal use tonight) so that she could place her feet flat on the floor. She extended her Earth-sense through the ground, blocking out the sound of the conversations but letting the vibrations of the chatting and laughing and grunting and chewing define the world for her.

At the head of the table, Avatar Aang was seated with Prince Zuko, Lady Caldera Yu Mai, Suki, Lord Zhao, and Governor Hige. Aang was talking about a holiday that the Air Nomads used to celebrate with a big feast. Toph felt sorry for the kid; she knew what it was like to not have a home to return to, anymore. True, she hadn't actually liked returning to that home back when she had it, but she had always expected it to be there. Now that it wasn't, now that Gaoling and the Earth Rumble and the Bei Fong estate and- and they were gone, the world didn't feel quite right.

Aang probably felt that way, too.

But at least he didn’t have to struggle to get people to acknowledge him. He was an Airbender and a Waterbender, and Toph had even started him on some Earthbending training during their preparations for this trip. His abilities were proof enough that he was the Avatar. Toph, on the other hand, had been faced with more of a struggle after Gaoling. She had only her passport and her cowardly Earthbending teacher with which to convince people that she was really the Bei Fong heir, and never mind the hoops she had been force to jump through to steal the title of Earth King.

Still, Aang was a good kid, so she didn’t throw that kind of thing in his face.

Shifting the focus of her Earth-sense, Toph also picked the rest of her allies at the dinner table- Sokka and her Earthbenders and even Commander Zhao. They were less chatty, doing more listening than talking. Of course, they couldn't listen as well as Toph, but they couldn’t help that.

Toph also picked out another trio down at the far end of the table. She hadn't been ashore for that Welcoming Ceremony where these three people had made themselves known to Aang and Mai, but it didn’t taken long to find them here. Of everyone in the room, those three people walked with the most grace, the most efficiency. Mai alone in the entire assembly matched their poise.

So it wasn't exactly a stretch to peg these three yahoos as Weapons of the Fire Nation.

(What a dumb title.)

Toph could feel the tension in their bodies as they ate. They weren't friends with each other, even though they were sticking together as a group. The old woman- Lady Caldera Yu Gerel, Mai had called her- had to be the one in charge, or else the most dangerous. The other two- Bangfei was the guy with light feet and Heiyaoshi was the girl with steel weighing her limbs down- kept looking at Gerel, either taking cues from her or making sure that she hadn't moved when they weren't paying attention.

Interesting.

What Toph found especially notable, though, was that Gerel never looked at anything.

Aang had said that she wore a blindfold, but Toph hadn't immediately accepted that as a sign of blindness. She remembered how, as a little girl, one of the healers working for her parents had blindfolded her on the theory that it would let her eyes rest and eventually 'recover' the ability to see
that she had 'lost' when she was born. (The idiot was fired six months later.) Also, Mom had once talked about how some cloth was thin enough that people could see through it. There was any number of reasons Gerel could be wearing a blindfold, from health reasons to trickery.

But she didn't look around. She didn't face people who spoke to her. She didn't angle her head for a better view of something.

So, blind or not, Gerel was acting like she didn't use her eyes. Did she rely on hearing? Or some other trick?

Mai said that Gerel was a Firebender.

Hmhmhmhm.

As Toph let that one roll around in her head, servants came forward to take everyone's dishes away. Toph felt Governor Hige stand up, and a second later he announced, "Avatar Aang will now tell his tale of how he faced adversity and dishonorable forces to come visit our glorious Homeland. Give him your honorable attention, and as you do, please enjoy these frozen sugar treats, a delicacy from Dezato Island brought to us by Governor Leiko."

The room briefly became noisy again- and Toph felt all kinds of vibrations lighting up the earth- as servants placed desserts in front of every guest and everyone else leaned back and got ready for storytime.

Everyone except the Weapons.

The girl, Heiyaoshi, stood up. Gerel must have noticed (without moving her head), as Toph heard her voice echo through the floor with, "You don't wish to hear this?"

Toph strained to hear Heiyaoshi's response: "I was briefed on current events. I'm more interested in a different perspective."

And then she began walking directly towards-

Hmhmhm.

Heiyaoshi was approaching Prince Zuko.

Aang began with, "Um, it's been nice to meet you all. I, uh, guess that my 'story' began at the Southern Air Temple..."

It didn't escape Toph that Twinkletoes there wouldn't be able to do a big storytime thing and pay attention to what Zuko was doing at the same time. As for the others, fancy Lady Mai might have a blindspot (heh) for her old friend, Sokka probably wasn't close enough to hear a whispered conversation, and who know what that Suki girl was all about?

Toph might just have to do some Earthbending-enhanced eavesdropping on their Fire Nation ally.

It might be good to be King, but it was even better to be Toph Bei Fong.

When Zuko caught the feminine shadow approaching him out of the corner of his right eye, he thought that it was Mai, but a quick glance confirmed that she was still sitting next to Aang ready to poke the kid if he started to say something that shouldn't be announced to a group of Fire Nation governors.
And if Suki was still seated at his left (guarding the side where he was missing an eye), then this newcomer was no friend-

He turned, inhaling in preparation for possible Firebending, and found Heiyaoshi the Weapon of the Fire Nation approaching. Like Mai, she was pale-skinned and dark-haired, and her dark tunic almost hid the black long sheathes strapped to her. But Heiyaoshi was displaying a toothy little grin, and her eyes were shining. "Prince Zuko. Would you honor me with permission to join you?"

Her voice was low and scratchy, almost breathless, not the confident tone he would have expected of a woman with swords strapped to her forearms, thighs, and back. Combined with her unstyled hair, left to hang straight and black to her shoulders, it made her seem younger than Zuko knew she had to be.

She was being polite, and so far he had no reason to suspect her of being an imminent danger to him. He nodded.

She kneeled at his side, brushing some of her hair out of her eyes so that she could look up at him. "Thank you." She kept her voice down, no doubt to avoid disturbing Aang. "Are you enjoying your stay here on Zenmatsu Island?"

She was close enough that Zuko wouldn't have even had to reach to grab one of the pair of swords on her back. He whispered, "Governor Hige has been most welcoming. I am eager to return to the Capital, though."

"Yes, I expect that you are." She glanced over at Aang, who was stumbling over an explanation of his adventures at the South Pole without mentioning Zhao's antagonism, and then looked back over to Zuko with a smile and a face that was growing red. "I- I am very glad that you have returned to the Homeland, Prince Zuko. We have never met, but you have always been rather special to me. You and your sister, I mean."

Zuko found that an odd thing to say. "Why? I was hardly an object of fame before- before my failures at Ba Sing Se." He had come to wonder if he really had failed at that battle, but he was hardly going to contradict the official story to someone he barely knew.

She brought her hands together and stretched her arms down, lowering her gaze for a long moment. Was- was this Weapon of the Fire Nation shy?

Eventually, she looked back up at Zuko. "I had not yet been given a rank when you were banished, but I still kept track of the Royal Family. You are all so important to the Fire Nation! And Zenmatsu Island is my home, so knowing that you- you and your sister, of course- came from Zenmatsu blood captured my interest. It made me realize that a simple warrior girl from the western-most island could still accomplish something worthy of the highest recognition. I became a Weapon thanks to your example."

Zuko shook his head, trying to make sense of that. Aang was talking about ghosts in the Southern Air Temple, but Zuko couldn't escape the absurdity of what this woman was telling him. "I'm not of Zenmatsu blood! I- you just said I'm of the Royal Family-"

She blinked. "You don't know?"

He leaned closer to her. "Know what?"

"Prince Zuko, I- you- did you not know that your mother was born on Zenmatsu?"

Zuko flinched away from her. His mother was born on this very island?! But no, that couldn't be!
Zenmatsu had both minor nobility and wealthy merchant families who profited from the trade from the colonies, yes, but there was no way that someone from such stock could have married one of the Fire Lord's sons! Mother would have had to be from the Capital itself, or perhaps one of the Grand Clans of the Inner Islands. She couldn't—

Could she?

He leaned close enough to Heiyaoshi (close enough that he could smell the sharp licorice scent of her perfume) and hissed, "What was her name?"

Heiyaoshi's face colored again. "U- Princess Ursa. But before she was a princess, she was Ursa of Hira'a, a little village near the island's center."

His mother was a peasant?!

No, it couldn't be.

Could it?

He recalled the last time he had seen her, in the rear courtyard of the Fire Palace. He had been out past sundown, practicing his Firebending away from Azula, meditating in the shadows and trying to maintain a little flame in his hands, when Piandao and Mother passed by him. They were both wearing hooded robes, and hadn't noticed him until he called out. He had asked where his father's 'bodyguard' was taking his mother, but all Piandao had said was, "This has nothing to do with you, my Prince. Go back inside, go to bed, and everything will be fine."

Mother had added, "Don't worry yourself about me. Good night, Zuko. I will always protect you."

That was the last Zuko ever saw of her.

He had asked what happened, of course. He hadn't been given any answers, of course. Father had simply remained silent; Piandao always said his honor would not allow him to speak of his duties; Azula would deflect and taunt him about something else, and Zuko eventually decided that she didn't know either.

Could there—

If there was something he could learn about Mother in this Hira'a—

Zuko knelt down beside Heiyaoshi and took her hands in his own. Her face went even redder, but Zuko ignored that and said, "Where is this village?"

King Toph focused on Heiyaoshi's body as she and Zuko began whispering about the location of this peasant village. Toph could feel the hammering of the Weapon's heart and the noise of her breathing through the floor; there was no lie in her and no detachment, either. Her body was a storm of anxiety and excitement. Zuko was quickly becoming the same way, although there was more control in him.

How strange that a sword-wielding Weapon of the Fire Nation was more emotional than an angsty, angry, pouty Firebender.

While Aang finished the story about how the ashlands in the Earth Kingdom were a sign that the whole world was in danger, Toph turned her focus back over to that oldest of the Weapons, the old lady Gerel in the blindfold.
Gerel, for the first time all night, had turned her head. Her covered face was pointed directly at Zuko and Heiyaoshi.

Then Gerel turned so that she would have been facing Toph, if she could see through the blindfold, and smiled.

Huh.

Katara panted as water dripped down from her soaked blindfold and ran in rivulets down her face. They clung to her jawline and crawled down to her chin, where they came together into fat droplets and fell down into the pool. Each impact sent tiny ripples across the surface.

She could almost imagine that she could feel those ripples through her saturated clothes.

Just like she believed that she could feel the ripples coming off Master Pakku's movement on the other side of the pool.

Too bad she'd been thinking that for the last hour and still hadn't managed to hit him with a waterwhip.

Feeling those ripples wasn't easy. Water, it turned out, was movement. Yes, she had known that before, known that Waterbending was about push and pull and redirection, but she hadn't before experienced how much movement was there. The ocean moved in accordance with the call of the moon, on which the Fire Nation warship bobbed, and the water in the pool itself swirled around as a result of it all. The pool itself was influenced slightly by the moon, as well, and by the wind that caressed the water's surface, by the gravitational pull of the earth deep below the ocean, and even by the beat of Katara's heart and the thrumming of her body as she breathed in and out.

Water was the element that was most affected by the world's forces, and water wasn't afraid to hide that. Yet it was the most durable of all elements, because none of those forces could destroy it.

Another drop of water ran from the blindfold down the bridge of Katara's nose and hung there on the tip.

She snapped into motion, pulling a bit of water from the pool and shifting to send it snapping out as a whip towards what she thought was a source of ripples in the pool.

There was a masculine cry of pain.

But it wasn't Master Pakku.

The laughter that followed belonged to him, though.

"You came close to putting Sitwook out of commission for a while," Pakku said, referring to one of his students who had been filling the pool before Katara arrived. His voice was coming from somewhere behind Katara. "Next time, a little less force would be fine. You just need to tag me, not knock my head off."

Katara wiped at the drip of water on her nose. "Well, Sitwook shouldn't have been in the pool if he didn't want to get hurt. I had to strike fast to make sure you didn't dodge."

Sitwook groaned wordlessly.

"He's right," Pakku said. "He wasn't in the pool."
"Then what was I aiming at?"

"Well, I can hardly answer that question, can I? I'm a Waterbender Master, not a mind-reader. Still, you were obviously aiming to keep the water, so you did well enough with the exercise. We'll try again tomorrow. For now, I think it's time we had a group exhibition of the basic forms, and then maybe some sparring before we get to our chores on the ship."

There was the sound of a body pulling itself out of the water, and Katara focused on the massive chaotic rush of liquid that surged forward to fill the space Pakku had just vacated and then was pummeled by the water that fell back in from his skin and clothes. "You can take off your blindfold, now." And then something soft and wide landed on her head- her hat!

Katara took the blindfold off to find that night had fully fallen. A red lamp attached to the bridge tower shed light on the rear deck, and she could see the other students abandoning their circular arrangement around the pool. They had been standing like an honor guard around the space, and Sitwook happened to be the one standing where she was facing. Two of the other boys were helping him walk away. Pakku was already heading back around the tower to the main deck.

Before she got out of the pool, Katara waded forward. She was sure she had felt the ripples in this direction. Pakku thought it was enough that she had tried and failed, but she hated the thought that she was such a bad Waterbender that she couldn't at least accomplish something tonight. She wanted to be good enough- good enough to deserve her rescue, good enough for her tribe, good enough to help Aang- and maybe be something more. If she was so bad at this-

She halted in place and gasped.

A little dragonfly, almost invisible in the dim light of the lap, was resting on the surface of the water.

It was right between where she and Sitwook had been standing when she struck.

When Aang and all his friends got back to their rooms, they all instinctively assembled in the atrium at the center. Mai, Sokka, Toph, Zuko, and Suki all came out and sat down around the fountain where Appa and Momo were lounging.

Aang summoned a wind and used it to hop up on Appa's head and gave the big guy a two-handed rub right on his arrow. "That party went great! They had lots of vegetarian food for me and everyone was so friendly! Governor Hige even said he'd take me on a tour of some nearby villages tomorrow so I can meet regular Fire Nation people."

"I-" Sokka stared to say, but Momo fluttered over and landed on his chest, immediately reaching towards the front pockets. Sokka squealed, "Hey, what are you- I was saving those for later!" Momo jumped to the ground with one arm wrapped around what looked like a bunch of fried dough balls, already chewing one. Sokka growled, but then slumped and turned his attention back to Aang. "I was going to say that I kind of agree with you. Everyone clapped after your story, so I guess they didn't object to the overall save-the-world-and-let's-be-happy message."

Mai yawned. "Well, don't read too much into that. For a nation of world-conquering jerks, we're very good at being polite at parties. But yeah, as boring as it all was, things could have gone badly and didn't, so I guess it's a victory or something."

Aang nodded. If even Mai couldn't say anything worse than 'boring,' then things were pretty good! He looked over to Zuko and said, "Do you want to come with me on the tour tomorrow?"

Zuko seemed surprised to be addressed, his eye widening momentarily. "Um, no. I should- um, there
are some letters I need to write. I should do that. Tomorrow."

"Oh. Okay." Aang looked over to Toph. "How about you?"

"Sure, why not?" She raised a hand to point directly at Zuko. "Also, Princey-Pants just lied to you. He can't come because he's going to find his mom's village near the center of the island."

Before Aang could even blink, Zuko was on his feet and stomping towards Toph, growling, "Why you little-"

Suki was the first to react, hopping up and stepping in Zuko's way. The prince didn't stop until he collided with her, but Suki held her ground and wound up pretty much holding Zuko in place.

Aang slid down from Appa's head. "Your mother lives on this island?"

Zuko continued to glare at Toph. "I don't have to explain anything to you people. I'll do my part in Uncle's plan, and that's all you need to know."

Mai stood up as well, walking over to stand in Zuko's path right behind Suki. "Zuko, what's this about your mother? I thought she - I thought that she was gone."

Zuko turned his glare on her for a moment, and then bit out, "I just learned that Mother may have been born on this island. In a village called Hira'a. I am going to investigate that claim tomorrow, and I won't let any of you stop me."

Aang considered that. "We need to talk to all these governors, to see if we can get them to support Prince Iroh's coup, but I guess we can do without you for a few days. If you need to look into this to be at peace, then it's best for you to go as soon as possible."

An idea struck him, and he turned to look at Appa. "Hey, buddy, do you want to take Zuko to this village? You won't have to fly very fast or in any danger, and you can take breaks whenever you need to."

Appa gave an assenting grunt and sniffled.

"Great! Thanks! This will really help us." Aang reached and gave Appa’s nose a pat.

"What?" Zuko finally stepped back from Suki, looking at Aang with clear confusion. "You're just going to let me take your sky bison?"

Aang shrugged. "Well, Appa is okay with it, so sure! I figured Suki is going with you, and she saw how to hold the reins when we were on Kyoshi Island." A thought occurred to him. "You're not scared of Appa, are you?"

Zuko shook his head. "I've never flown before, but he seemed friendly enough on Crescent Island."

Wait, what? "You met Appa on Crescent Island?! After you- after-" Images of their confrontation in that abandoned temple flooded through Aang's memory. It hadn't given him a good impression of the prince, but he and Mai had never found out what happened to Zuko after Aang was consumed by the Avatar State.

It hadn't been a good night for anyone.

Zuko nodded. "When I woke up after the volcano's eruption, I was down on the shores of the island. Your sky bison flew over to investigate me, and I- I told him you were probably up in the ruins of the temple and pointed the way. I wasn't sure if he'd understand me, but- well-" Zuko trailed off as Appa shuffled over to him and gave him a big lick.
Aang felt a smile growing. Anyone who was nice to Appa couldn't be *all* bad! He was feeling better and better about this whole plan! "Then it's settled! Even taking breaks, Appa will get you to Hira'a and back faster than any carriage, and then we can get back to convincing the governors."

Zuko tried to wipe the bison spit off his armor, while Suki stepped back with a giggle so that she was standing next to Mai. Zuko flung some of the gooey saliva to the ground and nodded to Aang. "Thank you, Avatar."

"Sure, no problem!"

Toph snorted. "See, that wasn't so hard. Now let's talk about how you're obviously being baited by that Heiyaoshi weapon-girl with Mai's fashion sense."

Aang blinked. "Baited?"

Suki blinked. "Heiyaoshi?"

Mai blinked. "My fashion sense? That trash wears all black and can barely be bothered to comb her hair!"

Zuko swung and almost started stomping towards Toph again, but Suki and Mai were still in his way. "Do you have a problem, little girl?"

Toph cracked her knuckles. "You may address me as 'your majesty.' And I ain't got a problem, Princey-Pants. I'm just looking out for you. Maybe you're not savvy enough to have picked this up yet, but when a girl is all smiles and practically crawls into your lap while whispering long-forgotten facts about mysterious moms, then she's out to get you. Or she's weird."

Sokka barked a laugh. "Zuko, I didn't realize you had such unique tastes! No wonder Mai ditched you."

Aang grinned, too. "That's a good one."

Suki, however, didn't seem to see the humor. She crossed her arms and threw a look at Toph. "She wasn't in his lap!"

Toph, of course, couldn't see it, but she was grinning anyway.

Then Mai stepped away, bringing her hands together in her sleeves and looking up at the moon. "Heiyaoshi is a Blademaster of Kilauea. That has a whole lot of boring meaning behind it, but the important point is that they all use short swords made of volcano glass because it's invisible in the night. They're *good* fighters, but they have this whole philosophy about fighting with more than just outright combat. It's possible that Heiyaoshi is looking to play politics, here. Or I guess she could be trying to seduce Zuko; stranger things have happened. Hn, stranger things have happened to me in the last six months."

Aang wind-hopped over to take Mai's place between Zuko and Toph, just in case, and said, "So we should be careful, but I still think Zuko needs to go see this Hira'a village. Maybe Heiyaoshi's plan is to just try to drive us apart, so the best thing we can do is work together and be honest with each other."

Toph nodded. "That's exactly what I was trying to do. I like you, Twinkletoes."

Sokka cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention. "I hate to be the one to have to say it, but Heiyaoshi's whole plan could just be to draw Zuko away to kill him. She could be lying about this
village on this island-

"She was telling the truth about that, at least," Toph interrupted.

"-and even if she's not, Zuko will still be vulnerable out away from the rest of us, even with Appa. And Suki, I guess?"

Suki crossed her arms. "You can't keep me away."

"So if a freaky Weapon of the Fire Nation attacks you?"

Mai said, "Then Suki and Zuko will both die."

Both Suki and Zuko went, "Hey!"

Mai shrugged. "She's a Blademaster of Kilauea. I'm not going to lie to make you feel better."

Zuko sighed. "I won't let myself be drawn into a battle, then. If we're attacked, we'll let the sky bison get us to safety, and then figure out another way to investigate Hira'a. My I can contact Azula or F-"

He broke off, and then finished with, "We can figure something out when the need arises."

Aang nodded. He couldn't imagine what kind of family Zuko must have, that he couldn't even rely on his dad or sister to help him figure out why his mother disappeared. And why would his mother even be missing the first place? While what he had seen so far of the Fire Nation itself hadn't been bad, there was obviously something very wrong with the people who ran it.

Maybe that could help convince the island governors here to turn against their Fire Lord.

Maybe.

For now, Aang just said, "So, who wants to be the one to tell the Zhao's not to expect to see Zuko for a few days?"

Sokka's hand immediately went into the air as he called, "Not it!"

Zhao's first morning back in the Fire Nation dawned clear and warm, another auspicious sign that had him almost believing that the whole enterprise wouldn't end up in flame and death.

But so long as it ended it flame and death for Zhao's enemies, he could probably deal with that, too.

And, he had to admit, this assignment had been fairly easy so far. The Avatar and Prince Zuko had been in the Fire Nation overnight and so far no one had tried to kill them, a very positive sign. And while he would have to continue worrying about such things- one of Zhao's first tasks this morning was to issue orders for the Avatar's military escort for the tour with Governor Hige- he was at least able to do so in a luxurious guest suite in a sprawling mansion.

There were worse things.

And then, as Zhao was writing out those escort orders, one of the worse things arrived in the form of a page who announced, "Lord Zhao to see you, sir."

Yes, there were worse things.

Zhao rose from his desk and nodded. "Send him in."
Father stepped into the office with his usual placid gait. "Commander Zhao, thank you for seeing me."

"Lord Zhao, what can I do for you?"

Father kept his voice light as he said, "I was just informed that Prince Zuko is no longer on the premises. Is there a problem?"

"No." Prince Zuko was always a problem, but that was hardly Father's business. And at least the Prince had sent the strange Water Tribe boy to inform Zhao of this whole thing. "But thank you for asking."

Of course, Father wouldn't leave it at that. "Might I inquire as to where the prince is going? It is my responsibility to organize this summit, after all, and even you have to admit that it is odd for one of the guests of honor to simply go missing."

"I suppose I do." Zhao certainly hadn't been happy when the Water Tribe boy showed up last night with news of Zuko's excursion to Hira'a, but then he had realized that serving Admiral Iroh loyally didn't mean he necessarily had to succeed at keeping Zuko alive. He only had to try. "However, it is a Royal affair, and not one that will threaten this gathering. Prince Zuko will be back soon, and the Avatar intends to continue with the planned itinerary."

"I see." Father ambled closer as he stroked his long beard. "And since it is a Royal matter, no doubt Prince Ozai would be informed, or else keenly interested."

Prince Ozai? "Lord Zhao, are you saying that you might receive inquiries from Prince Ozai? I thought you were chosen to oversee this event because you're a neutral party."

Father shrugged. "I am neutral enough, not favoring any of our guests over the others. But if you are insinuating that I am exclusively forwarding Ozai's agenda, you are wrong. I have received no inquiries yet and will not seek to spread information that I am not asked for. But I have many old friends to whom I owe some favors, and I like to be able to accommodate them when I can."

Zhao took a deep breath, trying to cultivate some of that self-control that Jeong-Jeong had always tried to teach him. Yet he couldn't help but remember how Father had been in the Capital when Zhao had arrived, back when he was plotting to accuse Ozai of treason and use Zuko's naiveté as proof. Father had even been in possession of a misrouted write meant for Zhao? Or was it misrouted after all?

That sneaky old coot.

Zhao's voice was hard as he said, "Then tell your old friends that if they want to know, they'll have to hunt down Prince Zuko himself. Now, if you'll excuse me, I do have more important things to do this morning than listen to you whine about your curiosity."

Father bowed silently, and let the page lead him out.

Well. So much for an easy assignment.

TO BE CONTINUED
Aang and Zuko both go sightseeing, and neither likes what he sees.

When Zuko and Suki climbed on the sky bison ("His name is Appa, and he's a good friend," the Avatar had said before wishing them a productive journey) the skies had been clear and the sun was shining.

But the winds were strong, and soon Zuko saw clouds coming in over Zenmatsu Island.

Those clouds were directly ahead of him.

"Looks like rain," Suki said.

They were sitting together on the sky bison's (Appa's) head. Suki had the reins, and even with poor weather ahead of them, Zuko didn't miss the gleam in her eyes as she looked out over the sprawling tropical forest and leaned into the wind. For the trip, she and Zuko both had dressed in comfortable red traveling clothes that wouldn't draw attention. (Unlike the sky bison they were on.)

Zuko had always thought Suki's eyes were blue, before now. Yet, seeing her in the casual dress of his Homeland, he realized that they were actually a shade of purple.

He turned his own good eye back to the skies ahead of them. "Can this- Can Appa fly through rain?"

Suki shrugged. "Avatar Aang described how he and Appa were caught in a storm a hundred years ago, and wound up crashing into one of the Southern Seas. But if the rain doesn't get heavy, then we should be okay. It will make Appa's fur heavier, so we might need to take more breaks." She leaned down and rubbed her hands through the air-shaped fur between the bison's horns. "Sound good, big guy?"

Appa let out a sound that could have been a war cry or comfortable agreement. Zuko decided to take it as the latter.

He still had a hard time making himself believe the Avatar's story about running away from home a hundred years ago and surviving in an iceberg to emerge into this world. He accepted the facts as true, but that wasn't the same thing as believing it.

In a way, it was much like Zuko's thoughts of his own family.

He wasn't sure what he knew about them versus what he believed, either.

"My father would have to have known that my mother was a peasant when he married her," he found himself saying. "It doesn't make sense that he would have found out later and then sent her back home."

Suki glanced at him. "But it would fit what you remember. Do you know anything about how your
 parents met?"

He shook his head. "I always believed that it was a standard betrothal, but now that I've been thinking about it, I guess I just assumed it. I can't recall anyone actually telling me about it."

"Is that how the Royal Family always marries? By betrothal?"

"Yes." He looked at Suki's eyes again, deciding that the purple shade didn't contrast as sharply with her red clothes as blue would. "That's not to say that the royal getting married doesn't have a say. He or she could have someone in mind, and then all the proper agreements could be pursued. But my cousin Lu Ten was betrothed to Mai, and I don't think they had even met before the negotiations started. Anyway, Uncle broke that engagement off for some reason. Maybe he'd tell me, if I got the chance to ask?"

Suki shrugged. "So if I understand betrothals correctly, there's a trade that goes on, right? The person with lower social status needs to provide a dowry of some kind?"

Zuko nodded. "As you might guess, the Royal Family would be the one receiving the dowry for any betrothal. That's why this idea of my mother being a peasant makes no sense. What could her family have gifted my grandfather to make that match?"

"What did Mai's family pay for her engagement to your cousin?"

Zuko frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

"Well, even though she didn't know Lu Ten, Mai's family was already close with the rest of us." Zuko paused as he thought about how best to summarize all those details he'd let slumber in the shadows of his mind during his exile. "She and Azula were schoolmates. She and a girl named Ty Lee. They were all close friends. But Ty Lee is dead now." Zuko shook his head. He still couldn't believe that- another item for the list. "Mai's father had made some important contributions to the war effort through his military engineering, and he had been awarded a residence in the capital and membership in the Caldera clan. I guess you could say he was a rising star. Favored. People like that were frequently rewarded with gold, along with other gifts. For the hand of the son of the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation, I expect that Mai's family would have paid back most of the hoarded gold of their rise."

The wind picked up, and Suki pulled the reins to signal Appa to rise above them. "It wouldn't have made a difference that Mai was a Weapon of the Fire Nation?"

Zuko shook his head. "That didn't happen until after I- I left. But if the betrothal had been made after Mai was given her rank, I'm not really sure. There are only nine Weapons- well, eight now that Ty Lee is gone- and only Lady Gerel is wed. She married decades before she became a Weapon, though. I'm not really sure if it would make a difference. If Mai survives long enough to marry, and gets together with someone from the Fire Nation, and we survive long enough to see it, I guess we'll find out."

Suki laughed.

Zuko gave her a questioning look.

She shrugged. "It just sounded funny, the way you explained that we all have to live. Most people would just assume that much."
Zuko looked ahead at the approaching clouds. "It's not a very safe assumption, considering what we're all trying to do."

Aang tugged at the wrap on his head and tried to ignore how the bouncing of the carriage was so different from the gentle bobbing of a sky bison in flight.

Mai, seated next to him on the carriage's rear bench, noticed his discomfort. "You okay?"

Aang gave her a smile and a nod. It wasn't a big deal, really. Maybe a little disappointing that he couldn't go out in his Nomad robes, but by this point, it was something he was used to.

Governor Hige, sitting opposite Aang on the forward bench next to King Toph, bowed his head. Like most of the Fire Nation big-shots they had encountered, Hige had a mutton-chopped, tri-pronged beard, although it contrasted with his round glasses. "I thank you for your discretion on this trip, Avatar. While you are officially welcome as a diplomat, and Commander Zhao's soldiers will be guarding us, we can't be sure that- uh, certain elements wouldn't still attempt violence again you."

"Yeah." Mai sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. "I'm still not clear on who these 'elements' are. The Fire Lord knows we're here and nominally approves, so the military won't attack us. The Home Guard answers to the Governors. We know there are politics at work, so of course there's the possibility of professional assassins, but they're hardly going to be fooled by a head-scarf."

Next to Governor Hige, Toph nodded. She had been allowed to wear her fancy green robes, despite whatever this danger was. "Especially since it would be easier to just hit the mansion."

Hige frowned. "My mansion is very well guarded-"

"-and any security has its holes," Toph interrupted. "Trust me, I know it, and don't go pretending you aren't up on it, too. You and Zhao are afraid of something that's a part of the Fire Nation itself."

Aang continued to be impressed by the little King. For all that she was kind of rude and loud, she paid close attention to what was going around her. Aang looked to Hige and offered a smile. "It's okay. You can tell us what's wrong. We're not here to judge the Fire Nation, and we understand that some things are just outside of even a Governor's control."

Hige leaned back in his seat. "That is- generous of you, Avatar. But you won't offend me by judging the Fire Nation on this point. The problem is the people of the Homeland."

Aang felt Mai tense beside him, but she displayed no reaction that Hige could have noticed as she said, "The people?"

"Oh, yes, my lady. You probably aren't aware, living in the Caldera, but there are- well, problems. But it will be easier to show you. We're almost at our first destination, a local club where some of the more affluent members of the Inawaka Clan gather."

Aang recognized the name of 'Inawaka' as being the name of the port city over which Hige's mansion stood watch. So this clan was like Mai's Caldera clan, part of the new system where nobles owed loyalty to their home city and governor.

The carriage soon slowed to a stop, but Aang knew to wait until a certain pattern of knocking sounded at the passenger compartment's door. When it did, Governor Hige led everyone out into the summer air.

Zhao himself was waiting for them beside their carriage. His own more military transport- an open
cart with high sides- was parked just ahead, and his soldiers had already disembarked and were standing on guard around them. "The area is secure, Governor, Avatar. You may proceed with your visit."

At least it was a nice area. They were within grounds enclosed by a wooden wall, but one that seemed more for decorative purposes than security. It blocked off whatever the wider view was, leaving Aang to look only at the lovely gardens around him, and the Pleasure House rising up above them.

And it was into the Pleasure House the Governor Hige headed.

It was big enough to contain all kinds of gambling and entertainment, but this visit seemed to be more focused. Hige led the way into a large room where all kinds of people in fancy clothes (all red, of course) were gathered. It was an assembly that Aang could barely tell from the guests at the big dinner the night before, and for all he knew, some of the same people might be here. Still, it was nice how they cheered for him.

Then the first of the guests stepped forward, a man in a Fire Navy dress uniform, and approached Mai, and Aang realized that it wasn't him they were cheering for.

"Lady Caldera Yu Mai," the man said, "welcome back to the Fire Nation! And you don't have to share details, but congratulations as well on the completion of whatever secret mission the Royal Family had you running. I am Vice-Admiral Cho, and this is my son, who is currently looking for a wife-"

"Ah," another of the guests said, a woman with gray hair, "Lady Mai can talk to your son later, Admiral. We have a gift to welcome you to Inawaka and thank you for gracing our lowly clan with your golden presence. You have our gratitude and service, my lady!" She handed Mai what looked like a fancy horn of some kind, and then fell to her knees in a bow.

No, not a bow- a full kowtow, with forehead pressed to the floor.

In fact, the whole room was kowtowing.

Mai stood there, holding her gifted horn, and threw a glance at Aang that to him seemed a little wide-eyed for her. "Um, hi, everyone. Thanks for the musical instrument?"

Hige shifted so that he was standing directly behind Aang and whispered, "The Caldera clan is the most prestigious in the Homeland, living around the Fire Lord himself. Each person here is hoping to catch Lady Mai's eye and favor, gambling that she'll remember them for promotion."

Aang blinked. "That Admiral mentioned his son."

"Yes, a bit forward of him, but there are many parents here hoping to set up a betrothal with an offspring. I suppose he wanted to jump to the front of the line."

Aang could only shake his head. Mai was practically being mobbed now, still holding her new horn, but Aang wasn't sure how he could rescue her.

Toph leaned towards Aang. "She's fine. Just a little anxious, according to her heartbeat and breathing. Don't worry your twinkling toes about it."

Aang smiled his thanks, and then realized that he was being approached as well. An old man with long white hair that spilled out over his red robes was walking over, saying, "Are you friends with Lady Caldera Yu Mai? How lovely. I am Yingbi, head of the Ying merchant family..."
Aang put a smile on his face and prepared for a few hours of being the second most important person in the room, for a change.

By the time the ski bison (Appa) reached Hira'a, the sun was covered by sheets of gray clouds that drizzled over the landscape—a warm, muggy wetness that wasn't quite soaking Zuko's clothes even as it left his hair and skin slick.

Or rather, it was by the time they reached Hira'a charred remains.

The first sign that something was wrong was the forest. The growth on Zenmatsu was all thick and lush, encroaching strongly on the rocky landscape pushed up by volcano activity, but as Appa had carried Zuko and Suki further on their journey, they found the foliage below suddenly thinning. The trunks and branches of the tall trees were more visible, with most of the green coming from short growth on the ground rather than leaves on the trees. There were also many fallen trunks, all of them blackened and missing branches.

The forest continued to grow thinner, the surviving trees reaching up as scattered sentinels dwarfed by the massive rock spires dotting the landscape, until it disappeared entirely. Lakebeds sat empty despite the rain falling even now, while what seemed like stone monuments of some kind sat split and blackened beyond any kind of recognition.

Thankfully, what was left wasn't an ashland. Most likely, the cause had been a natural forest fire.

That distinction hadn't saved Hira'a.

The remains of the village didn't seem to have been touched since it burned down. Pieces of the frames of some of the buildings still stood, and if they were anything to go by, the people here had lived in comfortable, spacious homes. There even seemed to be the ruins of a theater, or at least a stage, in the center of the village. Hira'a had probably been a nice place to live.

No one lived here now.

Suki was silent as she brought Appa down. Zuko was thankful for that, because he had no idea what he was supposed to be feeling, never mind how to communicate it. Why hadn't Heiyaoshi said anything about this? It was possible she didn't know, and come to think of it, Zuko hadn't explicitly said he was coming to visit; he had just asked about Hira'a location.

Or else this was what he was meant to find.

But why? There were no answers here.

As soon as Appa had landed, Zuko slid off the bison's head and rushed over to the nearest set of ruins. The ground squelched beneath his boots, and the rain seemed to be growing heavier, but Zuko just increased his breathing and pushed the energy into his Inner Fire to generate more body heat. Up close, he could see the stone of what must have been the base of this home's firepit, but nothing else was recognizable in the mud and debris and-

Wait.

There was something half-buried that was too regular in shape. It seemed long and thin, like a rod of some kind-

No.
Zuko stepped back so that he was no longer standing within the remnants of the home.

That had been a bone.

A human bone.

He heard Suki coming up behind him. He turned so that he could see her with his remaining eye, but once again he didn't know what to say.

She nodded. "We don't know how many got away. If they were living off the forest or something else that was ruined, then there would be no reason to come back so soon."

As ever, she was good with logic. She could figure things out.

Zuko, at least, was good at pushing further on his path. "Let's get back to the bison. Maybe we can find another settlement, or at least some people who can tell us what happened."

"That was the worst experience of my whole life," Mai said as they were getting back into the carriage. She plopped down on the rear bench and let the golden horn tumble out of her hands to the floor.

Aang hopped into the seat beside her. "Worse than Crescent Island, and the sinkhole, and all those boat rides you got seasick on?"

She extended her arm and flicked his ear. "Clearly that was an objective and precise evaluation. Don't question me."

Toph sniffed as she got back to her own seat in the forward bench. "You two are gross. Does it smell to anyone else like some rain is coming?"

Governor Hige was the last to board, closing the door to the passenger compartment behind him. They were in motion soon after. "Ah, you tolerated that very well, Lady Mai. And don't worry, you'll be safely anonymous for the rest of our activities today. I just couldn't scrape together enough of the upper crust here without saying who they'd be meeting, and frankly you are more of a draw than even the Avatar. These people aren't looking to control the fate of the Homeland, you see; they just want to move up to a more prominent clan and residence."

Aang slumped at the return of the serious discussion. He much preferred to tease Mai, but he knew his responsibilities. "That's part of what I don't get. Your cities define your clans, now, right? But what's the point of being part of a clan, if no one has any real loyalty to it?"

Hige smiled and pushed his glasses further up his nose. "You are truly wise, young Avatar. Yes, that's exactly part of the problem. The clan system was already decaying when the Fire Lord reorganized it, but now it's just a way of measuring social standing. The closer a clan is to the Fire Lord, the more prominent. I'm the least of all the governors, here on Zenmatsu, the furthest of the Outer Islands. Perhaps I had any hope of being promoted and surviving the experience, I'd be more invested in Azulon's games."

Mai inhaled sharply. "That's why it was so easy to arrange Zuko's homecoming here. You're fine hosting the Avatar, no matter how many Fire Nation fortresses he's knocked over, because it draws attention and power here that you wouldn't normally get."

Hige shrugged. "Not a bad guess, but not quite the truth. Of course, I'm more than happy to do a favor to both Prince Iroh and Prince Ozai at the same time. But chasing an appointment closer to the
capital island will do me little good until the flow of power moves in the proper directions. The clan system needs to be reformed, and- well, we're on our way to see the next problem. We won't be as close, but I think what you see will be illuminating."

Aang wasn't enjoying this tour as much as he had hoped. He had expected getting a taste of modern Fire Nation culture, like seeing a festival or trying some food or learning the new dances. Instead, he was getting a lesson on how the Fire Nation was slowly killing itself.

But the fact that Hige was revealing all of this meant that he wanted it to be fixed. And he thought Aang might be able to help.

That was probably good news.

At least, Aang hoped it was.

The rain began coming down harder, and Zuko's search slowed.

The problem was the sky bison. "Avatar Aang said that Appa was struck by your sister's lightning," Suki explained. "Katara healed the physical damage with her Waterbending, but apparently lightning does more than just cook flesh. Appa has to take it easy and rest often so that his energies rebalance."

Zuko remembered the incident, of course. It was when June had tracked the Avatar to that cargo ship, and he and Azula had stolen a speedboat to intercept them before they got away. The irony, that his relentless drive to capture the Avatar was now interfering with his quest to discover his mother's fate, was not lost on him.

By the time they found any answers about Hira'a, the sky bison's fur was soaked through and he smelled like the world's biggest nest of rats. Zuko had to concentrate on his breathing in order to maintain enough of his Inner Fire to keep himself warm. Suki didn't have any such advantages, and she didn't object when Zuko put an arm around her shoulders so that she could share his heat.

The traveling merchant they found was making do with a simple, practical umbrella, "Oh, yes, Hira'a. Used to stop by a'sell to 'em. Simple stuff, a'cause they didn't have much coin, and I'd a'do some metalworking fixes."

Zuko pointed the way. "It's all gone now. The forest, the village- everything."

"Yup. Forest fire, they says. Some a'kind a'lightning storm in the forest. People a'said they'd a'see weird lights in those woods. A'could been lightning whatdyacallit- phenomenon. Or evil spirits. Only they a'says spirits ain't the business a'simple folk."

Zuko waved the matter away. "What about the people?"

"Fires took 'em by a'surprise. Some got a'caught in their homes. Most got away. A'scattered around to other villages."

"Do you know if a woman named Ursa might have been among the refugees?"

"Hn, never a'heard that name, myself. Sorry."

Zuko turned away. He heard Suki offering thanks to the merchant, and approved, but he didn't trust himself to deal with niceties right now. His search for his mother was at a dead end. If she even really was from Hira'a, and if she returned there after leaving the palace that night, then she might have survived the fire and moved to another of the villages here. (Assuming she was among the
survivors.) But tracking her down would involve methodically visiting all the surrounding settlements and asking around. It could take weeks, and was too dependent on his mother letting herself be found, using her real name.

He had a feeling it wouldn't be even that easy.

And he had his obligations to Uncle Iroh. This business with the Avatar. He wanted to just forget about it all, and if there had been a clear trail to his mother, that would be one thing. But this was too tenuous, and Uncle had helped Zuko return to the Fire Nation.

Besides, a drawn-out search would keep from getting all the way home.

Father was waiting.

Suki came up and put her hand on his back. "Let's go check Hira’a again. Maybe we can find some clues. It's on our way back, anyway. We can use it as chance to let Appa rest."

Zuko nodded.

It was better than nothing.

He hoped.

The carriage came to a stop, but Aang could still hear some kind of noise coming in to the passenger compartment. "Is that rain?"

"Ugh." Mai clasped her hands in her sleeves. "I hate getting wet. Tell me someone brought an umbrella."

Governor Hige opened the slats on the windows, revealing their destination beneath gray skies and a light drizzle.

It looked to Aang to be a fairly typical Fire Nation village square, like the kind he and his friend Kuzon had played in during their visits. He saw shops and residences, and a metal statue in the center of a person in some kind of fancy armor.

Near the statue, some of the Home Guard- the more lightly armored police forces that answered to each island's governor- were setting up a large tent over wooden supply boxes.

Hige closed the shutters again. "Well, I wasn't planning on having us leave the carriage, anyway. It's better for us to observe from a distance. We can stay in here out of the rain."

"Hey!" King Toph sat forward. "What about me? I need my feet on good, solid earth to see anything!"

Mai picked up her golden horn from the floor and set it on top of Toph's head by its wide bell, almost like a hat. "There you go."

Aang cringed and waited for an outburst, but Toph just tilted her head to the left, and then to the right, and grinned. "That works! Do I look good?"

Mai said, "You appear very royal."

"Sweet! I'll just watch from this side, then." Toph opened the door nearest her, and eased herself down to the ground. The whole carriage would be between her and the village square, but that
wouldn't stop her Earthsense.

Hige cleared his throat. "Well, uh, with that resolved, let's begin our own observations, yes?" He opened the shutters again, and Aang inched over to see. Her heard Mai shifting on the bench behind him, and then she pressed up against his back as she angled for a view. He could feel- even though he had a scarf over his baldness and Mai wasn't actually touching it- that her head was hovering just above his. He resolved not to let himself get distracted.

As Aang watched, the Home Guard soldiers struck a gong they had set up in their tent, and people began shuffling out of their homes. They didn't seem happy, or at all eager.

Maybe it was because the rain was picking up.

Two of the Home Guard brought out what seemed like a large, wood-backed sign. Aang squinted, and could make out what seemed to be a bearded face on it.

"Fire Lord Azulon," Hige whispered.

All of the people fell into kowtows before the image.

After a few minutes, a big-bellied man of Home Guard stepped up and bellowed, "You may rise."

The people did so, and the picture was taken away.

The big Guard continued, "That does not count towards your daily total. You must still bow before the portraits of the Fire Lord in your homes- pictures generously provided to you by our glorious leader in celebration of his matchless leadership- one more time today."

Hige nodded. "Once before every meal."

The big Guard held out his hand, and a scroll was put into it by one of his compatriots. "Before we get to our special business today, we have a matter to settle. Citizen- uh- Zhuding, step forward."

The crowd gasped. The people began moving away from one man, who started shaking.

Aang frowned. "I don't have a good feeling about this."

Hige hissed, "Don't interfere. There will be no loss of life, and you'll just make things worse if you try to stop it."

That didn't set Aang at ease, but he kept watching.

The shaking man came up to the tent of his own accord. Two of the Home Guard forced him down to his knees, and stood at attention on either side of him.

The big Guard bellowed, "Citizen Tang, please step forward."

A little boy hurried up out of the crowd.

The big Guard held out his hand again, and like the scroll before, he was now given a small leather bag. The big Guard walked up to the child and passed on the bag, narrating to the crowd, "You are a god boy, Tang. You have done well to reveal your father's crime. Zhuding failed to bow three times to Fire Lord Azulon two weeks ago, supposedly too tired from working to get to his knees for the leader who won our honorable war of conquest. This is a terrible act of disrespect to the man who owns all of us, who by his grace and generosity gives us work and shelter and honor! Tang has been rewarded with candy, fine treats made in the Capital, for his honesty and loyalty. Zhuding will
receive the standard punishment for his first transgression." He nodded.

The two Guards on either side of Zhuding freed bamboo rods from sheaths on their back, and one struck Zhuding across the shoulders. Then the other did, then the first again-

Aang moved for the carriage's door-

-and Hige grabbed his wrist. "I have ordered as much mercy to be shown as possible. The man was not stripped of his shirt, and I emphasized that he was to be given the appropriate punishment for his first offense. If you interfere, his punishment will be more severe."

Aang yanked his hand free. "You could stop this!"

"Could I? Remember what we saw of the people in my clan, crawling over each other to ingratiate themselves with someone from the Caldera? If I tried to circumvent the Fire Lord's law, the nobles here would do to me what that boy did to his father. I would be punished, a new governor would be put in my place, that man would be killed, and you would be a criminal in the Fire Nation."

Aang didn't know what to say.

Thankfully, Mai stepped in with, "That stinks."

Aang nodded, and turned back to the window. The Guards were still striking Zhuding, but then the one on the left seemed to trip out of nowhere with such force that his bamboo rod flew out of his hands to land in the crowd.

Through the windows on the opposite side of the compartment, Aang could hear Toph whistling nonchalantly.

He grinned. That was some nice Earthbending.

Back at the gathering, the big Guard shook his head and bellowed, "All right, that's enough. Let's get down to our real business. Fire Lord Azulon, in his continuing generosity, has found a way to enhance his people's education. We will be collecting the storybooks handed out two years ago, 'Glorious Victories of the Fire Army,' and in exchange we will give you a new volume written by the Fire Lord himself, 'The Victorious Life and Times of Fire Lord Azulon.' Families will read this book together every night after your shared meal. Children are encouraged to memorize it. Step forward, one at a time, and trade the old book for the new book. Don't get it wet. And no shoving!"

As Zhuding was dragged away, the other Guards broke open the crates within the tent and pulled out stacks of new books.

Hige whispered, "I received the orders and materials for this just a few days ago, and rushed to pass them on to the Home Guard. I wanted you, Avatar, to see what the Fire Lord has been doing over the last few years. He demands more and more devotion from the people, stealing reverence from our nation. He's building a cult to himself, and I shudder to think what he needs it for. Something must be done to restore balance to Fire Nation rule. And I have hopes that you, Avatar, can find a way to do this."

This was even worse than Aang thought. He knew he'd have to combat favor for the Fire Nation's war, but a nation-wide cult to Fire Lord Azulon?

On the other hand, this seemed to be fairly recent, and was obviously not liked by a man like Hige. If Zhao and Iroh were any indication, the military wasn't too happy, either. Maybe this could be a chance to easily get the rest of the Fire Nation's leadership to support Prince Iroh!
For now, Aang figured that mentioning Iroh's plan might not be the smartest thing to do. "I understand. With the support of you—um, you know, the governors—maybe I can do something."

Hige smiled and pushed his glasses up higher.

Then the whole carriage around Aang flipped and flew and crashed, and the air vibrated with the force and sound of an explosion.

Perhaps it was Zuko's imagination, but he thought the rain had lessened again when they finally made it back to Hira'a. Even so, he almost missed the large beast standing amidst the ruins of the village. From their position in the sky, atop Appa's head, the creature's hide blended all too well with the shadowy mud of the ground.

Suki spotted it first, letting go of the reins to point. "Look, there's something moving down there!"

It took a few moments, but Zuko was able to make out a long snake-like body, maybe the same length as Appa but much thinner. It seemed to remaining in one position, although its head kept twitching towards something. "Is there something else down there?"

Suki squinted, wrapped Appa's reins around her left arm as an anchor, and then leaned straight over the side of the sky bison's head. "I think— I think there's a person moving around!"

A scavenger come to pick over the detritus of a village that burned to the ground years ago? No.

Zuko refused to believe that someone else had come here the same day of his own visit. "Take us down. As fast as you can."

Suki climbed back up onto Appa's head, and then directed the sky bison into a dive.

As soon as Zuko judged the distance safe, he leaped off of Appa's head towards the robed figure, his fists blazing with flame.

The last thing he was expecting was for the stranger to whip around to face him before he even completed his leap, or for his forearms to suddenly grow cold and his flames to die.

He landed in a tumble, sliding through the mud.

"Zuko!" Suki's cry came just before the sound of her own boots splashing in the mud, and he guessed that she was coming to his aid. He tried to warn her off, but before he could, the stranger's arms snapped, and a massive gout of flame shot out.

Zuko reached, trying to steal control of the fires before they could hit Suki, but he slipped in the mud again and fell face-fist. He could do nothing but flounder as the fires landed right in front of Suki, cutting her off.

"Enough," a harsh, elderly voice called out. Zuko recognized it—Lady Caldera Yu Gerel?!

The blindfolded Weapon of the Fire Nation?

Zuko peered through the rain with his good eye, and sure enough, Lady Gerel was standing there steaming. She wasn't wearing the formal robes he had only seen her in before now, instead dressed
in thicker and plainer clothes appropriate to traveling on a rainy day. She still had her blindfold on, though, and it was still marked with the painted character for 'dragon.'

Zuko got to his feet and tried to wipe some of the mud off his clothes. "As a Prince of the Fire Nation, I demand to know what you are doing here."

Lady Gerel didn't so much as twitch. "I cannot tell you."

"What? Perhaps you didn't understand. I just issued a royal command."

"I know, Prince Zuko. I am under obligations that prevent me answering you."

Zuko blinked. What kind of obligations? He looked around, and saw the large beast Suki had spotted from the sky- an eelhound, the fastest riding-animal in the world. That explained how Gerel could have gotten here today without borrowing a sky bison. But why Hira'a?

Suki splashed over to stand beside Zuko. "Lady Gerel, I believe. And, evidentially, you're a Firebender."

Gerel didn't turn to face Suki, of course, but she did say, "And you are the bodyguard who has been protecting the Prince. Odd that you would let him make the first strike against an unknown enemy."

Zuko flicked some of the mud off his hands. "Neither friends nor bodyguards let me do anything."

Suki snorted. "Yeah, it's not like he gave me a chance to stop him. But I'm curious, Lady Gerel: you're obviously an excellent Firebender, if you could defend yourself so easily. Tell me, can you make lightning, like Zuko's sister?"

Gerel didn't answer.

Zuko was confused. Why would Suki ask about-

-lightning-

-the merchant had said that the forest fire was started by a lightning storm-

-the fire had destroyed the village-

-ruined his mother's trail-

-and Gerel had refused to answer why she was here.

Zuko's fists clenched again as he whirled to face the Weapon. "It was you. You destroyed the forest! You started the fires!"

Gerel sighed. "I was hoping to avoid this."

It was as good as a confession, as far as Zuko was concerned. "Why did you do it? Tell me!"

"I cannot, Prince Zuko. My obligations still stand."

Those 'obligations' again! What could she mean by that?

The answer hit him like a punch to the gut. "You were ordered to! Someone sent you to do this. Someone who- someone who outranks me!" There weren't many people who could countermand Zuko's royal orders as a prince, and all of them were members of his own family.
Gerel sighed. "Don't jump to conclusions, your highness. As a Weapon, I serve only the Fire Lord, and even when I follow the commands of others, I do so as part of my services to your grandfather. I wouldn't disclose the secrets of the lowliest peasant, if I learned them while doing my duty as a Weapon."

"Then maybe I'll just have to make you tell me." He took a Firebending stance.

Gerel didn't move.

Zuko tried to punch a fireball at her, but even as the flames formed around his fist, Gerel snapped with a grabbing motion, and a chill once again exploded from within his forearm and the flames snuffed out. She caught his now harmless fist, and shoved with enough strength to tip him backwards into the mud again.

As he fell, he saw Suki silently throw a kick at Gerel's head, but the older woman seemed to have started dodging even as the attack was first unfolding. She ducked beneath it and slid a foot out to create a burst of flame that made the mud beneath Suki explode and knock her off her own feet.

Zuko started to get up, but found a wall of flame extending from Gerel's fists to blot out the sky just above him. He let himself drop again and managed to avoid having his face burned off, but boiling drops of rain passed through the flame to pelt him. He rolled as fast as he could out of the way, and above the squelching of the mud heard the sound of flesh striking flesh and Suki crying out.

Zuko finally reached safety and scrambled to his feet, raising his arms in preparation to meet Gerel's next attack-

-but the old woman was just standing there, standing with one leg resting on top of Suki, the buddy boot planted right on her stomach. Yet Gerel wasn't aiming a fist or even a finger at Suki. The Weapon merely nodded. "Both of you need to stop this. You're tired and wet and cold. I can sense your warm blood moving in preparation for your movements before you've even finished the thought. And I- well, I am a Weapon of the Fire Nation. I do not feel the rain if I do not wish it. You cannot win, and I have no wish to hurt either of you."

Zuko let himself slump. Gerel wasn't wrong. "I have to know why you did what you did- who gave you the order."

"This is not something you can beat out of me, Prince Zuko. Please, remember your dignity and honor."

Dignity? Honor? Yes! That was it! "You're right. This is no time or place for a fight."

Gerel's face twitched beneath her blindfold. "What are you-"

"I challenge you to an Agni Kai! Tomorrow at sunset, back at the governor's mansion. If I lose, I will give up on my search. But if I win, you will tell me who demanded the destruction of this village."

"Prince Zuko-"

"You cannot refuse. Suki is my witness. I am calling your honor into question. No true warrior of the Fire Nation should destroy one of our villages, or kill your own countrymen!"

"I did not mean to destroy the village!" Gerel shifted so that Suki was no longer underfoot, and she was finally directly facing Zuko. "I only wanted to destroy the forest! The village- it was an unfortunate bit of collateral damage. But it was under threat from spirits anyway. I might have even saved the survivors."
"Rationalizations! I accuse you of having no honor. Restore it by giving me the name, or let the Fire decide tomorrow in a duel." He glared at Gerel, his one eye against a face with both its eyes covered.

She gave short, sharp sigh. "Congratulations, your highness. You have trapped me. For your own sake, please give up the challenge. I have no wish to kill you, and an Agni Kai is to a death blow, if not death itself. As this village proves, my control is not complete. No one's is."

Zuko shook his head, sending mud and rainwater flying. "You won't have to worry about it on my account. I do not intend to lose."

"Teenagers." Gerel let her shoulders slump. "Then I have no choice but to accept. Tomorrow at sunset, then." She turned and began striding back to her eelhound.

Then she stopped, and without turning, called out, "I can give you one name, your highness: Heiyaoshi. She's the one who manipulated us both into this situation. If you die tomorrow, I will always credit her with the kill."

Gerel continued to her eelhound, climbed into the saddle, and with a twitch of the beast's reins, raced off into the storm.

Zuko stood there in the rain, letting the mud wash off of him. Eventually, Suki came over to him. Zuko hesitated looking at her, afraid of the disapproval he knew had to be in her expression.

But he would not let himself become a coward. He forced himself to turn his remaining eye on her.

Suki, it turned out, was smirking beneath a coating of mud. "Zuko, you're too clever by half."

Well, it was better than being called an idiot.

It might even be true.

Aang was having trouble making sense of the world. He had been sitting in the carriage, watching the exchange of official Fire Nation storybooks outside. There had been a light rain giving a warm humidity to the air.

Now, he was lying on the passenger compartment's ceiling, he smelled burning nearby, and something heavy with both soft and really hard sharp bits was on top of him- no, someone! Mai groaned and pushed herself off of Aang.

He helped her to her knees. "Are you okay?"

She blinked once, and he saw her eyes focus on him. "Yes. You?"

"I think so."

She nodded, and then her eyes flicked elsewhere. "Hige is out and we're on fire."

Aang turned, and found Hige lying in heap on the other side of the compartment- which was upside down. Behind him, what had been the shuttered windows was now a gap covered in flames, like a flaming hoop at a circus, but with more smoke.

Mai said, "You get the governor. Be careful with him. He's not moving."

"Okay. What are you going to do?"
She grinned, drew a pair of razor discs from her sleeves, and lunged straight through the flames.

Yikes!

But she passed through quickly and was lost to sight. She was probably okay.

Depending on what she found out there.

Now that he was focusing, Aang was aware of the sound of echoing cracks coming from outside the carriage. They sounded like explosions of some kind. Was someone attacking? Okay, that was a dumb question. Of course someone was attacking. And the best way to deal with an attack was to not be there!

Aang crawled over to Hige, and was dismayed to find blood streaming down the governor's face. His glasses were gone. Aang searched through the white hair, and sure enough found a large gash. Head wounds bled easily, so it was hard to tell how bad it was, but Hige was out cold. That wasn't good. Still, Aang had to get him out of here.

Rather than go out through the flames like Mai, Aang summoned a thin, tight burst of air and threw it at the shuttered windows on opposite wall. They exploded outward, and Aang heaved Hige onto his back and ran out before the dust and wood fibers could settle.

He emerged into a battlefield in the middle of a village.

Bodies of Fire Nation soldiers were laying everywhere, and the buildings around them were missing chunks. The air shuddered with an explosion every other second, but Aang couldn't immediately tell where they were coming from. He put Hige on the ground and looked around the other side of the carriage, and found Mai and Toph fighting someone in the village square.

Their opponent was a tall figure in a hooded robe, and as Aang watched, Mai threw a group of razors at his head, but the man raised an arm and-

-and the razors bounced off, leaving the sleeve shredded to reveal a forearm made of metal.

Then a beam of light shot out from beneath the hood to strike the ground at Mai's feet.

A second later the spot exploded-

-Mai was tossed into the air-

-Toph raced by on a speeding ramp of stone and caught Mai in her arms.

Aang breathed a sigh of relief. And he was starting to figure out what was going on.

He stretched his arms out and waved them around his body, pulling the air into a swirling wind. It resisted him, so heavy with humidity, but he swept a foot across the ground in front of him at the same speed and added that to the summoning motion. The wind obeyed, forming around him in a swirl.

Then he kept spinning.

More spinning.

One more moment-

Aang pulled his arms in close to his body, shaped an invisible ball with his hands right in front of his


stomach, and stopped his spinning so that he was facing the burning carriage, pulling one of his legs up to fold in front of his arms.

Then he threw his leg and arms out all at once, unleashing the winds he had been gathering like a massive wall. They slammed against the carriage, and for all its weight, it was free-moving and completely independent of the ground that it was resting on, so when the wall of wind hit it, the path of least resistance was to simply let the air give it a push.

A pretty hard push.

And so the carriage flew forward to crash just about where the freaky guy in the robe was standing.

Then Aang called out, "Let's get out of here!"

Because even if he had just gotten a direct hit, the carriage wasn't moving quite fast enough to do major damage against a guy that big, never mind what kind of abilities he might have if he could think explosions at people.

The villagers, at least, seemed to have all vacated the area. Aang didn't spot any soldiers- either the fully armored types who had been part of the security detail or the Home Guard- who weren't lying on the ground. Toph was riding her stone ramp over to him, Mai firmly in hand.

Then a wide cart raced up beside Aang, pulled by roaring komodo rhinos, with none other than Commander Zhao on the driver's bench. The cart was empty, and Aang realized this was what the soldiers of the security detachment had been traveling in all day.

"Get in," Zhao barked.

"What about the village?" Aang said as he lifted Hige again and hopped into the cart.

"I'll send reinforcements," Zhao growled as Toph and Mai hopped aboard. They were still all standing when Zhao whipped the reins, and the rhinos pounded into a run with enough force to knock them all off their feet. Aang twisted so that he wouldn't fall on Hige, and instead wound up landing on both Mai and Toph instead.

None of them seemed inclined to move. Aang was fine with that.

"So," he said, "anyone know what that was about?"

Toph groaned. "I felt the guy stomping up to the village. I think he has a metal foot. He was staring at your carriage and seemed to be concentrating on it. I got all suspicious, so when he shoved his head forward and his heart made this big thud, I lifted a rock shield and tipped the carriage out of the way. So you only wound up getting partially blown up."

"Oh. Thanks." That explained part of the experience, at least. "Why was that guy able to think explosions at us?"

Mai sighed. "You know how I said that Piandao is the most dangerous Weapon of the Fire Nation? This is the guy who doesn't let him get lazy. He has a weird Firebending technique that lets him shoot a ray of light and blow up what it hits. And yes, he's definitely still alive and dangerous, even after getting hit by a carriage."

"What's his name?"

"He renounced it as part of his training. I only know him as the Disciple of the Third Eye."
"Catchy," snorted Toph. "So now someone is trying to kill us."

"Someone," Zhao called back from the front of the cart, "was always trying to kill you. Several someones, probably. Now we're just aware of one more of them."

Aang couldn't argue with that logic, so he just lay there with his friends as Zhao drove the cart back to Hige's mansion.

It was only his second day in the Fire Nation, and already they were dealing with a crisis. But then, that probably shouldn't be a surprise.

TO BE CONTINUED
Fire Meetings

Chapter Summary

Zuko's Agni Kai causes all kinds of trouble. Typical.

Fire Meetings

"This is important news about Zuko." Azula crossed her arms and glared at the guards in front of her father's suite, wishing she had taken the time to put on some makeup and perhaps a touch of combat armor. Making people fear for their lives was all about the proper presentation. "My father needs this information."

The guard, for his part, utterly failed to be impressed by a fifteen year old girl in a robe and ponytail throwing out orders hours before dawn, despite the fact that- and Azula was quite sure on this point- the fifteen year old girl in question could kill him. "I am sorry, your highness. Prince Ozai's orders are very clear. He is not to be disturbed by anyone until he announces in the morning that he is ready."

Azula really did consider killing the man his affront, or at least incapacitating him and stepping on his face a little. She had already cut down loyal Fire Nation warriors in the process of freeing Zuko from Zhao's prison, and one more certainly wouldn't trouble her. However, this particular warrior was operating under Father's orders, and if Azula went against those orders, Father might be upset with her. Azula did not want her father upset with her. This was urgent news, news that demanded immediate attention even though it was still several hours before dawn, but she always did everything that her father commanded.

But Father might also be upset in morning when he found out that Azula had not woken him up to hear this news. Whether she let the matter rest until he could deal with it, or tried to take things into her own hands now, she ran the risk of being disappointing.

This was a dilemma.

Azula normally cherished dilemmas as a chance to exhibit her true genius, but not in the dead of the night after being woken from a dream by a messenger. If only there was some other avenue to Father's-

Oh.

There was indeed someone. This would not be fun, but Azula refused to become a disappointment.

Without a word to the guard, she spun on her bare heel and stalked down the hall of the palace's residential floor. This high up in the tower, only the Royal Family was supposed to be living in the various suites, but as a practical matter, it was helpful to keep a few important servants close at hand. Azula headed for these rooms, almost all unoccupied given the minimal amount of Royal Family available these days, to one particular door.

It was locked, of course.
Azula did not let that stop her, of course.

However, she made a tactical mistake, no doubt due to the obscene hour. The flaming kick that destroyed the door also ruined her night vision, and when the blue fire faded, she was blind for a moment. In that brief time, there was the sound of movement within the room, the whisper of air being sliced by something sharp, and then-

Azula felt the tip of a sword pressed lightly against her throat. She held very still. "It's me, you clod."

"Princess Azula," Piandao said from somewhere in the darkness. "My apologies. You startled me."

The blade was removed from Azula's throat. "Detonating my door made for a rather tense awakening, as I'm sure you can imagine. How can I help you at this late hour? Or perhaps early hour?"

"I'm so sorry an old man like you can't get a full night's sleep, but a messenger woke me up with news that Zuko is going to be fighting an Agni Kai at sunset today against a Weapon of the Fire Nation. Father's guards won't let me pass on the message, and so here we are. Are you going to help me deal with this, or shall I inform my father that you're being even more useless than usual?"

"Consider me at your service." Light exploded into the darkness, revealing Piandao leaning over a small lamp with a pair of sparkrocks. He was like a living shadow in his dark robe as he gestured her into the space. There was little furniture, besides the cot, but the walls were decorated with paintings, and a few shelves on the wall boasted such oddities as a rock, carved wooden trinkets, and even a glass bowl full of what and what seemed to be swimming minnow-frogs. "Who is Prince Zuko's opponent?"

"Lady Caldera Yu Gerel." Azula came in, kicking charred pieces of the door out of the way with her bare feet. "According to a wire from your spy at the Zenmatsu gathering, Zuko went out on a mysterious jaunt with Suki and the Avatar's sky bison. Gerel disappeared at some point while he was out. Zuko came back claiming that he had an official duel, and Gerel confirmed it when she returned. I have no doubt that Zuzu will lose, but we have to keep him from real harm."

"How kind of you to look after your brother."

Azula frowned. "This has nothing to do with kindness. Father will be displeased if Zuko is so much as injured." If only she could speak with Father right now! She'd never tried to visit him at such an hour, and so had never before been refused access. She didn't like it. "How quickly can one of us get transport to Zenmatsu Island?"

Piandao frowned in the lamp light. "I'm not sure. It would certainly be a race, even if a sufficiently speedy watercraft is readily available. But what would we do when we get there? Did Prince Zuko issue the challenge, or Lady Gerel?"

"It was Zuko." No, Piandao was right; Zuzu would never give up a challenge of honor. "Then whoever goes will simply have to kill Gerel."

Piandao barked a laugh. "Just kill one of the greatest Firebenders who ever lived?"

"What, you don't think you can?"

"Oh, I think I would probably win such a fight, but it would not be a quick or easy thing. And then someone would have to explain why a known agent of your father is trying to murder a respected national hero."

Hm, that was a fair point. But if it was a matter of known agents of Father-
Piandao nodded at something in her expression. "I thought so. Prince Ozai was the one who had the Disciple of the Third Eye attack the Avatar."

Azula inhaled sharply in surprise. How did he- "Ah, Lord Zhao. You got a copy of his report."

"Well, he was my friend before he became our spy. But he couldn't tell me why Prince Ozai wanted the Avatar dead."

Azula considered telling him to shut his servant mouth, but really, if he knew this much, a little more information would hardly be a problem. And Piandao already knew many dangerous things. "The Avatar, as well as this runt Earth King and Mai-" She took a moment to forcibly unclench her jaw. "All of them are complicit in this scheme of Uncle's. It's endangering Zuko, so Father decided that they needed to be punished. When we heard from Lord Zhao they were going out without Zuzu, it was too good an opportunity to pass up. Unfortunately, it didn't work, but we'll just have to try again sometime."

Piandao's eyebrows rose at that.

Azula said, "Do you have a problem with Father making use of another Weapon of the Fire Nation?"

"Of course not, your highness. To be honest, my real worry is Prince Ozai's need to punish everyone who so much as looks at Prince Zuko with less than complete fawning. Killing the Avatar might not be the best idea, given what we're hearing about the Spirit problems in the Earth Kingdom. We don't want the same thing here in the Fire Nation. And according to the report I saw, this attack was sloppy. A village was endangered, Governor Hige injured, and the targets all escaped. That is not the type of activity that will be tolerated by the Fire Lord, and it could turn other powers against us."

Azula scowled. She didn't like to hear criticism about Father.

But what Piandao said was logical.

But Father was always right.

But Azula couldn't think of how Piandao was wrong.

So, clearly, both Piandao and Azula were not wise enough to see how Father was, in fact, perfectly correct about the matter.

Then what was the point of even discussing the matter of saving Zuzu from his stupid desire to fight an Agni Kai? If they weren't smart enough to do anything by themselves-

Azula realized that Piandao was staring at her with one of those calculating expressions. She snapped her fingers. "We're getting off topic."

"Well, even the Disciple of the Third Eye might find Lady Gerel a tough target." Piandao looked down at the lamp in his hands. "Her eyes work fine, but she's worn that blindfold for decades. It's allowed her to develop her Firebending so that she can sense all heat around her, and even manipulate it to a certain degree. Again, I think she'd probably lose such a match, but it would not be sure, and it would not be quick. If you could even get in touch with that brute so quickly. However-" Piandao abruptly quieted, staring off into the shadows and stroking his goatee.

"Yes?"

"Well, you're thinking of brute force methods. Prince Ozai favors them, but maybe we can do
something more subtle. Just as the Disciple did yesterday, Lady Gerel once did some kind of favor for your Father—maybe half a year after Zuko was banished—although I don't know the nature. Perhaps she can simply be ordered to forfeit, or blackmailed."

"Unless she's already doing this on someone's orders."

"Well, yes, unless that."

So, Father once made use of Lady Gerel as well? Odd that Azula hadn't known when she had been part of arranging the hit with the Disciple of the Third Eye. But Piandao was aware, even if he didn't have the details. Unless Piandao was lying— but no, he was terrible with falsehoods. He could avoid saying things like a professional, but he could never get an active falsehood past Azula.

So did Father not completely trust her?

But she always did everything he commanded.

Yet, there were times she wasn't even allowed in Father's suite, and she was never offered an explanation. She was stuck here, brainstorming with Piandao while Father was locked away beyond her reach until morning.

Azula's stomach hurt. "We'll just have to be ready to give Father all the options. See what kind of transportation you can arrange. Find out if your contacts know who might be controlling Gerel. I'll look into contacting the Disciple again. If you think of anything else, send word to me. No one sleeps until we talk to Father."

Without waiting for acknowledgement, Azula turned and stalked back to her suite to get dressed. She would just have to prove to Father that he could depend on her and trust her with his secrets.

She had no doubt that she would succeed. Less than perfect was less than acceptable.

Sokka was less than thrilled with how breakfast was going.

He didn't like mornings in general, but when he did have to deal with them, he liked a mix of food and peacefulness. Silence was always good, but a nice conversation like describing dreams or planning the rest of the day could be a good way to get his brain loosened up and ready for a day of being the solitary logical thinker in the group.

This morning, though, was not peaceful. He was eating his Fire Nation fruit bowl at a ‘team meeting’ out in the atrium between their rooms in Hige's mansion, seated on the edge of the fountain. He swatted Momo away from his fruit while Mai and Suki stared each other down in front of the fountain.

"I can't believe you're going through with the Agni Kai," snarled Mai. Her participation in this chaos was especially hurtful, since she usually sided with Sokka in his hatred of mornings.

Seated on Sokka's left, Zuko sighed.

"Well," retorted Suki, "he wouldn't have to if all this stupidity with you Weapons wasn't causing so much trouble." Where, oh where, was that calm and collected demeanor of a Kyoshi Warrior?

Seated on Sokka's right, Aang sighed.

Out past Mai and Suki, Commander Zhao paced back and forth. "Really, backing out of the Agni
Kai would only have political repercussions. Zuko's banishment would still be over, and he'd still be a prince."

"See?" Mai brushed at the long fringe hanging just short of her eyes. "Zuko is just being stupid for sticking with this."

"Oh, now we're listening to Zhao?" Suki snorted. "He's our best friend all of the sudden?"

"Hey!" Mai pointed a finger straight in Suki's face like it was a knife. Maybe Mai thought it was. "You were there when he lit my stomach on fire, remember? I'd gladly shove needles in his eyes, but for now I don't want Zuko to get himself killed."

Suki batted Mai's finger out of the way. "No one wants to see that, but screaming at him isn't going to do anything! You heard Zhao, things are all full of politics now! Your crazy Weapon friends are getting everyone in trouble, and if Zuko backs out now, none of the people we need on our side will respect him! This is your fault!"

Zhao stroked his chin. "Fault is beside the point, but it's true that everyone will think Prince Zuko a gutless worm. Still, as I always say, survival first and then reputation. It's kept me alive, so far."

Mai and Suki ignored him, choosing instead to go back to expounding on Zuko's stupidity and cursing everyone who worked as a Weapon, respectively.

Sokka, Aang, and Zuko all sighed together.

King Toph stomped over from where she had been sharing her breakfast with Appa and kicked the shin of Sokka's boot. "Those two are just going to keep going at it. Either one of you stops them, or I stop them."

Aang and Zuko both stood up, but Sokka popped a square of papaya into his mouth and yanked them both back down to the edge of the fountain.

He stood up and went over to stand between Suki and Mai. When they paused in surprise, he said, "Before we decide who deserves to die for this whole situation, I have a question. What is an Agni Kai?"

Everyone stared at him.

Mai said, "We went over it last night-"

"No." Best not to let anyone else build up talking-momentum just yet. "Everyone's been throwing the words around, and yes, context has made it clear that we're talking about a Firebender duel of some kind, but some of us grew up with enough War in our lives that we didn't need to go inventing extra excuses to kill other people. What is an Agni Kai, why don't we think Zuko's is likely to survive, and why is it such a big deal to give up on the whole thing that Zhao is the only one taking it seriously?"

Silence continued to reign.

The best part was that it was an honest question! When Zuko had come back from his jaunt out to find his mother's grave or whatever, it was Suki who broke the news about Gerel and this 'Agni Kai,' but with everyone so tense after the Sparky Sparky Boom Man who had tried to kill Aang, Mai, Toph, and Governor Hige, there had been a dearth of things like rational discourse or helpful details.

Finally, Zuko stood up. (Good. He hadn't shouted all morning. He was on Sokka's mental Approved
"An Agni Kai is, at the most basic level, a meeting between two Firebenders governed by the spirit of Fire. It takes the form of a combat trial. In the Fire Nation, a clear victory means a fight to the death, but the winner only needs to prove the opportunity to kill the loser. Death isn't actually required."

Zhao harumphed. "But choosing to spare the loser is a message itself. It could be that the victor is too weak to take the kill, or else he is insulting the loser by treating the kill as unnecessary. When I fight an Agni Kai with a subordinate over a contested demotion, it's actually expected that I let the loser live so that he can suffer the indignity."

"Everyone makes a big deal out of an Agni Kai," Mai took up. "People actually think it's a way to resolve feuds, and that's about as tiresome as it sounds. When two Firebenders are mad at each other, they of course need to prove to the world who's better, or just want to fight it out and don't want to be charged with criminal activity. Putting conditions on the outcome isn't unheard of, but it's not all that common. Which should tell you how pointless it is."

Zuko shook his head. "It's not just about legal murder. When conflicts of honor or loyalty arise, an Agni Kai is a way to test which side is most in balance with the element of Fire. That's why only Firebenders can duel. Those who can't Firebend have their own culture of formal trials."

Mai twirled a blade around her finger, and very loudly said nothing.

Sokka decided not to pursue it. He turned to Zhao. "And you said something about political messy stuff?"

"Yes, Tribal, I did. Your whole purpose for being in the Fire Nation is to forward Prince Iroh's plan. Prince Zuko is a needed part of that, but if he backs out of an Agni Kai challenge that he issued, it won't exactly improve his reputation. But he'll still be alive, and just having a representative of Prince Ozai visibly supporting the Avatar is valuable enough by itself."

Sokka nodded. "Don't call me a Tribal. Anyway, it sounds like an easy solution. Zuko drops out, and we get on with our lives of overthrowing tyrants and nearly getting blown up by weird people with metal arms."

Toph pulled a finger out of her nose and examined the tip. "Not that you got blown up yesterday."

"No, but I have a sad feeling it's just a matter of time."

Zuko snapped his hands in a dismissal that left flame trailing through the air. "No! I won't back down. I don't care if I'm risking my life. Even if information about my mother wasn't at stake, Gerel burned down a village of our own people. Lives were lost. She needs to answer for that, or at least the person who gave her the order."

Mai's hands tightened around her blade. Suki groaned. Zhao gave a laugh that was mostly a grunt. Sokka sensed that he was losing the crowd again.

That's when Aang stood up. "I understand. It's your duty as a Prince to look after your family and homeland."

Well, it was as good a lead-in as any. If there was one thing Sokka was clear on, Zuko was never going to back down no matter how much everyone screamed, so it was a matter of finding the least stinky path through the whole mess, a path that would get everyone calm again. "Hey, Zhao, you're not busy today, right?"
"What? I'm in charge of this whole group's security, Tribal. I'm always busy."

Sokka held up a finger. "One, that is a highly offensive term and I ask again that you not use it." He held up another finger. "Two, if you don't, I'm going to hide a strawberry in your armor and send Momo to find it." He held up a third finger. "Three, you're a big bad Firebending master who's fought duels, aren't you? You should be giving Zuko tips, because you've somehow managed not to die despite how much everyone here had been hoping for it at times. You must be good at not dying."

"Me?!"

"Sure. Keeping Zuko alive is part of your security duties, right? Well, making with the securing."

While Zhao stared, Sokka saw everyone else losing their tension.

Suki said, "I could teach some helpful footwork."

Aang raised his hands. "Appa, Momo, and I can cheer you on!"

Sokka clapped his hands. "And I can finish my breakfast! Go, Team Avatar!"

Everyone was still talking as he went back over to the fountain and retrieved his fruit bowl.

It was empty, and Momo was lying in it with an obviously full belly.

Before Sokka could give a proper long-suffering sigh, a blueberry bounced off his head. He caught it before it could fall to the ground, and looked over where Toph was still sitting in the grass.

She held up her own fruit bowl. "I'm done anyway. You earned it, Chief."

Well, how about that?

Unlike poor Zuzu, Azula had no problem with just waiting around for something to happen-provided, of course, that she knew something was indeed going to happen.

She was currently kneeling in the foyer of Grandfather's- Fire Lord Azulon's- suite, waiting for her appointment.

She was fairly certain a happening was about to go.

It had been a busy morning. By the time Father was up and ready to receive visitors, Azula had a full presentation (complete with visuals she could hang from a stand) on the various options they had for saving Zuko from himself. As Piandao changed the various maps and blueprints displayed on the stand, Azula had gone through each option for either trying to reach Zenmatsu Island by sunset or organizing some kind of assault using local forces (including itemized lists of costs). Being able to provide such thorough information to Father was its own reward.

And yet Father had chosen none of those options.

"You did an excellent job, Azula. You've obviously put much thought into this, and I'm proud of how hard you've worked to find a way to help your brother," he had said. But there was no pride his face, just a tightness she hated to see. "Yet I'm afraid that even the best of these options seem tenuous, and this Agni Kai isn't an isolated event. If we interfere with haste, we might be putting Zuko in even greater danger. As much as I ache to help him, we'll have to trust in his perseverance and prepare for what comes next."
Azula had wanted to ask, with a deadpan tone, if she should go ahead and assume she'd be an only child by tomorrow, but the look on Father's face had stopped her. He was plainly worried.

And Azula had failed to help.

But Father was strong, and so he had stood up and said, "We have to identify our enemies and break off their ability to influence events. And we need to bring Zuko back here as quickly as possible. That might bring us into conflict with Iroh's forces, so we need to prepare for that, as well. Piandao, we have much to discuss. Azula, you've been up for hours, forced to deal with this stressful situation without guidance, and I apologize for that. You should take a nap. You know you need the proper amount of sleep to stay healthy."

On the one hand, it was nice to have Father acknowledge the sacrifices she had made for Zuzu. On the other hand, Azula had been dismissed while the grown-ups talked about important matters.

She needed to do something to help. She needed to prove to Father that she could be included. She needed to find a challenge that would force herself to grow as a person, princess, and destroyer.

So, naturally, she had gone straight to make an appointment to see the Fire Lord. And had waited. And waited. And waited. Grandfather was, presumably, a busy man.

The door at the far end of the foyer finally slid open, and Azula looked to find a man walking into the room, followed by the old women Li and Lo. The man wore servant robes, revealing only the skin of his face and hands, but even that much was all covered in blood-red writing. The tattoos were very fine, and Azula recognized on his cheeks a portion of the text of the Nawaphon Hnangsux-specifically, the passage about how all other elements bow to Fire, and even the bones of the earth can melt.

Ah. This would be Mutan of Lower Hu Sin, then.

A Weapon of the Fire Nation and Grandfather's personal advisors. Well, even if she was being screened, at least she was being taken seriously.

The old women kneeled down side-by-side across from Azula, while Mutan took a place standing at attention with his back to the far wall. The Weapon was acting as a guard, then. Azula glanced around the room, and spotted several decorative pieces- a statue here, a vase there, and so on- that could be made of stone, all potential ammunition for an Earthbender. Yes, she was indeed being taken seriously.

Li (or Lo) said, "Princess Azula."

Lo (or Li) said, "What brings you to the Fire Lord?"

Azula smiled. "Oh, I just wanted to talk about this matter with Zuko. It's obvious that Grandfather is behind drawing him into the Agni Kai, but honestly, all these complications are just making trouble for everyone. Wouldn't it be better to reach an accord so we can all get on with our lives?"

Li (or Lo) said, "What makes you think Fire Lord Azulon has anything to do with Zuko's duel?"

Lo (or Li) added, "The Prince has a history of burning in his own fuel."

Ah, a reference to the hilarious 'friendly-fire' incident that got Zuko his scar and ended Father's military career. These sycophants thought themselves so clever. "Please, don't insult me. I'm not here to argue or deliver some kind of formal legal charge. I just wanted to ask what we can do to resolve
this without further difficulty. There's little gain in continuing to antagonize each other, especially with so many Weapons involved. Things could easily get out of hand."

Li and Lo didn't so much as glance at each other, but Azula was sure that the twins would be on the same page. One of them (the one on the left) said, "Prince Ozai was the first to make use of Weapons."

The one on the right continued, "He requested the service of Piandao when he resigned from the Fire Army. Checking his ambitions has led to escalation."

Azula snorted. "Please, you act like Father is planning treason." Why bother when Grandfather was so old that a stiff breeze would probably kill him? Considering Uncle's plan for the Avatar, perhaps it even would be a stiff breeze! "He just wants Zuko back, so that we can serve the Fire Nation as the Royal Family is supposed to, compared to traitors like Uncle Iroh."

Li (or Lo) leaned forward. "That is escalation, too. Assembling a stronger faction here in the Capital, using the son who Ozai burned and let be sent away?"

Lo (or Li) leaned back. "Since when does Prince Ozai care for his son? The Fire Lord thinks it a falsehood meant to lead him astray."

Azula concealed her surprise. She didn't know how to answer that. She couldn't explain how Father had changed his mind about Zuko- how Father had changed so much in general since the banishment. He became more verbal, more willing to offer praise for things other than achievement. He became interested in things besides strength and Firebending. And he decided that he wanted Zuko back, safe and welcome.

Or was it just part of Father's plans? According to Piandao, there were things going on that even Azula didn't know. Could-

Could Father's behavior be part of that?

Was he manipulating everyone?

Was he manipulating Azula?

Well, if he was, then he surely had a good reason. Perhaps she wasn't strong or clever enough. She would have to prove herself, or allow herself to be destroyed in the attempt.

It took a moment before Azula was confident enough to speak again. "Then perhaps what is needed here in the palace is some de-escalation. Surely, a path can be negotiated where Zuko can return and the Royal Family as a whole grows in strength."

Li and Lo both narrowed their eyes. The one on the right said, "The return of Zuko would come with a considerable price."

The one on the left added, "The Fire Lord is eager to learn what you have that will entice."

Azula shook her head. "I am not here to work out a deal just yet. But it is good to know that the Fire Lord is open to such-"

"Azula!"

The sound of Father's voice jolted her spine like a fizzled attempt at Lightningbending. She froze and tensed, her combat instincts coming into play, but the heavy sound of Father's footsteps behind her
cooled her Inner Fire.

Father's hands clamped around her right arm and dragged her out of the room.

He only let go when they were back out in the hall. Azula stumbled to her feet (she would meet the punishment that was sure to come with strength and obedience) and glanced around. There were the Crimson Guards in front of Grandfather's door, of course, and some servants moving around on business. She wished they would all go away.

The guards slid the doors to Grandfather's suite shut as Father whirled on her.

Azula forced herself not to cringe.

Then she saw Father's expression.

He wasn't mad.

He looked terrified.

He pulled her into a hug. "Are you all right? I came as soon as I learned where you were! What were you thinking?"

"I-" Azula blinked. Talking while being hugged felt strange. And she didn'tlike how the guards and servants could see this. She whispered, "You said we had to prepare for what is going to come next for Zuko. Negotiating an end to hostilities with Gra- Fire Lord Azulon struck me as the most efficient course of action."

Father leaned back so that she could see him smile. "You're such a good sister, trying to take care of Zuko like this, but you shouldn't have risked yourself." He lowered his voice and added, "Those old spider-snakes are monsters. I don't want you anywhere near them."

This-

This was because Father was worried about her?

Did he think Azula so weak?!

Or-

Was there more going on than Azula was aware?

More than Father didn't want her to know?

Azula hated having these thoughts.

But she knew she wouldn't be able to serve Father properly until she managed to defeat her doubts. And, in the end, that was all she wanted: to be the best daughter in all of history. "Yes, Father. It will be as you say."

"Good." He finally let her out of the hug, but kept a hand on her back as he guided her back to his own suite in the palace. "I have some thoughts on how we can quickly get Zuko back here, once this business with the Agni Kai is done. I need your opinion on some aspects of the plan. Do you feel up to it?"

"Of course."
She always did everything that her father commanded.
Always.

Sometimes, it seemed to Mai like she was the one who always got stuck cleaning up after all the stupid people in her life.
Always.

She leaned against one of the columns that formed the colonnade circling Governor Hige's whole mansion, watching the small stream of people headed for the large courtyard at the rear of the grounds. It was there that, in about half an hour, Zuko and Gerel would have their Agni Kai. The sun was dipping towards the horizon, and Hige's guests- the other Outer Island governors and staff members and whoever else was currently freeloading- were trading whispers as they hurried to get a good seat.

At least they weren't smiling. The morons were smart enough to know that there wasn't going to be any good outcome to this particular Agni Kai. Even those who might immediately benefit from having either Zuko or Gerel shamed- or worse- could get rolled over in all the drama that was sure to follow.

Said drama could even include a civil war, just because this was the Fire Nation.

Finally, Mai spotted the person she was waiting for. It wasn't one of her friends, or even one of friend-adjacent allies who were part of this conspiracy of Prince Iroh's. No, those were all helping Zuko get ready in some form or another, right down to King Toph advising him that the key to winning a duel was to win, not lose. Mai had quietly excused herself from that, leaving it in Sokka's more or less capable hands to make sure Zuko was on time. And, yes, Mai was trusting Suki to manage things as well. She may not exactly like the Kyoshi rebel, but Suki was competent enough.

No, Mai was waiting for Heiyaoshi.

And Heiyaoshi was passing by, walking all by herself to the Agni Kai, none of the other Weapons in sight. Gerel, of course, would be preparing for the fight, and it seemed that Bangfei didn't feel the need to hang around with the others all the time. Smart of him.

Mai straightened, went over to fall into step with Heiyaoshi, and said, "If Zuko dies, I'm going to turn you into the world's tackiest pin-cushion."

"Tacky?" Heiyaoshi looked over with a frown. "Black is the sacred color of the Blademasters of Kilauea, the color of volcano glass. Volcanoes are what formed the islands of the whole Homeland. They are our ancestors, in a way."

Mai didn't feel the need to get into a theological argument about how elegant styling and a dash of color could enhance the impact of wearing black and that Heiyaoshi looked a walking ink stain. "I'm serious. Your life is on the line with this Agni Kai."

"And what exactly would that accomplish? There's no need to make this personal. I was just doing my duty as a Weapon of the Fire Nation. I am quite fond of Prince Zuko, but a weapon does not choose how a warrior chooses to use it."

"What makes you think this is personal?" Mai didn't even miss a step. "I am a Weapon, too, and everyone knows I don't care about anything."
Heiyaoshi actually smiled. "Then why warn me? If retaliation against me is your duty, then giving me notice will only make it harder for you. A Blademaster of Kilauea thrives on long-term planning."

Hm. Mai hadn't thought about that.

Her thoughts had been wrapped up in the danger Zuko was in and how she was supposed to feel about it. The whole situation made her angry, but she couldn't identify the reason. Sure, Zuko was a necessary part of this whole conspiracy they were running with Iroh, and Aang believed that it was their best shot at starting to fix the world.

But having that threatened shouldn't make Mai actively angry.

The obvious answer, of course, was that she cared for Zuko on some level. That's why she got started on this whole mess, after all, all the way back in the South Pole. But then she formed a real friendship with Aang and Sokka, and later Suki (kind of) and Katara and now maybe even King Toph. And her reunion with Zuko had been terrible, leaving her disappointed in him and angry at how he'd changed. She could work with him for this scheme as long as he wasn't being a jerk, but she knew that her old attachment to him - whatever it was - was gone.

So why was she angry?

Was caring about people not something you could turn off once you started, even if you didn't particularly want to be a part of their lives anymore?

Ugh, that would be the worst.

Of course, Mai wasn't about to share that with a woman who lied and killed for a living. "I'm telling you so that when you start looking over your shoulder every waking moment to see if I have a line-of-sight on you, your employers will be aware of just what a stupid mistake they made. And I'm telling you now on the off chance you can actually do something to stop this, as useless as you probably are. It's not like I had anything better to do."

"Ah. I hope that on some level I don't disappoint you."

Mai stopped, and let Heiyaoshi continue on to the courtyard. Stands had been erected for the audience to sit and observe, and the center of the space was staked off to form a field of battle. Zhao’s guards were stationed around the courtyard, although there weren’t a lot of them. Zhao was running low on soldiers after the attack of the Disciple of the Third Eye. Would Iroh send more as reinforcements?

Mai felt a wind whip at her clothes. She turned and found Aang coming in for a landing, his glider snapping back into a staff, just outside the colonnade.

He trotted over to her. "Was that Heiyaoshi? The Weapon who sent Zuko to Hira'a?"

Mai nodded.

Aang looked over at the makeshift arena, and then back at Mai. "How come you were talking with her?"

Mai shrugged. "Just preparing for the Agni Kai in my own way."

"Oh. Um, were you threatening her?" Aang actually blushed. "It's just that it seems like something you would do."
Mai felt an absurd urge to smile, but successfully denied it. She didn't want to antagonize Aang like that. "Yeah, I told her I'd kill her if Zuko dies. And yes, I was serious. I don't like when people go after my friends, or friend-adjacent allies. Knives are very good at hurting people back, and I'm very good at knives."

Aang looked back over at where Zuko would soon be fighting an Agni Kai. "I know not everyone thinks life is sacred- or, you know, sacred enough not to sometimes want to kill- but trying to hurt other people can hurt you, too. Look what Prince Zuko has gotten into."

Mai blinked. "But earlier you told him you understood why he had to do it."

"I do. But that doesn't mean I don't wish I could change the way he thinks. I just know I can't. But with you-" He turned to her with eyes that seemed to be softer than even his disarming usual. "I really don't want you to get hurt. And I know you can change if you really want to, even if it's hard and kind of messy."

Wow. Quite the commitment he was asking of her. Mai shrugged. "Well, we're on a path that's going to bring us against lots of different enemies. I have an aversion of getting hurt, myself, but I'd rather it be me getting hurt than my friends. And friend-adjacent allies."

Aang sighed. "Yeah. I understand that, too."

And Mai knew he did. "Come on, let's go give Zuko some last words of tiresome encouragement or whatever he thinks he wants from us."

Zuko kneeled on the northern end of the Agni Kai grounds and prepared himself for a fight. He breathed and focused on the feel of the setting sun on the bare skin of his back and arms. He let the silk bolt resting on his shoulders remind him of his status as a recognized Firebender warrior. He let his sister's words, the talk of strategy and strength she had imparted when training him to fight the Avatar, run through his head.

But mostly, he tried to avoid thinking about how worried his friends and allies had looked when they wished him luck and let him go to his battlefield. Suki could barely even talk, she was so clamped down with (presumably) fear.

But Zuko had to fight this duel. He had to avenge his mother's home village. He had to learn why Lady Gerel had been sent to make war on their Homeland, and who had ordered such a thing.

A gong was struck.

The duel had begun.

Zuko inhaled sharply and moved in a rising spin that brought him fully to his feet and gave him enough power and momentum to snap out a punch that blossomed with flame. It wasn't the most respectful or honorable way to begin a duel, but it was probably his only way to win.

He had a brief glimpse of his opponent before the fire consumed his line of sight, and she had only begun to turn to face him. He noted that her arms- surprisingly solid for such an old woman, but not for a Weapon of the Fire Nation- were still at her sides, and while she was wearing the typical female attire for an Agni Kai, she hadn't taken off her blindfold that blood-red cloth with the character 'Dragon' painted on it.

But for now Zuko could only see the fire, and he quickly slid to his right along the edge of the battlefield, hopeful that with flames between them, Gerel wouldn't be able to sense his body heat-
A fireball like a comet came out of nowhere to explode on the ground at his feet. Zuko jumped away from the riot of sound and light and heat, wondering if the fireball had been crafted to be louder and more explosive so that Gerel could keep track of it, or perhaps flush Zuko out of hiding—

No.

Wait.

The fire wasn't fading. Gerel must be maintaining it.

A second explosion came from Zuko's other side, filling his world with fire. It was intimidating, but it hadn't come close to hitting him, and although these fires were being maintained as well, he had little to fear from them. Yes, even a Firebender could be burned- his scar and missing eye were proof enough of that- but not if he worked to prevent it. A simple motion was all it would take to assume control of any flames that got too close, and then he could handle them without fear of injury—

-just like Gerel was doing now as she advanced through her screen of flames. Zuko ducked to execute a sweeping kick that would send his own fire at her feet in a bid to turn her approach—

-but Gerel breathed and the flames around him grew, cutting her off from his sight—

-and Zuko was forced to roll clear as the flames shifted, undulating and whipping around unpredictably. Zuko stood back up and raised his arms in preparation to defend himself from the growing flames, but then they suddenly drew back, only to pulse forward again in certain spots, and then those spots retreated back while others flared and the flares whipped around chaotically before dying to let other sources flow into the same space in the air—

The fire undulated around him, and Zuko felt like he was trapped in a bag while unseen enemies on all sides beat on it with fists and sticks. How could anyone be controlling this with any level of precision? It was too chaotic. His whole world was flames and already he could feel them searing the skin on his arms and shoulders and back and chest and—

Gerel burst out of the fire, twisting and ducking to avoid her own conflagration. Zuko quickly punched a fireball at her, but she twirled just enough to avoid it and continued in her approach, moving quickly despite having to avoid the twisting and lashing inferno—

The Avatar.

She was moving almost like the Avatar, quick on her feet and holding her body in a way that let her turn in an instant while still maintaining full control. It wasn't quite Aang's style; Gerel wasn't holding a solid stance, instead almost weaving like a drunk in a way that would have looked sloppy if not for the fact that every movement kept her just out of the dangerous reach of another flame.

She—

She could see. Or something like it.

Zuko realized that she wasn't controlling the conflagration. She had unleashed the full fury and unpredictability of fire, and she was somehow seeing- or- or sensing each bit of the flames, and reacting to them.

He also realized just how in over his head he was here.

As Gerel approached, Zuko decided that his only hope was to end this as quickly as possible. He jumped at Gerel, summoning his Inner Fire to his left foot and snapping out a kick that would—
Gerel leaned forward, catching his foot with her right hand even before he could build up any flame, and pushed with just enough force to make him land in a backwards stumble-

-a gout of flame lashed at his back, and Zuko couldn't stop himself from crying out-

-an open palm smacked against his head, spinning him around and he couldn't keep his balance and he felt a new heat covering his sweating body-

-flames stabbed at the skin of his bare feet-

-he screamed-

-he fell-

-fire all around him-

-had to find Gerel-

-didn't even know where he himself was on the battlefield-

-too bad he wasn't fighting her in the rain again-

-pain on his arm-

-another whip of fire-

-roll away-

-hands-

-his hands were in the flames-

-he couldn't win-

-he couldn't survive-

-forfeit the match-

-too busy screaming to find the words-

-help-

-enough-

-enough-

-wait-

-someone was screaming, "Enough!"

An explosion of cool air washed over Zuko, dampening his pain for a blissful moment, and he beheld a brief image of a blue glow that was at once searing and comforting, a glow in the shape of an arrow pointing down to two eyes narrowed in anger-

-and then everything went dark.
Aang couldn't not intervene. As soon as he saw Zuko disappear into that storm of flame, and heard the cries of anguish echoing across the courtyard, fear pierced his heart. It was fear for Zuko, yes, and also fear for what Mai would be forced to do if the prince didn't survive. The fear lanced deep enough to carve a path straight into the deepest parts of his self.

And in those deep parts, Aang's past lives could be found.

It was Avatar Roku who screamed a denial of Zuko's suffering, and in that moment, Aang agreed completely. He didn't want to see anyone hurt, not Zuko or Mai or Sokka or Suki or anyone. Yes, he had struggled with hate for Zuko, when he thought Zuko's sister might have killed Appa, and he remembered all too vividly the ambush on Crescent Island. But even hate wasn't enough for Aang to want someone to get hurt.

He didn't need a plan or any fancy tricks. Roku provided the power, and all Aang had to do was slam his hands together and imagine the winds that used to blanket the Southern Air Temple. With the full force of the Avatars of the past behind it, the result was an explosion or air that knocked everyone in the courtyard to the ground and strangled the fire.

Then Aang leaped out over the battlefield, riding the winds to a landing right beside Zuko. The prince didn't move from the ground, and the skin of his bare torso was red and ragged and wet. The sight shocked Aang straight out of the Avatar State, and he was left as just the last Airbender, the center of attention at a well-attended Fire Nation death-duel.

The whole courtyard was silent except for Zuko's ragged breathing.

Then Lady Gerel crawled forward, lowering her head into a kowtow. "I accept the Avatar's declaration of the Agni Kai's conclusion. I decline the opportunity to take further action against my challenger."

Aang blinked. That- that was convenient.

He heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Suki running over to Zuko, leading a man and woman who were carrying bags of supplies. They kneeled around the fallen prince, and as they began to work, Aang realized they were healers. Maybe Zuko would be all right, and they'd avoided disaster and all kinds of bad things! Sure, it wasn't good for Zuko that he had lost, but-

"Is this what we're being asked to support?!" The call was loud and dripping with anger. Aang looked to the audience, and found one man- the governor of Hantaino Island, Aang remembered from the welcoming ceremony and introductions- standing. The old man looked around at the other spectators scattered and knocked down by the wind blast. "Even if we take the Avatar's action as legal, is this who we're to count on to save the Fire Nation? A boy who doesn't have the strength to control his power? A child who will fly into a- a glowing cursed rage whenever one of his friends is hurt?"

Aang shrugged. "Well, who doesn't want to help their friends?"

Apparently, a lot of Fire Nation big-shots, because the various governors, politicians, and important people all looked less than convinced as they untangled themselves from the stands.

One woman in some fancy clothes said, "He couldn't even protect Governor Hige, despite his power! At least we know the limits of the Fire Lord's strength."

Another voice added, "And the Fire Army is exploring those new metals for use in the colonies-"
"My esteemed countrymen," Lord Zhao interrupted, hurrying over from where he had been observing with the guards. He was still straightening his robes as his steady voice carried clearly over the courtyard. "I heartily encourage discussion about the opportunities available to you, but this is not the place. A glorious Agni Kai has been fought here, and as- ah, unorthodox as it may have ended, we should respect that. The governor's staff tells me that dinners will be available to be served in your rooms, soon, and it will be much more comfortable to meet in smaller, more orderly groups. Please, let us retire from this place with respect and decorum."

Aang heard some grumbling from the spectators, but it quickly faded and they all began leaving, filing out of the courtyard and into the colonnade that would lead them back to their rooms. He glanced back and saw that Zuko was being carried away on a stretcher, observed by Lady Gerel, but before Aang returned to his friends, he hurried over to Lord Zhao. "Um, thanks for that. It seemed like it was about to get ugly."

Zhao the Younger approached from behind Aang, and it seemed like he was sneering less than usual. "Yes, Father, that was well done. It seems that you're not completely compromised."

Lord Zhao's face was as expressionless as Mai's usually was. "I have my own ties, but I am still responsible for organizing this gathering, and I will not accept a riot on the field of an Agni Kai. Thank you both for your appreciation, but if I may be so bold as to offer a bit of insight, you have much more important things to worry about."

Commander Zhao nodded. "True. At this rate, we're going to have the leadership of the Fire Nation completely turn against us, and I'd say we're about a week out from the first assassination attempts from the governors. I dread the report I'm going to have to make to my commanding officer."

Aang knew that the younger Zhao was referring to Prince Iroh.

By saving Zuko, had he completely messed up his whole reason for coming to the Fire Nation? To the point that more people were now going to try to kill him and his friends?

Oops.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Slippery Paths

Chapter Summary

Sometimes, the right path is the most dangerous. Actually, it pretty much always is.

Slippery Paths

"You seem stressed," Iroh says. "Here, have some tea."

The liquid in the cup glows with pale reflected light not unlike the glow of the moon, but it's not really moonlight. The forest all around this little clearing is luminous, the trees themselves glowing like ghosts beneath the stars.

Aang takes the cup, and can’t help but smile. "You treat tea like it's the fix for everything."

"Perhaps I do." Iroh takes a sip from his own cup, and his eyes crinkle with amusement. "I will consider other paths when I finally encounter a difficulty that tea can't solve. I'm sure it will happen someday."

Aang wants to laugh, but his latest problems come to mind all too quickly. Instead, he tries the tea, and finds the flavor to have a touch of sweetness that is indeed soothing. "I just don't know what to do. Governor Hige is still unconscious. Last night, Sokka, Mai, and I put together a list of the people who might be friendliest to us, and I'm going to meet with them today to see if I can get them to help me, but everyone seemed really upset with the way I ended Zuko's Agni Kai. I'm scared that I won't be able to talk to them right."

Iroh nods. "The Fire Nation today is a land that puts more weight on action than words. That can be a good thing, but only when actions are interpreted properly. Without that understanding, it becomes a land that just reflects each person's own biases."

"So what can I do?" Aang finishes his tea.

"Well, young Avatar, we are unfortunately left with having to play by the rules of the game we have joined. Certainly, meet with your potential allies, and I hope you find the words that will bring them to your side. But if that doesn't work, then you must find the action that will provide what the rulers of the Fire Nation want to see, but also guide them to a new view of what we want to show them." Iroh sighs, and puts down his tea. "I know; that's not as specific as you would like. I will think on this, and we can talk again when one of finds the answer."

Aang bows his head, and Iroh bows back.

Around them, the light of the ghost-trees reach a new height of brightness-

Aang’s eyes struggled open to find the sun shining down on him through a pair of windows. He tried to move, but he was constricted. Was he trapped? Had he gotten lost in the forest? Was he-

No, he had been dreaming. He was in his room in Governor Hige's mansion on Zenmatsu Island, and the sheets of the bed were twisted around him.
Or had he been dreaming? Had that been a real conversation with Prince Iroh in the Spirit World? Iroh said he could reach people through dreams, and it had been in a dream that he had passed on directions for finding Tyro and Haru's secret Earthbending village.

Aang had thought it was neat, when Iroh first revealed that, but now he just felt uncertain. He didn't really like the idea of getting visits in his dreams from uninvited guests. It made it really hard to keep track of what was real.

But it's not like it made much of a difference right now. Aang still had some tough work to do today, and even though he knew what he wanted, he had no idea how to get it.

But then, Air Nomads didn't let a thing like uncertainty stop them. He untangled himself from his sheets and hopped out of bed. The best way to start the day was with food and friends, and as bad as things were right now, he still had both of those right nearby.

---

Zhao found that running a security detail wasn't much different than captaining a ship. Yes, all of the duties were completely different, but the nature of the jobs were the same—there was always some little task that needed to be completed, he was responsible for everything even when he was asleep, and disaster was always just one whim of nature away.

Also, he understood maybe half the orders he was expected to execute.

Zhao was making his way through breakfast when one of the soldiers under his command—one of the marines assigned by Prince Admiral Iroh to his mission—came into the apartment in Governor Hige’s mansion that Zhao was using as an office. She said, "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Zhao nodded towards the shin-high cage that sat in the corner of the room, as well as the angry creature shuffling around inside of it. "Take that outside somewhere without letting the Avatar or any of his companions see you. Set the creature free, and make sure it doesn't follow you or come back here."

The soldier blinked. "Uh, sir?"

"These are part of a package of orders that came straight from Prince Iroh last night by wire." Zhao polished off the last of his sweet congee. "If necessary, I expect you to give your life to keep the Avatar's group from finding out that we had their lemur in a cage since an obscene hour of the morning."

The soldier bowed. "Sir!" She went over and took the cage by the handle built into the top, prompting the lemur bat-thing within to screech at her, and was soon off on her very important mission.

Zhao had no idea why he had been woken up last night to send some of his soldiers off into the city to buy that cage, or why they had to lure the lemur creature with bits of fruit and trap it while the Avatar slept. But the orders had come from Prince Iroh himself, and considering that they were in response to the report of Prince Zuko's near-disastrous Agni Kai, Zhao felt that it could have been worse.

And, at least, it was now over. Zhao set off to do the morning inspection, and then afterward he should probably make sure that the healer procured for Prince Zuko wasn't a disguised assassin. It would be a bit too humiliating for one of Zhao's most important charges to die because was he was overseeing the temporary capture of a child's pet.
At some point in the night, Zuko had lost his awareness of the pain.

It took him a long time to wake up, but as soon as he started to feel an inkling of awareness, he could not let himself succumb to sleep again. He had to know what was going on. He fought his way back to consciousness, slowly coming into new sensations- soothing coolness against his skin, a sharp but familiar odor, constricting cloths that kept him in place, a whispering whose meaning was just out of reach. At last, he opened his good eye, and looked around.

A man in the robes of a healer was leaning over Zuko, moving hands gripped around small candles over his Qi-lines and whispering a chant. They were in Zuko's room in Governor Hige's mansion. The healer met Zuko's gaze and paused in his chanting to say, "Do not disturb your bandages. I will change them and reapply the ointment later."

Ah, that explained the odor. Zuko was familiar with the Red Ointment used for burns and other injuries. It was made from different mixes of herbs, with the most prominent ingredients giving it a red color. Perhaps if Zuko had taken some more of it with him into his exile-

He nodded his agreement to stay still, and the healer returned to his quiet chanting.

But the exchange was apparently enough to disturb someone. There was a startled movement, and Zuko looked to find Suki waking up in a chair near his bed. Her eyes twitched to take in the scene before settling on Zuko. "Oh. How are you feeling?"

That's when Zuko realized that he wasn't wearing his eyepatch. He tensed at the thought of Suki seeing him like this, but then he remembered that she'd seen his empty socket before. It didn't bother her, apparently. "I'm not hurting. What happened?"

"Avatar Aang saved you. He used his Avatar power to Airbend the flames away, and declared the Agni Kai to be over. Um, you lost, but Gerel submitted to Aang and let you live. So that's good!"

Zuko appreciated her effort, but let his eye drift closed. "I failed. Gerel will never reveal who sent her to Hira'a, now." He had no idea how else to pursue his mother's fate, or to unravel the mystery of why a Weapon of the Fire Nation would be sent to destroy a Spirit Forest. Why risk creating ashlands right here in the Fire Nation? "Well, nothing to do now but continue to help the Avatar. Maybe if I stay watchful, I'll catch something-"

Suki's expression twisted, and Zuko's voice died to let the quiet chanting of the healer fill the space. Something was wrong.

Finally, Suki said, "Aang is going to need help, once you're recovered. They said your burns should heal without scars if you keep them clean and use plenty of ointment, and in a few days you can--"

"What," Zuko interrupted, "is the problem with the Avatar?"

Suki winced. "Saving you- it kind of upset a lot of the Governors. Aang is going to try to meet with some of them today to see if they'll support him, but if things don't go well, he might have to leave the Fire Nation as an enemy."

Oh.

So Zuko hadn't just failed at finding his mother. He had ruined Uncle's plans as well.

He could have let the mysteries about Mother go. He could have tried to handle it like Azula instead of declaring an Agni Kai.
But no, he couldn't. Not as he was. He knew himself that well, at least.

For once, Mai had gone into a meeting with a bunch of stuffy nobles and administrators with no fear whatsoever of being bored.

That was not the good thing she would have expected before getting caught up in Aang's life.

The others were already gathered when Mai and Aang arrived in the mansion’s dining room. A line of ten people in red silks kneeled in a row on the same side of the table, ages ranging throughout adulthood but all of them wearing an expression of disapproval that reminded Mai of her parents. She wondered briefly what Mother and Father would think of Aang, if they ever met him.

(They’d probably either sell him out to Azulon or else urge Mai to marry him, depending on whose side they were supporting at the moment.)

Sokka and King Toph had wanted to come along to this meeting, and Mai would have welcomed their practicality, but there was no helping it. Last night, Aang had sent a written request for a conference with the ten governors who he guessed would be the most receptive to Avatar-groveling, and the reply specified that he and his Weapon advisor were welcome to an audience. She supposed that no one wanted to tell a Weapon she wasn't welcome, but bringing along a pair of extra (foreign) advisors probably wouldn't be the best way to kick things off.

When she and Aang had taken their places kneeling on the opposite side of the table from their hoped-for allies, Governor Leiko (the lady who had brought frozen sugar treat delicacies for the big welcoming banquet the other night) began by sliding a piece of paper across to Aang. "These are the names of everyone challenging you to an Agni Kai, Avatar. These include governors, merchants, nobles, and several servants and bodyguard acting as proxies for masters who aren't Firebenders."

Mai, of course, kept her expression blank, but she did start calculating angles on various critical tendons for all of the ten governors on the opposite side of the table.

Aang just blinked. "Um, can you say that again?"

Leiko tapped a single finger on the sheet of paper. "This is actually the easy way of handling things, Avatar. My compatriots and I wanted to give you a fair chance to address our concerns, and what better than testing your attunement to the Great Element?"

Aang leaned back and scrunched his nose. "Um, I can think of all kinds of better ways than challenging me to death duels. Look, the reason I asked to meet with you is because I think we can talk this out. If I could just explain and get us all on the same side, then we could go to the other governors and maybe fix this before anyone gets too mad."

Mai had to suppress a wince. A few days of hanging out in the Fire Nation had apparently not made Aang into a master politician yet, given how he just went and announced his agenda. But then, he had been hanging out with Zuko and Toph, so of course his sense of subtlety would have atrophied. To be honest, Mai herself probably wouldn’t do any better. She’d just sound bored while being blunt, but at least she'd be self-aware about it.

Leiko actually smiled. "That's the hard way you're describing, Avatar, and you'd never convince everyone. But if you win Agni Kai matches against your challengers, then the truth and justness of your actions in Prince Zuko's favor will be unquestionable. And such a display would win you quite a bit of favor."

"But I'm not a Firebender!"
Mai said, "The Avatar means that while he definitely has the ability to Firebend, his training has only just begun and accepting an Agni Kai at this point would be an insult to the challenger."

Aang nodded. "Yeah, that."

Leiko dipped her head in an acknowledgement. "Then we seem to be at an impasse. Lady Gerel might have accepted your interference, but how can we see it as anything but disrespect for our culture? The Fire Nation admires strength, Avatar Aang, and not only did you stop a contest of strength meant to settle issues of honor, you did so on behalf of an ally who shown a considerable lack of strength so far."

Aang's frown reflected how Mai would have reacted, if she were in the habit of wearing her emotions on her face. He said, "But he finished that quest to find me and bring me to the Fire Nation."

"A point in his favor, yes." Leiko looked around at the other governors, and didn't speak again until she had gotten nods from each of them. "However, Prince Zuko was banished in the first place when his cowardice ruined his father's bid to conquer Ba Sing Se. While he was clever in bringing you to the Fire Nation without violence, it's still clearly not what the Fire Lord meant. And now losing this Agni Kai with such a poor showing-"

"Against," Mai interrupted, "a Weapon of the Fire Nation."

Leiko continued, "A show of strength is needed from your faction. The Fire Lord is strong, and he has no compunctions about projecting that strength."

Mai looked over at Aang, and found him staring at the paper with all the names of his challengers. His shoulders sagged, and she didn't miss the moisture accumulating at the corners of his eyes. He must have really thought he could fix this problem just by talking.

But then, he'd only been in the modern Fire Nation for a few days now.

Mai reached out and took the paper away from him. She noted that there were two columns of names. "There are too many challengers here to properly accept any offers. The Avatar needs time to review each name, decide which if any will offer an honorable opportunity to settle this issue, and then prioritize the matches he accepts. I suggest we end this meeting, and the Avatar will send further word when the time is appropriate."

Leiko gave a short bow. "That is reasonable. Thank you for hearing our words."

Mai bowed back. "Thank you for giving us the opportunity to listen." Jerk. She rose and pulled Aang along with her.

She had hoped he would stay quiet until they got back to their rooms, but they were barely out in the hall before he said, "I'm not really going to fight all those people, am I?"

"I don't know. I just said that to get us out of there without insulting those morons." She let go of his arm. "I'm your expert on Fire Nation culture, not a politician."

Aang actually perked up at that. "Maybe we can talk to Zuko about it! Princes are politicians, right? Maybe he'll know a way to get out of fighting. Just because he chose to get into a stupid fight doesn't mean he had to, right?"

Mai decided not to say anything. Let Zuko be the one to disappoint him.
It was a warm, gloomy, rainy day, and Katara loved it.

A bell clanged to signal a break in the work shift, and Katara closed the latch on the equipment box she had been restocking. Out here on the deck of the Fire Nation warship, light raindrops—so small that instead of falling they were driven sideways by a breeze—ticked the skin of her face and hands. She risked a brief look up at the sky, but there was no emptiness to worry her. A sprawl of gray clouds extended out in all directions, hiding even the position of the sun.

It was fairly light weather, out here on the ocean. Katara still hadn’t experienced a true storm yet, but this kind of rain was welcome. Even working, she could practice feeling the water around her, letting her senses extend through her soaked clothes and out to the rain-filled air while she focused on whatever task was at hand. Master Pakku was still training her with the blindfold and the pool, as well as teaching her the Waterbending forms of the Northern Water Tribe, but Katara wasn’t going to just rely on him. She wanted this for herself, and would pursue it with all her strength. She *would* bring the element of water into her heart.

For now, though, it was time to rest.

Katara passed back into the interior of the ship. Since getting out onto the open ocean, they had sailed north on a task for Prince Iroh. With no witnesses around, all of the Waterbenders were now allowed above decks during the day, and Katara had been happy to move to a day shift. Although the moon was a comforting source of power, she didn't want to have to rely on darkness. She wanted to build up the strength to face the bright sky of the day, and maybe go outside one day without a hat on.

Then she would have finally escaped from that cage on Crescent Island.

Plus, Ty Lee much preferred the day shifts, and Katara wanted to accommodate her friend.

Katara reached the stockroom that had been converted into their cabin and opened the door. "Hey, what did you bring to eat today?" Ty Lee was working in the ship's galley, and she had taken to bringing food back to their cabin that they could share while they talked and enjoyed a break from the otherwise all-male crew. Katara was hoping that today there was—

—there was—

—there was a young man standing in the cabin.

Ty Lee was standing next to him, and she whirled in a flutter of her Airbender nun robes to face Katara with wide eyes. "Oh, uh, hi! I didn't know the shift had ended. Um, I, uh, *this isn't what it looks like!*"

Katara frowned. "Really? Because it looks like you have a stowaway in our cabin who nearly got me killed once. Right, Jet?"

Jet— for it was indeed him— winced. "Your name is Katara, right? I really am sorry for that. If there was any other way to make sure the Avatar got safely off of Crescent Island, I wouldn't have—"

"Don't care," Katara interrupted. Apologies were nice and all, but she very clearly remembered how this guy had drawn swords and blocked her way onto the ship Sokka had brought to Crescent Island, preventing her and all of the other newly-freed Waterbenders from escaping the exploding volcano. Jet had declared that no one would be leaving until the Avatar was safely aboard the ship, and the fact that he had changed his mind when that Firebender girl had attacked and acted as rearguard for their escape didn't make up for the first impression.
At least, not for Katara.

Ty Lee, though, sighed with relief. "Oh, good. I thought you assumed he was my boyfriend or something."

"No, I recognize him."

"He's not my boyfriend, for the record."

"Okay."

"I don't even have a boyfriend."

"I figured."

"I'm not dating anyone."

"Ty Lee-" Katara stepped fully into the cabin and closed the door. "I want a real explanation for this. Please, tell me why Jet is here."

"Sure." Ty Lee smoothed out her robes and shrugged. "It's not much of a story. I noticed that some of the food supplies have been going missing, and I was afraid that it was some cute elephant-rats, and if someone saw them, they'd get tossed overboard or hurt or something. So I went looking the other day in the really deep parts of the ship, and I heard sounds that definitely weren't little feet skittering, so I-"

"So you found a stowaway," Katara cut in.

"Yeah."

Jet gave a little laugh. "She gave me a good chase, but it made sense when I realized she's an Airbender." He turned a smile on Ty Lee. "Good thing you're just as kind to Earth Kingdom spies as you are to elephant-rats."

Ty Lee rolled her eyes but smiled. "See, Katara? He's working for that cute King Toph. She sent him to look out for us on our mission, since we don't really know all that much about this Master Pakku guy, so-"

"No, he isn't."

Ty Lee blinked and looked at Katara. "I thought we just met Master Pakku?"

Katara groaned. "I meant that Jet isn't working for King Toph. Well, he was, but she wouldn't have sent him like this in secret. We're probably in more danger with him here than if it was just us."

Jet stepped forward. "Katara, I-"

She snapped an arm out towards him, and all of the water soaked into her clothes and beaded on her hat jumped out into the air and flew towards him. It wasn't a lot of water, but it was enough to knock him back against the wall with the porthole, and as he slipped to the floor, Katara breathed and lowered her hand, freezing the water so that he would be wrapped in a band of ice. He could probably break through it, but it would delay him for a crucial moment if he tried to attack.

Katara put her hands on her hips and leaned over him. "My brother told me all about you. About how you pretended to be a friend, but you were secretly terrorizing Mai in a blue goblin mask. He told me how you were found out and thrown in a brig, but you broke out and killed your former
friends so that you could control whether Aang got safely off of Crescent Island. I want to know the real reason you're here."

Ty Lee actually growled as she stepped over to stand beside Katara, glaring down at Jet the whole time. "You were mean to Mai, huh? I don't think I'm your friend anymore."

Katara nodded with satisfaction.

Jet shivered, but managed to put his smile back on. "Look, I won't deny that I've done some hard things. My homeland was conquered by the Fire Nation. Firebenders killed my parents. I've seen people oppressed and tortured and made into slaves. So yes, I've fought back as hard as I can. Your friend Mai was lying to the Avatar at the time, and I was briefed that she was tied with the Fire Nation's Royal Family. I was told that the Avatar might be the world's only hope, so I when I had to choose between hurting some good people or making sure that the last hope survived his mistakes, I made the practical decision. I don't feel good about everything I've done, but I never made those decisions without knowing what they really were."

Katara glanced over at Ty Lee. The other girl's gray eyes and white-gold robes revealed no clue about her Fire Nation origins. Katara had no desire to argue with Jet, not after having lived the last decade of her life in a Fire Nation cage, but she would never trust such an extremist. "None of that explains why you're here."

Jet nodded. "I didn't just come up with the idea of putting on a blue goblin mask. The same people who told me about Mai's background gave me that mask. I was part of a- well, it's basically an Earth Kingdom resistance. Or that's what I thought. The Blue Spirits are warriors who work for a group of wise men called the White Lotus. The master of the White Lotus is a powerful, sacred man. He sends orders to the Blue Spirits in dreams, directing us to preserve balance and save the world from the Fire Nation. He sent me to investigate a hidden village where fugitive Earthbenders were finding shelter, and while I was there he told me that the Avatar would be coming soon, and that I should protect him at all costs."

Katara's jaw was hanging open. Dreams? But from what Aang said, that was how Prince Iroh contacted him! So- so Prince Iroh was the leader of a secret, extremist resistance against the Fire Nation?

Jet continued, "When I was captured by Fire Princess Azula, the White Lotus sent help to rescue me. I was saved by a group of Waterbenders- the same Waterbenders who eventually showed up to help the Avatar at the Ba Sing Se ashland. I was assigned to work with King Toph at the time, but now I wonder if I wasn't just there to watch for the Avatar's arrival again."

Katara stepped back and crossed her arms. "And now what? Aang went to the Fire Nation."

"Yes. I was probably supposed to go with him, but I started taking sleep draughts every night after that Commander Zhao arrived with this whole crazy deal. I didn't want to risk dreaming. If Prince Iroh is the one in charge of the Waterbenders, and he meets with the Avatar in dreams, then he has to be the master of the White Lotus, right? All this time I've-" Jet's face grew tight. "I've been working for the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation."

Ty Lee's eyes went wide, and she started to say something, but Katara quickly held up a hand to stop her from speaking. If she knew Ty Lee, then the other girl was about to let slip something that would give her away as an old friend to the Fire Nation's Royal Family.

Once she was sure Ty Lee got the message, Katara moved her hands outward to melt the ice holding Jet in place, letting the water splash to the floor. "So you snuck aboard to find out what's really going
on. Me and Ty Lee being here is a coincidence."

Jet nodded, sitting in his puddle. "Down in the brig, they have that guy who summoned the monster at the Ba Sing Se ashland. Long Feng is his name. Most of the crew doesn't even know he's aboard. I don't like it when Fire Nation princes are keeping secrets. I want to find out what's going on. I want- I need to find out what I've really being working for all this time."

Long Feng was on this ship?! Master Pakku had to know about it, right? There was a Fire Nation captain and crew, but Pakku was the one getting orders from Iroh and acting in charge. Could the Fire Nation soldiers be hiding it from him? Was there a way Katara could find out? Her first instinct was to go ask Pakku directly-

No. There was no way that was a good idea.

"Okay," Katara said. She looked again at Ty Lee, and while those gray eyes were strong and supportive, they offered no answers. Katara took off her hat and threw it on the bed, and then turned once again to Jet and pointed at him. "I still don't trust you. You are to stay away from me and Ty Lee, or I'll throw you overboard myself. You don't come near us, you don't try to send or leave us messages. If you get caught by the rest of the crew, we'll say we don't know you. If you try to claim anything about us, I'll do whatever it takes to prove that we have nothing to do with you. Do you understand?"

The beginnings of a smile twisted the corner of Jet's lips. "But you're not going to stop me if I behave."

Katara sighed. "For what it's worth, Sokka believed that you really were trying to help Aang, in your own disgusting way. I won't tolerate anything Sokka wouldn't. But maybe you can be useful." She turned to Ty Lee. "Would you please help sneak him out of here? And pretend that elephant-rats really were eating that missing food?"

Ty Lee nodded. "I'm with you."

"Good. Thanks." And they would definitely be speaking more about this later, once they were alone and had the time.

Katara just hoped she was doing the right thing.

It seemed that Sokka and Aang and Mai and all the others needed her sooner than she'd expected.

Aang walked into Zuko's room and gave his biggest smile. "You're looking pretty good! Aside from all the burn marks, I mean. But they'll probably heal cleanly, so that's fine." Then he remembered the scar on Zuko's face and the missing eye. "Uh, I mean-"

Mai saved him once again by holding a hand out in front of his face. "Aang means that it's nice to see you not dead. And I suppose I agree."

Suki, sitting over by Zuko's bed, groaned. "Don't you ever just relax and act human?"

Aang tensed, afraid that an argument was about to break out, but Mai just said, "This is me relaxed and acting human. I'm pretending when I smile and speak politely."

Suki sighed.

Zuko, lying down with some pillows behind his back to prop him up, made a dismissive gesture.
"Well, uh, I'm glad you both came."

"Great!" Aang skipped over to Zuko's bed. "Are you comfortable? Are they giving you good medicine?"

Zuko nodded. "This ointment they're putting on me is very good for burns. It takes away the pain and promotes healing. The bandages just need to be changed a few times a day to prevent infection." He reached his hand up towards his face- towards his eyepatch- but then shook his head and let his hand fall again. "I'm being treated well. And I owe my survival to you, Avatar."

Aang smiled. "Thanks, but we don't know that Lady Gerel really would have killed you. I just didn't want to see you getting hurt."

Zuko pushed himself up so that his face was level with Aang's. "No, Avatar. Gerel unleashed great power, and there was a good chance I would have been too injured to recover before she even realized it. My life was in real danger, and it was your assistance that ensured my survival." Aang was about to try to brush it off again, but Zuko continued, "After our past conflicts and what I've cost you, that you acted against your own best interests to save me is a great gift. You have an honor worthy of respect, and I regret even more now the way I tried to treat you."

Aang had to break Zuko's gaze, and he twiddled his fingers together out of a need to move around in some way. Zuko's words were really nice, but Aang didn't think they were true. Yeah, he didn't want Zuko to get hurt, but there had been that confrontation he witnessed between Mai and Heiyaoshi, where Mai threatened to kill the other Weapon if Zuko died. And there was Zuko's part in Prince Iroh's plan to set the Fire Nation on the right path. Aang didn't think his own motives could be very pure with all those other concerns in his mind, especially when it was the fear for Mai that had pushed him into the Avatar state.

All he could say was, "That's too much."

Once again, Mai came to his help, stepping over and dropping herself into a free chair. "If anyone wants to return the favor, Aang has officially been handed his own Agni Kai. Everyone offended by his jumping in has issued a challenge."

Mai nodded. "But there's no one who was technically in charge of your Agni Kai, so it's a free-for-all. Gerel isn't making a challenge, so she can't represent everyone's problems. This is Governor Hige's mansion and so he owns the Agni Kai grounds, but he's been out of it since the Disciple of the Third Eye tried to blow us up. Lord Zhao is in charge now, I guess, but he's staying out of things. So there's nothing stopping everyone from stepping all over each other to challenge Aang."

Zuko blinked. "They can't do that! All those matches for the same offence? That's not right!"

Mai nodded. "But there's no one who was technically in charge of your Agni Kai, so it's a free-for-all. Gerel isn't making a challenge, so she can't represent everyone's problems. This is Governor Hige's mansion and so he owns the Agni Kai grounds, but he's been out of it since the Disciple of the Third Eye tried to blow us up. Lord Zhao is in charge now, I guess, but he's staying out of things. So there's nothing stopping everyone from stepping all over each other to challenge Aang."

That was interesting. Aang rubbed a hand over his scalp as he thought. "So could we get a magistrate or someone to sort everything out?"

Zuko leaned back into his pillows again. "Probably. But then you'd still have to fight at least one Agni Kai, and all of your challengers would get to pick a representative. What if they pick a Master? Gerel probably wouldn't do it, but she's far from the only dangerous Firebender out there."

Mai nodded. "It's classier than I expected of everyone. It's still an assassination attempt, but it's a very neat and legal one. I guess some of them really do like Aang."

Suki snorted. "I'd ask if you're joking, but if Zuko's sister is what these people aspire to be, then I can
believe it."

Aang couldn't help but shudder at the thought of the Blue Fire Girl who had thrown lightning at Appa. "With my luck, they might even pick her to fight me."

There was real pain in Zuko's voice as he said, "And she might do it, too. No, we need to find another way around this problem. I'll have to think about it. I don't- I'm not really good with politics like this."

So much for Zuko being a trained politician. Despite all the trouble, Aang couldn't help but smile. "It's almost like we're a bunch of kids in way over heads."

Zuko grimaced. "I'm almost eighteen! I've been of age for a year now!"

Suki smirked. "On Kyoshi Island, we come of age at sixteen. So I might not be quite seventeen yet, but we've been adults for the same amount of time. We're contemporaries."

"Ah," Mai drawled, "the fascinating complexities of international cultures. I don't suppose Aang being a kid will help us with the Agni Kai situation?"

Zuko shook his head.

Mai stood up from her chair. "Well, then, I'm bored. I'll see you all later."

Aang shuffled over to block her path. "You're not upset because you and I are the only kids here, right?"

Mai regarded him with narrowed eyes. "Who says I'm a kid? I don't recall telling you my Dawning Day." Then she brushed past Aang and left.

Huh.

Mai could be seventeen?

He turned back to Zuko and bowed. "Um, I should go with her. I'm glad you're doing okay. Get better soon!" Then he dashed out after Mai.

She was waiting for him out in the hall, leaning against the wall. "Don't worry, I wasn't leaving you."

"Oh, good." Aang straightened his clothes and did his best to look like he hadn't just been running. "I mean, I knew that."

"I was just teasing you, you know."

"Of course." Aang wasn't sure if that meant she was kidding about being of age, and wasn't sure he wanted to ask. He still wasn't quite thirteen yet, and Air Nomads didn't draw a clear line between childhood and adulthood like the other nations did. Age wasn't as important as earning arrow tattoos, or securing the chance to lead a Reflection Gathering, or having a sky bison partner becoming a parent. Aang had his tattoos, but those other opportunities had been lost with all the other Airbenders. Maybe he could adopt a home and come of age in that culture. He liked the sound of Kyoshi Island making people adults at sixteen-

No, wait, first he had to get through this Agni Kai business. Then he could think about how to twist laws to his benefit in other ways.
Mai poked him. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I just- there's a lot of things that I need to think about."

Mai stared at him as she ran a hand through her hair. "Don't they say that the best way to come up with new ideas is to get your mind off of them for a while?"

"Do they? Monk Gyatso liked to take breaks." Aang frowned as he thought back to how Monk Tashi got mad at Gyatso over a little thing like letting Aang play some Pai Sho after finishing his practice, and High Monk Pasaang even wanted to send Aang away to the Eastern Air Temple over it. "But the other Elders didn't really like that."

"Well, I don't know, I think I just heard it somewhere. Either way, I'm saying we're taking a break right now. I'm going to show you how Ty Lee and I used to have fun when all everyone wanted to talk about was death duels and the fate the world."

Aang blinked. "Those are common topics in the Fire Nation?"

"I don't know." Mai grabbed him and began walking. Aang let himself be pulled along through the mansion hallways. "I didn't really do much listening. Do you want to go have fun before dealing with all this stupidity or not?"

Aang grinned. Yes, he did.

Mai clamped her legs on the edge of the roof, and stretched backwards so that she was dangling upside-down above the street vendor. Had her hair not been contained in a bandana, it would have been spilling all over the man. While he stirred one of his heated pots, she grabbed several pouches of fire flakes and threw them one at a time up onto the rooftop above her. She did this without sound, the vendor unaware of her presence.

He turned and leaned to work the billow on the cooking fire contained beneath his little stove-stall, and while he was out of sight, Mai grabbed three sticks of sugared fried-dough balls, holding them between the fingers of her left hand. With her right, she reached up past her tied-off shirt to her belt to get enough coins to pay for the stolen food. Before she could quite get them, she heard the vendor moving again, and quickly did an abdomen-crunch to lift herself above his rising head.

Come on-

Come on-

The vendor turned his head and called out to someone, raising his hand in greeting, and Mai took the opportunity to grab the coins. She dropped them into the man's raised hand, and before he could get over his surprise, she pulled herself back up and climbed out of sight onto the rooftop.

Ha!

She still had the touch.

Standing in front of her on the rooftop, Aang was looking at her with a mix of awe and horror. Like her, ee was dressed incognito as a peasant of Inawaka, his bald head covered with a bandana, but his shining eyes were all Airbender. "And why couldn't you have just climbed down and bought the food the old-fashioned way?"

Mai handed Aang the sticks of fried-dough balls, and then recovered her bags of fire flakes from
where she had thrown them. "Because when I did this with Ty Lee, we didn't bother paying. The whole fun of it was the stealing. But you don't like that-

Aang frowned. "That guy works hard to make and sell that food!"

"And thus my interesting way of making a purchase." Mai got back to her feet, opening one of the fire flake bags, and she had to resist the urge to dust herself off. There would be no point in these clothes, a simple set of pants with worn knees and a short shirt that had seen better days. She had bought the clothes from a servant girl working in Governor Hige's mansion, since she and Aang could hardly go have some real fun down in the harbor city if they were worried about looking nice.

She did take a moment to take off her bandana, though, and let her hair fall loose down her back.

Mai and Aang walked along the rooftops as they ate their snacks. This was what she and Ty Lee had done as kids when they absolutely had to get away from their homes. Up on the rooftops, they had been invisible, separate from everyone else in the Caldera. They had felt that way anyway, Ty Lee with her identical sisters and Mai with the parents who wished she'd been born mute, so bringing the feeling to life was a nice escape. And, of course, if they didn't have a taste for a bit of mischief, they never would have become friends with Azula.

"Hey," Aang said through a mouth full of sugared dough ball, "what's that?"

Mai turned to look down at the street, and found people gathering at a corner. There was some display going on at the center of the crowd, three people in masks and bright clothes moving around-

Oh.

One of the masked people called out over the buzz of the crowd in a high voice, "The only escape from my realm is a demonstration of skill!" The performer then swished her robe around to evoke the movement of smoke, a clear sign that she was meant to be a ghostly spirit.

One of the other tree performers pointed at her. He wore the mask of a wolf. "Very well! Take on the form of a body, that I might chop it up and feed it to the birds!"

The crowd gave a little cheer at the promise of bloody violence.

Mai threw a glance at Aang. "It's a Spirit Play. A little supernatural drama for the masses."

"No," the Ghost Woman said once the applause died down. "I will not let you sully my form with the wretched steel you stole from the humans! You have brought a friend into my realm, and he will be your undoing. Demonstrate your skill with an Agni Budokai!"

The crowd gave a collective call of, "Oooh."

"No," the Wolf Man groaned. "I will not draw steel against my beloved friend!"

"Don't worry," the friend said. He was wearing a mask that looked like some kind of rodent. "I trust your skill! Let us Agni Budokai!" Then he stuck his thumb in his mouth and made a loud sound like a sky bison breaking wind.

The crowd laughed. Bodily functions were always a popular form of entertainment.

The laughter rose as the two masked men began stabbing at each other with fake swords, the metallic paint on the wooden blades glinting dully in the sunlight. The Rodent Man dodged his companion's blade with exaggerated contortions, but when he stabbed back, the Wolf Man evaded the thrusts with
something approaching real skill.

It was an ugly, unprofessional attempt at depicting an Agni Budokai, but this was a Spirit Play on the street, not the Solstice Feature of the Ember Island Players. Ash, even the Players' Late Summer Farce always had better fight choreography.

And even though this was just a Spirit Play, Mai was a bit offended. After what she went through with Ty Lee-

But before the Agni Budokai could reach its conclusion, there was a piercing whistle, and Mai saw a pair of Home Guard soldiers pushing their way through the crowd. The woman in the lead called out, "Let us pass! This is illegal superstition! You're under arrest!"

The crowd began dispersing and the guards picked up their pace, but the actors used the new gaps between the people to make their escape. With a skill that belied their early display, they flipped and jumped and twisted around the fleeing members of their former audience, moving quickly down the street and shedding their cheap costumes.

They might have even made their escape if another pair of Home Guard soldiers weren't coming from the opposite direction to cut them off.

Oh well.

But next to Mai, Aang gasped. "They're going to get caught!"

This again? Saving Zuko yesterday wasn't enough?

But no, it wouldn't be for Aang. He wanted to save everyone, even if it put him in danger.

And while Mai knew she couldn't stop it, she did have it entirely in her power to really mess up anyone who tried to hurt Aang. "Come on." She grabbed his hand and pulled him to the edge of the rooftop. "Kick up some dust to cover me." Still holding onto him, she jumped, and he floated them both down to the ground on a cushion of wind. She let go of his hand and threw herself into the crowd right at the point where the new soldiers were about to tackle the fleeing actors.

Then the winds picked up, and a wave of the dirt and dust and filth that had accumulated on the street across the ages swept over the scene. Mai had just enough time to get a fix on everyone's position before everything was lost in a miniature sandstorm.

She closed her eyes and got to work.

A shove here.

A jab there.

Grab the ankle-

Whoops, she got a handful of foot instead-

Eh, same difference-

Lift and flip-

Duck for a sweeping kick.

And then run like her lovely long hair was on fire.
When the dust settled, the actors were gone and the two soldiers were lying in the street groaning. No one seemed to be taking any notice of Mai, so she began walking along like she hadn't just assaulted members of the Home Guard, and retrieved her last bag of fire flakes from her belt.

She just took her first bite as Aang stepped out of the crowd to walk at her side. "So," he said, "that was fun."

Mai shrugged, but didn't disagree.

"Hey, what's an Agni Budokai? It sounds like an Agni Kai."

Mai couldn't help but think back several years, to black clothes and pounding drums and the smell of fire on steel and Ty Lee's body contorting around her. She popped a few fire flakes into her mouth to distract herself. "They're kind of similar. An Agni Budokai is a- a sort of demonstration."

Aang nodded. "The play used it as a demonstration of skill. They were using swords."

Mai's eyes grew wide. "And people have a fight like that?"

"No." She felt her heart speed up at the thought. She had pretended, at the time, not to be concerned, but- "It's not a fight. It's a demonstration. The whole point is to not hurt your partner."

"Ohhhh. So those guys were stabbing at each other and missing on purpose. Um, besides them just acting, I mean."

"Exactly. In a proper Agni Budokai, there's a drummer who calls the movements. Depending on the exact kind of drumming, each participant has to strike in a certain way. A call for a stab, for example, or a diagonal slice. It gets pretty complex. You have to do the strike properly, at the same time your partner does their strike properly, and you can't touch each other with the flaming blades. It gets- it gets pretty close. There are always burns, but as long as there are no cuts, the participants pass."

"Wow. How fast does the drumming go?"

Mai popped the last of her fire flakes into her mouth, and then raised her fists and mimed beating at something fast enough to make her fists into blurs.

"Huh," was all Aang could say to that.

Mai wasn't in the habit of revealing things she didn't need to. She certainly didn't like talking about things that actually scared her. But this was Aang. "I- uh, I was fourteen when I completed an Agni Budokai with Ty Lee."

Aang stopped short in the street. "You what?"

Mai stopped as well. Aang didn't seem inclined to get moving again, so she tossed her empty fire flakes bag to the ground and leaned against the building beside them. "I did an Agni Budokai with Ty Lee. She wanted to complete one for her thirteenth birthday. She was- well, it was a family drama thing for her. She thought we were good enough to do it, so she begged me to help her. It took a lot of practice, but we managed it. Did it in front of all the guests at her sisters' birthday party. I think that's when Bangfei fell in lust with her."

Aang smiled. "Heh. That must have been amazing. But why? You said family drama, but- well,
what did it really accomplish? People had to know you were already really good."

Mai snorted. "Oh, they did. But completing the Agni Budokai was what got us made into Weapons of the Fire Nation. Even though we were thirteen and fourteen, we proved we were adult enough to become soldiers. It's like what Zuko said about an Agni Kai, yesterday. People make a big deal about fire being involved. It's how warriors who aren't Firebenders can prove that they embody the spirit of fire or whatever. Ty Lee and I got in there, risked our lives and each other, and managed not to hurt each other. The whole point is to do it with a friend, like in the play, to show what you're willing to risk. And then you show that you're strong enough that it doesn't matter. In other words, anyone who does an Agni Budokai is a jerk, but a jerk who has to be taken seriously."

Aang didn't say anything. His gaze was unfocused, and he didn't seem to be listening.

Mai poked his face. "What is it?"

He blinked, and his gaze focused on her. "What if- what if I did an Agni Budokai? Would that show everyone that they don't have to fight me in an Agni Kai?"

Mai nearly fell over.

Aang? Do a performance with flaming weapons where he and a partner all but tried to kill each other? She couldn't picture it. Hadn't she just said this was a thing jerks did? Mai herself was awful enough to risk stabbing Ty Lee, and she had taken a certain perverse pleasure in imagining her parents' reaction if Ty Lee maimed or killed her. Even Ty Lee had a mean streak, using the whole thing to stand out from her sisters and dragging Mai into what amounted to a temper tantrum.

Aang wasn't like that.

And now he was turning his pleading eyes on her.

No, he wasn't a jerk. But he'd risk himself to keep people from getting hurt. If doing this would mean he didn't have to fight an Agni Kai or mess up Prince Iroh's plan-

But he'd be risking someone else, too. And that's when she understood.

Mai kept her face blank. "You think that since I did one, I can do it again."

Aang blinked. "Couldn't you?"

"Of course I can. I was only fourteen at the time. I'm twice as good now." She leaned down so that their noses were almost touching. "You're a good martial artist, Aang, but do you think it's enough to be in the right place when I throw a knife?"

He nodded.

She held onto his gaze without blinking. "And can you swing a burning staff precisely enough to warm my face without cracking my skull?"

He jumped backwards.

He was right. An Agni Budokai would solve their problem. But that was only if they did it right, and did it successfully.

She straightened to her full height. "If you want to do this, I'll help you. We'll need time to practice,
but they'll give it to us. If you want to do this, I promise you'll get my very best."

Aang breathed in.

Aang breathed out.

He said, "Do you think I can do it?"

If she said no, this would be the end of it.

But she couldn't lie to him on something this important, not again, not after Crescent Island. "Yeah. Of course you can."

He gave a single, slow nod. "Then I think we're going to do an Agni Budokai together."

Ash. "Well, have fun while you can today. This is going to take lots of learning and practice, if we don't want to get hurt. And if we succeed, we're going to impress a lot of people. By the time we're done, you're going to be a real man, Avatar Aang."

He blushed.

Better to make a joke of it while they had the chance.

TO BE CONTINUED
Fire Dance

Chapter Summary

Aang learns the ways of the Agni Budokai.

Fire Dance

Aang hung from his glider and looked down at the courtyard below, his robes flapping in the wind. The various guests of the comatose Governor Hige were gathering at the rear of the mansion, in the same space where Zuko had fought his Agni Kai against Lady Gerel days ago.

Aang spotted Governor Leiko, spokeswoman for the faction that claimed to be on his side, even though their idea of helping him was challenging him to a hundred (more or less) Agni Kai matches. Lord Zhao was also there, talking with his son Commander Zhao, probably trying to ask what this was about so that he could sell the information to his mysterious friends. But the younger Zhao didn't know; Aang had just told him that this gathering would solve their Agni Kai problem and would it be too much trouble to provide security and not betray anyone?

He spotted his friends, standing in a formation at the far side of the courtyard. King Toph and Mai were standing tall like the nobility they were (or claimed to be), while Sokka lurked next to them with Momo on his shoulders. Zuko was still recovering from his Agni Kai inside, Suki acting as his bodyguard.

From this high, Aang only had to shift his gaze to see the center of the mansion, where Appa was resting in the atrium between their guest rooms. Appa lowed loud enough to hear even up this high, and Aang took it as a wish for good luck.

Aang also decided it to take it as the signal to begin the show.

He dove down on his glider, swooping over the heads of the assembly in the courtyard to land just before his friends. The toes of his boots just touched the ground when Toph shifted one of her bare feet and raised a platform of stone beneath him. It continued to rise as he straightened so that he stood taller than anyone else here.

Aang looked out over the gathered Fire Nation leadership and gave them his best Angry Old Monk Glare. "I have called you all here to make an announcement. I will perform an Agni Budokai in two weeks' time with Lady Caldera Yu Mai."

It was King Toph who had come up with the idea for this big show. Last night, after Aang had explained his plan to the others in Prince Zuko's recover room for getting the governors back on his side, Toph had stood up and said, "Yes! We're finally going on the offensive."

Zuko, lying in bed still wrapped in bandages, had frowned. "An Agni Budokai might answer their claims, but they may not want to agree. There's so much politics involved in all this-"

"Exactly," Toph interrupted. She had begun pacing- or more like stalking- across the center of the room. "Politics is just people pushing each other around without actually doing any shoving. So it's time to start pushing back. Aang is the Avatar, so we tell them that the Avatar has decided how this
is going to go, and we tell them that anyone who doubts this Agni Booboo thing is a traitor and should be drawn and quartered!"

Sokka had nodded. "Or maybe drowned or something. We can wordsmith it later. But how do we know it will work?"

Toph's smile was all teeth. "Because I wasn't a king until I made everyone bow to me. Trust me, this is what I do. It's all about your character. So make them realize that your character is the toughest tough whoever Tophed. I mean toughed."

Zuko had shrugged. Suki hadn't said anything. Sokka grinned. Momo stole a peach.

It was after Mai nodded that Aang finally said, "Okay."

So now he stood on Toph's platform, planted his staff like a flag, and waited for the first objection to his words.

One of the older governors obliged with, "What about all the Agni Kai challenges that-

Mai sidestepped so that she was directly in front of the platform and snapped her hand out dramatically. (Sokka had coached her.) "How dare you presume to question the Avatar? Have no respect for the Fire Nation? The Bridge Between Words honors us with an Agni Budokai and you want to talk about matters of procedure? This Weapon of the Fire Nation spits on you!" Then Mai actually spat next to her feet, and it wasn't half bad despite her getting only an hour of spitting lessons from Toph.

Aang tapped his staff on his platform. "I have heard doubts about my actions here in the Fire Nation. As the Avatar, I cannot stand for this, but I will not dishonor any opponents with my untrained Firebending. Let an Agni Budokai prove my worth as an expression of warrior fire. Let Lady Caldera Yu Mai's peril-" His voice dried up, but he quickly continued, "-show my strength."

The crowd was silent.

Then there was movement, and a young man stepped out from the front of the assembly- Bangfei, one of the Weapons of the Fire Nation. He looked up at Aang. "You will adhere to all the laws of the Agni Budokai?"

Aang nodded.

"You will accept all the risks? The fire and the blades and letting the holy drummers hold your fate in their rhythm?"

Aang nodded again.

Bangfei threw his hands into the air. "Brother!" He fell into a kowtow. "I am honored by your actions! Let all see that the test of the warriors who cannot command fire is good enough for one of the most powerful of all Benders!" He kept his head pressed against the ground. "And I know that Lady Mai will be an excellent partner for you. I saw her Agni Budokai with Lady Ty Lee. Never was there a more beautiful display of Fire Nation strength."

Aang glanced at Mai, and she rolled her eyes. Bangfei seemed to be big on anything Ty Lee liked.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Aang saw Lord Zhao approaching. He dipped into a short bow as he said, "I would be happy to make the arrangements, Avatar. The local Fire Temple has the required personnel and materials."
Aang tapped his staff again. "Um, make it so!"

The assembly was chattering now in voices just above whispers.

Then a new figure came out of the crowd, a living shadow that resolved itself into Heiyaoshi, the Weapon who had sent Zuko looking for his mother's village. She bowed towards Aang, bending low at the waist. "Avatar, I thank you for the consideration you give to the test of the Warrior's Meeting. Too often, the Agni Kai is given more honor, but an Agni Budokai is no less important to our culture."

The chattering of the crowd grew louder, but it didn't sound to Aang like it was getting angry. One or both of the Weapons were playing politics again, but now it seemed to be in Aang's favor.

Toph nudged the platform with her foot, making the thing give a shudder that Aang felt in his whole body. She probably wanted him to assert himself again. Should he thank Heiyaoshi? No, Toph didn't thank anyone, and he was supposed to be acting like her. "The Agni Budokai will show my strength. It two weeks, the fire of the Avatar will be clear." That sounded good. Anything talking about being strong and fiery seemed to be popular around here.

Governor Leiko finally stepped forward. The voices all quieted as she said, "Very well, Avatar. Let the Agni Budokai show what it will." She gave a nod, and there might have even been the start of a smile on her lips, and then she turned and walked away.

Toph kicked the platform again, and Aang saw Sokka making flying motions with Momo's tail.

Oh, right!

Aang tapped his staff again. "Two weeks!" And then he jumped, spun the staff to summon a wind, and snapped its wings out so he could ride off into the sky.

That went well.

Probably.

Mai was pleased with how the announcement had gone. Aang had sounded strong, no one yelled at him, and she even managed to spit right on her first try! (So gross.)

Now she had to train Aang for a deadly combat demonstration. No problem.

Alone in her room, she finished changing and ran her hands through her hair. She still hadn't cut it, and there was no way she'd be able to wear even her usual ox-horn buns and twin tails for an Agni Budokai. She'd have to look into some tight stylings that would keep hair of this length out of the way. Or she could just hack it off. For now, she grabbed the bandana she used as a disguise in the city the other day and used it to bind and hide everything.

Finished, Mai grabbed her case of blades and threw aside the curtain concealing her from the shared atrium. Aang was already waiting on Appa's head, and a set of servants were setting down a palanquin beside the gathering, the shades cast aside to show Zuko, still swathed in bandages, sitting with less comfort than Mai would have expected. But then, it would have been a while since he had last ridden in one of those things. Suki hovered nearby looking ready to catch Zuko if he took a tumble.

Aang looked over as Mai approached and went still. Then he jumped off Appa and landed standing, all without taking his eyes off her. So, he had noticed what she was wearing.
Normally, Mai favored loose, flowing robes that could hide her movements and cover an army's worth of sharp metal. However, that would be actively dangerous in an Agni Budokai, what with all the fire and the blades that had to brush against skin. She'd need a proper costume made up, and so for now she was forced to make do with an ensemble that was tight where it wasn't nonexistent and nonexistent where it wasn't tight.

And it probably didn't help that her bare midriff left the burn scar on her side completely visible.

While Aang stared, Mai reached into her case, grabbed a razor, and threw it so it passed close enough to the side of Aang's bald head that the skin immediately reddened with irritation.

Aang squealed and finally looked her in the eyes.

Mai stared him down. "Yes, I'm dressed like I crave attention and spent five minutes thinking about how to get it. But if you're paying the wrong kind of attention to me, one of us is going to get stabbed. You can't look here-" She motioned, and Aang blushed. "-and be swinging a sword or a whatever there safely. Are we clear?"


Mai knew he had harbored a crush on her back when they first left the South Pole, but her betrayal at Crescent Island had taken care of that. She doubted he would ever feel the same way again, but he was a boy at that age, so she supposed that moments like this were to be expected.

Her betrayal must have hurt even more, if he liked her like that, right? She had to keep from grinding her teeth together in anger at herself. Why couldn't she have stopped to really think about what she was doing, back then?

Why hadn't she stopped the think ever, before Crescent Island?

"You're forgiven. Don't do it again. Now, speaking of swords and whatevers, we have to start by picking weapons. I'll be doing knives, of course." Mai reached once again into her case, retrieving the scroll she had borrowed from the mansion's library last night after they had come back from the city. She unfurled and held it so that Aang could see, revealing the drawings of the weapons classes allowed in an Agni Budokai. "Which one will you be using to endanger my life?"

Aang grimaced. "All of these look really sharp."

"That's the idea. Hitting me with a burning stick would hurt, and skin does sizzle when it's cooked, but there's more of a sound if some blood boils away at the same time. It makes for a better spectacle, I suppose."

Aang's blush was all gone now, in favor of a greenish shade. "How about you pick one for me?"

Mai put the scroll down, reached out, and flicked Aang's forehead. "I don't think you've been listening. This is going to be hard, Aang. I need you doing your best. Yes, I've done this before, but I did it by living and breathing knives for a month, on top of all the other training I gave myself since I first picked up half of a broken pair of scissors. You need to be responsible for yourself. I'm trusting you just as much as you're trusting me."

He lowered his head. "Sorry. Maybe we shouldn't do this. I don't- I don't want to hurt you. I wanted to try it because I thought-"

Mai reached out to his chin and raised his gaze again. "You thought we can do it. And I think that, too. I just want you to take this seriously. Okay?"
Aang held out his hands, and Mai gave him the scroll. He looked it over, and then tapped a finger over a staff-like weapon near the bottom. "What's a Monk's Spade?"

It took Mai a moment to recall, and when she did, it was her turn to blush. "Oh, you don't want that."

"Why not?"

Ash, how to explain this? "Uh, that's what we- that is, the Fire Nation- um, according to the history books it's what- well, it's what Air Nation Warriors were supposed to use."

Aang blinked.

Mai pointed down at the drawing. It was essentially a staff, not unlike Aang's glider in its closed form, but at one end was a crescent-shaped set of metal prongs, and at the other was a flat spade-like metal blade. "You can see the martial possibilities, but they taught us that Airbenders would land on windowsills and snag babies and jewelry and stuff with them. We even have a legend about an Air Nomad thief who used a spade to steal the Great Dragon's Sacred Eggs from the heart of the First Fire. And, of course, it's a handy way to desecrate corpses by shoveling ash over them instead of building a proper pyre."

Suki hummed. "According to King Toph's strategy, that might be perfect! It will make you look like a living Fire Nation nightmare!"

Aang winced. "I'm not sure looking like an offensive ghost story will be showing the proper respect for Fire Nation ceremony."

Mai, though, had to admit that Suki had a point. She liked the image of her people fearing Aang. "It's not just an Airbender thing. They started as a tool of the Fire Sages. The spade removes ashes out of hearths, and the prongs can push back the heads of overly-affectionate long-necked dragons. Not that we have dragons anymore."

Suki chuckled. "So Fire Sages were linked to monks, who were linked to Air Nomads, who became evil enemies who lifted babies out of cribs with spades. Or did they use the prongs? I guess it depends on the crib. Quite the twisted history the Fire nation made for itself, there."

Mai shrugged. "I guess. Anyway, the point is that you would be associating yourself with Fire Sages in addition to our propaganda about Air Nomads. Not a bad thing for the Avatar."

Aang smiled. "So there's a duality! The staff is a symbol of both enemies and respected leaders. It's part of Fire Nation society and has been turned against it only not really. It should bring up a lot of mixed emotions."

Huh. Pretty good observation. But then, Aang would know about type of stuff, being a monk. Mai preferred her symbols to be more literal. "If the Monk's Spade is what you're going with, we can let Lord Zhao know and he'll get us some to practice with. For now, you can use your staff."

"Great! What are we doing now?"

"Good old fashioned forms." She took a ready-stance and looked at Aang. After a moment, he realized what was going on and copied her stance. "We need to learn the same physical language. By the end of the day, I expect us to be doing these moves perfectly, simultaneously." She transitioned to the next stance, an defensive posture that still advanced a step, and Aang copied the motion. So far, so good.

One hundred steps and stances to go.
Aang spent three hours of that first day mimicking and learning Mai's forms. Not only was it physically tiring, but the effort it took to keep his mind purely on business while Mai contorted was also mentally exhausting. She had told him to pay proper attention, though, and for a good reason, so he tried his best for her.

Eventually, she declared that it was time for a lunch break, and Aang let himself collapse beside a bowl of fruit that Sokka had brought out for him.

That's when Zuko began delivering a lecture on the philosophy of Fire, the importance of The Meeting of the Warriors, and how to properly embody the Spirit of Strength. That was way too many capital letters to listen to during lunch.

"Feel the sun on your skin and the heat of the blood in your veins as you move," Zuko said. "You can't produce or control fire yet, but by finding the connection to your own Inner Fire, you can become aware of the fires around you. When Mai throws a flaming knife at you, you won't have to even look at it, because you'll feel it coming before it even leaves her hand."

Despite the heaviness of the subject and Aang's exhaustion, he found himself interested. "That makes sense. I met a Guru-" The memories of that failure took his voice away for a moment, but he promised himself that he wouldn't fail to save any more of his friends. "-and he taught me how to sense things by looking within myself and following the connections I have."

Zuko blinked. "Yeah, that's- that's what I mean. I didn't know it could be done with more than fire. Was this Guru an Airbender?"

Aang shook his head. "I don't think he was a Bender at all."

Sokka called out through a mouth full of rhino jerky, "I do retain skepticism about that guy's supposed magic powers."

Aang frowned. "But he taught me how to do what he did! Kind of. He told Mai that her family and friends were still alive and she didn't kill anyone on Crescent Island! And look, Zuko is here, and that Piandao guy is protecting her family, and-" He was about to say that Ty Lee turned out to be alive, but then remembered that it was still supposed to be a secret. "-and everyone is alive. And he told Katara that her family was waiting near Ba Sing Se, and we found Gran-Gran Kanna and the others there!"

"You knew," Toph squealed, standing up and knocking her own bowl of fruit over. "I thought I was surprising you all with my little Water Tribe! You lied to me! You jerks! Even Lady Caldera Yu Mai with the Airbender-hypnotizing curves lied to me! I've lost my faith in humanity!"

"Hey!" Sokka pointed at her. "I was surprised! Do you think I paid any attention to some weird Fugu making claims about my tribe?"

Mai said, "I just completely forgot."

Toph sniffed. "Very well. I believe you. The Earth King sees all truths."

Suki giggled.

The rest of the afternoon was spent with Mai and her form-drills again, only this time she took up her knives and showed how her every motion could be used to send a blade flying at a training dummy. Once again, Aang worked very hard to pay attention to the right things, and found them fascinating all on their own. He knew Mai's fighting style, of course, but seeing it broken down with nothing
obscuring her was a revelation.

Even how Mai fought turned out to be beautiful.

The next day, Aang played the part of a moving training dummy, but she aimed to miss him. It was both terrifying and enchanting, and by the time they broke for lunch again, Aang was seeing the snapping of her arms and the curve of her hip and the roll of her shoulders in all the shapes around him. She was in the arcing waters of the atrium's central fountain and the blades of grass around it and leaves of the potted plants lining the perimeter and the clouds in the sky above.

After lunch, a page from the local fire temple came with the weapons they would use in the Agni Budokai, and they were able to put Zuko's teachings about fire ("A fire-unification theory," Sokka had called it) to the test.

They got a bucket of thick lantern oil from the mansion's servants, and Mai dipped one of the new knives' blades into it. Zuko, now walking around again, snapped his fingers, and the oil ignited.

Mai didn't so much as twitch when the fire came to life so close to her hands.

She moved the knife in slow, wide slices, gave a half-hearted stab, and then twirled it by the handle so that she was holding it in a reverse grip. She quickly angled her arm so that the blade was still pointed up, and Aang realized she was trying to keep the heat and the fire from cooking her hand.

She held out her other hand and nodded at Zuko.

He produced a pair of gloves from a pocket, and slipped one over Mai's free hand. The fingers seemed a smooth fit despite the thick material, but the glove stopped short at the bottom, leaving the base of her palm exposed. Aang wondered what the purpose of the gloves was.

Then Mai flipped the flaming knife into the air in front of her.

What happened next was so fast that it was only by matching the results to the blur of his memories was Aang able to piece it together. Mai had caught the burning knife by the tip with her gloved fingers at a moment when the spinning motion pushed the flames down. The metal would have still been red hot, but she would have barely touched it before she flung it into the fountain.

She nodded as the waters doused the flames, and then went over to retrieve the knife. When she pulled it out, the blade still glistened with blackened lantern oil, but the metal itself seemed unarmed.

Mai smirked. "Still got it."

Wow. That was what she had done with Ty Lee? Juggled red-hot bits of metal while the slightest delay or missed motion would mean grabbing something that would cook her skin clean away?

Aang was growing less enthused with an Agni Budokai by the day. He couldn't endanger Mai like this-

She lifted the Monk's Spade up off the ground with one of her feet and kicked it up in the air so that he could catch it. "Here you go."

He looked over the strange weapon. "Um, are you sure-"

"Yes." She twirled the knife by the handle so that the blade's motion created a gleaming halo around her hand, and her smirk softened into a smile that made Aang's heart hammer. "Believe it or not, that was the fun part."
Aang squared his shoulders. "Okay. But I can practice with mine before we set it on fire, right?"

It wasn't until the fourth day that he felt ready for fire. Thankfully, he had a lot more handle to work with on the Monk's Spade than Mai did with her knives, and soon he was twisting and twirling without fear of the fires being whipped around him.

It was on the fifth day of practice that Aang could see those fires in his mind's eye while his real eyes were closed.

On the sixth morning, he could see the fires on Mai's blades as well.

By the end of the sixth afternoon, he was unconsciously breathing in time with the pulsing flames on both weapons, and Zuko said, "Congratulations, Avatar. You have begun your Firebending journey."

Mai nodded. "Then it's time. Tomorrow, we begin practicing an actual Agni Budokai. Along with still practicing all that other stuff."

If only all the elder monks could see Aang now.

Zhao gestured as he reached the end of the mansion hallway, and his escorts - good guards from his own command - stepped out to take station on either side of the door. Zhao himself didn't slow, putting on a smile as he swept into the room. "Ah, Governor Hige, so good to see you awake again. You've had quite the nap!"

Hige's frown might have been for having his coma of over a week reduced to 'quite the nap,' but more likely it was a result of lingering pain from the head wound beneath his bandages. "Commander Zhao. I admit, I was expecting the Avatar to come first."

"Perhaps you have not heard, but the Avatar is in training for an Agni Budokai. I'm sure he'll visit later when he hears the news, but I didn't see the need to allow him to be interrupted. I'm sure you understand."

Hige shifted in his bed. He was propped up with all kind of pillows, and the healer kneeling beside him on the floor glanced over to confirm the governor's continue safety. "Perhaps it is better we speak first, Commander. After all, you'll have to supervise the Avatar's exit from my home."

Ah, the tip had been correct. "I am disappointed to hear that, sir, but I understand."

"It was one thing to do a favor for the Fire Princes when it was just a matter of politics. I even had hopes that the Avatar could help the Fire Nation with- in these difficult times. But this? Explosions? Villages nearly being wiped off the map? Rogue Weapons going to war with each other? My life endangered? No, this is too much. The Avatar must leave."

Zhao bowed his head just enough to be respectful. "As I said, sir, I understand. I find the situation appalling." Then he straightened and took on a tall, solid posture that would have done Admiral Jeong-Jeong proud. "However, your concerns are not part of my mission. The Avatar needs to perform this Agni Budokai to accomplish what he came here for. We will be staying, the boy will win the favor of all the politicians here, and then we will move on to the next phase of our journey and leave you in peace."

Hige's eyes went hard behind his glasses. "This is my home. I rule this island for the Fire Lord. You
have no authority here, Zhao, and the Avatar can be declared a criminal at my whim. Know your place."

Zhao couldn't help but smirk. Oh, he knew his place, all right. "I can see why you've never risen behind this distant island, Governor. You think you have a position of power, but let me illuminate the situation for you." He clasped his hands behind his back and began pacing. "Admiral Iroh's intelligence networks have determined that you, as befits a man of your position, are heavily, personally invested in the prosperity of Zenmatsu Island. In fact, you own a share of every merchant ship that lands here filled with goods from the colonies. Can you calculate how much it would cost you if every single one of those ships were sunk for pirate activity by elements of Prince Iroh's Northern Fleet?"

"Wha- but-" Hige started to get up, but the healer at his side grabbed him and settled him back onto the pillows. "Those ships have nothing to do with pirates!"

Zhao shrugged. "I'm sure reports will be diligently filed describing the evidence each captain noted when they made the decision to sink the target. Prince Iroh will, of course, review those reports and make a proper, impartial decision on whether the captains under his command acted correctly. Should you question the judgement of the Prince Admiral, you would have the legal option to petition the Fire Lord for intervention. I'm sure that would work out well for you."

Really, it was too easy. Zhao had come close to a position of power in the Capital, and might still get one. Hige was just an old man who had risen as far as he could.

The governor sighed. "And if I let the Avatar stay?"

"Then I have no reason to believe your ships will be accosted. You would continue to profit, your partners would remain placated, and the Avatar will be gone shortly after his Agni Budokai. The Disciple of the Third Eye has not been seen again since the attack that injured you, so I think the risks are clear?"

Hige closed his eyes. "The Avatar can stay. Now get out." He let himself sink back into the pillows.

Zhao gave a quick bow. "Thank you, Governor. Please know that I don't enjoy executing such agendas." Then he turned on his heel and made his exit. The guards at the door fell into step behind him as he emerged into the hall once again.

Zhao grinned. He'd lied about not enjoying it. Providing security was all well and good, but it was always fun to use his real talents.

It wasn't until the taiko drummer arrived that Aang got annoyed with the training. Learning and copying Mai's forms for hours didn't do it, listening to Zuko's attempts to describe the philosophy of fire didn't do it, and juggling flaming weapons didn't do it. But then on the seventh morning, after Aang and Mai completed their stretches, one of the mansion servants led in a young man about Prince Zuko's age with stiff red robes, a shaved head, and an easy smile.

"Greetings, Avatar. I am Kei Lo, an apprentice Inferior Sage from the Inawaka City temple. I am a trained taiko drummer of one year, here to help you with your preparations for the Agni Budokai."

Kei Lo bowed deeply to Aang while several servants carried a large drum into the atrium.

"Greetings, Avatar. I am Kei Lo, an apprentice Inferior Sage from the Inawaka City temple. I am a trained taiko drummer of one year, here to help you with your preparations for the Agni Budokai."

Kei Lo bowed deeply to Aang while several servants carried a large drum into the atrium.

Then Kei Lo turned to Mai, and his eyes grew wide at the same time his cheeks flushed. "My lady. Uh, Lady Caldera Yu Mai, it is an honor to meet you." He bowed low again, but his eyes never left Mai.
That's when Aang started to get annoyed. "So, why are you here? You said you're an apprentice? And a-- an inferior sage?"

Kei Lo straightened, and after a long moment, managed to drag his eyes away from Mai. "Apologies, Avatar. I am an apprentice, but I will be among the drummers guiding your Agni Budokai. It is my privilege to enable the most important Warrior's Meeting in a century and a half. And don't take the 'inferior' title too seriously. An Inferior isn't a Firebender, but is no less knowledgeable or spiritual than a sage who is."

Mai tossed Aang's his Monk's Spade. "Remember when I said that the drumming dictates how we move? Well, Bongo Boy over here is going to teach you what attack you are expected to perform with each drum pattern. There's a million of them, or something. Then I guess he'll do the drumming for our dry runs?" She looked over at Kei Lo.

He smiled at her. "I will stay here day and night and follow your every command."

Oh, bison dung.

But Aang had promised that he wouldn't get distracted. He needed to pay attention if he was going to complete the Agni Budokai, was going to be the partner that Mai deserved and spare her from harm. Besides, this Kei Lo clown was a stranger. Mai had given up her whole life for Aang. He didn't have to worry about anything!

Kei Lo motioned to the drum that had been set up beside the fountain. "Shall we begin?"

Mai nodded. "We should probably start with a demonstration. I still remember all the moves. (I'll probably be an old lady before I forget, the way I practiced.) Why don't you run through all the sequences, and I'll perform the proper moves for Aang?"

Kei Lo dipped his head. "Your expertise does you credit, my lady." Then he yanked his robe over his head and tossed it aside, revealing that underneath he was wearing just a pair of loose pants. The muscles in his chest bulged as he ran through some quick stretches.

Aang bit back a groan.

At least it wasn't hard to pay attention to Mai. As Kei Lo pounded the massive drum with a pair of sticks the size of his forearms, Mai took up her knives and began to move.

No, she began to dance.

It was a more martial dance than Aang had ever seen, but it was graceful movement commanded by a beat, so he decided that it counted. Kei Lo shouted a command with each change in his pounding: "Strike head left. Strike head right. Circle. Retreat. Reverse strike chest left. Circle. Retreat. Reverse strike chest right." Mai stayed in motion the whole time, precision evident in every action. Her knives flashed in the sunlight and her pale skin glowed. The scar on her side stretched with each contortion, but even that motion had a kind of beauty.

Aang recognized, in the dance moves, the components of the forms that they had been practicing for the last week. He was starting to see how, once he learned the responses to the drummed commands, he'd be able to know where her body would be during every moment of the Agni Budokai.

If he got it right, that is.

Kei Lo shouted, "Finish," and Mai came to a stop and bowed to an invisible partner.
Aang had to clap. "That was amazing! I've never seen a dance like that!"

Kei Lo choked.

Mai's face went as scarlet as her bandana. "Aang. Stop it."

Huh? What did he do? "Did I say something wrong?"

"Just- just don't call it a- a dance, okay? You may have gotten me comfortable with camping and treason and lemurs, but I don't need that kind of talk going around about me."

Aang was even more confused. "I don't get it. What's wrong with dancing? Everyone does it!"

Kei Lo barked a laugh, blushed, and then turned away.

Mai sighed. "Only in the privacy of their rooms, I hope. I mean, sure, I know people in the Earth Kingdom do it. Haru's village had a dance. Probably the colonies are that depraved. But there is no public dancing in the Fire Nation. We have more self-control than that."

Aang blinked. "None? At all? But you have to have festivals-"

"No dancing at festivals."

"But what about purifying dances to calm Spirits?"

"Most stories of Spirits are enemy propaganda, and when we have to do such things, we do martial arts demonstrations to intimidate the Spirits with our strength."

Aang shook his head. "Come on, I know you don't believe this stuff anymore. You've changed and learned about the world!"

Mai lowered he head and rubbed at her eyes. "Yes, I have. For you. And- and I'm satisfied with that. But I can't just throw away everything that I am and become- become- I don't know, Suki or something."

"I know." Aang summoned a wind to help carry him over to her. "I wasn't asking for anything like that. It just looked like a dance, is all. I think you'd enjoy real dancing if you tried it."

Mai smirked. "Do you really?"

Aang thought about it. "No, probably not. Well, maybe if you could offend someone with it."

Her smirk softened. "See? You do know me. Now, let's get back to training. By the end of tomorrow, I want these moves to be reflex for you."

Aang nodded. He was going to be dancing with Mai! Sure, there was going to be fire and blades and danger and political pressure, but it was still a dance with the most beautiful girl in the world.

That made it a little better.

Heiyaoshi, Weapon of the Fire Nation and Blademaster of Kilauea, stood unmoving in the shadows, and her guests had no idea she was there.

The group of men, their faces wrapped to hide everything but their eyes, had approached the servant entrance of Hige's mansion slowly. They stopped just beyond the light cast by the lantern hanging
above the door, peering around for her. She waited until one said, "The note said a woman would be here with our pay. Should we-"

Heiyaoshi stepped out into the light. "The note also said you should move quietly, and announce your presence with a whistle like a toucan-puffin's chirp. The note warned of danger if you were spotted."

The man who spoke bowed his head. "Apologies, mistress. We are here now with the equipment."

Heiyaoshi motioned for them to follow her through the door and into the mansion's servant passages. Although these hirelings deserved punishment, her own efforts to divert servants and waylay Zhao's guards had made up for their failure, and she had no personal need to hurt them. She just wanted this job done efficiently.

She led them down a flight of stairs, into the basement, and then motioned for them to stop. She continued on alone, moving into a dark storage room while drawing her volcano-glass swords, neither action producing any sound. She listened as she let her eyes become used to the darkness. There was no one else here. She was safe.

She used a pair of spark-rocks to light the small lantern hanging from her belt, and waved the masked men into the room. "This is the place. Your device must be unobtrusive."

The man who spoke laid down the sacks that must have contained his equipment. "We were promised pay."

Heiyaoshi took the lantern off her belt, laid it on the ground, and then threw her money-pouch beside it. It remained tied and sealed, but it jangled as it struck the ground, a cascade of golden musicality that made the masked men all lean forward.

Without another word, they got to work.

One began drilling a small hole in the ceiling while the others cleared some large clay pots away from the wall. The drilling continued as the others assembled something involving a billow and several large metal balls that made hollow sounds when touched. As they tightened the last screws on the device, the drilling was completed, and another man came over with a thin tube that he ran into the hole. The group then worked together to hide the length of the tube against the corner of the ceiling, keeping it locked in place with large metal staples. At last, they ran the tube into their contraption, and then moved the displaced clay jars in front of it.

The man who had spoken motioned at the device as he said to Heiyaoshi, "Fill this one. Build up the pressure with the pump. One, two, three, four, five. Turn this valve and the pressure will drive the action. Close the valve again before another go. Do you understand?"

Heiyaoshi nodded. It was simple enough.

She hoped this would be sufficient to sabotage the Agni Budokai. It was a shame that it would probably hurt both the Avatar and Lady Mai, but Heiyaoshi had her orders. Besides, if she didn't stop them, then Fire Lord Azulon would be activating the ninth Weapon of the Fire Nation and setting him or her against the Avatar.

Even the effects of Heiyaoshi's trap here would be better for the poor children than that.

Mai had two kinds of training that were helping her with this. One was, of course, all the preparation she had done for her first Agni Budokai with Ty Lee, years ago. That training had been so intense
that Mai still knew all those drum beats and what they meant, never mind the lasting improvement in her blade skills. Even today, her body already knew its business and merely needed to build the proper muscles again.

The other kind of helpful training was the lifelong regime that let her completely control her face.

Because the last thing Aang needed was to see the worry she felt deep in the pit of her stomach.

While Kei Lo struck his taiko drum, Mai stepped past Aang while he did the same, the fire from their burning weapons cooking the air around them. Their trotting took them several paces apart just as Kei Lo changed his tempo, signaling an Airborne Parry. Mai started to spin, tossed one of her burning knives just above her head, completed the rotation, caught knife by its tip with gloved fingers that would be able to take about a second of direct heat before her skin would start to cook, and threw it at Aang.

He was ready, bringing his Monk's Spade up in a diagonal one-handed strike that met her rotating blade in mid-air and reversed its motion back towards her-

-but not as high as she needed to catch it-

Mai hopped out of the way as the burning knife struck the ground right where her feet had just been.

Aang blurted, "Sorry!"

She shook the apology away. Zuko, observing nearby, made a motion and the fire on the knife went out. Kei Lo stopped his drumming.

Aang was at her side in an instant. "Sorry! I can deflect it back for you to catch, but I hit too soon this time and caught the blade on the wrong angle. Next time I'll do better!"

Or, next time he might knock it straight into her face before she could catch it. Or he'd be a second too late and the blade would sink into his chest.

Mai made sure her face didn't reflect her thoughts. "I know you will. You've almost got this."

And he did. There was every chance they would succeed tonight.

But there was also every chance they would get it wrong.

The problem was that there was no certainty. If there had been no chance, Mai wouldn't have any compunction about telling Aang that they couldn't do this. There was just risk, and risk was the whole point of an Agni Budokai. Aang had already decided to accept that risk, and trying to change his mind now wouldn't work. It would put enough doubts in his head, though, that there would be greater chance of tragedy.

Aang worked best when he didn't realize he was in over his head.

Mai resisted the urge to wipe at the sweat on her forehead. That would just move it to her arm, and it was gross no matter where it was. "Why don't we finish for the day? It's almost dinner time, and we're just getting tired, now."

"Yeah, we do need our rest." He twirled his burning Monk's Spade fast enough to generate a wind, the speed of the motion denying air to the fires on the end-blades and smothering them. "Monk Gyatso used to say that it's just as important to replenish our energies as it is to practice our moves. He also said that relaxing the mind could be even better than pushing yourself."
That made sense. It probably wouldn't save their lives, but it made sense.

At least it would be over tomorrow, one way or another. "That sounds good. In fact, we should probably take tomorrow off. We've be practicing for two weeks straight, and we want to be fresh for tomorrow night. Let's take the day and do whatever to get ready."

Aang frowned. "You mean like meditating?"

"Meditating, sleeping, reading a book bad enough to get us mad, beating enemies up to get in the proper mood, whatever."

Aang laughed.

That was that. Their training was complete.

Aang went over to talk to Appa, and Mai started gathering up the various knives she had left lying around. As she bent over, she heard someone approaching, and Mai looked up find Kei Lo smiling at her. With his shaved head and bare chest, he almost looked like an older, Fire Nation-flavored Aang. He said, "I guess you won't need me for anything else, then?"

Mai shook her head. "Thanks for the help. Have a nice life."

He chuckled. "I'll be one of the drummers for you tomorrow night. My master will be leading, so I won't have any input into the signals, but I'll be part of the performance. I'll summon the proper warrior spirits to strengthen you." His cheeks colored. "Not that you'll need it. You obviously have the skill and spirit to do this."

She supposed this was what passed for sweet talk amongst Inferior Sages. "Well, that's nice. And you're very good at drumming."

His face grew even redder, and he bowed at the waist. "Your praise honors me. Good night, then, and good luck! I'll be rooting for you."

Well, with an apprentice drummer rooting for them, they had nothing to worry about. Woo.

As ever, Mai kept her feelings from showing on her face.

And she'd have to keeping doing it until the Agni Budokai tomorrow night.

Aang started the day of the Agni Budokai with meditation. For the first time, he added some candles to the experience, reaching out to feel them in the same way he had been reaching out to the flaming weapons. The candle lights were so small and peaceful in comparison, and he found himself breathing in time with them. He still did not understand the element of fire, but he was aware of it.

The pulsing of the candle almost reminded him of the pulse of the volcano on Crescent Island.

He hoped that wasn't an omen.

He put it out of his mind for the rest of the day. He ate with his friends, talked and did some exercises, took Appa flying to help get his buddy back into shape, meditated again with Zuko, and went for a walk on the mansion's layers of curving rooftops with just Momo for company.

"All of this is just the beginning of the plan to replace Fire Lord Azulon," Aang said to the lemur. "Do you think it's going to get worse, or better?"
Momo just cooed and climbed up to perch on top of Aang's head.

That was either really profound or completely meaningless.

Aang continued on his walk until he noticed the sky start to darken.

It was time.

He jumped off the roof and rode the winds back down to the atrium between his friends' rooms. They were all waiting for him, except for one person.

The curtains of Mai's rooms had already been moved to hide her from sight.

Aang headed into his own rooms and changed into his costume. Or uniform. Kind of both. It was simple enough, just a black fully-body tunic that was tied and pulled tight in the back. The form-fitting tunic would provide only minimal protection from fire, but it would let the flames and blades pass close to him without catching or snagging. The last part was a cloth that tied over his ears and neck to cover the lower half of his face. He wouldn't even be able to mouth any words to Mai; they would have to communicate solely by their eyes and motions.

When he was finished dressing, he emerged to once again find all his friends waiting for him—except Mai.

"She went ahead," Sokka said. "And before we follow, I just want to wish you luck and apologize for not realizing, before we came to the Fire Nation, how useful a Waterbender healer would be when messing with politics. We should have brought Katara along."

Aang shrugged. "Well, now we'll know for the next time we try to reform a militant society."

Sokka grinned and punched Aang's shoulder. "That's what I like to hear. Be safe, brother."

Toph threw a fist into the air. "Now let's go wow all those Fire Nation idiots! Remember, don't respond to pain, and if anyone acknowledges anything besides your flawless victory, kill them as an example to others!"

Aang decided that was a joke and laughed.

Zuko came over and put his hands on Aang's shoulders, looking at him with his intense one-eyed gaze. "Remember, Avatar, that you carry my honor today, too. Don't mess this up."

Suki gave Zuko a soft whack on the side of the head. "What Zuko means is that we all believe in you, otherwise we'd be tackling you to the floor and begging you not to go." She gave him a dazzling smile. "Kyoshi's spirit be with you."

Aang acknowledged that with a nod.

And then it was time to go to the dance.

He took his Monk's Spade and led everyone to the mansion's main dining room. Unlike an Agni Kai, an Agni Budokai was conducted indoors—something about locking in the heat of the performance. All of the guests were gathered, milling about at the edges of the room and leaving a large space in the middle empty. Tall torches had been set up to provide a dim light, leaving the gas lanterns dark and unwanted. A trio of large taiko drums were set up at the edge of that space, and Aang spotted Kei Lo among the trio of bare-chested sages standing ready with their sticks. Kei Lo gave a wave and a smile.
Aang headed for the center of the room. The crowd parted to let him through, familiar faces appearing for brief moments with somber expressions: Governor Hige, Lord Zhao, Commander Zhao, Lady Gerel, Bangfei, Heiyaoshi, Governor Leiko. Then he was past them all, alone in the center with only one other person.

Mai was crouched on the opposite end of the empty space, her head bowed so that she had to only be seeing the floor beneath her. She was wearing a black tunic just like Aang's, and her hair was pulled into a tight bun. Two knives rested on the ground in front of her, but more were sheathed along her arms and legs.

Aang put his Monk's Spade down on the floor and lowered himself into a similar crouch.

It was time.

One of the drums was struck, the sound echoing through the room. The crowd ceased their talk. All was silent.

The drum was struck again.

Aang rose, picking up his Monk's Spade as he did so, and saw Mai doing the same with her knives.

A steady rhythm was being beaten, and on every other beat Aang took a step towards Mai. She approached as well, and for all that her tunic clung so closely to her body, it was her eyes that captivated Aang. They were intensive and bright, appearing almost red in the light of the torches, and they were shining more than they ever had before.

Rather than getting lost in those eyes, Aang found his rhythm in them.

As they grew close, they reached out with their weapons until metal rested against metal. A second drum came in, the pattern calling for a Rising Sun turn, and Aang and Mai circled the center of the room while keeping their weapons pressed together.

The third drum came in, adding a flourish to the beat that called for the Boiling Seas. Aang spun in place as he continued to walk, the motion pulling his Monk's Spade away from the blades of Mai's knives, but she was rotating as well, and soon the weapons were almost in contact again. Just before they met, Aang reversed his spin, still stepping in a circle, as Mai did the same. They continued in that way, spinning and circling, their weapons ever quite touching, until all three drums roared together and then went silent.

Aang ceased his spinning but the room continued to move around him. That wasn't a problem, as he found Mai's glistening eyes before him, and he met her gaze as he twirled his Monk's Spade and then swung so that the sharpened spade was arcing towards her neck.

She deflected the blow with one of her knives, the spark of contact lighting both blades on fire, but Aang was already shifting his staff so that now the crescent blade was now coming at her from the other side, but once again her knife was there to protect her, and once again a spark heralded the arrival of flames.

Aang and Mai stepped back from each other as all three drums sounded again, a harmonious cascade of beats that sent out a deadly call to the dancers.

Aang spun his Monk's Spade in front of him, feeling the heat of the burning blades, and watched as Mai twirled her own knives in each of her hands to create a wreath of fire around them that gave her the appearance of a Firebender. She held her arms out wide as he raised his staff above his head, and they stepped together until their chests were almost touching, so close that Aang could feel the heat
of her body against his despite the flames around them.

Their eyes met, and Aang thought he saw hers crinkle at the corner in a way that might have signified a smile.

Then they both took long steps backward. Mai brought her burning knives forward again and stabbed at Aang, bringing the Agni Budokai into full bloom.

TO BE CONTINUED
Fire Blood

Chapter Summary

The Agni Budokai continues and comes to a bloody end.

Fire Blood

Sokka had to admit, in spite of all the fiery Fire Nation fire-ness, Aang looked good out there.

The kid and Mai were doing their dance-fight-thing like professionals (which Sokka supposed Mai technically was), playing like they were trying to kill each other with their knives and Monk’s Spade without actually touching each other with blades or flames. Mai looked like she usually did, except in tighter clothes, as a fighter she was on a whole higher level than Sokka would ever be able to reach. She was his age, but she must have started stabbing people in the cradle, because her every move out there was teaching him what a professional warrior really was.

Aang, though- for all the kid's skill, Sokka had never seen him moving like Mai's equal.

In fact, maybe calling him 'kid' was unfair. The Southern Water Tribe had used the Ice-Dodging trial as a rite of adulthood because it combined danger and responsibility with the skills that all Men Of The Tribe would need in order to provide for their families. (Pretty convenient.) Aang wasn't even fourteen yet, but didn't he have his own responsibilities right now? Hadn't he gotten stuck providing for the whole world? And weren't the necessary skills (amazing fighting moves and an ability to get even Firebender Jerks to listen to him) being demonstrated in the Agni Budokai right now?

And wasn't he also standing as an equal to a certain sarcastic Fire Nation woman?

Well, either way, Aang might be looking all manly out there, but Sokka had his own responsibilities, and they were a bit nastier.

For example, Sokka had been watching the crowd with one eye (which had taken standing at a very precise angle so that he could also see the Agni Budokai), and he just noticed the jerky Weapon of the Fire Nation Heiyaoshi making her way out of the dining room.

*That* couldn't be good.

It was fortunate that, during the two weeks Aang and Mai had been practicing their little dance, Sokka had been doing his own kind of practicing by talking with Toph about all the various things that could go wrong tonight.

(Hey, everyone needed a hobby, right?)

Sokka searched out his own path through the audience, being careful not to block anyone's sight or step on any sensitive Fire Nation toes. He made his way to the same exit Heiyaoshi had disappeared through, and as he stepped into the hallway, he pulled a certain device from his belt. It was just a little assembly of springs, a couple of gears, and two blocks of wood. When wound up, it would clap the wood pieces together for as long as the spring had tension, no different in function than some kinds of children's toys.
Sokka wasn't playing, though. He spotted Heiyaoshi turning a corner up ahead, and took a moment
to move to the nearest door and toss his device into the empty room behind it. It landed on the floor,
already clapping, and Sokka closed the door so that no one would hear it.

No one would hear it, but any intimidating blind Earthbender she-kings in the area would feel the
vibrations through the solid floor and hopefully come running. It would have been nice if Toph could
have been here on station, but it wasn't like Sokka had access to more than one of those kind of
Earthbenders, and someone had to watch the mansion's perimeter in case of an outside assault.

(Sometimes it was stressful being able to think like an evil genius.)

Sokka peeked around the next corner to see Heiyaoshi walk through a pair of double doors at the
end of this stretch of hallway, going down a flight of stairs. Well. He could follow or wait for King
Toph. If he waited, he would have a fighter with him who might actually be able to match a Weapon
of the Fire Nation. But he would also be leaving Heiyaoshi alone to do whatever it was that was
taking her to the basement during Aang's Agni Budokai.

Well.

Sokka skulked over to the stairs and plunged down into the darkness.

The drums thundered on.

The pounding was a continuous, powerful stream that went straight into Mai's ears and was
transformed into movement and danger and heat.

She was sweating from head to toe beneath her tights, but that was why they were black. (Or
spiritual symbolism or something.) She wouldn't have to worry about anyone knowing how messy
the Agni Budokai was getting as she and Aang worked their bodies and weapons together.

The drums thundered on.

Mai and Aang weren't constantly in motion, but it was close enough. The brief moments of stillness
were just to build the tension between and around them, moments to draw in a breath or show of
their weapons before snapping to the next stance or attack or spin. In those moments, their eyes met
and a connection was established from brain to brain and heart to heart and body to body.

Mai recognized the sensation as she once again brought a flaming knife in to stab at Aang. He
sidestepped it and pushed with the shaft of his Monk's Spade to knock her arm away as she brought
the other in for a slice, but he shifted the staff and blunted that faux-attack as well. Then he flipped
backwards, his feet coming up fast and close and he would have kicked her head off if she hadn't
already been leaning backwards. Instead, she could feel, though her soaked tights, the wind
streaming off the toe of his boots drawing a line of moving air from below her stomach all the way
up her chest to her masked face. A few droplets of sweat were drawn up off the exposed bridge of
her nose by the pull of the rushing air, and they seemed to float above her in an infinite moment
before she snapped back upright and met Aang's gaze again.

The drums thundered on.

They exhaled as one, and Mai saw that Aang's eyes were narrowed in that way that meant he was
smiling beneath his own mask. She couldn't help smiling, too, as they let their bodies draw together
again for another easy clash of weapons. Her knives took the blows steadily despite the burning oil
that covered them. Aang shifted between the spade-like blade at one end of his staff and the twin
prongs at the other, both of them burning as well, managing the awkward length with expert ease.
The drums thundered on.

This was the power, the spirit of an Agni Budokai. Mai couldn't even remember why she had been worried about it. Sure, death and horrible injury were a constant danger, but she was doing it with Aang. He was a kid, he was too kind for this cruel world, and he was perpetually in over his head.

But she knew that.

She knew him.

And that was what made an Agni Budokai work.

The drums thundered on.


It had been the same when she did an Agni Budokai with Ty Lee, those years ago. As they trusted their lives to each other's skill and put all of themselves on the line in front of everyone they knew, Mai had realized amidst the blades and flames that Ty Lee was the only person in the world she trusted this much, and that trust was returned in full. They had not only survived, their performance got them both declared Weapons of the Fire Nation, people so skilled and dangerous that they needed to become government property for the safety of the Homeland itself.

And now Mai was doing the same thing with Aang.

Trusting.

Performing.

Succeeding.

The drums thundered on.

Knives struck the Monk's Spade. Flaming metal clashed against flaming metal. Blades passed so close that sweat-soaked tights sizzled. She trusted Aang. He trusted her. There was a connection between them every bit as strong as the one she shared with Ty Lee. She had finally admitted that connection, so long ago (it seemed) in the light of Guru Pathik's funeral pyre, admitted that her loyalty to Aang went beyond wanting the Avatar to save the world. But she hadn't named that connection at the time. She couldn't. She still couldn't. Perhaps she never would.

But here, moving with him, clashing weapons with him, sweating with him-

She could feel it.

And she realized she could trust it.

Forever.

The drums thundered on.

Mai threw herself into a spin towards Aang with arms outstretched and burning blades held out to cut. The fires curved and trailed as she moved and she felt the heat surround and cuddle her, but Aang moved straight into the center, twirling his Monk's Spade from hand to hand to hand to hand. Their bodies passed each other and her knives struck the burning ends of his staff and the spade-blade passed her left hip and the needle-like prongs passed her right hip. Then their motion took Mai and Aang passed each other, never having touched, their steps as intricate as clockwork gears. And
yet she had noticed, as they came so close, that she and Aang were breathing in time.

Were their hearts pounding as one, too?

She spun to face him again, but instead of approaching him she flipped one of her knives to catch it by the tip of the burning blade. She held it just long enough to feel the heat through her thick gloves-less than a second, really- and then threw it. It whipped straight at Aang’s head, but once again his Monk’s Spade was there, rising up in an arc to knock the knife up into the air above him. By then Mai was throwing the second knife, but Aang knew it was coming and was stabbing down with the burning prongs to catch it, only to twist his staff and toss it up to hit the first knife. The collision sent them flying to the ground on either side of him.

They’d never gotten that move right in practice.

Heat and satisfaction pumped through Mai’s veins. Her blood sang.

The drums thundered on.

It was almost done. The Taiko drummers- Kei Lo and the other drum-sages from the local temple-were signaling for the start of the finale. Aang raised his staff above his head and twirled it fast enough to create a wind without any Airbending. He seemed so tall.

Mai approached against that wind, drawing the last two of her knives from their sheathes on her calves, lifting her left leg so that she could strike one knife against the hardened heel hard enough to ignite the oiled blade, and then with her next step switching legs to ignite the second blade. She slide the dull edges of the knives against each other as she approached Aang to create a kind of whispering metal music, her blood feeling molten within her veins.

With deliberate steps, she came up close to Aang and began to stalk in a circle around him. She let herself drift to arm’s length, keep the burning tip of one knife and then the other pointed at his neck. She could see him laboring to breathe through the heat as he kept twirling his staff above their heads, his mundane wind the only thing keeping her flames from reaching up to touch his chin.

She withdrew her arm as she came up behind him and let herself fall into position against him, back to back, pressed together so that she could feel the firmness of his upright body. She crossed her arms over her chest, positioning the knives to extend out over her elbows.

With the swiftness of the storm Aang halted his staff and snapped it down and around to swing the burning, sharpened spade in at the left side of her stomach. She unfurled her right arm with a timing and angle so that her knife caught and deflected the blow, but Aang was already bringing the staff around to the other side to stab the burning prongs at her stomach on her right.

And in that split second, Mai’s mind thought she needed to remember when Zhao slammed a fireball into that spot back on Kyoshi Island, and so supplied a vivid recollection with all the sound and smell and feel and pain.

Mai thought it was very professional of herself to only react with a flinch so small it was almost invisible.

But that flinch meant her arm unfurled at not-quite-the-correct angle, so her knife merely scraped against Aang’s burning prongs very hard, and before he could reverse his weapon’s direction the tips of penetrated her flesh.

She hissed through her mask, the noise lost in the drumming.
The pain exploded from the wound all through her entire right side, where her punctured muscles and cooked skin screamed almost as loud as the sizzling of her blood and sweat.

The drums thundered on.

But the Agni Budokai was not over yet, so Mai made herself move. As the drummers signaled the final sequence, she snapped a turn that brought tears to her eyes and positioned her body to face Aang. His own eyes were wide with fear.

He knew he had stabbed her.

He was worried about her.

And because Mai trusted Aang with all her being, because she was submerged in the connection they shared, a connection that went deeper than any in her life, she forced herself to curve just a little bit more than this next stance required, drawing extra attention to her feminine contours and the way her soaked tights clung to them. It was agony and grossness, her whole right side roaring as sweat was forced into the charred holes and blood was squeezed out. Good thing these tunics were black.

Mai let the pain embrace her as she winked at Aang like there was nothing wrong and this was an entirely appropriate time to flirt.

If he hadn't already been flushed by the exertion she knew he'd blushing now.

Her playfulness was a lie, but that was part of their connection. Mai was a liar, an honorless protector, a shadow on Aang's brightness. She regretted that, but part of their connection was that he already knew what she was and accepted—

—loved?

—accepted her anyway.

That was part of their trust, too.

Just like Mai would trust Aang to finish this Agni Budokai quickly and spectacularly so that she could hopefully get help before she did herself permanent damage or bled to death.

The drums thundered on.

Earth King Toph ran, every slap of her bare feet against the ground lighting the way for her.

The vibrations exploded outward through the ground to define the walls and paths and guards and doors of Governor's Hige's mansion. She plunged into the building, Zhao's security staff keeping out of her way, but she could sense them turning their heads towards her. They knew something was wrong, even though they couldn't feel the clacking of Sokka's little toy.

Good. It was about time those people earned their pay.

Now Toph just needed to figure out where, exactly, they all needed to be.

Sokka's toy was slowing to a stop, but Toph didn't need it anymore. It had called, and she had come. It wouldn't necessarily be in the same spot that Sokka was right now, and as she moved deeper into the mansion she was able to confirm that— the room was empty. She didn't need to walk all the way over to it and open the doors to know it could be safely ignored.
So where was Sokka, then? As Toph slowed, she could feel Aang and Mai doing their sexy-dance thing in the dining room, as well as the excited crowd watching them. The picture Toph was able to put together was precise but *sharp*, with the drums and the dancing and all the idle foot-shuffling filling out the detail but also threatening to overwhelm her with feedback. She forced herself to concentrate anyway.

During their preparations, Sokka had purposefully sat or stood on hard surfaces as often as he could, and Toph had stayed by his side whenever it wasn't awkward. She had grown to know his particular body-pulse very well. (It was a particularly fun job, because Sokka smelled like love and hotness. Toph felt like she owned Destiny a drink for the favor of assembling Sokka, Aang, and Zuko in her life as such a nice potential Royal Harem.) And as she cast her attention over the assembly in the dining room, Toph couldn't feel her friend.

Crud.

Where was he?

She extended her attention through the rest of the mansion, finding servants and secret lovers and guards and a lemur and a sky bison and a colony of wood-ants that someone should really remove from that wall and of course plenty of elephant-rats running and rolling and widdling in the kitchen and basement and-

The basement.

There were two people down there right now.

Sokka.

Heiyaoshi.

Crud.

Toph didn't even bother with stairs. She moved towards the dining room, but instead of going in, she swept a foot over the floor and tightened her fists, pulling the stone away to create an opening for herself. She took a moment to sense the exact height of the basement, and then hopped down.

She hated being in freefall.

But the ground came exactly when she expected it.

Toph landed and bent the floor to bounce herself back up into a run towards the figures at the opposite end of the chamber, the resulting vibrations revealing jars and baskets and shelves and some kind of machinery in a far corner. Heiyaoshi stood tense in front of the machinery, pressed so tightly against Sokka that their heartbeats sent vibrations into each other.

Toph also sensed Heiyaoshi's volcano-glass knife being held right under Sokka's chin.

Toph growled, "Stand down, lady. You get one warning. That Water Tribe guy is under my dominion."

Heiyaoshi's heartbeat was steady. "My apologies, your majesty, but I do not take orders from you. But I have no ill will to you or this Tribal, so I see no need to hurt either of you if you don't interfere with my task." She took a step back towards the machine.

Toph took an equal step forward. "What is that thing?" She focused on it, feeling the confusing
assembly of metal parts-

"It's going to pump something upstairs," Sokka gasped, "with a hose pointed at-"

"Shut it." Heiyaoshi moved faster than even Toph could make out. Sokka squealed and his stomach muscles clenched.

Toph hissed, thinking at first that Sokka had been stabbed, but his body's pulse didn't change. He wasn't losing blood. Heiyaoshi must have just jammed the butt of her knife into his stomach.

Toph forced herself to enter the patient and still frame of mind that would let her utterly destroy her opponent. Now that Sokka had told her what to sense for, she could find it. There was a hole in the ceiling, and right above them Aang and Mai (there was something wrong with Mai but she was moving too quickly to tell exactly what) were doing their shimmying. "You're going to kill them?"

"Only injure them, in all likelihood." Heiyaoshi took another step towards the machine. "The hose will spray a fine mist of flammable liquid, and the fire on their weapons will ignite it. It will simply look the Avatar had a compulsive moment of Firebending in the midst of his performance, and it will ruin the Agni Budokai. Many boys on the cusp of manhood have trouble controlling themselves in exciting moments. No one will doubt his failure."

Sokka's slow, awkward swallow with the knife still under his chin summarized the situation very neatly. "Um, exploding mists are probably going to do more than injure my friends."

Heiyaoshi shrugged so slightly that it must have been invisible to anyone who had to rely on eyes. "That depends on how fast a healer can get to them, I suppose. But if you won't stand down, then you will have no chance."

Heiyaoshi's grip tightened on her volcano-glass knife at the same time the muscles in her arm compressed.

Heiyaoshi was about to stab Sokka.

Toph couldn't stop herself from snorting in amusement. A flick of her fingers was all it took to reach out and take full control of the volcano-glass blade. It might have been made in the Fire Nation, but volcano-glass was just earth that had been heated until it was fused and brittle. It, like Sokka, was under her dominion.

She was the Earth King, after all.

The blade hung in the air, locked into place no matter how hard Heiyaoshi grunted and tried to move it. Sokka chuckled. Toph grinned as she pulled the sharp point away from Sokka, wrenching Heiyaoshi's arm in the process.

Then the Weapon of the Fire Nation let go of the knife and shoved Sokka and dived for the machine and reached out for a valve-

As Heiyaoshi's fingers brushed the device, Toph did the only thing she could in that split-second. She extended her influence, finding the other knives and swords made of the glass that were strapped to Heiyaoshi's body, and yanked her arms towards her body. All the volcano-glass blades broke free of their hilts and stabbed deeper into their sheathes-

-through their sheathes-

-into Heiyaoshi's flesh.
And Heiyaoshi gave a strangled cry as her body suddenly became too ripped and full of holes to muster the strength to turn that valve.

Toph was grateful for the stomping boots that burst into the basement chamber and made her flinch out of her state of concentration. She always hated the feel of blood leaking out of a body and pooling on a hard floor. "Who's here?"

"I am," Commander Zhao bellowed. The other new arrivals- soldiers in full armor- moved out of Zhao's way as he dragged someone into the basement. "This is Fire Sage Kagemori, one of the observers sent by the temple. What happened down here?"

Ah, that would explain the sound of rustling robes. Toph nodded her Royal Approval. If Zhao couldn't arrive in time to help, at least he was taking care of the political angle.

Sokka pointed down at where Heiyaoshi was choking and leaking. "She was trying to sabotage the Agni Budokai!"

Sage Kagemori gasped, but Zhao just crouched beside Heiyaoshi and barked, "Whose order? Answer!"

Toph didn't have much hope for a straight answer, and so she was surprised when Heiyaoshi bubbled, -palace- Azulon's- office-"

Toph concentrated again, trying to push past the ickiness to signs that Heiyaoshi might just be scattering dust. "Hard to tell if she's lying, with her injuries. But why-"

Heiyaoshi gave a gurgling little laugh. "-never- wanted- be- weapon-" The last word was so weak it was nearly inaudible, and Toph moved closer so that she could hear better.

She wound up putting one of her bare feet in a pool of warm, sticky liquid that had to be blood.

"-tell- Zuko-" Heiyaoshi choked, coughed, and Toph felt something inside the Weapon's body shift in way that stopped most of the regular pulsing. "-the- nnnninthhhhhhhhhhh-

Whatever Heiyaoshi was trying to say, it was lost in a wet rattle.

Toph felt Heiyaoshi's lungs shrink one last time and her heart still. Muscles all through the body relaxed one last time. Toph stepped back so that she was no longer standing in the puddle. "I couldn't make that last part out."

Zhao stood up and chuckled. "No matter. We got something valuable." He turned to the sage. "You heard her confession? She was operating under the Fire Lord's orders?"

Toph could feel this Kagemori guy shaking under his robes. "Y- yes, Commander. I- I heard. Is- is there usually this much b- blood?"

Sokka crossed his arms over his chest. "We don't know that she was telling the truth."

Zhao shrugged. "No. But it was the most probable explanation, and it will serve our purposes. Fire Lord Azulon created the Weapons, and they all answer to him, ultimately. One of them interfering with a sacred ritual is scandal enough, never mind a deathbed confession of his involvement. The sages won't have a choice but to call for an investigation. Right, Sage Kagemori?"

"-so much blood-"
Toph couldn't say she really liked politics, but she had learned to use them. If Zhao was right about the Fire Nation's ways, this really might be useful.

For now, though, she didn't have to care. "Come on, Sokka. Aang and Mai finished their booty-bumping, and something doesn't feel right up there." Overhead, Toph could feel the pulse of Mai's body slowing just as Heiyaoshi's had. "We better bring some mud."

She could feel Sokka's nod as they began to run. "Right. Mud. Scenario number forty-seven, as I recall. I am so glad we talked about this stuff."

Aang had never felt so warm.

There was the heat of the fires and the exertion of the dance, but this warmth went beyond that. It came from within, from his Qi and his heart and his joy.

It was similar to the burning he felt when he had linked with the volcano on Crescent Island, but there was no pain, now. This wasn't a destructive warmth, an explosion of pain and sorrow, but a steady heat of victory and love. It came from within, but it also came from without, from the connection he had with Mai.

They were about to finish the Agni Budokai.

They had been strong and they had been good and they had been beautiful. Even that one mistake hadn't stopped them; Mai must have only been scratched by the prongs of the Monk's Spade, and now there was nothing left to stop them. They had come together and emerged on the other side of a new fusion.

Aang couldn't imagine that Mai would ever be able to fluster him again, not after this.

They stepped to opposite sides of the performance space in time with the hammerings of the Taiko drummers. Aang spun his Monk's Spade from hand to hand and left to right to left. The burning ends of the staff flickered from the movement but didn't die. Behind him, Mai would be twirling her last two knives as she moved to her position. Their timing would have to be just perfect, because they wouldn't have time to even meet each other's eyes before-

Aang reached his spot, spun around, and threw his staff into a spin not unlike the way the old Water Tribe boomerangs flew through the sky. It rose and spun until it passed the middle of the performance space and then fell again in a perfect arch.

It was headed right for Mai.

But Aang couldn't watch her, because she had thrown her knives at him at the same time he tossed his Monk's Spade.

He breathed in, held it, and watched the knives come in at him. The whirled end over end, trailing fire through the air. They weren't quite the blur that Mai could render her projectiles when she really tried, but they were still moving pretty fast.

Good thing Airbenders were fast, too.

But this would be tricky-

-both knives came in at him-
-he snapped his right hand out and wrapped his fingers around the hilt of the knife on that side-
-he felt the heat of the burning blade on his hand-
-no, he hadn't grabbed wrong, it was just the fire warming the air around it-
-the other knife was still coming-
-Aang was over-extended at a bad angle-
-coming in at his heart-
-he ducked as he reached-
-metal and fire above his head-
-
-reach-
-warm-
-fire trailing in the air-
-hot-
-grasp-
-hot-
-fingers around the handle-
-clench-

And Aang was holding the knives in his hands. He started running as soon as she was sure of his grip, heading towards Mai and preparing to stab with both blades-

-she had his staff-
-her grip was wrong-
-her run was unsteady-
-he saw pain in her eyes-
-red droplets were trailed on the floor behind the path of her right foot-

Oh no.

There was no time to stop this. He was running and she was running and their weapons were out and the drums were thundering louder and louder and the crowd was chanting something now and-

Mai swung the staff as her eyes pinched with what must have been a wince.

Aang stabbed as horror plopped into his stomach like a stone

The burning spade stopped just short of Aang's throat.

He halted the flaming knives just short of Mai's heart.
They both trembled as their eyes met and they held their poses.

Mai's eyes were clouded in pain, but her stare was steady and Aang could feel her worry and concern washing over him. He knew his eyes had to be betraying his terror for her and an offer to stop at any moment.

They held their poses.

Another drop of blood fell from Mai’s side, and Aang saw it splash on the floor near a little hole and then drain down into it.

The drums stopped. The chanting stopped.

Silence reigned.

The drums all sounded one last time, a single burst of sound and power that echoed off the walls and ceiling and floor.

Everything went quiet again.

Then the audience burst into applause and cheers.

It was over.

Aang threw the knives aside as Mai completely collapsed and slumped over him. The Monk's Spade fell from her hands, rattling against him, and he even felt the flames brushing his tights until a twitch of his hips sent it clattering to the floor.

"Ash," Mai hissed through her mask.

Aang swallowed. "Where?"

Her eyes squeezed shut for a moment. "The stab."

So it hadn't been a narrowly averted mistake, after all. Aang had shoved burning metal into Mai's body.

He needed to get her out of here. He needed to get help. He needed- he needed a Waterbender, but he didn't have one! He needed-

He needed-

He-

And then Suki was there helping him to keep Mai upright, and Zuko was standing with his back to Aang, saying to the audience, "The Avatar has completed his Agni Budokai! Let all here stand as witnesses and celebrants! He and Lady Mai will speak just as soon as they recover for a moment..."

"Come on," Suki whispered. "This way." She pulled Aang and Mai back to the edge of the dining room, and Aang tore his gaze away from Mai's masked wince to see that they were heading towards a discrete door in the wall that must have been a space for servants.

It proved to be a small little room, but it was large enough for Mai to lie down.

As soon as she did, Aang saw blood starting to pool beneath her the right side of her stomach.
And then Suki yanked his hands so that one was on her shoulder and one was on her leg. "Keep her still. No movement."

Aang did so, feeling Mai's pulse beneath the tights and skin. She trembled, but her eyes crinkled in a smile as glanced at him. "Watch the hands," she coughed, and then gave something that could have been a laugh.

It didn't make Aang feel better. "What do we do?"

Suki stood up and stepped away, and Aang looked over to find her examining the shelves built into the little room's walls. They were lined with jars and what seemed to be bundles of spare chopsticks. "Need to find something to bandage her. Maybe-

"Good job, everyone," came King Toph's voice, "but you can all relax. I'm here to solve your problems as usual."

Aang snapped his head around to see her stomping into the little servant's supply closet, Sokka following with what looked like a Firebender soldier's helmet full of dirt and a clay jug in his arms. "Toph! Mai's-

"Yeah, I see. So to speak." She kneeled down beside Aang. "Keep her still, try to enjoy yourself, and don't distract me. Sokka, where's my mud?"

"Coming up!" Sokka was pouring water out of his jug into the helmet, turning the dirt into mud. He mixed it up with his hands a bit and then slammed it down between Toph and Aang. "Fresh and sloppy!"

As Aang watched, Toph scooped some of the mud and slathered it over Mai's wounds. She worked carefully, spreading it thickly and evenly. Then she laid her hands over the mess, sinking her fingers into it.

Mai groaned. "That feels weird."

Toph snorted. "It gets better." She breathed in and breathed out, and then took her muddy fingers up off of Mai again, but began moving her hands in air with the same motions she had used to spread the mud. Despite the lack of physical contact, the mass of mud swished back and forth, its thickness bunching up at one end and flowing back to the other, never spilling out beyond where Toph had set it. It seemed to draw in the light that was spilling through the door, becoming a shadow like out of the deepest cave.

It was Earthbending, but Aang didn't understand the point.

Mai sighed with something like relief.

Finally, Aang said, "What are you doing?"

Toph continued her movement. "Earth-healing. I learned from a shaman who supported me when I stole the kingship."

Earth-healing? Like what Katara did? Earthbenders could heal? Toph could heal people?!

Aang blinked. "You can fix Mai?"

Toph gave a shake of her head. "Earth-healing doesn't work that way. It's not like what those Waterbenders did after we fought the ash-monster. It doesn't put back together what you broke. This
will keep Lady Caldera Yu Mai here from losing more blood or doing any more damage to her wound. It will give her strength, but her body will still need to do all the work of repairing itself. Earth-healing just gives you the chance to work your way back and the tools to do it."

"Wow." Maybe Toph really was the greatest Earthbender alive, after all. It made sense that she was King.

They all watched as Toph worked, but it was over quickly. She lowered her hands, and then motioned at the spread of mud. "You can scrape most of that off, now, but leave a coating. It will work like a bandage." She stood up and wiped her hands on her shirt. "Now, I think you and Lady Caldera Yu Mai have a public appearance to make."

Aang helped Mai to her feet, and although she moved slowly and gingerly, she stood without shaking. She leaned on Aang with one arm wrapped around him as she used the other to remove her mask and undo her hair-bun. Her hair fell down on his arm and hand, sweaty and tangled and with none of its usual gloss.

But her eyes were bright and her gaze was steady.

Sokka said, "I think everyone out there is waiting for a quick Avatar speech. Remember, we want them to support Iroh and overthrow their Fire Lord. Heiyaoshi tried to sabotage your dance but she's dead now and Zhao says we can use her to start turning the sages against Azulon. Say something strong and Avatar-y. Don't say, 'um,' at all. Good luck!"

Aang nodded his acknowledgement as he and Mai walked past Sokka, past Toph, past Suki, and out into the dining room. Zuko was standing by the door, and they passed him by as well. The audience- the governors and nobles and merchants and sages and all the important people of Zenmatsu Island- halted their conversations and turned to look at them.

Aang and Mai both. Alone together.

Aang looked back at the people and wondered what to say.

Mai used the arm she had around his shoulders to give him a squeeze.

Aang raised his chin and said, "I have completed the Agni Budokai with Lady Caldera Yu Mai. We did it with the help of all our friends and allies. People of the Fire Nation, the Earth Kingdom, and the Water Tribes all worked together to make this possible. Their work allowed me to channel the fighting fire. I have honored your warriors, your nation, your ways, and your people."

Amidst the crowd, the sages- including Kei Lo- all clapped their hands once and kowtowed. The head sage called out, "The blessings of fire and blood fell upon this Agni Budokai! We confirm its power and rightness."

Aang nodded. "I did this to settle the matter of ending Prince Zuko's Agni Kai."

Governor Leiko bowed at the waist. "No Agni Kai is necessary now. We have seen your attunement with Fire."

Aang breathed out the last of his tension. "Thank you. But that's not the only reason I did this. I want you to believe in the Avatar. I want you to believe in me. And I've come to the Fire Nation to warn you that Fire Lord Azulon's ways are damaging the whole world. I was told that one of his Weapons tried to ruin what I did tonight. I want to bring healing to the Earth Kingdom, the Water Tribes, and the Fire Nation. I want your support in this, because this healing can only come from all of you. All of your people. And the whole world will have to work together to make sure it works."
He paused for a moment, looking out over the stern faces of the crowd. "Is that okay?"

Governor Leiko was the first to drop to her knees. Other governors soon followed, and then the merchants, and then the nobles. The head sage started to rise back up from his kowtow with a scowl, but then Bangfei and Lady Gerel- the two surviving Weapons of the Fire Nation here tonight- dropped to their knees, and after a glance at them, he slowly followed suit. Finally, Governor Hige awkwardly lowered himself with the help of a servant.

The whole room was kneeling to Aang.

Mai squeezed him again. "You did it."

You turned to look at her, and found her smiling. She was sweaty and her hair hung messily over her face and her smile was strained, but he still had never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

He wanted to kiss her.

Instead, he said, "We did it."

Iroh was awoken in the middle of the night with a wire from the Fire Nation, from Commander Zhao, outlining the events surrounding the Avatar's Agni Budokai. Word of mere success could have waited for morning- or what passed for morning this close to the top of the world- but there were other concerns, concerns about the Fire Lord and the Weapons of the Fire Nation.

One was dead, having betrayed Iroh's father in her last moments. Whether the Fire Lord really had given her the orders, or she was merely working for someone with a more complicated political agenda, it was still a betrayal to the whole concept of the Weapons.

Father would soon learn the perils of essentially enslaving such capable people.

If he cared.

For now, Iroh had his own work to do. This matter could be used to drive a wedge between his father and the Fire Sages, but the Fire Lord had been very good to them, and they would be slow to betray him.

Iroh, though, had an idea for how to help that matter along.

He simply had to push more work onto his nephew and the Avatar.

Sighing, Iroh called for the servants to bring tea as he began composing the telegraph message he would be sending back to the Homeland.

Mai had to admit that she had never healed so fast from a stabbing. It was only a few days later and she could stretch without worrying about springing a leak.

That this stabbing was so bad it nearly killed her was beside the point. Or proved it better. One of the two.

Either way, she hated that it had happened in the first place.

At least it was finally time to leave Zenmatsu Island behind.

The whole convocation of Outer Island governors had officially ended at breakfast that morning after
a boring speech from Lord Zhao, and Mai thought that Governor Hige's own goodbye speech was very nice despite being a fancy way of telling everyone to get out of his house and stop getting him blown up. The various guests were leaving throughout the day and would continue to do so until night fell, in all likelihood. Mai herself still had to pack, and she was pretty sure that King Toph was expecting someone else to handle the clothes strewn all over her own room. Mai resolved to make sure that either the mansion's staff handled it, or Sokka and Suki were left picking up Earthbender underwear. After all, Mai was injured, and shouldn't be straining herself by touching heavy shirts and such, even if she did probably owe the little Earthbender her life.

For now, though, it was time to say goodbye to Aang and Zuko.

The sun was shining down on Hige's personal dock, just like the day those weeks ago when they had arrived on Zenmatsu. Zhao's ship was making its own preparations for departure, as well as King Toph's Royal Second-Hand Steamer.

Aang and Zuko wouldn't be taking either of those, though.

Some of Zhao's soldiers were lifting some packs of supplies up onto Appa's saddle while Zuko glared at them and Suki made concerned goo-goo eyes at him. Aang was keeping Appa calm with nose-rubs and apples while having a conversation with Sokka about something. Perhaps they were arguing about how much meat belonged in a healthy diet. That was their favorite debate.

Mai folded her hands in her sleeves and walked up to them. "So, it's almost time to go, huh?"

Sokka looked at her. Then he looked at Aang. "I'm- um, going to go find Toph so that- she can say goodbye? Yeah, that's a good one. You two have fun."

Mai was tempted to trip him as he walked over in Zuko and Suki's direction. Then she and Sokka both saw that Suki was currently giving Zuko a hug, and Sokka changed direction before she could work up any more malevolent plans for him. Oh, well.

Aang drew her attention back with, "So, you're looking good. Um, you know, I mean with your injury. But you're looking very pretty, too."

She checked his face for a blush, but couldn't find one. Maybe he didn't mean what he had said.

But she doubted that.

Besides, she did probably look pretty. She had done her hair up in that same style as when they had all arrived in the Fire Nation. There was no real reason for it, other than wanting to feel fancy in the wake of the sweaty, bloody Agni Budokai.

The one where she had almost ruined everything with her weakness.

"I'm sorry," she found herself saying.

Aang blinked. "For what?"

Mai considered. "Well, for almost ruining the Agni Budokai, but I guess I'm still sorry for lying to you from the South Pole all the way to Crescent Island, and betraying you to Zuko there, and being so messed up after that, and getting myself captured in that sinkhole, and-"

"Stop!" Aang shook his hands in front of her face, dropping the apple he had been about to give to Appa. Aang ignored the giant tongue that flicked out to snap up the treat, instead locking his gray eyes on Mai. "You don't have anything to apologize for!"
She arched an eyebrow.

He frowned. "Okay, you're right about most of that, but you already did apologize, I think. And I already forgave you! I mean that you have nothing to apologize for with the Agni Budokai. You finished it even though I stabbed you!"

"You would see it that way." Mai shook her head, sending all her small braided hair-tails floating in the breeze. "But I had told you that we could do it, and I nearly failed. That's worth an apology in my book."

Aang blinked. "Why?"

What kind of a stupid question was that? "Hasn't all the time we just spent in the Fire Nation taught you the answer? We tend to take things far too seriously. Especially things that involve blood."

Aang blinked again. Then he laughed.

Mai let slip a smile. People didn't often laugh at her jokes. "But the truth is that I do keep failing you, and I- is too trite to say I feel bad about that?"

"Well, I feel bad about stabbing you."

"But I flinched. It was my fault."

Aang tilted his head. "So, what, it's okay for you to not make sense, but I have to? How is that fair?"

Mai's smile grew wider. "That's the kind of thing I would say. It's good that you can think like me, since I'm not going to be around to keep you and Zuko properly depressed about things."

Aang reached out and took her hands in his own. "Is it too 'trite' to say that, after that Agni Budokai, even when we're apart you're still with me? I feel like- like we- we-"

Mai took pity on him and gave his hands a quick squeeze. "You don't need to say it. That's the point of an Agni Budokai. Some things can only be expressed by actions."

Aang nodded.

Mai eased her hands free of his, and let a razor fall free into her palm so that she could twirl it. "And if something happens to you on this trip, Prince Iroh will have to answer for his actions."

Aang reached out to rub Appa's nose again. "His plan worked out so far. You know, aside from assassins and fire duels. And his wire said he's going to contact me and Zuko again in the Spirit World as soon as we get to the island."

Mai snorted. "I know. But it's not how I like to operate. Besides, wherever he's sending you, you're only going to have Zuko. And Zuko is an idiot."

Aang looked over at where Zuko was gingerly walking up Appa's tail to the saddle. "I'm more worried about you. And the others. You're the ones who are going to be around while all the accusations about Heiyaoshi are made. And Zhao will be starting to work on getting the military on our side-"

Mai turned her smile into a grin and twirled her blade faster. "I'm just sorry Toph was the one who got to take out Heiyaoshi. All that stuff is why I'm staying to look after the others instead of inviting myself on your trip with Zuko. I'm a Weapon of the Fire Nation. Even if I can't do an Agni Budokai
right, I can deal with the other Weapons. At least, once I heal, and long enough for you to get back. Then, between the two of us, we can handle all kinds of things, right?"

Aang beamed up at her. "See? You're not a failure."

Mai opened her mouth to object, but stopped herself. He was right. Why was she trying to protest?

Oh, right. She felt bad whenever she failed Aang.

Well, she'd just have to stop doing that, then.

Sokka ambled back over. "I can't find Toph. I'd be worried if she weren't the scariest member of our group right now."

Up in the saddle, Zuko groaned. "We need to get going! I want to arrive before nightfall!"

Aang looked at Mai and shrugged. "I guess we better leave. Give King Toph my regards?"

"Of course. I'll also tell her you think she smells like feet." Aang laughed again, and she brushed at her fringe of hair even though it wasn't long enough to hang over her eyes. "Well, goodbye for now. Don't die."

Mai expected a hug in return.

Instead, Aang stood on the tips of his toes and popped a kiss right on the tip of Mai's nose.

Huh.

Later, Mai watched Appa fly off, Aang and Zuko and their packs of supplies visible in the saddle. She threw a warning glare to Sokka, whose grin looked far too smug, and then turned to go back to the mansion and pack her things up for their own departure.

Coming back home had made for very interesting times. Mai had a feeling that was a trend that would continue.

TO BE CONTINUED
The Platinum Connection

Chapter Summary

Platinum is bad news - but a good lead.

The Platinum Connection

No one had ever actually told Jet that he was the best Blue Spirit, and he knew for a fact that the Fire Nation had at least one warrior who could defeat him without even trying very hard.

(Back when he used to dream, that girl would sometimes show up in his nightmares.)

Still, he was willing to bet that he was the only person alive who had survived as a spy and stowaway on a Fire Nation cruiser for weeks on end. How much longer he would last, though, was an open question.

Jet was once again in the uniform of the Blue Spirits: the black suit that would blend in with the night around him, and eponymous snarling goblin mask. He was hanging from the bottom of a metal walkway connecting two ships come together for a midnight meeting on the open seas. The moon was nearly full, but its light did not reach down her, beneath the bridge, and the sea below was a dark void present only in sound.

On one side of Jet was the Fire Nation cruiser that had been his home since he deserted his assignment as King Toph's spymaster, and on the other side was a civilian vessel of some kind that looked tough enough to put up a real fight. And yet that vessel had been here waiting, within sight of the shoreline, and hadn't tried to run when the cruiser came upon it.

That was when Jet knew he needed to find out what was going on.

And so he had finagled a way onto the underside of the walkway between the ships without being spotted (now that had been a trick), the strength in his arms and legs the only thing keeping him from plunging into the waters below. It was harder than it should have been to hold on, but he hadn't exactly been sleeping and eating right. Still, it had to be done, and he had long ago accepted that punishing the Fire Nation was more important than anything else.

Jet hung on and listened.

An unfamiliar voice said, "The north wind blows cold."

A voice that Jet recognized as belonging to the Fire Nation Captain Wu, his unwilling host for the past weeks, replied, "But we are headed to warmer lands."

Then a third voice chimed in with a grunt. "Oh, good, we established that we're all the right people. Because Fire Nation ships half-crewed by Waterbenders and pirates who sit around waiting to meet them are so common."

Jet knew that one. The complaining of Katara's Waterbending Master, Pakku, was a common sound around the ship.
The first voice said, "I'm not a pirate. You lot hiring me makes me a privateer."

Instead of laughing, Pakku barked, "Ha!" Then he added, "Did the people who hired you give you a stamped paper confirming that?"

The pirate/privateer hesitated for a moment. "No.

"Then you are a pirate. But I haven't been living on this filthy metal ship for three extra weeks because I wanted to argue vocabulary. Do you have the materials?"

The pirate almost sounded hurt as he said, "It's- it's not my fault. The shipping schedules all got changed around. But I got you your platinum, just as ordered. (Am too a privateer.) Just have to give the word to my men to bring it up-"

"My people will get it," the Captain Wu cut in.

The walkway above Jet once again rattled with footsteps, a group moving perfectly in time.

The pirate's voice had a harder edge to it when he spoke again: "Sure, just march over to m'ship without so much as a 'please.' The money's good, but I'm glad to see the end of this job. Worst pirate/privateer I've ever done."

Jet wondered about this matter of being a privateer. There was no one left in the world to privateer against; the official remnants of the Earth Kingdom had surrendered after Ba Sing Se was scorched off the map, and even before that didn't have much of a navy. Jet knew that King Toph's rebels didn't have one. And if the Fire Nation was paying pirates to hit ships, why not issue the formal papers?

The only answer, of course, was that it was a secret operation.

And the only group currently shipping platinum was the Fire Navy itself.

Even Long Feng had needed to seize the metal from the Fire Nation for his heretical activities at Ba Sing Se. The Fire Nation was the only group with the science and technology to extract the metal from the earth. Even Earthbenders couldn't separate it from whatever ores it normally came attached to. Sokka had worked in a lab devoted to the matter, and had talked about it front of Jet enough for him to be sure of it.

He needed to see how much platinum was being moved. He eased over and pulled himself up so that he could peek a look up over the edge of the plank.

On the pirate ship, a large crate had been brought up to the main deck and six Fire Nation soldiers were standing around it. A crane from Jet's ship was being maneuvered over to the crate, and while the others stood on guard (presumably against the pirates loitering around the deck), one of the soldiers climbed up to attach the hook to the crate. That one held on as the crate was lifted and slowly swung over to the Fire navy ship.

It didn't look like it was as much platinum as King Toph had taken from Long Feng, but it was still a good amount. If Pakku and the Fire Navy were involved, then this must all be for Prince Iroh- head of the White Lotus order, and so also the commander of the Blue Spirits. What did all of that have to do with stealing platinum from the Fire Nation? Couldn't Prince Iroh just get it through legitimate channels? Did this mean he really was working against his own nation? But then how could the Navy ships under his command be going along with this?

Before Jet could formulate any answers, he heard Pakku say, "Is that all of it?"
"Aye. The rest was just the regular metals, and I was promised I could keep that."

"Yes, fine, whatever. Captain Wu, let's get moving to Temple Base as soon as everything is secured. I've been delayed enough in getting back to the North P."

"What is that?!"

Jet looked over in the direction of the shout to see Pakku, Wu, and a strange civilian all staring right at him. The civilian—probably the self-proclaimed privateer—was even pointing.

Ah.

Jet doesn't need to think about what came next. He had trained his whole life to avenge his parents, and the extra lessons imparted by the Blue Spirits made him extra dangerous. But it wasn't just about fighting or maneuvering; part of being a Blue Spirit was knowing how to terrify people.

Jet ran at the assembled captains, knowing that his black-suited body would be almost invisible in the night but also that his grinning goblin mask would shine in the moonlight. He saw them startle at the combination of his speed and image, a moment of surprise that would leave them vulnerable, but not to attack.

Instead, he hit them with noise (flash-powder thrown to the deck of the ship), unpredictability (climbing the side of the crane and jumping off it to land out of sight), and a disappearance into thin air (a quick exit into a ventilation duct most would have thought too small for a man Jet's size). Before they even figured out that he had left, he was below decks, moving along paths that would keep him away from the regular traffic. He was quiet even compared to the rest of the sleeping ship, happy in darkness while most people needed at least a little light to see by.

And so as Pakku, Captain Wu, and the self-proclaimed privateer were no doubt just starting to wonder what they had seen, Jet let himself into the converted stockroom being shared by Katara and Ty Lee.

Both girls were asleep, burrowed together under a shared blanket in the bed they had made out of tarps and netting bundled on top of a series of supply crates. Neither reacted as Jet came in and locked the door behind him, but he was nevertheless careful to keep quiet. With any luck, he could be out and gone without needing to bother them.

If Katara knew he was here, though, she would probably be more than bothered.

Despite how difficult she was being, Jet could admit that he liked the Waterbender. Her brother was a true enemy to the Fire Nation, even if Sokka was too trusting of trash like Lady Caldera Yu Mai. Katara was the same way, someone who had been hurt indescribably by the Fire Nation and wanted to fight back, but still somehow thinking that there were lines that didn't need to be crossed. But Jet didn't doubt their loyalty or their strength. He wished they could have been real friends, instead of allies of convenience.

Katara didn't want to be involved in what Jet was doing here. Didn't want to be contacted or left notes or anything.

But Jet didn't trust that what he had just learned was safe in his head. He needed to find out more. He needed to see what this 'Temple Base' was that the ship's next destination. He needed to know what was being done with the platinum. He needed to find out why Long Feng was being kept a secret prisoner on this ship.

And learning all that would be dangerous.
Jet had no real help he could call upon. There had been no opportunity to get in touch with any other Blue Spirits, and even if there was, Prince Iroh could see into dreams. The Blue Spirits had been trained to meditate so that their experiences would flow into their dreams regularly. Jet had been using a mix of sleeping draughts and his own mix of intense meditation to keep himself from dreaming anything incriminating, but not everyone could do that.

So he'd just have to force Katara to be his ally, whether or not she liked it. It was a shame, but the Fire Nation could not be allowed to win.

But it was okay. Someday, everyone would realize that Jet was a hero, and was doing what was right.

Or they'd all be dead. But then at least he'd have tried.

Pakku thought that it took far too long for the Fire Nation soldiers to search the pirate ship for the- whatever it had been. And they didn't even find anything. Typical.

The pirate captain- whatever his name was- was practically a stewed sea prune by that time. "I'm getting my people and my ship out of here. You- you're being haunted by sea spirits!"

Captain Wu snorted. "There's no such thing as sea spirits."

Pakku quirked an eyebrow at that. Was that really what sailors in the Fire Navy thought? No wonder they needed so much metal and coal to get around. Still, it wasn't his problem. "Then since our intruder couldn't be a spirit, and we've ruled out a rogue pirate spy, it seems we have nothing to worry about. I'm going to bed. Captain Wu, the Waterbenders you requested are on station. I'm sure I can leave you to see our privateer friends off?"

"Yes, Master Pakku."

"Good. Have fun with that." Pakku made his way below decks, to the hold he and the other Waterbenders were using as sleeping quarters. He prepared his hammock as the engine started up again and was about to get in bed when flashes of red light came in through the porthole. He took a quick look, just long enough to confirm that Captain Lee was indeed proceeding to sink the pirate vessel as planned. Flaming balls of pitch were being launched at the former 'privateers,' and when any of the crew tried to jump off to escape the flames, the Waterbendering students he had left on duty raised the ocean to make sure that all hands would be lost.

It was a testament to how long Pakku had been serving under Prince Iroh that the sight didn't keep him awake for very long.

The shift-warning bell brought Katara out of a restless, dream-filled sleep, and she felt immediately that the ship was speeding along to some new destination. After cruising around on some business for Prince Iroh for a while, were they finally going to the North Pole?

She tried to get out of bed, but found herself weighed down by a certain acrobat from the Fire Nation. Just like every morning. Ty Lee was a cuddler. "I have Waterbending practice. We have to get up."

"Hmmmmmmmmm." Ty Lee sighed, and then her eyes snapped open. "I'm awake!" She started to smile, but then winced. "And something is poking me." She unwrapped her arms from around Katara (who took the opportunity to escape from the bed) and reached beneath her to pull something out of the bed.
Katara tugged her outer tunic on. "What is it?"

"It's a note. Folded very nicely, too. It's-" Ty Lee unwrapped it and read for a moment. "Oh. It's from Jet."

Katara froze. "He signed his name?!"

Ty Lee flopped back down into bed and held out the note.

Thinking thoughts of ice and waterwhips, Katara took it and read. She read about Jet's adventures last night, about the platinum that Iroh might be stealing from the rest of the Fire Nation, and the Temple Base they were now going to. It turned out that Jet didn't sign his name, merely drawing a picture of an elephant-rat instead. Ty Lee had thought she was hunting food-stealing rats when she had stumbled across him weeks ago.

Jet probably thought he was being very clever.

Katara was going to feed him this note the next chance she got.

Something heavy and warm and smelling of mountain peaches leaned into Katara's back, and Ty Lee's breath tickled at her ear as strong but thin arms snaked over Katara's shoulders. Katara stiffened at the unexpected contact and felt her heart speed up, but then she relaxed again. This was no different than sharing a bed. Ty Lee just liked to be physical, and Katara still wasn't quite used to that.

"Don't start the day angry, Katara. Now is a time for positive energy, and you need to be properly balanced for your Waterbending lesson." Ty Lee moved a hand to tap the center of Katara's chest. "Your power is here. Take it back for yourself."

That tap made Katara's face warm, and it wasn't even a Qi-blocking attack. She crunched the note in her fist, but let her arms drop loose at her sides. Ty Lee was right. Jet was a jerk, but she wasn't going to let this ruin her day. She was learning Waterbending. She was really getting to know her element. This trip was good for her, and Jet hadn't ruined anything yet.

She breathed in and breathed out.

"Okay," she said.

Ty Lee hummed. "I can feel the tension leaving your body. That's good. You are ready, Katara Water Tribe. Go out there and show that cranky old man how they throw water around in the south!"

"They don't. Not anymore. But someday they will again. I'm going to make sure of it." She pushed Jet's note into the hand that Ty Lee had over her heart. "I'm good now. Thanks. Destroy this before anyone sees it. I need to get going."

"Gotcha!" Ty Lee stepped back and moved to get her day-clothes.

Katara retrieved her hat.

She tied it in place as she hurried out to the main deck, where the other students were assembling in the dawn light. Like every morning, they were lined up according to experience, with Kinto all the way up at the far end and Katara at the tail. Her hat blocked out the sight of the heavy, empty sky above, and she risked only a quick look at the horizon to confirm that the ship was indeed racing along as fast as it felt.
Pakku was kneeling in front of them, eating out of a bowl of something steaming with chopsticks. On either side of him was a wooden tub full of water. "Now that everyone is here, we're going to do some sparring today. Quick moves from the Marlin Forms only, I think. Our ship is cutting rather quickly through the water, and I want to see that reflected in your actions. These moves are useful during water-glides, when you need to defend yourselves from anything that can unbalance you."

Kinto raised a hand, which Pakku acknowledged with a nod. "Master, when water-gliding, we have so much water beneath us, and our momentum allows us to attack with great power. Quick defensive moves seem unnecessary."

"Yes, I'm sure they do to someone young and inexperienced. But even though you can attack with power, that leaves you even more vulnerable to unbalancing. Because I'm such a nice old man, I'm not going to make you actually fight while surfing behind the ship. (Maybe tomorrow.) But you can go first right here on the deck, Kinto. Now, we just need to find a sap willing to fight you." Katara raised her hand.

The boys all made noises of surprise, but quickly quieted. None of them wanted to fight Kinto.

Pakku snorted. "Oh, this should be interesting. Very well, Katara. Come out here and give us a show."

She stepped out and took a ready stance.

Kinto didn't get out of line yet. "Master, she's- she's-"

"Go on, Kinto, spit it out. I know you're not the brightest but you're perfectly capable of enunciating."

Kinto glanced at Katara. "She's a girl, Master."

"No, really? I don't know how I missed that." Pakku slurped something out of his bowl and swallowed without chewing. "Kinto, either step out and fight or go find a latrine to help clean. Katara knows what she signed up for." He poked into his bowl with his chopsticks and frowned at whatever he saw. "And I'm sure she's nice enough that she won't hurt you too badly."

Katara blinked. Was that- was that a compliment from Master Pakku? Or a challenge? Or both? Either way, Kinto went red in the face and stepped out across from her. He took a stance, and then moved to pull the water out of the tub on Pakku's left. It hung above his hands, ever moving, the light of the sun undulating through its mass to twinkle against the deck.

Katara pulled the water out of the other tub, letting it form a low half circle around her back and under her arms.

Kinto scowled at her. "If I win, I'm taking a kiss as a prize. But don't worry, I won't tell my betrothed. Wouldn't want her to blame you for bewitching me."

By Pakku's rules, a fight begins when both combatants are armed. So, instead of responding, Katara made the first strike, skipping forward and using a short one-handed slash to shoot a spike of water out. The Marlin Form called for channeling power into small areas of contact, so Katara focused on the tip of her little spear and sped it towards Kinto's chest.

He blocked easily, using a simple Fin Fan splash to blunt the attack. Katara pulled her deflected water back and tried to strike again from a new angle. He blocked that attack, too, taking a step back.
They were simple attacks, and Katara hadn't expected them to get through. Kinto was tough, despite
his attitude problem, and was one of the more innovative Waterbenders studying under Pakku. He'd
even invented some of his own moves. Katara simply wanted to probe his defenses in this style, and
get a feel for the speed of the exchanges.

Spikes and fans and stabs and skips. That was the Marlin form, and with the ship speeding alone
beneath them, the wind was buffeting them like Katara imagined the ocean buffeted at a marlin
speeding through the waves.

She let all of that sink into her mind, let her thoughts detach and roll over the situation like water
rolled over fish scales, let her body start moving to the sway of the world around her.

Kinto stabbed with a spike of his own, but Katara broke it in half with a Scale Curl and then spun
her attack up into a Fin Fan splash at his face. He ducked it and pushed back at her with a Thrust
Rain, and Katara retreated a couple of skipping steps as she summoned her water together for
whatever would come next.

Kinto stabbed, but it was a short feint. Katara didn't react. He tried it again, using the opportunity to
move a step forward. She decided to hold her ground.

Then he came in with full force.

The exchanges that followed were faster than Katara was used to fighting, stabs and slashes and
bumps and pushes and skipping movements back and forth and round and round. It got frantic at
moments, and Kinto never seemed to be bothered by the pace, but she focused on keeping her water
controlled and flowing, and she was able to power through.

She retreated again, expecting her opponent to take a moment to plan the next assault, but instead he
pressed in at her, forming a pair of liquid spikes- one sprout of water extending from each fist- and
alternated stabs in at her.

Kinto didn't even seem to be aiming for anything, and at this speed Katara couldn't tell which of the
blows might be a danger. She spread her water out into two Fin Fan splashes and worked to keep the
shields between her and the attacks, curling her waist to move her whole upper body, but that left her
completely on the defensive. Kinto stabbed with one arm and tried to duck beneath her shield to
bring the other arm up, and Katara had to back away again to bring her shields into line.

Kinto kept pace with her, always moving forward, always backing her to the ship's railing, always
stabbing, always focused-

-always unbalanced.

Katara stopped with a squeak of boots on the deck and extended her legs into a low jump forward.
She threw her shields ahead and let go of her control of most of the water, retaining only just enough
to form a short spike in front of her right hand. She had to reach down with her left hand to keep
herself from falling flat on her face on the deck, so low was she, but as Kinto slashed apart the
shields she had thrown at him, she came in at him at knee-level and raised her water-spike for a jab.
She aimed-

-aimed a little higher, because it wouldn't do to embarrass him too much-

-and slammed a hit straight into his stomach. Her water-spike was dense and stable enough that
pushed his gut in deep, and then she spun around him and rose to stand tall and take a stance.

She watched as Kinto sank to his knees, his back to her, completely vulnerable. She could have
struck again, if she wanted.

It took her a moment to realize that meant she'd won.

*She'd won!*

Ha!

Then Kinto spun, his hands clutching at the air and swirling in circles. There was no water responding to his motions, and Katara had just enough time to wonder what he was doing before her stomach flipped and hardened and swirled and gurgled and bubbled and expanded and popped.

One moment she was ready to violently vomit and the next she felt like she had to rush to the bathroom and then was back to wanting to throw up and back again.

All of the sudden she was aware that she was on a ship that was bobbing on an ocean that wouldn't keep still. The world spun around her. Down didn't seem like such a simple matter anymore.

Kinto-

He was doing something to her.

*Something like Master Hama had come up with.*

Katara sank to her knees and swallowed against another urge to spew her stomach's contents all over the deck. She had to do something. If she could take out Kinto-

And then her stomach was no longer moving. Katara swallowed and wondered if she should try moving, but there came a wind against her face and the sound of a water whip snapping, and-

Her hat was gone.

The sky was above her, big and blue and pressing down with the weight of the world. It was so much more massive than the world below it, stretching up into an infinity from which *anything* could come to hurt her.

Katara tried to scramble back to shelter, but as soon as she rose the deck somehow wobbled like rubber and she fell again and everything was being destroyed and pressed by the sky-

A jacket plopped down over her head and blinded her to everything.

The jacket smelled like Master Pakku.

And then she heard him barking, "Kinto, were either of those last two moves from the Marlin Form?"

"Master," Kinto started to say.

"*Answer me.*"

"N- no, master."

"So, are you stupid? Did you not understand when I said I only wanted to see quick moves from the Marlin Form? Or do you think you know better than me? Should I write home and tell them there's a new Grand Master of the Northern Water Tribe?"
"N-no, master, I-"

"Oh, just shut up. We all know what this was about and I'm just going to get angrier if I hear any more of your stupidity. Get out of here. You're done for the day. Tell the shift officer that you're shoveling coal for the next two shifts. And I will be checking."

"I-"

"I said shut up, Kinto. That means you keep your mouth closed and get out of here."

The only thing Katara heard after that was the sound of boots on the deck. Then something was being pressed into her arms.

Her hat! The string she used to tie it to her head was snapped, but the hat seemed okay. She lifted the jacket off her head just enough to make space, put the hat on, and then fully removed the jacket.

Master Pakku was standing above her. The sky was thankfully out of view.

She bowed her head. "Thank you, master."

He took the jacket back. "Your stomach?"

Katara frowned. She stood up slowly, her legs still shaking, but she forced herself to straighten. Her stomach gurgled and she had to swallow again to make sure there would be no unpleasantness. "O-okay. What did he do?"

Pakku scowled. "Something I should have discouraged more. Anyway, get out of here. You're in no condition to train anymore."

Katara inhaled as the start to a spirited protest, but then her stomach gurgled again and she had to snap her mouth shut.

Maybe Pakku was right.

Katara nodded and turned to go.

Pakku called after her, "Tell the duty officer to give you some inside work."

Katara turned back to look at him, nearly toppling over. She couldn't go back to her cabin?

Pakku's face had no expression. "I said you're in no condition to train, not that I'm giving you a day off. Get moving, then. I do have other students who merit a little of my attention today."

Yeah, she didn't know why she expected anything else from him. She was 'just' a girl to him, even if he had agreed to teach her, and she was still so broken that she couldn't look at the sky. She gave him a nod and turned to go find the duty officer.

Although maybe she'd head to the rear of the ship first to throw up over the railing.

Jet had taken to sleeping in a torpedo shell. The space within was large enough to stretch out and hidden from view, better than some places he had slept in before. And the likelihood of the weapon being armed and put into battle was slim, considering that half of the ship's crew were Northern Waterbenders.

It had been for use against the Northern Tribe that torpedoes had been invented by Prince Iroh's fleet,
something that could be dropped in the water and propelled by mechanical means to damage ships and icebergs down where even Waterbenders had to make a special effort to reach. According to the histories Jet had been taught by the White Lotus, torpedoes had been much more effective than flaming projectiles thrown through the sky.

The irony of torpedo's presence still left a bitter taste in Jet's mouth, even after all these weeks.

Still, he knew how to make use of his environment.

He slept the day away in the usual fit of thin and watery dreams that left him confused and on edge when he woke up, but that was fine. Dreaming of this ship, or of Katara and Ty Lee, or even pirates and Waterbending Masters and platinum, would be dangerous. Prince Iroh might be searching for Jet, spying on his dreams. Better to lose rest than give things away that easily.

Jet only emerged from his hiding place when the bell heralding the night shift clanged. He could hide better at night, could use the darkness to disappear from anyone who spotted him. And if he couldn't, then he knew for a fact that the Blue Spirit mask was more frightening at night.

He snuck through the ship, keeping to the least used passages, where he'd never have to pass by more than one of the crew at a time. They were so secure in the safety of their ship that they never questioned the shadows, never counted them to make sure that they didn't grow unexpectedly. Perhaps, after all these weeks, they had even grown use to the extra shadows that Jet's darkly-clad body appeared to be.

He moved through his usual routine, stealing some food and supplies, taking care of his few needs, and then squeezing up through some of the ventilation ducts up to the outside of the ship. After that, it was just a matter of finding a perch away from ground-level eyes and enjoying the sea breeze. It was cold tonight; from what Jet had gleaned on previous nights, they were sailing the waters north of the Earth Kingdom. It wasn't cold enough for ice or snow, though, so the Waterbenders must not be going home yet.

Still, Jet wished he had brought a blanket. His suit was thick, but not as warm as a coat.

Several hours later, the engine shifted. Slowed. The coast was easily visible in the light of the full moon, rocky and comforting in the way the lands of the Earth Kingdom always were. The ship turned towards the coast, and Jet looked to see if they were heading towards a dock of some kind. If they were, it was displaying no lights.

Perhaps they were going to be sending a landing craft to a beach?

But no, as the ship fully oriented and got closer to the coast, Jet could see that a river- no, a canal, complete with gate- lay ahead of them, shimmering in the moonlight. The ship must have been displaying some kind of signal light, because as it approached, the gate was opened, and it was allowed to pass unhindered.

The ship moved on through the night. Jet dozed off a few times, but never to the point of dreaming. Perhaps it was good that he hadn't brought a blanket. Several times he was brought out of his sleep by the ship coming to a stop, and opened his eyes beneath his mask to find the ship at a lock that a team of Waterbenders was quickly filling. Soon the ship would be on its way again, traveling up the canal at a higher elevation.

He was jolted out of a half-sleep when the ship turned off its engines completely, coming in to what had to be an artificial bay. The landscape all around was mountainous, massive rocks pushing up out
of the earth to spear the sky. In the moonlight, Jet could see that snow was indeed gathering at the highest peaks, shining white like beacons against the dark rock.

Was 'Temple Base' a mining operation of some kind, then? That canal was long, and to get it this far into mountains would have required both Earthbenders and Waterbenders.

And then the ship finished docking, and lights across the compound snapped on. They were harsh and steady, different from the gas and crystal torches that the Fire Nation usually favored.

And they continued up the nearest mountain.

From his perch, Jet could see a cable-car station at the far end of the complex, the thick wires leading up in the same direction as the lights. They must have been shining from atop the support towers, all the way up to the snow-capped peak of the mountain. No doubt a telegraph system was using the same path to communicate between the complex down here and whatever was up at the top.

Jet had a inkling where the platinum was headed.

He watched as the ship's crew began readying the crane on the main deck, and newcomers on the dock brought over a wheeled pallet.

Perhaps it was time for Jet to disembark.

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Despite how tiring the day was, between whatever Kinto had done to her stomach and the full shift of work on top of that, Katara was having trouble sleeping. Every time she drifted off, she found herself beneath a sky that curved to erase the ground under her feet, leaving her alone in a heavy void.

She'd snap awake each time, jolting so hard that Ty Lee would wake up, too.

Thankfully, the other girl wouldn't say anything. She'd just snuggle back in and soon they would both be asleep again.

Except now Katara's latest crash into wakefulness left her thinking that something was missing, and it took her a moment to realize that the ship's engine wasn't running.

They'd stopped.

Katara untangled her legs from Ty Lee's and got out of bed. She went over to the porthole for a look outside. The full moon was shining down on some kind of dock, where supplies were being loaded onto the ship. So just another quick stop on the way to the North Pole, then.

Unless this was the 'Temple Base' Jet had mentioned in his note. The place to where Prince Iroh's stolen platinum was being delivered.

Maybe what Katara needed was some fresh air.

She threw on a tunic, and then went back to the bed to lean over Ty Lee. "I'm going topside for a bit."

Ty Lee wrinkled her nose, rubbed her cheek against the pillow, and murmured, "Okay that's nice love you g'night." All without opening her eyes.

Chuckling, Katara grabbed her hat and headed out.
When she got to the main deck, she found Master Pakku waiting for her.

No, not for her. He was staring up at the full moon, seemingly unconcerned with the activity on the dock. But when she stepped out into the silver light, his gaze snapped over to her. "You shouldn't be out here."

Katara dipped her head. "Sorry. I just wanted some fresh air."

"Well, get it tomorrow. This deck is restricted right now."

Katara took a step back, as to leave, but only that one step. "Why? I thought we were all allies."

"We are." Pakku rolled his eyes. "But we're not all friends, and just because everyone is working together doesn't mean they want all their secrets our in the open." He stepped towards her, making a shooing motion.

What was she, an unwanted polar bear-dog? "But it's nothing that's going to hurt Aang, right?"

Pakku blanched at the name. "N- no, nothing like that."

Katara put her fists on her hips. "You're lying."

"Watch what you say to me, you little-"

"You're lying to Kanna's grand-daughter."

Pakku groaned and grabbed his forehead. "Katara, this really does not concern you. Go back to your cabin and stay there. You don't want to anger Prince Iroh and jeopardize this little alliance he and the Avatar have cooked up."

Katara took a step forward. "If it's that bad, then maybe this is something I should see. Please, Master Pakku. I- I don't think you're a bad person. You're my Gran-Gran's friend and you've helped me when you could have just ignored me. (You're kind of a sexist jerk, but I think you're okay with that.) I just want you to tell me what the problem is."

Pakku stared at her for a moment, and then gave a little clap. "Very nice speech, girl. The problem, since you ask so nicely, is that you're up where you're not supposed to be. Get out of here, or tomorrow I'll have you take Kinto's place shoveling coal for two shifts in a row. Is that clear enough for you to understand?"

Katara looked him in the eyes.

She was used to Pakku's sarcasm, his rudeness, and his regular refusal to display anything even approaching empathy.

She wasn't used to seeing his eyes crinkled with fear.

He was afraid.

Not of her.

But something.

Katara bowed low at the waist. "Yes, master. My apologies, master."

And then she headed back inside.
She went straight to her cabin and shut the door. A peek out the porthole revealed a pallet of crates being brought down to the docks. So they were still working. She had a little time, then.

Katara went over to the bed and reached out to shake Ty Lee. "Wake up."

"Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm."  
"Ty Lee, you have to wake up. It's important."  
"Hmmnnnninnnnnnnnnn."  
"I need you."

Ty Lee stretched and finally opened her eyes. "G'morning?"

Katara shook her head. "It's still night. But you need to get up and get dressed."

Ty Lee blinked.  
She blinked again.  
She sat up and threw the blanket off. "What's going on?"

"We're leaving." Then Katara turned to pack.

The guards were too alert for Jet to get off the ship while the platinum was being offloaded. He had to remain crouched in a shadow under the ship's exhaust chimneys while soldiers patrolled.

It wasn't until they brought Long Feng out that everyone was distracted enough to for Jet to run down one of the mooring lines.

Long Feng, who abandoned Ba Sing Se. Long Feng, who turned its ghosts into a threat to the whole world.

Jet would very much like to meet him.

He normally wouldn't have known Long Feng well enough to tell that the figure brought out with a bag over his head and big fur-lined boots on his feet was indeed the former director of the Dai Li, but the smell that filled the air around the procession of prisoner and guards was more than recognizable. Jet had encountered the smell during his investigations into ship's secret low-level brig. It was a thick stench that reminded Jet of a battlefield, of the odors that arose when human bodies were opened up and left to ripen.

At the same time, it was different. Weaker.

Whatever his captors had been doing to him, Long Feng was no corpse.

Yet.

The guards hustled their prisoner through the small base, clearly heading for the cable-car station. Jet followed in the shadows, paralleling the steady march of his prey with progress that came in fits and starts between the glances of the soldiers. He even reached the station first; Long Feng was a slow walker, and this was no high-security prison.

Then all Jet had to do was climb to the top of the station, and position himself to slip onto the roof of
the cable-car as it began its journey up the mountain.

He even had time to grab a small tarp to serve as a blanket.

Fortunately, the trip was faster than Jet had expected. The Fire Nation must have invested in some heavy machinery for this place. But then, the shipment of platinum had preceded Long Feng to the cable-car station. If they were moving large batches of metal up the mountain, they had to be able to handle massive weights. Benders would have had to be involved in the construction, as well as technologies that Jet couldn't even guess at.

And he definitely didn't like that those large quantities of platinum were being sent to the same isolated location as a rogue Earthbender who had tried to use that very metal to raise the dead.

The air grew colder as the car climbed, but not debilitating. With his makeshift blanket, Jet was able to retain feeling in his fingers and toes all the way to their destination. He hid behind the cable-hook as the car was carried into the station, and then slipped down the opposite side as Long Feng was brought out.

Jet made his own way out of the station, looking to explore, and emerged through a maintenance door into a world of contrasts.

There were buildings up here, on the top of the mountain. In the bright glow of the full moon, he could even see similar structures on other nearby peaks. They were all tall, reaching structures- even the smallest of them- seeming to favor vertical space over horizontal. It made sense, given the lack of room up here on the mountain tops, and also how long these buildings had to have been here. They were old, clearly, and had long ago become one with the mountains.

Could this-

Wait, 'Temple Base'?

Yes.

Jet had a feeling that he had stumbled across the Northern Temple of the Air Nomads.

Now that he knew what to look for, he could see the depiction of air swirls and wind currents in the decorations on all the buildings, and of course an Airbender wouldn't have any trouble with paths that incorporated large amounts of empty vertical space. He wondered what that Ty Lee girl would make of it all, given that she had to be Earth Kingdom in origin. Jet thought the construction was beautiful.

It made the contrasts with the new construction even more infuriating.

For the Air Temples had not been left as they were. Piping ran all over the place, bolted to the outsides of the buildings, and then passing through holes punched right through the ancient walls. Black, heavy smokes wafted up from exhaust vents, rising up out of shattered domes, to stain streaks across the star-covered sky. In the light of the moon, Jet couldn't tell what color of the decorative highlights on the temples, but he definitely saw that all of them were darkened.

He ran a finger over one wall. His glove came away with soot and oily residue.

It wasn't enough that the Fire Nation had wiped out the Air Nomads, or stolen their temples, but they had to destroy and pervert it all, too.

And people wondered why Jet would do anything to hurt them.
At least there weren't many guards. They probably figured that anyone who was up here had to belong. And for all he knew, everyone up here knew each other and would instantly spot a strange face. Best to stay to the shadows, where he belonged.

He made his way to one of the buildings that still had lights on at this hour. The entrance didn't even have a door to keep anyone out, but Jet opted to enter through a second-story window. He climbed in to find himself on a spiraling ramp jutting out from the wall in what seemed like an art gallery, maybe? Some kind of web-like lattice work made from metal rods was hanging from the ceiling in the empty center space, while an opening in the center let in the moonlight. The web pieces shimmered, and Jet realized that they weren't just metal—they were platinum.

Something was making chirping sounds in the space above, but Jet focused on the voices echoing from below, ducking back from the railing to avoid being seen.

"The structure is definitely directing the energies," a man said, "but this is far from the exit output we were hoping for."

"I'm measuring only a 40% increase from the previous trial," a second man chimed in.

"Yes, not nearly enough. I theorize that the shape of the structure is critical, and we're not very close to the optimum arrangement right now."

"It's a sound idea."

"But how to find the optimum structure? Trial and error would be far too inefficient with this many pieces."

"Before we left the lab there was the word about the new shipment of platinum being brought up. They were also supposed to be bringing a criminal with some knowledge, as well as his library."

"A proper consultant would be better than a captive, but a 'library' sounds promising. Well, let's write up this latest data, and then we can see what new things have been brought to us."

There were the sounds of footsteps, and Jet risked moving forward to peek over the railing. The two men were down on the ground floor, carrying some kind of equipment to the door. The chirping above grew louder.

He looked again at the arrangement of platinum. What was going on up here? What 'energies?' What were they hoping to get from Long Feng and the Dai Li's archives?

Down below, the echoing footsteps disappeared through the door.

That's when something screamed.

It was a high-pitched inhuman voice, startling Jet so bad he nearly knocked his own mask off reaching for his weapons. He had the hook-swords out even as the scream was dying, but couldn't tell where the attack might be coming from. The echoes were fouling up his sense of direction—

More chirps came from above

Jet finally looked up.

With the only light coming from moon and the opening the ceiling, he had missed it before, but now the movement let him make out the bodies. He counted five, dark lumps clinging at various points on the platinum web.
Jet had no idea why they were there, or what they were.

They weren't human, certainly. They had two arms and two legs, but not the right shape at all. And while he knew he was far from an expert on the full range of animal life in the world, he found it strange that nothing about the creatures seemed familiar. The smooth skin, the oddly-jointed limbs, the coloration: it all seemed to be a random jumble of traits with no survival logic behind it.

Maybe they weren't real animals at all.

As one of the creatures let out another short scream (Mating call? Communication? Warning about an intruder?) Jet decided that he had seen enough of this place.

He needed to see what else was going on here at 'Temple Base,' and then he'd need to find a way to get that information to the Avatar.

Somehow.

He had a feeling it was going to be very important.

TO BE CONTINUED
The Mask of the Blue Spirit

Chapter Summary

Jet makes a discovery that will decide his fate, while Katara takes her final exam.

The Mask of the Blue Spirit

Ty Lee wished she knew who she was fighting.

Not that it was going to stop her.

She jumped through the open doorway into the Communications Center, lashing out with a fist even before her feet touched the floor. She struck the right arm of the technician who had been sitting at the control console, making the limb drop uselessly. The man started to make a noise, chin wobbling as his jaw dropped, but Ty Lee slapped a palm-strike straight into his solar plexus and the force of the blow went straight through the chest-plate of his armor to silence him. Then she grabbed his numb arm, yanked him out of his seat, and threw him across the room to crash into the other technician who was only just getting out of his chair.

A cartwheel brought Ty Lee over to the pair, more fists put more limbs out of commission, and then one after another she put them in choke holds that put pressure on a very specific spot on their necks.

Ty Lee knew all about the human neck. There were parts that made it very easy to kill.

But Ty Lee didn't want to kill anyone, so she held down just long enough to put her victims to sleep. That left her as the only person left conscious in the Communications Center of Prince Iroh's secret base-thingy.

She wasn't wearing her abbey-robes for the first time in weeks; she was once again an operational Weapon-class citizen of the Fire Nation. And she had no idea if she was fighting loyal servants of her Homeland or people who were traitors- traitors like she was. But maybe in a different way.

Katara peeked through the doorway, still wearing her hat. "All done?"

They had come straight from Master Pakku's ship, Katara's Waterbending allowing them to sneak out and into this weird hidden outpost. Ty Lee had been more than happy to be the muscle in this partnership. She leaned back against the wall, put a hand on her hip, and winked at Katara. "It's just you and me, now." It felt good to be back in her circus outfit.

Katara's cheeks colored, but she said, "Just the way I like it," and hurried into the room.

Ty Lee giggled. Katara was quicker with that kind of thing than Sokka. Oh, he was fast and clever when he was bantering with Mai and Toph, or coming up with ways to outsmart Commander Zhao, but he got flustered when Ty Lee acted all friendly with him. Katara was like Mai, never intimidated even when scandalized, and unlike Mai, Katara was actually played nice. She must have been much better socialized than Mai.

Then Ty Lee remembered that Katara had grown up in a cage in a Waterbender prison for the last decade of her life after seeing her parents murdered, had been locked away by Ty Lee's nation
because of who Katara might have grown up to be.

Just like the Fire Nation would probably do to Ty Lee, now, for the crime of waking up one day and being able to command Air.

She decided that she didn't feel much like winking at anyone right now.

Instead, she went over to join the other girl at one of the room's desks. Katara had spread out a bunch of maps and lists and stuff. All the writing made Ty Lee's head spin, but it looked important. "Ooh, what's all this?"

Katara motioned at one of the maps. "Look, they've marked all these places with numbers. And this paper has those same numbers on it, and under each one is a list. See, this number is here in the south of the Earth Kingdom, and the list that goes with it says, 'Primordial Mud, Books, Rune Tiles.' And then next to it all is a date from about a year ago. The rest are the same, lists of stuff and then a date."

Ty Lee was impressed. She had been taught that Tribals were all illiterate and couldn't understand complicated stuff, but Katara had been in prison for a decade and still was just diving into this wordy recordkeeping. "So what does that all mean?"

Katara shook her head. "I don't know. But Iroh's people are tracking something here. The latest is-" Katara's voice trailed off as she flipped through some of the papers. "Ah, here we go! It says, 'Platinum,' and gives a weight. Then there's, 'Prisoner TB1 - Long Feng,' and, 'Books.' And the date is tomorrow? Oh, it's past midnight. It's today. This must be what our ship brought."

"Jet told us about Long Feng. And his note told us about the platinum. He was right. Prince Iroh had all this stuff brought here without telling us."

Katara pulled her hat back a little, letting the light of the lamps reach her sparkling blue eyes. (Ty Lee really liked the look of blue eyes. They went with Katara's blue aura, and contrasted beautifully with the orange that had developed at the edges since she started learning under Master Pakku.) "All of these items might have Spiritual natures. There are a bunch of entries for platinum and books, as well as tiles and items that I'd expect to see in a temple or being used by a sage. Aang said that Prince Iroh wanted to restore balance to the world. Maybe this is part of that? But then why would Master Pakku want to hide that from me?"

"I dunno." Ty Lee made herself think about it. She hated sneaky secret-keeping, but she was from the Fire Nation. She hated it even while she was always up to her neck in it and even did it herself. "Prince Iroh liked to learn about all kinds of things, including the other nations. But learning and collecting are one kind of thing, and that Long Feng guy is another really bad thing. He's stuck in a cycle of hurting people because he can't admit that he hurt himself. That's how he wound up making that ash-monster. And Pakku was keeping Long Feng a secret, the same way I used to dance in secret."

Katara blinked. "Why would you dance in secret? Dancing is a part of life."

"Well, yeah, outside the Fire Nation. But at home, it was considered disruptive, lewd behavior." It was one of the things that had driven Ty Lee to leave her family and friends behind. If Azula had ever caught her dancing- "So why would Long Feng be Prince Iroh's secret dancing?"

Katara's lips twisted in something like a smile. "That's a much better question than it sounds."

Ty Lee's aura went bright pink. "Thanks!"

"Come on, we need to learn more."
Jet didn't like how this place kept surprising him, even when it was in his favor.

Prince Iroh's occupation force wasn't large enough to fill the Air Nomads' old temples. Jet's explorations had uncovered quiet dormitories and strange laboratories (both of them occupied by men who accumulated aprons, magnifying glasses, and journals in startling quantities), overstuffed libraries and museums of inescrutable equipment, none of it quite fitting its space and so leaving plenty of room for shadows and sneaking. He had been able to bypass guards and the strange academics who talked of platinum and energies. He had passed small temples with platinum doors, and within were things that made noises Jet didn't recognize. Then there was the cave like a tomb, filled with long boxes with symbols on them made with melted platinum; some of those boxes had rattled as Jet came close.

It was a disturbing little trip to the large metal shed into which Long Feng had been dragged.

There was only one way in or out of the small building. An armored Firebender stood on guard in front of the door. Jet wouldn't be able to remain unseen if he wanted to see the Earth-Traitor. At best, he might be able to take the guard out quietly, and then the next shift would discover what happened. Then there'd be mud and blood on the ceiling, as his parents used to say.

Jet approached out of the darkness of the night, allowing his Blue Spirit mask to catch the light of the full moon, and waited for the guard to be struck by fear.

Instead, she bowed. "I didn't realize one of you was here. Do you need to see the prisoner?"

It took Jet a moment to figure out what 'one of you' meant. Spies? Traitors? Earth Kingdom?

Then he realized she was talking about his mask. He was a Blue Spirit, a warrior serving the Order of the White Lotus.

Even as his heart grew colder, Jet pushed his mask up off his face and smiled. "Yeah. New orders. Looks like I'm not going to be getting much sleep tonight."

The guards snorted as she pulled her keys off her belt and turned to the door. "And with three sweet hours until dawn, too. I don't understand the rush. We could have brought up the prisoner and the new supplies in the morning."

Jet shrugged. "It's more, 'Hurry up and wait.' Like always."

The guard gave a passionate grunt in reply, and yanked the door open. "Knock when you're done."

He gave her one last gracious smile and pulled his mask back down as he stepped into the little prison.

He stayed still as the door closed again behind him, cutting off all but a small square of moonlight filtering in through a barred opening in the ceiling. It revealed a single room, bisected by a line of ceiling-to-floor bars. Long Feng sat chained to the floor on the far side of the room.

The former Director of Ba Sing Se's Dai Li uncurled and looked up to reveal a thin, lined face. He seemed to have aged since Jet last spied on him, a few weeks ago. "Who are you?"

Jet stepped into the square of moonlight, and this time his mask got the expected gasp of surprise. He kept his voice low and put a growl into it as he said, "Why are you here, Long Feng of Ba Sing Se?"

"Me? But I-"
Jet whipped one of his hook-swords out from its holder and pointed the curve of the blade at Long Feng's face. "The dogs of the Fire Nation are perverting the dwellings of the Air Nomads, and seek to add their crimes to yours. Why have they brought you here?"

"I- I don't-"

"I have passed through shadow and air to find you," Jet whispered, putting honey back into his thorny voice. "I can remove you from your cages. Just tell me what they want from you."

Long Feng sat up straighter. "You'll get me out of here? Through iron bars?"

"I am an enemy of the Fire Nation, and yet here I am. There are Spirits and there are humans, but some of us walk the space between the two."

The words were pretty in their deceptiveness, taught to Jet by those who gave him his first Blue Spirit mask. Long Feng had been locked up and tortured for weeks away from the feel of earth; Jet saw the desperation in his eyes and smelled it in the room's funk. Sure enough, Long Feng started to speak, fought his way through a sudden coughing fit, and then managed, "They asked me about death. About how to reach beyond it."

"Beyond death?"

"I sought to bring Ba Sing Se back, and almost succeeded. They wanted to know the principles behind what I did. Where I learned how to manipulate the energy of those who have passed. Which books I read. How I figured out the properties of platinum."

Jet said nothing, did not so much as nod. He was remembering the sight of that ash monster on the horizon, of the animated remains of an entire city of people, lashing out mindlessly. (An entire city of his people, killed by the Fire Nation and denied proper rest.) He was also remembering how, sometimes, a Blue Spirit mission might be assigned that included a stop to pick up some rare scroll or artifact in a temple and pass it on to a White Lotus contact.

He remembered the creatures he had seen on the platinum web, remembered the body-sized boxes sealed with platinum characters.

Jet forced himself to consider two viewpoints. It was possible that Iroh was assembling materials to keep them out of the hands of people like Long Feng. Perhaps there was even a way to make use of those things—of Long Feng's knowledge—to do good.

But then why not tell the Avatar? Why keep Long Feng a secret from Katara?

The other way of looking at things was that Prince Iroh was from the Fire Nation, and so of course he was evil, and none of this was good. Did the Fire Nation have enough dead to raise as weapons? No. The Earth Kingdom certainly did. The Earth Kingdom had a lot of dead, especially after the Comet and the Ashlands.

Jet could only imagine the energies that had once been part of his parents, ripped from the scorched ground that had once been their homes. And then to be commanded by a Fire Nation Prince (even if he was a traitor to his nation) who had never lost anyone or anything, sitting up there at the top of the world—

Jet knew exactly what to do about it.

He stepped towards Long Feng, and in his spooky Blue Spirit voice, he intoned, "You have given me what I wanted. Now I will set you free."
Long Feng crawled towards the bars, to the very limits of his chains, and grabbed on to haul himself to his feet. He straightened, regaining some of what must have been his old Ba Sing Se dignity, and raised his head-

-just as Jet flipped one of his hook-swords out from its holder and whipped the dagger on the hilt through the bars and across Long Feng's neck.

Long Feng's eyes went wide and his mouth opened, but Jet was already moving, clamping a hand down on the other man. After he returned the hook sword to its holder, he brought his other hand into play, locking Long Feng in place with no means of making a sound.

It took a long time to die by a slit throat. It was relatively noisy and messy.

But Jet had experience in keeping it quiet enough and not getting much blood on himself.


He died.

His spirit would go on through the reincarnation cycle, but his knowledge would be lost forever.

When Jet knocked on the door, the guard didn't so much as glance into the little prison. "Get what you wanted out of him?"

Jet slid his mask up and smiled as he stepped back outside into the chilled air and bright moonlight. "Not really." He felt jumpy, as he always did after a kill, but he could feel an extra tension in his limbs. He was a traitor to the Blue Spirits now, a side all his own in this conflict for the fate of the world. "But I got what I needed. That's good enough in this business."

The guard laughed, and Jet made himself wink at her as he walked away.

Katara's blood was singing.

She was sneaking through a Fire Nation base controlled by Aang's most important ally. She had just cut ties with the Waterbending Master who was teaching her to finally feel her element in her spirit. The moon was full in the sky, putting her at maximum Waterbending strength. She had a daring, complicated, deadly, strangely kind friend at her side. The fate of the world might be depending on what Katara was able to figure out here.

And yet she felt none of the usual pressure or smallness as she lifted her gaze up to the mountains that towered above her and the Fire Nation outpost. There was a twinge of anxiety in her stomach, the same twinge she got whenever she contemplated the sky, but it was not holding her back from looking at the snow-capped peaks and the full moon above them.

Her blood was singing. She was on the hunt, just like a normal member of the Water Tribe, and she knew she could handle all of this. She had to handle it.

She and Ty Lee had left the Communications Center behind to investigate the rest of the base. Unfortunately, they hadn't found any more information about what Prince Iroh was doing here. There were warehouses and stacks of standard supplies and facilities for the people on station here. There weren't even a lot of guards or security; it had been simple for Katara and Ty Lee to stay out of sight.

However, there was a cable-car station and a line that ran straight up a mountain. No doubt that was
where the good stuff was.

Too bad Katara had no idea how she could get up there.

Ty Lee must have sensed Katara's doubts, lurking with her beside one of the warehouses. "Do you want to go back to Master Pakku's ship? There's been no alarm, so they can't know we left."

Katara shook her head. "I need to know what's going on, here. Aang needs to know. If I go back, I'll just be putting myself back in Pakku's and Iroh's control. They'll keep me away from any real information."

"Okay." Ty Lee looked back at the line that ran up the mountain. "But I don't know how we're going to get up there. I don't know how to work one of those things, and even if we fight our way onto one of the cars, they'll just stop the thing that makes them go. Maybe even cut the line. I have enough balance to run up a cord that thick, but not one that goes up that steep."

Katara crouched back further into the shadow cast by the warehouse against the moonlight. "What do we already know? We've seen the list of materials Iroh is collecting here. We know he brought Long Feng and platinum. Jet told us that he runs the Blue Spirits through this 'White Lotus' group. Why do all of that, but keep it from us?" Katara thought back to what Aang had explained about his meeting with Iroh, back in King Toph's hidden base. "He said his son is sick with- with some kind of curse or hex. He told Aang that he thinks the only way to save his son is to restore balance to the world. But what does that have to do with all this? He's taking things from temples in the Earth Kingdom."

Ty Lee sat down beside Katara. "I didn't really know Prince Iroh. Yeah, I met him a few times. I liked him because he was friendly and funny, and he even did a few magic tricks for me! His son, Prince Lu Ten, was kind of like him, but instead of jokes and magic tricks he liked to show off his Firebending. Lu Ten paid more attention to Mai, though, what with their betrothal. I think he kind of took it as a challenge to impress her in some way. But Iroh really thought it was funny how excited I'd get by his magic tricks."

Katara couldn't say that really helped her figure anything out. "So Prince Iroh liked magic tricks? Are you saying-"

"No, I'm just trying to explain. Iroh was nice and fun and seemed interesting, but I could also see his aura. He wasn't faking who he was, or anything, but his aura showed another part of him. It was like Azula. Both of them had a- a kind of cold place inside. Cold and smart. Azula could figure out how to get exactly what she wanted, no matter who she hurt, and then she'd do it. And hurt people. Everyone said Prince Iroh was the greatest conqueror since Sozin, and I think that's how he did it. He had a side behind being friendly and funny that could be like Azula."

Katara nodded. This was making more sense. "Is that why you left the Fire Nation? Because people were like that?"

Ty Lee frowned. "No. I- I didn't like it, but I was still friends with Azula. It's just that everyone- well, everyone but Mai- acted like they wanted to be part of some machine. They wanted to be parts, not people. And the only thing the machine did was fight a war. I never really cared about the war. I thought it was fine if people in other nations wanted to dance and not build modern technology and live in mud. I thought it might be fun to live in mud for a while. And when they made me a Weapon of the Fire Nation- Azula said I might have to be sent to fight. And I knew if I didn't she'd- she'd-"

Ty Lee shut her eyes. "Azula didn't like it when people didn't do what she said. And no one understood that I didn't want to be a part in a machine. Except Mai. So I decided to go to the colonies on an 'educational tour' and joined a circus."
Katara smiled. "I've never seen a circus. I've heard about them-

Ty Lee's eyes snapped open. "No! You'd love it, with the animals and the big tent and the jugglers! And of course the acrobats! Maybe I can bring you out on the high-wire! That's it, as soon as we're done being spies, I have to take you to a circus!"

"Deal. But first, we have to finish being spies," Katara stood up, looking again at the cable-car station. A car was coming down from the mountain. She'd be interested in seeing who got off. It might just be more soldiers carrying supplies, but it might be another clue as to what Prince Iroh had set up there on that mountain. "Come on; let's see what we can see."

Jet put a swagger in his step as he walked into the Air Temple's cable-car station. His Blue Spirit mask was hanging from the front his belt, hopefully acting as a badge to show his belonging.

A group of soldiers- Jet counted five- were standing in front of a docked cable-car. One of them was talking to man in the uniform of a technician, and they all turned to look as Jet's boots clacked against the stone floor.

The technician blinked and opened his mouth to say something, but Jet pretended he didn't notice and said, "Hey, has that ship left yet? The one with the Waterbenders?"

The technician blinked, shut his mouth, and blinked again. "Uh, no?"

Jet put on a smile. "Great. I'm hoping to hitch a ride. I wasn't particularly looking forward to hanging around until someone finally rustles up some transportation to my next assignment. You running a car down now?"

The lead soldier crossed his arms. "We were just heading down to investigate why the telegraph station down there isn't responding."

Jet didn't need to fake the frown that came to his face. "Why wouldn't it be responding?"

"Yeah, that's the question, isn't it? Maybe an equipment failure, or maybe something else. Who are you again?"

"Hong Shen," Jet lied, using the name of a fellow Blue Spirit he met years ago. Hong Sheng was dead now, so he likely wouldn't object. "You want some help? I could use the exercise."

His heart pounded. He had never quite calmed down after killing Long Feng, and if he couldn't make this bluff work, he had no idea how else he'd get down from the mountain. And he had a time limit.

After leaving Long Feng's body in its cell, Jet had headed back to the main Air Temple complex. He continued his explorations, checking out the buildings that still had lights on inside, and happened across something like a library. The building itself seemed more like a prayer space, but free-standing metal shelves had been set up and crammed with books of all shapes and sizes. In the middle of the space, a massive crate had been left open containing even more books, and Jet had spotted stenciling on the side that listed a number and the words, 'Books - Ba Sing Se.'

This was Long Feng's seized research into death.

Jet had known what he had to do. Taking advantage of the solitude, he used a candle and some string from his own supplies and rigged them in the crate so that candle would be suspended over the
books until the string fully caught flame and snapped. Then the candle would fall onto the books and destroy them with the Fire Nation's own element.

The only reason he hadn't gone ahead and burned them right there was the other thing he had discovered in that library.

Hanging on a wall was a massive map of the southern Earth Kingdom, and on that map was what, to Jet's trained eye, looked like a full invasion plan.

It was focused on a spot near Dang Bay, halfway between Chin Village and the Si Wong Desert. Jet didn't know of any real civilization out there (not that a backwards place like Chin qualified as especially civilized, but at least it had roads), yet the map nevertheless showed routes and movements for a massive influx of soldiers and equipment. Points were even marked as a timetable, listing a range of days for how long it should take to reach each point. Tanks and companies of soldiers and supply lines and massive equipment-movers were all represented, a formula for taking and holding a major city.

But there was nothing out there. There had never been anything out there. That bit of the Earth Kingdom was mostly wilderness, the ground being too soft and wet to build anything important. There wasn't even a major port nearby, since other spots on the coast offered easier paths to civilization.

Still, it was Earth Kingdom, and from the looks of it, Prince Iroh was planning an invasion.

It shouldn't even be necessary. The Fire Nation had conquered everything, renaming the proud Earth Kingdom as the 'Colonial Continent.' The Avatar was even working to help make Iroh into the Fire Lord, and then the plan was for Iroh to set the Earth Kingdom free.

So this invasion plan looked a lot like a complete betrayal.

Jet had known that it was up to him to spread the truth.

He had cut the map, with all its specific information, down from the wall. Fortunately, the crate with Long Feng's library still had its protective supplies intact, so Jet was able to roll and wrap the map so that even a quick dunking in water wouldn't damage it, and press it between two slats of wood. Then, with the map nestled between his hook swords, and the candle set up to burn the books in about a quarter of an hour, he made his way straight for the cable-car station.

Now, the lead soldier stared him down.

Jet was used to lying, to acting, and made sure that his nervousness didn't show. The knowledge that the whole Earth Kingdom was in danger, his home that his parents had died for, was pushed to the back of his mind. Instead, he focused on imaginary feelings of boredom, of a desire to get on a certain ship before it departed. He pretended to be another grunt running around on orders, his greatest ambition to be on his way and not have to wait around for incompetent higher-ups to finally arrange for him to be where he needed to be.

The soldier shrugged. "Come on, then. You guys are usually good in a fight."

Jet smirked. "Thanks. You won't be disappointed." Then he followed the soldiers into the cable-car.

The group sat in a cluster together at the front of the car, and Jet took a seat that was neither far away nor too close. He stretched his legs out and lowered his eyelids until they would look closed but still leave him a sliver through which he could watch his fellow passengers.
In retrospect, he probably should have tried to sneak on top of the cable-car again. But no, if they were on alert now because of that problem with their telegraph station, the staff down below would probably be watching the car's arrival closely.

The car was shifted onto the cable, and they were on their way.

The trip was fairly quiet. A few of the soldiers exchanged remarks, but there was a tenseness that kept conversations brief and low. Jet knew he was probably under suspicion, but that was fine. As long as he could get down off the mountain, he could fight his way free and disappear. These soldiers couldn't even comprehend the kind of training he'd had. Training bought and paid for by Prince Iroh.

Jet felt sick at the thought of all the help he'd given the man. Had the Blue Spirits always just been a tool of a rogue warlord? Had the White Lotus been corrupted?

Was the Avatar even as important as Jet had been led to believe?

Jet couldn't help but remember his first meeting with Aang, and how he'd been given the mission to remove the kid from Lady Caldera Yu Mai's influence. The threat had seemed obvious at the time, but had it really just been a political war between Fire Nation factions?

Jet's eyes closed completely for a moment, and he forced them back open. It had been a long night. Maybe he'd better chew a stim-leaf before he had to go back into action.

But if he did that, he doubted he'd be able to keep his hands from shaking. That made stabbing harder.

Eventually, they reached the bottom of the mountain. The cable-car station was a beacon in the early morning darkness. Jet wondered if, beyond the mountains that closed in on this valley, the sun was starting to rise. The full moon was still large in the sky.

The car jolted to a halt.

All of the soldiers stood up.

Jet did as well. "What happened?"

The leader looked out the front window. "They're sending a flash signal. Looks like someone finally woke up down here. Hmmm, they're saying something about-" He cut himself off abruptly and continued to watch a blinking light on the roof of the station.

Jet quietly shifted into a subtle combat stance and moved so that he was standing right behind the five soldiers.

The leader was tense. Jet saw him move his arms as though to assume a guard position, but then he halted the motion and held his arms stiffly at his side. "Well," he said, "we're stuck here for a moment. They had to shut down the lift. Engine trouble of some kind. We should all just relax."

"Sure." Jet slipped his Blue Spirit mask off his belt. "I guess I'm not going to make my boat."

The leader turned, and his face twitched.

Jet met his eyes.

Then Jet shoved the two closest soldiers with all his strength, toppling them over into the other three
and sending the whole group to the floor of the car. In a moment his mask was on his face and his hook swords were in his hands. The blades were already whistling through the air as the lead soldier tried to rise up and properly join the fight.

He didn't succeed. None of the soldiers did.

Jet's training had included a lot about avoiding a fair fight.

Once all five soldiers were dispatched, Jet took a moment to catch his breath. It had been a long, long night. He could fight a Weapon of the Fire Nation one-on-one, but not without real rest.

And as that beautiful Fire Princess had proved on Crescent Island, there were some enemies he couldn't fight even at the top of his game.

He used the crescent-bladed guards on his swords to smash one of the car's windows, and then he climbed out and dropped to the ground. It wasn't a short fall, but he tucked and rolled on landing and managed to come out of it without any broken bones. That carried him down the last of the mountain slope and towards the Fire Nation outpost.

The whine of an alarm horn filled the early-morning air.

He had been watched.

Ty Lee's aura flared with a bright yellow as she saw the masked figure drop from the cable-car. She had seen masks like that in the scary plays her sisters had liked to go to as kids, and it wasn't hard to connect the sight to Jet and Katara's references to the Blue Spirits. As a horn sounded an alert, Ty Lee realized that Jet had been playing the same spy-game that the girls had been all night, and now he had just gotten himself in big trouble.

Sounds of clanking armor and running boots rose up from somewhere nearby. Ty Lee pressed herself up against the dark wall of the warehouse and looked to Katara. "What do we do?"

Katara blinked. "That's Jet! He- he-"

"He's going to get to have to fight," Ty Lee interrupted. "Do we help, or are we okay with him maybe dying?"

Katara blinked again. "What? But- but- we-"

Ty Lee turned, put her hands on Katara's shoulders, and leaned over until their faces were almost touching. "Jet just got caught. We can either help him and fight our way out, or sneak away and stay hidden. I don't know where we even are, so if we fight, we'll probably be run down and captured or killed."

Katara blinked a third time.

Ty Lee nodded. "I know about these things. We probably have to let Jet die."

Katara inhaled.

Katara exhaled.

Then Katara met Ty Lee's gaze with hard blue eyes that made Ty Lee's aura flare bright pink. "I can get us out of here. And we need to find out what's going on for Aang. Jet probably knows something. I hate it, but we need him."
Katara's expression was grim and solid and fierce, but there was no meanness to it. No joy at the fight that was about to happen. Just a crystal blue glower that matched an aura swirled with courage and positivity.

Wow.

Ty Lee didn't need to say anything more. She smiled, winked, and leaped out into the road beside the warehouse, where a bunch of Firebenders were coming in at a run. They were heading towards where Jet was stumbling to his feet out of his tumble, and Ty Lee was once again striking while she waited for her cute little feet to touch the ground. Her arrow-fists found the weak spots between the armor plates and it was just a matter of tap-tap-tap-tappity-tap and the Firebenders were all down.

Katara rushed over to Jet, helping him stand, so Ty Lee spun around in a circle and checked the scene out.Oops, more soldiers were coming, people with spears and swords and the bare-fists that promised Firebending.

And behind all those Fire Nation soldiers was a wave of men in blue clothes.

Yeah, Ty Lee didn't particularly want to hang out here.

She stuck around only long enough to put the fear of cute pink acrobats into the first wave-

(Twist around the spears and flip over plumes of fire and sidestep, sidestep, sidestep the chopping swords until she could punch and pound and tap the spots that would send explosions of pain through limbs that would be chased by icy numbness and a body that would no longer do what it was told as Qi was disrupted from its holy flow.)

-and then cartwheeled away to follow Katara and Jet down another lane and deeper into the base.

Katara didn't like the way Jet couldn't keep up with her. She kept an arm around his shoulders and pushed him along towards the dock.

"Kat- Katara," he wheezed.

"Save your breath." She yanked him around a corner and down another lane, hoping this would take them away from more soldiers.


"What?" She pulled him around another corner, and saw the moonlight rippling in the distance.

The bay!

Then Jet was shoving something into her hands. "Get this- (huh) to Aang."

"What?" Katara looked down. She was holding a pair of wooden slats with something pressed between them. "What?"

"Aang needs to see that."

Oh- kay. Katara tucked it behind the water-skins she was wearing on her back. "Come on, the bay is-" She started running as she talked again, but then stopped short as she saw that the way ahead was blocked.

Kinto was standing in the center of the lane, and Master Pakku looked on from the side.
Great.

Katara stepped away from Jet and pulled some water from a skin on her back. Kinto was better than her, so she had to-

Jet threw a hook sword straight at Kinto’s face.

Kinto slapped it out of the air with an arc of his own water, but Katara was already running at him, picturing the Marlin Form in her mind. Kinto was better than her, but if she could-

Kinto spotted her and transformed his block into an attack that pushed a stream of water at her like an arrow from a bow.

Katara ducked-

-Kinto was better than her-

-Katara slid forward as she summoned a spike of water over each fist-

-but even the best Waterbenders needed their legs to move.

As she slid in against him, she slammed her fists into the sides of his knees. The water-spikes didn’t penetrate his flesh, but they did knock the vulnerable joints in ways they weren’t meant to bend.

Kinto’s knees cracked, and he screamed and dropped.

Katara stood up.

Then Kinto reached up towards her with a grasping hand (not again!) and her stomach felt like it was under attack from itself. It bloated and shrank and fizzled and rose up and Katara vomited explosively.

The force of it dropped her to the ground, and she twisted reflexively to try to ease the pain radiating from her stomach.

No!

Not again!

Kinto had hit her with this before. He could somehow Waterbend the fluids in her stomach. Master Hama had theorized something like this, only she-

Katara heaved, her stomach trying to rebel but not having anything more to offer. Just like her.

Jet ran over to where Katara and the strange Waterbender were both on the ground. Katara was curled up next to a pool of her vomit, while her opponent was splayed out on the ground nearby, his knees no longer supporting his weight. But that wasn’t stopping him from working some kind of Waterbending on her with a reaching hand.

Jet drew his swords. His first strike sliced deep into the Waterbender's extended arm, and the second was aimed for the head-

-but the Waterbender snapped his other hand out and a whip of water lashed across Jet's vision. The yanking feel was the only clue he had that his swords had been ripped from his hands, and he knew it was because he was too tired, too weak after everything else.
But then there was a blur of pink, and the Waterbender moved his waterwhip to lash at the new target, but Ty Lee raised a hand and a sudden wind sliced the liquid stream in half. She fell towards the Waterbender with fists raised, and Jet decided that this was a good opportunity to take care of business. He went over to Katara to find her gagging, but he ignored that and turned her over to reveal the flat wooden package with the stolen map stuffed behind her water-skins.

A moment later Jet was running towards the bay with his prize, leaving the girls behind.

The mission came first.

Jet looked across the dock and saw the Fire Nation ship he had come in on, but he would no longer be welcome there. Now that they had seen him, they'd search every corner until they found him. But past the larger ship, he saw a metal skiff tied up. That might be enough to get away, if the canal wasn't too heavily guarded and they-

Jet felt a line of cold move through his chest from back to front, and his legs turned to jelly. He stumbled and felt his arms go weak, so he wrapped them around the wooden package to keep it from slipping from his grasp. It was hard to breath, now, and the cold-

-the cold-

Jet looked down to see a thin spear of ice stabbing out through his chest.

A drop of blood fell from the tip.

Oh.

Jet’s vision swam. Was it the Waterbender? He tried to focus, to turn and look, and- no, not the one who had fought Katara. Pakku was standing behind Jet in a Waterbending stance. He nodded at Jet, and swirled his arms.

Jet tried to move, to roll or at least duck, but his body didn't respond. He just knelt there, and a wave of water slammed into him. It pushed him and carried him and he went flying off the pier into the bay and fell beneath the surface.

Jet struggled, trying to paddle, not realizing he’d forgotten his stolen package until it floated away from him. He paddled some more, but it wasn't working. He was sinking steadily. It was like the water was pushing him down.

The water was pushing him down.

He couldn't get out of this one. He had no more tricks.

He would only survive if Katara and Ty Lee managed to defeat a Master Waterbender and save him.

Katara, who he had nearly left behind to die on Crescent Island in his single-minded mission to help the Avatar.

Ty Lee, who seemed to accept him until she learned about how he had terrorized Mai.

Well, Jet had made the best choices he could, based on the information he had at the time. And he had done his part to get new information to the Avatar, so that the Fire Nation wouldn't complete its victory.

The last of Jet’s air bubbled out from his mouth, pushing his mask away. It rose up to follow the
map’s package, even as the very bay itself pushed Jet down even further.

His whole chest was cold now. The ice spear that ran through it wasn’t helping him float at all.

The waters grew dark around him.

He closed his eyes and decided to finally get some rest.

He’d have to trust that his allies knew what they were doing.

Jet’s fight was done.

Katara had finally managed to stop heaving by the time Ty Lee helped her to her feet. She glanced over towards Kinto, and saw him lying on the ground in a familiar limp-limbed spread. He also had a nasty cut on one arm that was bleeding profusely.

A part of Katara hoped he lost a fatal amount of blood.

The rest of her just didn’t care anymore.

Ty Lee helped her towards the bay, and Katara swallowed and made herself walk on her own. "I'm fine. You keep an eye out for an ambush."

Ty Lee stopped short. "You mean like him?" She pointed ahead.

Katara raised her gaze to find Master Pakku standing in their path, all the way on the pier.

Behind him, in the water, Jet's body was floating face down in a circle of red.

Pakku held up the package that Jet had given, and then stolen back. "The Blue Spirit is dead. I have what he stole. Obviously, you can't be my student any more, but there's no need for more unpleasantness." He flung the package out into the bay, and it spun and sailed until it splashed down out of sight. "I will take you to the North Pole, and will have Prince Iroh arrange a simple house arrest. Naturally, things will get worse if you persist in causing trouble."

Ty Lee dashed at him. Katara ran after her, eager to see what a Weapon of the Fire Nation would be able to do against that cranky old man.

Pakku twirled and threw his arms out, and the whole bay seemed to answer it response. It pulsed out from beneath Jet's body to rise and surge past Pakku, a tidal wave of force. Ty Lee leaped above it, but the wave curled to follow her. As Katara brought together her own water to turn into an ice shield, Ty Lee used a burst of Airbending to push herself over towards the wall. Katara couldn’t move under the assault of the bay-water, but Ty Lee kicked off of the wall to change direction away from the lapping waves. Yet the water continued to follow her, Pakku guiding it with one hand while the other kept a steady blast of water hammering at Katara’s shield, and when Ty Lee landed on the ground again, she wound up caught in a whirlpool of force.

Katara dropped her shield, taking a hard hit to her already fragile stomach, and tried to seize control of the waves, but they ignored her will and motions. Ty Lee was tossed and slammed against the sides of the nearby buildings, and when the water receded, she just moaned and slumped on the ground.

Katara turned to look again at Master Pakku. He was guiding the waves back over to him, and brought the water to swirl around his feet and rise up in a thin spout that lifted him into the air.
Katara forced herself to look up at him, even though the sky and the stars and the full moon were stretched out behind him in her vision. Her hands shook, but she made herself look.

He glared down at her, stern and disapproving. He didn't need to say anything. His challenge was evident.

Katara reached up for her hat and pulled it off.

She threw it aside.

Pakku's eyebrows rose.

Katara glanced over at Kinto. He was still on the ground. Katara's stomach still hurt and gurgled.

But if he could strike at someone in their own body-

Katara remembered what Master Hama had thought up, on one of many lonely stretches in the dungeons of Crescent Island.

Katara breathed in and breathed out. She raised her hands and reached for the greatest source of water in Master Pakku's body.

*His blood.*

She looked into the sky, let the fear it inspired in her set her heart hammering and her own blood singing. She felt a pulse within that mirrored the movement of the tides and the drifting of the rain. She felt that same pulse in Master Pakku, and just like she could control the tides and the rain, she could control that pulse. First she took control of her own pulse, settling her stomach and putting strength back in her limbs.

Then she reached *out*, and Master Pakku's whole body went stiff.

He cried out as his waterspout died beneath him.

Katara kept her arms outstretched, palms held vertically to keep Pakku from falling, and slowly lowered them. She could *feel* his body hanging on the flows of blood that were in her control, feel the squeezing of his veins and arteries, feel the squishy organs over which the blood permeated. That Katara thought she could *taste* that blood had to her imagination, the thick smell in her nostrils a waking nightmare.

Above, the full moon shone on.

Katara lowered Pakku to the ground until his feet touched the pier.

Then she kept going.

Pakku was pushed down further, pressed as if by a weight until he was spread across the ground in a tangled echo of Kinto. Katara walked over to her former Master, keeping him on the ground, keeping the man who had taught her and bullied her down while she stood tall above him. She could see his trembling, see the expression of agony on his face. This was hurting him.

He should have thought of that before he drowned Jet.

Not that Jet deserved life more than any other, and perhaps less than most, but tonight he had been on Katara's side.
She pushed a hand out sharply, and Pakku gasped and started to go limp.

Only when she felt him fully stop resisting did she let go of his blood.

Only when she saw that he was still breathing did she let out her own gasp of gratitude.

"Wow," came Ty Lee's voice. "I didn't know you could do that."

Katara shuddered, trying to get rid of the ugly sticky feeling in her veins. "I didn't know for sure until just now. My first Master, Hama of the South, thought up Bloodbending when we were in prison." But Master Hama hadn't realized how much it would violate, Katara was sure - both the victim, and the perpetrator. "Come on, we need to get out of here. Are we being followed?"

Ty Lee shrugged as they both ran out onto the pier. "I took care of some of the soldiers and Waterbenders who were chasing us, but the rest ran away and will probably be coming after us when they're feeling brave again?"

A spear crashed onto the pier just ahead of them, and cries sounded from the down the lane to surrender.

Ty Lee smiled. "See! I was right!"

Katara glanced around. Pakku's ship was moored here, but beyond it was a smaller skiff - another metal monstrosity of the Fire Nation, but it would float.

A fireball crashed nearby and the battle cries grew closer, but Katara spared one last glance at Jet's body. It was still floating, face down. The amount of blood in the water wasn't survivable.

But she noticed something else floating near him, and at first thought it might be the package he had died to retrieve. She used a hand to summon a tendril of water as she started running towards the skiff. She coiled the tendril in and caught what it had retrieved, and the feel of wood against her skin made her think, for a moment, that she had won.

But no, it was just Jet’s Blue Spirit mask.

Katara and Ty Lee reached the skiff before the rest of the soldiers were able to catch them, and Katara didn't even both looking at the controls of the engine. She raised her hands, took an arrow stance, and pushed up against the pier, surging the water of the bay with such force that the mooring line snapped and the skiff shot out like a stone from a sling. Ty Lee took the wheel, and Katara provided the propulsion.

It was only after they were well on their way down Prince Iroh's canal that Ty Lee took a break, and noticed the folded, thick material stuff in behind Katara's water-skins.

They unwrapped and unfolded it to find a map of the Southern Earth Kingdom, with markings laying out the details of a new invasion.

Jet hadn't taken it from her. He had used the wooden package as a decoy.

He had always been good at misdirection, and getting people to do what he wanted for an overall good cause.

Katara could acknowledge that much, at least.

Of course, even after dealing with a secret rendezvous, a rogue Blue Spirit, a stolen incriminating
map, and a student who decided to quit by way of torturing him with a heretofore unknown application of Waterbending, Pakku couldn't even get some sleep without duty intruding.

Instead of dreams and darkness, Pakku found himself kneeling in the Spirit World.

On the other side of a low table, Prince Iroh was preparing tea.

Ah, it was going to be one of those talks.

"I hear," Iroh said, as he stirred the powdered tea into the pot, "that you have had a busy night."

Pakku snorted. "It's good to know that the Fire Nation's telegraph network is as efficient as ever. Was there anything for which you needed more detail, or did you just want to harass me a little?"

Iroh sniffed at the steam emerging from the top of his pot. "It's good that the trap with the candle was found in time to save Long Feng’s books, but that map is a very dangerous thing to see out of context. If it does indeed make its way to the Avatar, then he might not go through with our agreement. And I wouldn't blame him!"

Pakku rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm sure your friendship will survive. He'll appreciate how understanding you are, no doubt."

Iroh chuckled, and poured two cups of tea. He placed one in front of Pakku, and then lifted his own for a taste. "Ah, delicious. I think you should return to the North Pole. There are things that will have to be done, now, in the colonies, but that would be a waste of your talents. Come back home."

Pakku inclined his head in acknowledgement. He made no move to touch the tea.

Iroh, however, was halfway through his own cup. "It is interesting that your own student was able to defeat you, is it not? Especially considering her handicaps."

Pakku felt his lip quirk in the start of a smile. Ah, here it comes. "Very interesting, indeed."

"I wonder, Master Pakku, if you have any defense of your performance."

Now, he did smile. "The girl might have only been my student for little more than a month, and a girl on top of that, but I can honestly say I'm more proud of her than any of my other students. Whether she becomes a hero or a monster, her accomplishments will be legendary."

Iroh nodded. "Anything else? About any part of your failed attempt to prevent this disaster?"

Pakku shrugged. "I gave it my best shot."

Iroh stared at him, his gaze searching. This was not merely Prince Iroh any more, or even the Admiral who had conquered the North Pole. This was the Dragon that lurked beneath the man.

Pakku lowered his gaze and finally took a sip from his teacup. It was good, as always, but nothing worth obsessing over. He preferred something fermented, and more than a little hairy.

Iroh sighed. "I see. Well, I can hardly ask more of you than your best."

"That's what I'm counting on." Pakku knocked back the last of his tea. "Now, did you need anything else, or can an old man finally get some rest?"

"Your student, the one who is injured. Will he lose the hand?"
"I could not possibly care less. Even if he does, I'm not going to let him slack in his training,"

"Yes, I would expect no less of you. Very well, Master Pakku. I will see you back in the North, soon."

The Spirit World faded, and Pakku drifted into a numbing darkness, followed by an old dream in which Kanna- young once again- lit into him over some disagreement that the dream failed to specify.

It was one of Pakku's favorites.

TO BE CONTINUED
Zuko stared out over the ocean, at the darkness on the horizon, and adjusted his eyepatch against the wind.

He'd meant to get a glass eyeball to fill the empty socket, but even though he'd been back in the Fire Nation for weeks, things had been too busy, too tense. Vanity had been completely driven from his mind.

It wasn't as easy to lose track of other concerns.

He still had no idea what to do about the mystery of her mother, of her mysterious origins as a peasant and her disappearance during his childhood. The Weapon Heiyaoshi, who had seemed to know something, was dead. Of course, she was hardly the only source of information; Father would have to know, and Uncle had to have witnessed some of that history, too, right?

Except, instead of being on his way home, he was being sent out on another of Uncle's errands. And Uncle hadn't even bothered to talk to him.

Zuko turned to his companion on this trip. Well, his human companion. "You're sure you can get back into the Spirit World to talk to my Uncle?"

Avatar Aang, seated next to Zuko on Appa's head and holding the reins as they all flew over the ocean, gave a wide grin. "Yeah! I've done it accidentally a few times already. When I'm sleeping, I just dream my way into a meeting with Prince Iroh. Has he ever contacted you that way?"

Zuko waved the point away. "We're out here by ourselves. If you can't talk to him, we'll have to fly back to Zenmatsu or somewhere else with a telegraph station. That will delay us by a few more days again."

"Okay, but I just said it'll be fine."

Zuko didn't feel inspired to answer with anything more than a grunt.

Aang leaned over towards him. "Why so grouchy? This time yesterday, we were all worried about the Agni Budokai. Now we have the governors of the Outer Islands backing us, our friends are on their way to handle more of the politics stuff for us, and we're setting out on an adventure!"

"Some adventure. We don't know where we're going or what we're going to do when we get there. I'd rather be on my way home."

"And," Aang continued with a bright voice, "you got a hug from Suki and I kissed Mai!"

Zuko needed a moment before he could switch his mental processes onto this new trick. "You kissed
Mai?"

The Avatar, the Last Airbender and the Bridge Between Worlds, actually giggled. "Yeah! Right on the tip of her nose!"

Oh, for First Fire's sake- "I'm very happy for you."

"Thanks!"

Zuko decided that he was done with this conversation. How was he supposed to ruminate on his troubles when this stupid kid just wanted to talk about girls? "I'm going to check the supplies. If we run out before we finish with this 'adventure,' we might have to leave to resupply and that will-"

"-delay us by a few more days again," Aang finished. "Yeah, I got it."

Zuko crawled back to Appa's saddle, where several large packs were tied down. Without other passengers, and seeming to have recovered from Azula's lightning bolt, the sky bison could carry a good amount of supplies.

Of course, this amount of supplies made Zuko's inspection a pointless exercise, but if it would get him away from a giggling twelve-year-old, he was fine wasting his time. Zuko checked the ropes, to make sure they were tight and secure, and then moved on to confirm that the lid of one of the crates was properly sealed to keep out moisture-

As soon as Zuko touched the lid, it slid right off and let the light of the setting sun into the crate. Zuko blinked down at a slim teenage girl, half-buried in bags of rice and seemingly staring past his head with milky eyes.

King Toph?!

She frowned. "You can see me, can't you? I can hear your teeth grinding. More than usual."

Zuko couldn't bring himself to speak. She- she had stowed away and- and- and had to have displaced some of their supplies, and- and-

Toph winced. "You're going to crack a tooth, Princey." She shoved the sacks off of her and crawled out of the crate, almost falling into Zuko's lap. "Hey, Avatar Aang! Looking good over there! Not that I'd know!" She waved in a direction that was almost correct.

The Avatar turned with confusion all over his face. "King Toph?!

"Wassup?"

Zuko shook his head in the hope that the situation would prove to be a dream that he could wake up and dispel, but King Toph remained seated beside him in Appa's saddle. She was wearing a worn green tunic underneath a vest that might once have been yellow, a far cry from the fancy way of dressing that he had seen from her before.

Zuko gave her his best one-eyed glare, and then remembered that she wouldn't be able to see it.

"Seriously, what are you doing here?"

Toph rested her head against his arm. "I decided that Mai and Sokka and Zhao could handle all the political stuff. They're not stupid and they cheat, so they can manage without me for a few days. I'm only on this whole trip to make sure Prince Iroh frees the Earth Kingdom like he promised. You and
the Avatar over there are on some super-secret mission for your uncle, so I decided to go along to keep an eye on you. (Figuratively. I'm blind.)"

Zuko shouldered Toph off of him as Aang said, "So why didn't you just ask to come along in the first place?"

"Because Iroh wanted just you two to go, so I knew you'd argue with me. This way, I get what I want, and all I had to do was focus on the smell of dry rice until my stomach stopped flipping. That's strategy." Toph's smile faded, and she sat back against the crate she had been hiding in. "Besides, you've been neglecting your Earthbending training."

Aang winced, and Zuko finally found a conversational thread that didn't make him want to either jump off the sky bison or throw one of his companions. "I didn't know the Avatar had started learning to Earthbend."

Toph snorted. "Yeah, that's the problem."

Aang fully turned to face them both, letting go of Appa's reins. "I've started! I- I've been meditating on the stuff Toph told me before we set out for the Fire Nation! We haven't really had time for anything else."

Toph nodded. "That's true, and that's why I'm here. The whole thing with the Agni Budokai forced you spend a lot of time focusing on Fire, even if you've only just started Bending it. But the Avatar is supposed to learn all the elements so that you'll understand and know every nation. How am I supposed to trust that you'll do right by my Earth Kingdom if you can't even flick a pebble?"

Zuko blinked his way through his surprise. That almost sounded wise. "She has a point. The Earth Kingdom is vast and rich in cultures. I traveled it for years and still haven't seen everything it offers, or all its kinds of people."

Toph sat up suddenly. "Oh, you've been! Ever stopped by Gaoling?"

Zuko felt his cheeks warm. "I- I'm not sure. I wasn't- I, uh, was focused on finding a safe place to sleep and something to eat."

"Oh." Toph leaned back again. "Well, I'd apologize for not welcoming you, but your family wrecked everything, so I don't care."

Zuko was just glad she wasn't trying to kill him for it.

Aang took the reins and settled back in his place on Appa's head. "So, are you from Gaoling, your Majesty?"

"Yup. It's just ash, now."

Zuko winced. "Sorry."

Aang sighed. "My home is gone, too. I'm sorry I can't see yours, Toph. Maybe you can tell us about it?"

Toph frowned. "No, I can't."

"Okay, I understand. If you don't want to talk-"

"No, I mean I can't. I only ever 'saw' it in the middle of the night, when I snuck out of my parents'
mansion. They didn't like me going out where I could get hurt. Or going out anywhere. Or telling the world about me at all. They were kind of over-protective.” Toph barked a laugh that made Zuko feel like he had swallowed a lump of coal. "It's funny; they locked me away so that I'd be safe at home, and the only reason I'm alive is because I broke out. My parents died in that mansion when it burned down." Her voice went low, almost lost in the wind. "I would have, too, if I'd stayed."

Aang looked over to Zuko. "Could you take the reins for a moment?"

Zuko shrugged and crawled up to Appa's head. After turning over the reins, the Avatar hopped over to Toph, sat down beside her, and wrapped his arms around her in a hug.

Toph snorted again. "You're a real softie, Avatar Aang."

Zuko turned his one-eyed gaze to the horizon ahead. This wasn't anything he should be watching. His grandfather had done this to these kids, and he knew his sympathies would be inappropriate. Zuko still had a home to go back to, even if it wasn't soon enough for his liking. But these kids could win everything they wanted from this whole enterprise, and they'd still be left without their homes or any family.

Zuko felt ashamed, for the first time, that he merely had to work hard and overcome impossible odds to get what he wanted.

Appa flew on.

Ahead, an island came into view, rising up above the ocean with jungles and the corpses of old volcanos.

Toph couldn't jump down off Appa fast enough, once they had landed. She only had a vague idea of the distance to the ground, based on the sky bison's standing height, but she still threw herself out of the saddle with no hesitation.

She'd never been so happy to feel loose, mushy sand beneath her bare feet. "Ahhhhh, there it is! Sweet, supportive earth!" She laid down on it, grasping some sand in her hands and letting the grains run through her fingers. Then, on a whim, she planted her face in the sand and rubbed it around a bit. If this was more solid ground, she could have used her Earthbending to leave an impression of her face here, the Earth King's mark on Fire Nation soil. But this was sand, and she'd never been very good at working with sand.

Hm.

She grasped a handful, everything but a small amount slipping through her grip, and sought out Avatar Aang’s little light feet on the beach. It was hard, as sand didn't carry vibrations the way soil or stone did, and Aang somehow managed to walk without letting his full weight come into play. But she could hear Appa thrumming happily and there was a sound of skin rubbing a bison-snout. Toph focused as hard as she could and found a blur that might have been a twelve-year-old (give or take a century) Avatar.

She beaned him with the sand.

"Hey!" There was more annoyance in his voice than pain. "What was that for?"

Toph picked up some more sand, lifting them so that the grains all fell out in a rain down on her head. "It's earth, and it stings when someone throws it at you, but it's all loose and shiftly. Maybe an Airbender can do something with it easier than a rock-solid Bender like me!"
"Oh!" She felt Aang’s weight decrease to the point where he completely disappeared from her Earth-sense, but his voice was loud and easy to pinpoint. "That sounds good! What do I do?"

Toph stood up as a weight landed on the other side of Appa, and she heard a grunt from Zuko. He felt heavier than he should have, so he must have been holding one of their supply boxes. Good to know that the Prince didn’t mind handling his own luggage. Toph usually avoided doing her own packing and hauling, but that was because people still had trouble thinking of her as the Earth King, so she needed to be as snobby as possible to reinforce her station.

Aang was still invisible to her, so she said, "First of all, stop floating!"

"Oh. Sorry." There was something near where the voice had come from that might have been Twinkletoes over there standing still like a normal person. "Now what?"

Toph took a low horse-stance, her legs wide apart and her knees bent to keep her close to the ground. "Earthbending requires a solid stance. If you come over here and try to shove me down, you'll fall over before I move at all." She brought her arms in close to her sides, elbows bent, and then used every muscle in her arm, shoulder, and waist to snap a fist out that would have shattered granite. "Earthbending requires strength."

Some of the sand in front of her burst forward like a traveling geyser, but Toph felt it start to die a short distance away, and it was lost to her senses before all the grains even settled back down.

Aang, though, burst out with, "Wow!"

Toph shrugged, still in her stance. "That was pretty pathetic, actually. Like I said, sand is weird. But that initial movement is easier than moving a pebble."

Then Zuko's voice sounded from back in Appa's saddle. "It's interesting that Earthbending comes from strength. I used to think I had to build muscle to be a good Firebender, but my sister taught me that Fire comes from our breath. And I discovered that its power comes from my inner strength."

Toph rose up from her horse-stance, straightening her legs and brushing a foot across the sand in a circle. "Breath and inner strength are nice, but that's probably because your fire isn't born until you make it. The earth has been here for longer than people or Spirits, and it's got all the strength anyone could ever need. You gotta show it who's boss if you want it to listen to you."

"Um, King Toph?" Aang's voice sounded like it was ready to retreat on a moment's notice. "I've been punching the whole time you and Zuko have been talking, and no sand is moving."

Toph headed over to him. As she got closer, his body resolved in her Earth-sense, but she still needed to put her hands on him to really evaluate his horse-stance. She felt up his feet, his legs, got close enough to his crotch to make him squeal, and then patted his back. "Well, your stance could be a little wider and lower. Here." She slapped her hands down on his shoulders and pushed him down.

He made another squeaky sound.

Toph nodded her approval. "Better. Try it now."

The only thing she detected was the whistling of air over a small fist. Sure, maybe her Earth-sense wasn't good enough to feel a few grains of sand moving a little bit of distance, but she doubted she was missing anything like that. "It's not working, is it?"

Aang groaned. "I broke my Avatar Spirit, didn't I? I bet it was something on Crescent Island! I lost my Airbending for a little while there, and now I can't Earthbend?"
"You didn't break your Avatar Spirit," Zuko barked. "You've been Airbending and Waterbending all this time, and I witnessed you communing with the fires in the Agni Budokai. Here, straighten up a little and hold out a hand. Steady your breathing, and feel the way it carries energy through your body."

What was Prince Busybody trying to do?

Aang's breathing was loud. "Okay, I feel it. Air Nomads know all about how our breath feeds our bodies. Now what?"

"Now," Zuko said, "when you punch, exhale- and summon your energies into your fist in the same way your lungs expel the bad air from your body. Connect to those energies the same way you connected to the flames during the Agni Budokai, and you will find your own fire."

Zuko was horning in on Toph's lesson! She opened her mouth to say something that would completely destroy his masculine security- -and then Toph heard a quiet sound of combustion. Her non-sight lightened, and she felt a new heat waft over her skin.

Aang laughed. "I did it! I'm a Firebender!"


The fire winked out.

Zuko cleared his throat. "I mean, uh, it's just not going as well? Maybe Toph isn't teaching you right."

Aang didn't say anything.

Toph let the silence hang around for a moment. "Well, that might be true."

Then she darted over towards the source of Zuko's voice and shoved him with all her strength. He cried out as he crashed to the ground and skidded across the sand, all of it hard enough for Toph to feel without a problem.

Then she straightened and brushed some sand off her clothes. "I'm going to take a bathroom break. You two losers better have camp set up by the time I'm back."

She couldn't stop her hands from forming fists as she stomped off.

---

Iroh looks older than ever as he gazes out over the sea of mists. "Have you heard of the Sun Warriors?"

Aang shakes his head, but doesn't think too hard about it. He's too intrigued by the sight of the stars above and the clouds below. It's a sight that reminds him of the Air Temples, but the mountain peaks here don't stay still. They seem to float on the gray mists, drifting to eclipse some constellations even as they reveal others. Perhaps the peak that Aang and Iroh are standing on right now is bobbing in the same way.

Iroh chuckles. "I expected not. The Fire Nation has been very selective about its own history since Sozin's time. Some parts are forgotten while others are blown out of all proportion. The Sun Warriors were the first civilization on the Fire Islands, before the ancient Explorers came. The Sun
Warriors lived in harmony with dragons, and so also became the first Firebenders. While much of Fire Nation culture came from the Explorers, we trace many of our philosophies to the Sun Warriors. My father's name is even derived from their language, and so my niece's is as well.”

Aang turns away from the cloud sea and its island peaks to look at Iroh. "Even the Air Nomads have- had only a few legends about the Explorers. What happened to the Sun Warriors?" He knows they cannot be alive now, not if he has never heard of them. And he knows too well what the Fire Nation does with civilizations that do not fit in its view of the world.

But Iroh smiles. "They hid. Although their great kingdoms are gone, a few tribes managed to survive in the wilderness of the Fire Nation. There, they preserve the true philosophy of Firebending. I was fortunate to find them, and am honored to carry their secret." He motions to Aang. "And I think it is an honor you should share with me."

"Wow! Yes, I would be honored! How do I find them?"

“They will find you, young Avatar. I have kept up communications with them, and you are already camped on the shores of their island. When the sun rises, they will be there. And they will share something with you that should help with our plan to lead the Fire Nation back to balance. In exchange, there is a matter with which you could perhaps help them."

Aang likes the sound of that. He closes his eyes and breathes in the cool air, air more pure here than he even remembers of the Air Temples. It fills his body and blows over his skin, and he almost feels cradled, as though he's lying on Appa's tail-

Aang stretched and opened his eyes to find the sun rising above the ocean. Not an ocean of clouds, but a real one, with water that reflected the orange light of the newborn sun. Even the white fur of Appa's tail, all around Aang, glowed with the dawn.

Then Aang noticed that a guy in face-paint and a big feathered headdress was sitting cross-legged right beside Appa's tail.

"Waaah!" Aang hopped to his feet and used a wind to keep himself afloat long enough to strike a fighting stance. "Who are you?"

The man raised his eyebrows. It looked harsh with his deep red face-paint, and the heavy gold around his neck added to the projection of power. "I am Chief Alba, for as long as the sun shines on me. I believe I am expected?"

Expected?

Oh, the Sun Warriors!

Aang relaxed. "Yeah! Uh, good morning! Prince Iroh said you'd be coming. I just wasn't expecting you to be so soon."

Chief Alba smiled as he stood up. His clothes were evocative of the Fire Nation in their red color, but his tunic was left open in the front to reveal his bare chest and long loincloth. His arms, though, were almost completely covered in bands of real gold. "Sun Warriors like to get an early start on things. I take it you are the Avatar?"

"My name is Aang." He brought his hands together and bowed low at the waist. "It's an honor to meet you and learn about the Sun Warriors. And the big guy is Appa, my animal guide. He's a sky-bison."
Alba bowed to Aang, and then again to Appa. "On behalf of the Sun Warriors, I welcome the Avatar and his guide to our l-"

His words were cut off by a battle cry and the sound of Firebending. Aang whipped his head around to see Prince Zuko popping up from his sleeping bag with a fist extended and flames flying out towards a thin man with a mostly shaved head.

The man brought his hands up and almost caught the flames, and then twisted his arms down to dissipate the light and heat.

By then, Aang had already run over to grab Zuko. "Hold up, these are friends! They're Sun Warriors! They're who your uncle wanted us to meet!"

Zuko blinked. He wasn't wearing his eyepatch, making for a disconcerting sight. "Sun Warriors? But- but they've been gone for- for thousands of years!"

The man who Zuko had attacked smirked. "Are you sure? Did you check?"

Zuko's jaw clenched, and Aang got ready to stop another Firebending attack, but the prince just rose from his sleeping bag and crossed his arms. "So now what?"

"Now we get Toph up!" Aang looked over to where she had made her little earth-tent last night, further up where the sand was more packed, but didn’t see it.

Instead, he found Toph sitting down with more of the Sun Warriors around her, saying something as she gestured wildly.

Chief Alba came up beside Aang. "Yes, we have already met the Earth King. She detected us as soon as we arrived, and we exchanged introductions. I must say, I expected the Earth Kingdom's ruler to be a Bender, but I never imagined anyone could have such power and control to use it as a substitute for eyes. The child is impressive."

Aang could easily agree with that. Too bad he was proving to be such a disappointing student to her. "So, uh, since we're all acquainted now, Iroh said that there was something I could maybe help you with?"

Alba glanced over at Zuko, and then back to Aang. "I certainly hope so. But that's what I want to see."

See? "See how?"

"If the Avatar cannot even sense- or find- the problem, then how can I hope for you to fix it?"

Oh. He was saying that Aang had to take a test.

Aang hated tests.

Alba offered a smile. "I will help you, though. I do want you to succeed."

Aang smiled back. "Oh, well, thanks! That's really refreshing. Ever since I got to the Fire Nation, it's been nothing but people challenging me to death duels. And that's when they don't just send assassins."

"Huh." Alba nodded. "That does sound like what I'd expect of them. All I want you to do is trace the connection between me and my Sun Warriors, and the darkness that has come upon us."
Oh. Like Guru Pathik had taught. "I can do that. Um, give me a minute, though?"

Alba sat back down, his legs crossed.

Zuko shuffled over. "What are you doing?"

"Ah, yeah, you haven't been hanging out with us for that long." Aang shrugged. "I can kind of sense the spiritual connections between people and things. It's part of how I can Bridge Worlds, like Avatars are supposed to do. Don't worry, it's nothing too spooky. Even Sokka is okay with it."

Zuko stared like he wasn't sure if he was being made fun of.

Aang figured a demonstration was the best response. He kneeled right in front of Chief Alba and closed his eyes, clearing his mind and trying to focus as he breathed in and out. Alba was a stranger, and Aang wasn't sure how to begin to find the connection. Maybe he should ask to hold one of the chief's hands? Or they could Firebend together, somehow?

Then a pair of little hands came to rest on Aang's shoulders, and Toph's voice drifted into his ears: "Everyone breathes, everyone has a heartbeat. This sand makes it hard to feel, but everyone makes vibrations that go down into the earth. Maybe I couldn't teach you to move grains of sand yesterday, but they're still shaking with the vibrations of all of us. Put your hands in the sand and feel for the vibrations of the guy right in front of you."

Aang figured it was worth a try. He leaned forward and pushed both of his hands into the sand, sliding them into the cool, damp ground until they were covered to the wrists.

"Back up," he heard Toph saying. "Give them some room."

Aang breathed, and focused on his hands. On the sand that pressed against them. He sought movement.

He failed to find any.

"Vibrations," Toph called out from further away. "They flow out with every movement."

"Perhaps," Alba said, "this will help." Aang heard the man stand up, and then felt extra warmth in the dawn air. There was the sound of combustion.

The Sun Warrior Chief was going through a Firebending drill.

And Aang could feel that in the sand. Could feel the pressing of feet against the beach, the shifting of weight. He focused on the movements as conveyed by the sand and the heat of the flames above him, and let that enter the quiet space in his mind at the center of all his meditations.

That's how he found the connection. It linked the chief to the other Sun Warriors around, and to a place a short distance away. Two places, actually. Both high above the ground, but one much higher than the other.

Both were cold.

Aang opened his eyes. "I know where we're going."

Zuko wished he could have seen this all with two eyes, even if the place wasn't in its best state.

Chief Alba and the other Sun Warriors were leading him, Aang, and Toph into what remained of
their civilization. It was a massive complex of ziggurats, plazas, statues, and city-buildings, all of it carved from ancient sunbaked stone. Zuko knew it had to be thousands of years old - there were places where the jungle had encroached that looked as twisted and ancient as any forest Zuko had seen. And yet it was all so precisely formed, the stone cut and arranged in ways that even modern architects would have struggled to achieve, at least those that weren't Earthbenders.

But it was all so empty. The place sprawled like a city, but there were no people in the streets, no lights in the buildings.

At least King Toph seemed to be in a better mood, this morning. As Aang led them through the maze of stone streets of the ancient complex, Toph grinned so innocently that the expression seemed alien on her face. "I gotta say, this place is amazing. The stonework is impressive enough, but then all that stuff you built inside it- Wow!"

Zuko frowned. Inside? "What does she mean?"

Aang stopped before a gate. "We need to go through here."

Chief Alba nodded, and stepped towards the gate, to a fist-sized receptacle built into the door. "We have ways of keeping intruders out of our temples. Be glad you are our invited guests, or some of the spots you walked over would have opened up into pits of spikes."

Aang's eyes went wide and Toph's grin turned sharp, but Zuko couldn't say he was surprised. They were the Sun Warriors, after all, so no doubt they were very good at defending themselves. "And that's a Firebending lock there? Fire Temples still use them."

Alba's eyes narrowed. "Keep in mind, Prince Zuko, who the Sun Warriors would want to keep out. We have no problems with Earthbenders or Waterbenders here. There's nothing that would even interest them. Your Fire 'Nation' is the only people in the world who could be a threat to us - who would want to take our treasures or destroy our wisdom."

Zuko didn't know what to say to that. He had no objections, but it pained him that, even here, the Fire Nation was in conflict with itself. He didn't think of the Sun Warriors as something separate but the feeling was apparently not mutual.

Toph slapped his arm. "You're learning a lot of new things today, Princey-Pants. I guess you're a better student than I am a teacher, huh?"

Zuko pushed her away. He hadn't meant to insult her, last night, when he blurted out that she might be a bad Earthbending teacher. He had just been trying to keep the Avatar from getting into a self-defeating mood. But feeling bad about saying something stupid didn't mean he was going to take her disrespect.

Over by the gate, Chief Alba fished into a pouch that hung from his belt and produced a carved orange crystal. It reflected the light of the sun brightly enough to make Zuko squint, but he did see Alba set the jewel into the gate's receptacle. What would that do? There could be a button in the back of the hole, but Zuko hadn't seen any signs of such a thing, and that wouldn't be a very good security system.

The crystal went dull, the light leaving it, and the gate began grinding open.

What could-

"Come," Alba said. "This is our most sacred temple."
The ziggurat beyond the gate was the tallest Zuko had seen yet, with a massive set of stairs going up the front. It was too bad they had left Appa to find his own breakfast at the edge of the jungle.

Alba moved towards the stairs, but the other Sun Warriors remained standing.

Aang looked back at them. "You’re not coming?"

The warrior who Zuko had (accidentally) attacked that morning- Ham Ghao- crossed his arms over his bare chest and looked at the ground. "Just because you're taking a tour doesn't mean we need to subject ourselves to what's up there."

Alba didn't so much as glance back. "It is too painful a sight for them."

Zuko exchanged a glance with Aang. The kid looked appropriately apprehensive as they started up the stairs.

Even Toph was quiet when they came to the top of the ziggurat. There was just a single structure up here, open to the air on three sides, with the pointed, golden roof held up by columns. The lone wall was carved with a flame-shaped alcove in the center, but the space was empty. To Zuko, it felt a little cold, just as Aang had said.

Toph's voice low enough to almost be a whisper. "The space goes down. Deep. All the way below the surface. But- but something doesn't feel right."

Chief Alba nodded. "This used to be where we maintained the Eternal Fire. But it went out, and soon our greatest seers were contacted by Prince Iroh in a dream. He told us that the Fire Nation had won its war against the rest of the world using the Agni Comet, and everything had fallen out of balance."

Aang stepped towards the empty hearth, almost as though he was listening for something. "And what was the Eternal Flame?"

"The Sire of all Flames. When humanity lived in cold and darkness, the dragons gave it to the first Sun Warriors as a gift, and we have kept it burning since then. To have it go out-" Alba's words choked off.

Zuko could scarcely believe what he was hearing. "The First Fire?! You- you've had it all this time? Here?" It was becoming harder to breathe. "I- I don't believe it. And it's gone out?"

The First Fire. The gift from the dragons that had allowed humanity to rise above other creatures, to stand against aggressive Spirits, to shape and build and explore and defend. Just as a person was given life by his or her Inner Fire, the Fire Nation had been given life by that old gift. It was the heart of civilization, second only to the sun itself.

How could he feel such a deep loss for something that he hadn't even known still existed until after it was gone?

Zuko had to sit down. He glanced at Aang and Toph, worried at the weakness he was showing in front of them, knowing that they couldn't understand what he was feeling-

Except neither one seemed confused. Aang was merely leaning on his staff, eyes wet and sympathetic, while Toph had her head lowered so that her hair covered her eyes. She even reached out and patted his head.

Zuko remembered the conversation that Aang and Toph had shared the previous day, about losing
their homes to the Fire Nation.

Of course they understood what Zuko was feeling.

Maybe he was just beginning to understand them.

Zuko forced himself back to his feet. "I don't think this is something that the Avatar can fix. The First Fire can't just be- be brought back!"

Aang shifted his staff in his hands. "Yeah. My Firebending would just make my own fire. Ooh, unless my Avatar Spirit can travel back in time!"

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

Chief Alba said, "I don't think so. But this isn't what I wanted your help with. This is just one of the symptoms of the state of the world. There is another symptom you may be able to relieve. Or, at least, Prince Iroh thought it worth a try."

Zuko crossed his arms over his chest. "My uncle is wise. And we'll do whatever we can." But hopefully the only solution wouldn't be to somehow go into the past. The state of the world was proof enough of the impossibility.

Alba nodded. "Avatar, do you know where you need to go next?"

Aang turned away from the hearth to look out across the city. "It was another high place. Higher than this. But I don't see- Oh. Now I do." He pointed.

Zuko followed the gesture to find the dual-peaked mountain that rose up beside the city.

"Yes," said Alba. "We have a long hike, yet."

Aang finally felt his heart lighten a bit as Chief Alba led them towards the mountain. It stood just outside the city, and although it loomed above everything else, it was no more than a day's climb, the sides conquerable with nothing more than a good pair of boots. The strangest part was the two peaks it had, one larger than the other with a deep gap between them. They almost reminded Aang of a dragon's claws.

That wasn't what had Aang feeling better, though. To get to the top of the mountain, they had to pass through the part of the city where the Sun Warriors still lived.

Before they saw anything, they heard it, sounds of life carried by the humid breeze. Aang smiled at the sounds of chanting, of voice raised together in harmony. He didn't recognize the words, and so couldn't tell if it was a simple working song or a hymn born from belief and reverence. Chief Alba brought the group through another gate, this one left open, and beyond that was the last section of the city before the paths up the mountain. Aang looked around as he passed into the neighborhood of smaller buildings, excited to see-

Oh.

It was a funeral.

Or, at least, some kind of mourning ritual. White linens hung from walls and poles and roofs, while people of all ages and sizes lined the streets and chanted. They were passing bowls of black powder around, each person taking some in hand and scattering it on either their head or feet.
"Ash," Zuko hissed. "They're covering themselves in ash."

Toph sniffed at the air. "Fresh ashes, too. What's that mean?"

Zuko shook his head. "I don't know. Ashes are considered to be filthy garbage in the Fire Nation."

Aang was surprised at Zuko's lack of knowledge. But before he could offer the explanation he remembered from his visits with Kuzon, over a hundred years ago, Ham Ghao spoke up again. "The Fire Nation has forgotten about ashes? What are your people doing out there in your fancy cities? Ashes are what are left after there's nothing left to burn. They are the physical substance of death itself."

Chief Alba added, "My people are mourning their own deaths."

Aang blinked. "Your people are dying? But you all look healthy enough to me!"

Alba shook his head. "It is not the physical form that is the problem. The Sun Warrior culture is about to lose something at its very heart, and even if we survive in body, it will be the end of us. Death of the body will be a comfort."

Aang traded a worried look with Zuko. Toph, of course, didn't meet his gaze.

Finally, Zuko said, "Why would the Fire Nation no longer know the meaning of ashes? That seems like a weird thing to forget, considering it's in half our vulgarities."

Toph perked up. "Did you count them? Is it really half?"

Alba stroked his short beard. "In my discussions with Iroh, I learned about the modern ways of the Fire Nation. I'm sure there are sages in some of your temples who know the truth, but the power of death is no longer a matter for symbols. The people of the Fire Nation live with death every day. The armies deal it out to whole cultures. Everyone knows someone who has died violently. The modern Fire Nation prefers blood as a sign of mortality." He gave a shrug of his heavy shoulders. "Let's get moving. We need to climb the mountain, and it will take us most of the day."

They passed through the neighborhood funeral, down streets dressed up in whites as the people dirtied themselves with the stains of black ashes. The whole time they chanted, and now Aang could hear the mourning in it, the acknowledgement of a passing.

His heart was no longer light as he set foot on the mountain.

Zuko was grateful for the climb.

It kept his body occupied, and gave him something to focus on that was simple. He made the climb into a kind of moving meditation, but unlike normal meditation- which he had always had problems doing right- the climb was a task that he could measure and complete. He had to get to the top of the mountain, and every step carried him forward towards that goal. So long as he was moving up, he could put his mind into a detached rest.

Chief Alba hadn't been exaggerating about it taking most of the day. They were only halfway up when the sun was directly overhead, at which point Alba called for a rest. The Sun Warriors all kneeled right there on the mountain slope, held out their hands to summon a ball of fire in each palm, and turned their faces up directly towards the light of the sun. Eyes closed, they chanted together, something faster and much livelier than the mourning song. That lasted for a few minutes, and then they let their fires fade and broke out something to eat from their knapsacks.
Zuko accepted bread from Ham Ghao, and thought himself fairly restrained for simply glaring in response to the man's taunt of, "Do you have this in the Fire Nation, or did your people forget how to bake, too?"

Toph had laughed.

As annoying as it was, it was preferable to the noises the group encountered as they continued their journey through the afternoon. Screeches of a kind Zuko didn't recognize echoed over the mountain slopes. "What are those?"

Toph craned her head. "Nothing I know. And I don't feel anything on the ground but us. So I'm guessing birds of some kind?"

Ham Ghao spat on the ground. "They're not birds. They're parasites, and I'm not surprised an Earthbender can't feel them."

"Parasites," Aang repeated. "How does a mountain have parasites?"

Ham Ghao shook his head. "The chief wants you to see for yourself. But energies flow whether or not they are in balance. The balance only determines what can draw strength from them."

Zuko sought his Inner Fire. "And is that strength a threat to us?"

Ham Ghao's face was a sneer. "Don't worry, despoiler. We take care of the dead, no matter where they come from. Nothing up here can hurt you anymore."

Zuko wasn't sure he could trust that, but nothing attacked them as they continued their climb.

The sun was setting when they finally reached the top of the mountain.

Alba had not led them directly to one of the two peaks. They had only reached the bottom of the gap between the points when they found a courtyard of smooth stone painted to evoke a blazing sun. A long set of stairs led up and then divided to reach to twin caves, one in each of the peaks.

Alba gestured to the stairs. "We are here. This is where the greatest secret of the Sun Warriors can be found. For now." He turned to look at the rest of the group, his face a scowl beneath his face-paint. "Know that we do not share this lightly. Avatar, your disappearance was a failure to uphold your responsibilities towards the world. Prince Zuko, your family has destroyed so much and hurt so many. And King Toph-"

She put her hands on her hips.

Alba shrugged. "We don't like to let outsiders up here. It's nothing personal."

Toph smirked. "It's good."

Zuko swallowed his own discomfort with the reminder that his family couldn't even show love to its own members. "Do you want our help or not? Let's get on with this."

Aang took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm ready."

"Then come," Alba said. He led the way to the stairs, and then turned to follow the right path. "We shall visit this one, first."

As they passed into the cave, they were assaulted by a distinctly sulfurous smell, so thick it nearly made Zuko gag. He recognized it as typical of volcanoes, but he didn't feel the same heat that
normally came with active spots. Perhaps there was some deep vent with no escape except through this shaft.

Then Toph gasped. "Wow."

Aang turned to her. "What?"

She blinked, and then shook her head. "As the tubby man said, you need to see it. I'm not going to ruin the surprise."

"It's not far, now," Alba said.

He was right. Compared to the climb up the mountain, it was just a short walk down a sloping path to the dragon's lair.

For that's what Zuko saw when the group emerged into a massive cave.

The dragon's red scales reflected the light that filtered in through a shaft in the ceiling, casting a moving glow that flowed across the rounded walls as the dragon shifted its body to meet their stares. Zuko could tell that it was massive, probably even taller than the Fire Palace at full extension, and its whiskery head had the unmistakable look of age, of the same constant presence as the ruins of the city at the base of the mountain.

That age was also visible in the dragon's clouded eyes.

The whole group was frozen by its gaze, and for a moment Zuko's heart was stabbed by the fear that the dragon would burn them, or maybe just catch them all up in its massive jaws, but then it just snorted and lowered its head down to the floor near its head. The dragon rumbled, a sound almost like a groan beneath the echoing volume. It coiled further on itself, crushing its own wings in the search for comfort, its arms and legs left to poke limply up into the air.

Zuko said, "Something is wrong with it."

He caught Toph's wince, and she turned away from everyone else.

Chief Alba just nodded. "It is the same with the dragon who lives in the other cave. They are the last dragons in the world, the Masters who have guided the Sun Warriors for generations as we refined and passed on our Firebending ways. They are Ran and Shaw, older than time."

"And they are dying."

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Dust to Dust

Chapter Summary

Aang figures out what to do about dying dragons.

Dust to Dust

The explanations started in the first dragon cave, and extended into their walk across the bridge to the second.

Aang, for his part, could scarcely believe what he was hearing. "The Fire Nation killed off all the dragons?! Mai said they weren't around anymore, but I didn't think their own friends had hunted them down!"

As he spoke, the group passed into the second cave. It, too, smelled like an active volcano, but now Aang thought he recognized something else, a scent of age and dwindling life. But maybe he was just imagining that.

As they moved deeper, beyond the easy reach of the setting sun, Zuko said, "You've seen an Agni Kai and completed an Agni Budokai." The unscarred side of his face was covered in the shadow, leaving visible only his old burn and the patch covering his missing eye. "I'm sure you can believe that eventually a Firebender would want to test himself in a duel against a dragon."

Aang could, but it wasn't a pleasant image. "And that didn't end really bad for the Firebenders?"

Zuko shrugged. "There's a reason defeating a dragon made the winner a legend. Victory even bestowed the lifelong title of Dragon."

Toph snorted. "Now, instead of Dragons, you have Weapons. That's what passes for progress around here, I guess. Oh, wait, didn't that old Weapon lady have a dragon title?"

Zuko nodded. "Lady Caldera Yu Gerel, the Seeing Dragon, and Weapon of the Fire Nation. She and my uncle are the last living Dragons."

Aang blinked. "Prince Iroh?"

"Yes. He is the Dragon of the North."

"A false claim," Chief Alba spoke up. He was the only one of the Sun Warriors to come with them into the caves. "Iroh came here long ago to find and fight the last dragons, but instead the Masters showed him the true Way of the Flame. He withdrew his challenge to them, and kept the secret of their survival."

Aang wanted to ask for more details, especially when that had all happened. It made Iroh sound good, but everyone said he hadn't left the North Pole since conquering it. So had he been 'good' when he was fighting a war against the Northern Water Tribe?

Before Aang could ask, they reached the end of the tunnel and emerged into the lair of the second dragon. He was surprised to find that, although similar in appearance, this one was a deep blue, like
the late summer sky above the Southern Air Temple after a rain. The color made this dragon all the more impressive to Aang, giving a fresh focus to its size and strength, the majesty of its wings and the wise air of its whiskers.

Even its miserable pose, sprawled across the cavern floor like a feverish child who couldn't get comfortable, couldn't take away from the impact of its appearance.

"It happened just after the Agni Comet came," Chief Alba finally said.

Zuko flinched. "You keep calling it that. Don't you mean Sozin's Comet?"

Alba scowled and made a sign in the air. "That ca gada did not create or discover the comet. It is the purest expression of the Agni Warrior's power, and so it is and shall always be the Agni Comet."

Zuko dipped his head. "Fair enough."

"So, wait," Toph said, "the comet that makes Firebenders more powerful poisoned the dragons?"

Alba shook his head. "The Masters were empowered by it. They participated in the Comet Ceremony along with the Sun Warriors, and it was a joyful experience for all. But when we returned to our city, we saw that the Sire of all Flames had gone out, and the next morning, when supplicants arrived at the top of the mountain to ask the Masters for guidance, they would not emerge from their caves. That was the beginning of the fading."

Aang summoned a wind to carry him down to the floor of the cavern, floating along the shaft of waning sunlight that stabbed down from the hole in the ceiling. He landed next to the blue dragon's head, and while its eyes twitched to look at him, it didn't otherwise move.

This close, it was even more intimidating. Its size was so real that it almost felt like a threat. But those eyes were old and wet and suffering, so Aang reached a hand out and placed it on the dragon's snout.

Then he breathed in, breathed out, and felt for the substance of the dragon that existed beyond its physical form.

Unlike with Chief Alba, that morning, it was easy to find the dragon's spiritual energies.

It turned out that the dragon was mostly spiritual energies.

What Aang felt was the greatest, most pure glow, a beacon in the world beyond sight. The connection it had with a similar beacon nearby- that must be the other dragon, the red one- was so intense they almost felt like one being. But that wasn't their only connection.

In fact, Aang couldn't even begin to count the paths their energies charted across the world. The persistent Línghún energy of the dragons connected to the mountain, to the mourning Sun Warriors in the city, to the tips of various temples, and out to points far away. Following those paths, Aang felt like he was standing at the tip of the Axis Mundi, looking down from the ultimate mountaintop at the whole rest of the world. The connections spread across the seas to what Aang realized was the rest of the Fire Nation. They even continued on over the vast oceans, to what must be the Earth Kingdom and Water Tribes. They encompassed the whole world, terminating in so many points they might as well be infinite.

Aang followed the trails of some of the closest and found warmth. It took him a moment to realize he wasn't experiencing a metaphor; there really was warmth and light of a physical nature at the end of those Línghún lines.
The dragons were connected to fires. All fires.

Torches, campfires, home hearths, cooking ovens, mechanical factories, candles, wildfires, lightning storms, forges.

But even all of that couldn't account for the number of connections. There were thinner lines that didn’t seem to end with much of anything, just old winds that might have been memories.

That's when he realized how ancient the dragons were. Because those ghostly points- those places where he couldn't find anything, now- were fires that had long ago gone out, forgotten and lost to the world by all but the dragons themselves.

Their physical forms were old, but their spirits were so pure that they transcended age. Perhaps that was how Guru Pathik had lived so long, before Aang had failed to save him from a Firebender. But the Guru's energies- his Qi and his Línhún that bound him to the rest of the world- had felt more solid.

The dragons, by contrast, were tattered.

And growing more worn by the second.

Immersed in the world beyond the physical, Aang followed the shredded motes of Línhún energy that broke off to waft and fade in the ether. They trailed down the mountain, pooling in spots where Aang could feel great history from ages long forgotten, and it was there that he encountered something else.

There were other things living on this mountain, things like the pixiu that the Guru had worked to save, things that were called 'monsters' by people who didn't understand. They had no physical form, but still existed in the physical world and interacted with its elements. And these creatures were eating the drifting motes of the dragons' lost energy.

That's when Aang remembered what one of the Sun Warriors, Ham Ghao with raspy voice and long ponytail, had mentioned on the journey up the mountain: "Parasites."

He opened his eyes and stepped back from the dragon. "There are parasite spirits on the mountain eating the dragons' energy!" He shuddered, and pulled a wind to cradle and lift him. His jump took him back up to the ledge by the cavern's entrance, where his friends waited.

Chief Alba crossed his arms over his chest. "Are the parasites hurting the dragons, Avatar?"

Aang thought about it, and then shook his head. "I don't know much about Línhún energy, but unless we can find a way to keep the dragons' spirits from fading any more, I don't think it matters what happens to the energy itself."

Zuko stepped forward. "Will making Uncle into the Fire Lord save them? Maybe if we get him on the throne soon?"

"I- I don't think so. Fire Lord Azulon has been in charge for a while, right?" Aang took a moment to sigh, because he didn't like what he had to say and wanted to put it off, even just for another moment. Is that why Mai sighed so much? "The dragons only got sick after the war ended. After the Fire Nation won by using the Comet to destroy so much of the rest of the world. And the dragons are connected to every fire, past and present."

Toph winced. "Oh."
Zuko looked back and forth between Aang and Toph. "What? What do you mean, connected to fires?"

Aang sat down on the ledge, resting his gaze on his knees. "It's something I learned from a Guru who was a friend to my people. He said that everything is connected." He couldn't help but remember the funeral pyre he had helped to make for Guru Pathik. Had the dragons felt that fire, felt the passing of such wisdom, felt Aang's failure? "It's like how I found the empty hearth of the First Flame, and these caves up here, just from touching Chief Alba. Our emotions create links of spiritual energy, but it can go so much deeper! And the dragons were a part of Fire itself."

"Yes," Alba said. "Fire is Life."

Aang nodded. "Except fire, and the Comet, was used to destroy so much on the day of the Comet. The ashlands were created, and all the bad energy from a hundred years of war was allowed to flow out like a flood. And the dragons-"


Aang rested his head against his knees. "The dragons felt it all. It hurt in the part of them that gave such long life. And now they can't take life from that, anymore." He didn't want to give voice to the final conclusion, but the silence left him no choice. And it was his duty as the Avatar to tell the truth about this. He had followed the connections of the dragons all the way to the ashlands, and had felt the death there. "I can't save the dragons. Nothing can. The old world died, and the dragons were too much a part of it. I can't help the dragons any more than I can bring back Ba Sing Se. Or Omashu. Or Gaoling. Or any of it.

"What's lost is lost. Forever."

Toph didn't like how depressing this whole jaunt had become.

They spent the night at the top of the mountain, since the walk down would have taken too long. Of course, Toph could have easily moved them all down on a sled or something else a lot faster than everyone's sore feet, but she didn't want a repeat of her last incident with a 'holy' mountain, back when she was campaigning to be Earth King. Besides, she didn't like the idea of these 'parasite' Spirits that everyone was talking about, especially since they were invisible to her Earth-sense.

So instead everyone slept under rock tents that Toph had made for them while she tried not to feel the vibrations of the dying dragons as they shifted around in their caverns.

It was really stupid that the Fire Nation had killed almost all of their dragons. It was like picking a fight with a badgermole: painful enough that no one was going to be happy by the end, no matter who won.

On the other hand, Toph could at least appreciate that she'd never have to deal with Firebenders riding flying dragons into battle. She hated fighting things that could fly.

But it was Aang she was really worried about. She thought she might have heard him crying, in those moments when she nearly drifted out of sleep.

The next day, going down the mountain proved to be easier than going up, and they returned to the ancient city in the afternoon. Once again, the Sun Warriors were doing their thing with the chanting and the dusting themselves with ashes. Now that she knew about the dying dragons, the whole thing made a bit more sense, but not by much. She understood that the Sun Warriors were too few to go to war with the rest of the Fire Nation; it was important to wait for the right moment, but it was also
important to listen for that moment.

So while Aang and Zuko brainstormed with the Chief and his advisors about what they might do about the dragons, Toph went exploring.

Most of the Sun Warrior city was empty; the Sun Warriors themselves were clustered in a modest residential complex where they lived communally, all of it about the size of a modest village. The rest of the city was temples and buildings that no one seemed to bother with. Maybe the people only visited at certain times, or the usual visitors were too busy wailing about dying dragons. The automated traps were still set and ready to kill intruders, so it wasn't like the temples were completely abandoned.

Aang had described, on the way down the mountain, what he had felt when he did his glowy thing up in the dragon cavern. (Toph knew he had glowed because even her blind eyes could tell the difference between light and dark, and the glow she had detected was the color of her mother's singing, whatever 'color' was.) He explained how he had sensed connections to people and fire and whatever.

And to some of the temples.

Toph was in one of those now, a ziggurat with a big room at the top. There was some kind of lock on the door, similar to the gate Chief Alba had opened the day before with a crystal, but Toph had used her Earthbending a new door in the wall. The room inside was ringed with some impressively detailed statues that seemed to demonstrate a series of forms, but Toph was more interested in the hidden switches in the floor. From how it felt, anyone who copied the forms would naturally press down on the switches with their feet and eventually get a prize for not screwing anything up. Pretty clever.

Toph went ahead and used a hand motion to trigger the final switch deep in the floor.

The circular center of the room shifted and slid to allow a pedestal to rise up.

Yeah, they definitely hadn't expected any Earthbenders to come poking around here. Toph decided to take that as an open invitation to do whatever she wanted- like, say, take the big metal oblong ball from the top of the pedestal.

(There was a trap on it, a very small lever under the ball that would pop up when there was nothing holding it down. Before Toph took the ball, she took the lever and the stone mechanisms underneath it into her control, and fused them into a solid structure. She could restore it when she was done grabbing stuff.)

Her fingers revealed a smooth surface and egg-like shape, with only a few carved decorations on the sides breaking up the curve of the surface. A quick lick revealed that it was made of gold, or at least coated in it; the object wasn't heavy enough to be solid gold.

So was this thing what Aang had sensed?

People didn't put just any junk on hidden, booby-trapped pedestals.

So she brought the golden egg-statue back with her. Her Earth-sense revealed that Aang and Zuko were still sitting around with Alba and the wise men in the Chief's home, talking more about some way to maybe do something about the dragons.

She walked right into the room (the Sun Warriors didn't do guards, apparently) and hoisted her prize. "Hey, is this important?"
The choking sound that Chief Alba made told Zuko that, yes, what King Toph was holding above her head was indeed important. Zuko couldn't keep the snap out of his voice as he said, "What are you doing? Do you think you can just grab whatever you want?"

"Honestly?" Her head turned towards him, but not her gaze. "Yeah."

Zuko couldn’t hold back a growl as he got up and took the golden treasure out of her hands. "Stop messing around. This is all very serious and-" He trailed off as he focused on the thing he was holding. It was warm, as might be expected of any metal that had been under the sun, but there was something strange about it. There was a deep warmth that made it- it- "It feels almost alive."

"In a manner of speaking." With a sigh, Chief Alba got to his feet. Aang did as well, coming over to look at the treasure in Zuko's hands, but Alba maintained his distance. "What you're holding is the egg of a Great Dragon."

Aang's burst of, "What?!" echoed Zuko's own shock.

There might be more dragons, after all?

But Alba's painted face was downcast. "Normal dragon eggs are exactly like they sound. An untrained eye could mistake them for the eggs of large birds."

Aang nodded. "I've seen them. One time, me and my friend Kuzon, we- well, it isn't important. What about this kind of egg?"

"Sometimes, dragon eggs do not hatch. The dragon inside is not strong enough to emerge at the right time, or its lifeforce fades before it is even born. In those cases, the dragon would normally die, but among the teachings we Sun Warriors received with the gift of fire, there was a technique to help such dragons. The egg is cast in gold in a ceremony by Holy Ones who command the Healing Flames, sealing both the dragon and invigorating energies inside. The egg is then given time, perhaps centuries, in one of our temples."

Toph grinned. "That's where I found this one."

Zuko groaned. "You messed up the egg, didn't you? You weren't supposed to take it out of the temple!"

Toph snorted. "No more than Aang broke his Avatar Spirit. Right?"

Zuko felt the Avatar's hands on his shoulders. "Let's calm down and listen to the whole explanation. Chief Alba doesn't seem too upset."

When Zuko looked over at him, Alba simply shrugged. "A little time doesn't matter. We are talking about a centuries-long process, here. And that egg is more or less ready. But it makes little difference, now. The only way to hatch the egg is by placing it in the Sire of All Fires and summoning the Masters down from the mountain. No other fire will do. Once the gold is soft enough, it melts away to reveal the egg within, and then the dragons take it from the First Fire and cradle it until it hatches. The emerging dragon is a Great Dragon, one with a special spiritual nature. We release them into the wild to find their destiny, but it is always of great significance to the world. We think the Masters themselves are Great Dragons who were born in such a way."

Aang's shoulders slumped. "And now without the Masters or the First Fire, that won't be happening again."
Alba nodded. "I do not know what will become of the eggs. The Sun Warriors will have to convene our wisest to discuss it."

Zuko looked down at the egg in his hands, taking in the sight with his good eye. A dragon was asleep in here, but might never get the chance to emerge. Would it sleep until the Final Flame, when the world was given over to fire to be burned away and reborn? Might the Final Flame allow this unborn dragon to finally emerge?

Zuko couldn't imagine anything lasting that long.

They brought the egg with them to dinner.

For every meal, the Sun Warriors gathered in a massive hall and shared their food. Some sat at low tables, while others just reclined in groups on rugs. Aang and his friends had joined the Chief and some of the other leaders, but it wasn’t a very happy gathering.

Everyone was still stained with the ashes of mourning for the dragons. The food was plain fare that offered sustenance without much else. Aang could deal with that, especially knowing about the dragons, but when he went to visit Appa, he resolved to get some apples out of the supply packs.

Appa had been waiting at the outskirts of Sun Warrior city since that first morning, and when he saw Aang, he bound forward and offered a big lick as a greeting. Aang laughed. "I'm sorry I was so busy! They have a real problem here, and I've been trying to help." He went over to the supply packs they had left behind, and unlatched one with a supply of apples. He tossed one to Appa, and scooped up a bunch more in his arms. "I haven't been doing a very good job with it. The last dragons are going to die, soon." It was strange to say such a thing to Appa. He was the last sky bison, and when he left the world, it would be another permanent loss.

The sky bison had taught the Air Nomads how to Airbend.

The dragons had taught the Sun Warriors how to Firebend.

Aang sighed. "I hope the original Earthbenders and Waterbenders are doing okay."

A voice emerged from the jungle to say, "The badgermoles are doing great. Thanks for asking." Toph stomped into the clearing and went right over to pat Appa's nose. "I don't know what the first Waterbenders were. Probably fish. So, you ready for an Earthbending lesson?"

Aang couldn't hold back a groan. "Great, another thing I can't do."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that." Toph took an apple out of Aang's arms and held it out for Appa to snatch. "Zuko was right; I'm not a great teacher. And you're pretty bad at Earthbending, so things really aren't working out."

Aang bowed his head. "I'm sorry."

Toph frowned, and then leaned over and slapped his chest.

"Ow!"

She nodded. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. You don't think of yourself as strong. I didn't hit you that hard, but you're whining about it. And you're the Avatar with all that power and junk, but you can't make yourself move a few grains of sand. It's ridiculous! I bet there are wise and fancy Earthbending Masters out there who could see what's wrong with you and then say something wise
or poke you in the right direction or something, but I just want to shout and insult you."

Aang gave the remaining apples to Appa. "I don't want to be yelled at or insulted."

"I know!" Toph threw her hands into the air. "That's why we have a problem."

"So you think I should find another Earthbender teacher."

"No." Toph let her arms drop to her sides, and she tilted her head. She wasn't quite looking at him, but he could tell that he had her attention. "Like it or not, I'm what you have, and you can't learn keep learning Firebending without learning Earthbending. You're acting as the Avatar, and you need to know the elements you're supposed to be fighting for."

Aang blinked. "So, what do we do?"

Toph stepped over to him, grabbed his shoulders, and shoved him down into a kneeling position. Aang cried out, because she wasn't gentle about it, but before he could ask what she was doing, she was kneeling in front of him.

She leaned forward so that their foreheads were touching.

Aang blinked. It was weird, being this close to someone.

Toph sniffled. "Everything is connected." He could feel the resonance of her words through her skull. "You said that before."

Aang had to keep from trying to nod. "I did. And it is."

Her lips twitched in a smile. "So even though they're different elements, Earth and Fire must be connected, too. The Fire Nation made the ashlands in the Earth Kingdom, and you said that the ashlands are what are hurt the dragons."

"That's right."

"So I got to thinking about those eggs-" the way she said the word made it feel especially resonant-"and how they're supposed to be put in that First Fire that went out. And how I felt something wrong in the ground beneath that temple."

Aang couldn't quite see the shape of what she was saying, yet. In a lot of ways, he was more blind than she was. "Where are you going with this?"

"I don't think you can save the dragons. That's not why you needed to come here. You need to find a way to help the Sun Warriors survive this. I think you need Earthbending to do that, and I have an idea to use its connections to help you learn it." She leaned back so that their faces were no longer touching. "Just now, you could hear my words, but you could also feel them, right? That's how you need to find your Earthbending. Feel it in a different way."

It sounded wise, but like a lot of what Monk Pasang had used to teach, the practicalities were escaping Aang. "What do you mean?"

Toph explained her idea.

And Aang saw a way to make it work.

Zuko had gone to bed before Aang and Toph came back from their visit to Appa, and even though
he always woke up with the dawn, he somehow found his sleep being brought to an end by a small, smelly, dusty, calloused foot mashing his face.

He grabbed the foot as he opened his eye, and found himself with a handful of King Toph. His little guest room was still dark, the only light coming in through the windows from the moon, but her dull eyes still found a way glint.

Zuko shoved her foot away. "What do you want?"

Aang poked his head out from behind Toph and said, "Good morning! (Almost.) I have an idea, and need everyone's help."

Zuko rubbed his face and reached for his eyepatch. "And this couldn't wait?"

Aang shrugged. "We have a lot to organize, and we can only do it before the dragons die."

That shook off the last of Zuko's sleepiness. He pushed himself to his feet. "What do you have in mind?"

So Aang explained what he and the little Earth King had come up with during the night. Zuko was skeptical, admittedly, but not so much that he didn't think it worth a try. So as the sun rose, they went off to find Chief Alba and once again run through Aang's idea.

Alba's face didn't move through the whole explanation, and when they finished, he let out a massive sigh. "I almost can't bring myself to hope. Truly, Avatar, do you think this will work?"

Zuko hadn't seen Aang looking so confident since they started on this side-trip. The boy's eyes were steady as he nodded and said, "I feel it. And that's even more important."

Zuko thought it his duty, as a Firebender and Prince, to add, "I trust the Avatar's feelings. I've seen him do things that- that I can't even begin to understand. If anyone can find a way forward in this, he can." He ignored Aang's grateful smile and Toph's approving nod.

More explanations and planning followed, as with the Chief's backing they met with the various leaders and sages of the Sun Warriors. There were plenty of logistics to work out, and of course everyone wanted a chance to ask the Avatar how sure he was of the whole thing.

Aang never wavered, and Zuko continued to support him.

The whole rest of the day was given over to spreading the word to the rest of the Sun Warriors. Everyone, from the oldest grandfather to the youngest girl, had to be informed. Anyone old enough to Firebend had to be included.

Zuko was surprised when he and Ham Ghao were sent to speak at what he was told to be the youngest class of Firebenders, and he walked into a plaza to find a group of children too young even to be taught to read.

Zuko blinked at them. "They're so little."

Ham Ghao snorted. "What age does your people consider appropriate to begin teaching Firebending?"

Zuko still hadn't come to like the man at all. "Well, we usually wait to confirm that a child is a Firebender at all before we start lessons. It helps to avoid wasting time."
"Wasting time?" Ham Ghao gaped at him. "You mean all your people aren't Firebenders?"

Zuko was going to try to say something truly insulting, but then he realized that the other man wasn't being sarcastic. "I- no, not everyone- the Royal Family is, but- but every Sun Warrior is a Firebender?"

Ham Ghao nodded. "As soon as a child can walk, we start them on the exercises. As soon as they can understand, we start telling them about the Flames."

Zuko didn't know what to say to that. So he turned back to the class, and the master who was leading them in some stretches. "Come on, let's get this done."

Zuko was exhausted by the time the day came to an end. He wouldn't have thought that merely talking to people was as tiring as walking across the Earth Kingdom or fighting an Agni Kai, but he was proven wrong. Part of it was the struggle to convey Aang and Toph's idea when it was so far beyond his own understanding, but another part was the lack of friendliness he found in the Sun Warriors. They listened to him, and never showed him hostility (at least, no more than Ham Ghao did), but he could feel their distaste for him and his home.

And really, he couldn't say they were wrong.

His family's war had killed the last of the dragons.

Zuko woke up at dawn the next morning, this time thankfully not with a filthy foot in his face, and quickly dressed. As much work as the explanations had taken, the actual preparations would require even more.

This time, Toph felt completely justified in using her Earthbending to lift people up the mountain.

When she had proposed the beginnings of this whole plan, she actually hadn't expected to figure so prominently in the build-up. She figured she'd hang around Aang, shout at people for him when he was being too much of a pansy, and maybe offer the occasional wise and sassy (or sassy and wise) word.

But it took a lot of effort to spread an entire civilization across a mountainside, and no one was better at making the Earth pull its weight than Toph.

Camps had to be set up at waypoints along the mountain's slope, and she was needed to create shelters out of the stone. She put stairs where the old or young or weak couldn't climb, although the people in charge tried to keep the less capable down near the base of the mountain. There wasn't time for even the strongest people to fully scale the mountain, so Toph created sleds she could use to speed passengers up the slope.

And then it turned out that she was needed for guard duty, too.

As she was helping to set up one of the waypoint camps where a group would spend the night, a scream echoed over the slope. She realized that it wasn't quite human when a second scream, this one very human and panicked, followed. Several Sun Warriors broke off to investigate, but Toph was way ahead of them, skating across the dust on the mountain's surface.

Some distance away, she found an old Sun Warrior man on his back on the ground, his trembles echoing through the ground as he tried to scoot away from something.

Toph came to a stop beside him. "What is it?" She didn't sense anything else out here-
And then the air was torn by a shriek that couldn't have come from a human throat, the same scream that had started all this trouble, a sound so loud that Toph nearly jumped out of her own skin.

It was the same sound she had heard the other day, when Chief Alba had taken them up to see the dragons.

Ham Ghao had called them parasites, and said they didn't have a physical form. Aang had echoed the term, and said they were feasting on the energy remains of the dragons.

Gross.

Toph wanted to see one.

A twist of her foot gathered up a good amount of dust, and she kicked it towards where the old man was pointing. Some of the motes flew on back to the ground, but most of the dust settled on a shape in the air, and she could at last 'see' what she was dealing with.

The thing underneath the dust had four limbs, like most creatures, but that was where the points of comparison ended. Toph had never encountered anything with this exact shape, but that made sense. Living creatures were the shapes they were because of the bits and pieces they had to hold together, and all those organs and stuff were there for a reason.

But Spirits?

They could be any shape, couldn't they? Because it didn't matter to them. They didn't have bits that could be smashed. Their shape only mattered to the people who saw them. And what did some dragon-licking Spirit-parasites care about that?

Toph snorted. "Don't worry about this thing. It can't hurt you."

But the old man was still scrambling away just as the other Sun Warriors arrived. One said, "What should we do?"

Toph lowered herself into a horse-stance, and a rising palm created a wall that would block the Spirit from the view of anyone who had to rely on eyes. "There you go. Now you don't have to look at it. If you find any more of those ugly, scary things, I'll hide them for you. And I won't tell anyone you were scared of something that's pretty much a big ghost-bug."

Even after everything was set up, all agreed that they would wait for dawn.

Aang had dinner down in the Sun Warrior city with Appa, and spent the night on his buddy's big fluffy tail. Zuko was up at the top of the mountain, so he'd be ready to play his part in the morning, and Toph was somewhere on the slope, looking over the various camps.

As busy as the day had been, sleep still wouldn't come. Aang looked up at the face of mountain and saw a new constellation made from scattered campfires and torches. Tomorrow, they'd be creating something similar, but far more orderly.

Hopefully, it would be more than just pretty.

The night passed until an hour before dawn, and it was like no time had passed at all.

Aang woke Appa with some nose pats, and soon the two were flying up to the dragon caves. In the darkness, he could only just barely make out the movements of the waking Sun Warriors below as he
When he got to the top of the mountain, to the last set of stairs and the stretch of bridge that connected the two dragon caves, he found the people there already in position, just as planned. Sun Warriors stood in a line within arm’s reach of each other, starting from the caves down the stairs to the plaza and onward to the slope of the mountain.

Zuko and Ham Ghao were waiting for Aang right in the center of the bridge. He jumped down to them and let Appa settle in the courtyard. "Is everything ready?"

Ham Ghao put his fists on his hips. "Does the Avatar question the commitment of the Sun Warriors?"

Aang frowned. "No, I was just asking if you're ready."

Zuko snorted. "I'm set to begin. Let's get to our places." He turned his back and headed towards the cave of the right, the one with the red dragon.

Ham Ghao made a sound halfway between a grunt and a laugh, and then headed into the cave on the left, that of the blue dragon.

Aang, for his part, sat down in a Lotus Position at the very center of the bridge and closed his eyes. Then he reached into the beyond.

Toph paused mid-step, her attention draining away from the line of Sun Warriors in front of her to the mountain beneath them all.

The earth was resonating with activity, of distant movements and excited hearts and reverent whispers. There was also something else- the ground itself seemed to be awake, paying attention to what was going on and readying itself. Only an Earthbender could have detected that, and only the best could have discerned the tone.

Up at the top the mountain, it had begun.

It was possible that Aang was touching the Spirit World. He knew it was possible, and although he had never tried to do it himself before, the nest of the Masters was a sacred place with a special energy. Maybe he was more than merely focused on the aspects of the physical world that existed beyond the physical; maybe he was halfway into another world completely.

He could sense Zuko and Ham Ghao climbing down the dragon tunnels, to where the Masters laid dying. He couldn’t hear their words, but he sensed the sentiment behind what they said, the requests they were making.

He felt the Great Dragons summon what might be the last of their strength, summon a part of their power that had sustained them for so many years. Even though he was far away, he felt the heat of the fires they breathed. It was a strange kind of heat, but then, Aang wasn't anywhere near it, physically. Perhaps the strangeness came from his distant observations through sliver of reality between the Material World and the Physical World.

Or maybe there was something special about this fire.

Zuko and Ham Ghao both reached into the flames, and pulled the hearts into their hands.
And then they both brought the fires out to Aang.

As they approached, Aang reached out further for the connections around him rendered in mysterious Línghún energy, for the Sun Warriors lined up all the way down the mountain. He could feel them linked to each other, linked to the dragons. He could feel how the dragons themselves were linked to the flames that Zuko and Ham Ghao carried.

Time to complete the circle.

Zuko and Ham Ghao stopped on either side of Aang, held out their flames, and bowed.

Aang stood up and opened his eyes-

-and gasped.

The fires were a rainbow of colors, colors even that Aang hadn't known existed. Gazing into those flames, looking at those colors, was like trying to see the whole world through a pinhole. The beauty revealed was breathtaking, but also only a small hint of what truly was.

Yes, Aang was honored to help preserve this.

He reached a hand into each flame, remembering Zuko's lessons from the preparation for the Agni Budokai. He became one with the flickering of the fires, and so they did not burn him.

But he wasn't here to Firebend.

Instead, he reached beyond, to the Línghún of the fires themselves.

And then he closed his eyes again, took that Línghún energy in imaginary mental grips echoed by the movements of his hands, and reached out to a Sun Warrior- a mere child- waiting at the top of the stairs. Ham Ghao and Zuko helped carry the flames along, and moved closer as Aang brought his own hands together towards that waiting child.

The two flames became one, and the Sun Warrior child reached out and took that single rainbow flame into hand.

And Aang stretched the connection between the dragons and the flames to the child, creating a new link.

But he did not tie it off, did not complete the circle. He left it ragged, left it unfinished, left it dangling in the ether.

And so when the child passed it on the next Sun Warrior in line, the connection spread.

And did so again when the flame was passed to the next person.

And the next person.

And the next person.

The last dragon fire began a journey down the mountain through the hands of every single living Sun Warrior capable of Firebending.

Aang smiled as the sun rose behind him. He'd have to pick up Toph on his way back down the mountain, but there was no rush. The journey of the flame would not be quick.
The important journeys, Aang thought, rarely were.

Toph was ready and waiting when Aang and Appa came for her. She could feel the sun's warmth on her skin by then, and sensed the Sun Warriors nearby passing on the dragon flame. She could feel the care with which they moved, but also the hammering of their hearts as they touched this sacred version of their element.

It made her wonder about the 'primordial mud' some in the Earth Kingdom swore by, the mud from which the all life had emerged to step onto stone.

It was probably pretty nice mud, if it was still out there.

Toph let Aang help her into Appa's saddle. "So, all good? They're not still going to be passing fireballs to each other when the sun goes down, are they?"

"It's going well." Aang's answer drifted on the wind as Appa started flying and he hopped over to his place on the bison's head. "I think they might get the fire down to the temple by around noon, actually."

When the sun was directly overhead. Toph snorted. "Gotta love it when the symbolism works out all nice-like."

Aang didn't respond. He was probably too into this whole thing to be playful about it.

Toph's only perception of their flight was the shifting of Appa through the air and a change in the feel of her own weight, but she pretended that she couldn't vividly imagine tumbling out of the saddle and finding herself touching nothing but rushing air. Thankfully, the flight was smooth, and soon Appa was touching down on the ground again. She let Aang help her down, and as soon as her bare feet met the smooth stone, her Earth-sense once again mapped out the Sun Warrior city around her.

Just as planned, they were at the first ziggurat temple they had visited the other day, the one with the empty hearth.

Toph waited while Aang retrieved his Monk's Spade from its place in Appa's saddle, and then they took the front stairs straight to the ziggurat's top, careful not to disturb the last Sun Warriors lined up along the climb, healers and sages, to the open room where the First Fire had once blazed. Chief Alba was waiting for them, and nodded at their arrival. "Avatar, Earth King. Is the flame being passed?"

Toph could feel Aang's excited vibrations. "It is! And it's beautiful! Wait until you see it!"

Toph grabbed Aang by his shirt, and he dropped his Monk's Spade. "All right, enough about pretty fires. You, Avatar Aang, have some Earthbending to do. Let's go!" She dragged him straight into the empty hearth, so that they stood on either side of the hole that extended deep into the ground. "All right. So, first we need to just feel it. You're not going to be moving anything if you don't know what you're moving. And if my idea is right-"

"There will be air down there," Aang finished for her. "Air that feeds fires."

They both sat down with the hole between them, and Toph leaned forward so that their foreheads were once again touching. "Straight down. Can you feel it?" She felt him put his hands down over the hole. "There's air down there, of a kind. There's supposed to be fire up here. And there's Earth all in between. Feel the path that goes down." She slapped her own hands down on the stone beneath
them. "The Earth doesn't move unless you make it, but it lets vibrations pass through it. Follow them. Follow my voice through your thick skull and down into the ground. Follow your heartbeat."

"Fire," Aang said. "It's like a heartbeat, too."

"Follow the vibrations your body makes when you breathe."

"Breathing is the movement of air, in and out of ourselves."

"Find what you know about those sissy elements and feel the Earth, Avatar."

"I do," Aang said. "I can feel it! This hole goes down as far as the Sanctuary was tall in the Southern Air Temple! I remember Earthbending there, when I was in the Avatar State."

Toph smiled, but kept her forehead pressed against Aang's. "Can you feel the wrongness?"

Aang was quiet for a long moment. "It's a blockage. A fire-feeding wind wants to flow through the earth, but the passage shifted and collapsed and now it's blocked."

"And that's," Toph barked, "what you're going to Earthbend first."

"Um-"

"And if you don't, this whole thing is for nothing and all the dragons and Sun Warriors will die horrible choking deaths!"

"Ummmmmm-"

That would have been enough to motivate Toph, but Aang was a softy, and she remembered how he was on their first night on this island. Zuko had talked him through Firebending easily enough, but the Avatar's flame had gone out as soon as Zuko suggested that he was a bad Earthbender. Aang needed to feel good about himself, or else he didn't have the strength.

Good thing Toph had strength to spare.

"You can do this. You're the Avatar. You've got, like, a billion past lives who are going to help you, even if you can't feel it. You've fought the Fire Nation and beaten up giant city-ash monsters and manipulated a bunch of Fire Governors into helping you overthrow their leader! You earned the respect of the Sun Warriors and led them to a new beginning, right here! They all love you. Right, Chief?"

She sensed Alba's nod. "You are saving us, Avatar Aang. We believe in you. And the fire approaches."

Toph slapped her hands down on Aang's shoulders. "This is your moment, kid! Show me your power! Let that underground wind flow again to touch the fire!"

Toph focused her Earth-sense on that blockage below. She didn't put forth her full Earthbending, because this wasn't about her. She left that stone in a passive state, waiting for Aang, and as she waited, she felt it start to tremble.

Come on.

Come on.

Aang groaned.
Toph tightened her grip on his shoulders.

The earth started to roll beneath them.

"You're doing it," Toph whispered. "You're already doing it."

There was a snapping below, and the little tunnel began to vibrate with the force of the wind now flowing through it.

"I think I did it," Aang gasped.

"You did! You're an Earthbender, Avatar Aang!" She pulled Aang up to his feet and out of the hearth. "Now make room because when that air hits the fire it's probably going to really pop."

Aang still couldn’t quite believe that he was an Earthbender when Chief Alba held the last dragon fire, that amazing rainbow ball of fire. Aang took it once again and it was just as amazing as it had up at the top of the mountain, but now, as let himself slip back into an awareness of the world beyond the physical, it might have felt a little heavier.

That made sense. This fire had passed through the hands of the whole Sun Warrior civilization, and they had all added their own Qi to it, had all formed a connection out Línghún energy. This fire was now the sum total of the Sun Warriors, something from the dragons entrusted to their care and made permanent in the light of the hottest sunlight.

Aang released it and the underground wind- the natural gas that had been trapped beneath this ziggurat and closed off somehow when the Fire Nation burned the world- created a conflagration that filled the hearth of the First Flame.

The First Flame was gone and could not be restored, but now the Sun Warriors had another flame to guide them through the night of this age. Aang would let them name it, let them find the most important meaning in it.

He turned to Chief Alba. "You can bring the eggs, now. Let's see if this worked."

The Fire-Healers who had lined the steps of the temple came up together, one of them carrying the golden egg that Toph had found. Aang retrieved his Monk's Spade and held out the shovel-end out to receive the egg. He carried the precious cargo to the flame, and held the staff out to place the egg right in the center of the massive rainbow blaze.

Then everyone watched. And waited.

It was Toph who noticed it first, of course. "The gold is melting! It's getting runny and melting off!"

Aang was soon able to see it. The gold's reflectiveness made it look like liquid rainbow in the center of the multi-colored fire, running down to fill gaps in the floor of the hearth and bringing the carvings there- dragons, of course- to a kind of life.

Once the gold had finished running, Aang put his Monk's Spade back into the fire and pulled out the egg.

The lead Fire-Healers stepped forward, summoning his own flames over his hands, and moved them over the egg, never quite touching it, in a way that reminded Aang of Katara's Waterhealing.

The Healer looked around at everyone and smiled. "The life within is thriving. It is not quite ready to
hatch, and we will have to keep it nested and protected until that day, but the egg is okay!"

Aang let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. As the Healer took the egg from the Monk Spade's shovel, Aang looked to the hearth, to the rainbow fire that would hopefully burn there for as long as there were dragons and Sun Warriors, and maybe even beyond. It was a new beginning, in a way, but also a continuance. It wasn't a perfect solution, and certainly wasn't a proper replacement for what had been lost, but it was something that wouldn't allow more to be lost, and that was important. As long as the Sun Warriors had something, they could build new things and grow.

A hand like solid rock slapped Aang's back. "Good job, Master Monk." Toph's grin seemed to lack its usual feral edge. "You figured out Earthbending and a way to help the Sun Warriors. I guess you're a pretty good Avatar after all."

Aang gave her push. "Thanks to you. I guess you're not as bad a teacher as Zuko says."

Her grin became toothy. "I'm going to tell everyone that I have the Avatar's official endorsement." Then she punched his shoulder hard enough to nearly knock him over.

As Aang recovered his balance, he noticed Chief Alba standing over by the side of the platform, looking out from the ziggurat towards the mountain. "Chief Alba?"

He pointed. "There is a signal."

Aang squinted, and through the glare of the noon sun, he saw a pattern of smoke clouds rising up from the peaks, from what must have been the courtyard between the two dragon caves. "What is it?"

"The Masters have breathed their last. It is truly a new era for the world."

The next few days were such a mix of mourning and joy that Zuko was never quite sure how to react. He found himself adopting a strategy that Azula probably would have recognized- show nothing to anyone until prompted, and then give them what they wanted.

It felt less dishonest than trying to sort out his true feelings.

The mourning was for the Great Dragons, of course, and the joy came from what they had left behind. The Sun Warriors were calling the new everlasting flame 'The Legacy of the Dragons,' and the egg that had been freed from its golden shell was at the center of everyone's attention. Chief Alba had decided that it would be cared for by different people, different families, based on petition; those who asked would be allowed to cradle and warm it for a day and night before passing it on to the next caretaker.

"It's hard to believe that this is part of the Fire Nation, too," Zuko wound up telling Aang at one of the banquets the Sun Warriors were holding. "I can't imagine the noble families, or even the various clans, sharing prestige like that."

"I hope they can learn," had been the Avatar's reply.

King Toph added, "I'd make a comment about that being easier than Aang learning how to Earthbend, but, honestly, that's too mean even for me."

Zuko resolved to take the lesson to heart, though. He wasn't sure how he would be able to use it, if at all, but if he had the chance, he wouldn't let the roots of Fire Nation culture continue to be forgotten.
But all lessons had to end, and eventually it was time for Aang to return to rest of the Fire Nation, to
the allies and enemies waiting for them. They left at dawn, of course.

They had Appa loaded up on the shore of the island, and a contingent of Sun Warriors came to see
them off. Chief Alba stepped forward and bowed to Aang. "Avatar, we thank you for all you have
done. I ask one more thing of you- keep our existence a secret from the rest of the world. What we
preserve here can only survive in secret.

"Sure, no problem." Aang bowed back to the chief. "Thank you for sharing your ways and
knowledge with us. I only wish I could have done more to help you."

Alba looked to Zuko next, and didn't bow. "Prince Zuko, for your part in the Avatar's works, you
have our thanks as well. I charge you with honoring what you have seen here by doing right by your
people and element."

Zuko, at least, offered his own bow. "I promise I will follow the path of my esteemed Uncle."

Alba grunted. "Feel free to do better, if you're up to it." While Zuko puzzled over that, Alba turned
to Toph. "Earth King, it was an honor to meet you. Keep these two in line, please."

Toph shrugged. "I'll do what I can, but things get weird sometimes."

Alba chuckled, and then made a hand motion. Ham Ghao approached carrying a golden box. He
gave Zuko one last sneer before offering the box to his chief.

Alba opened it, and held up the glittering necklace- blue and red flakes that captured the dawn light,
linked by gold hoops- that had been resting within. "Avatar, please accept this gift. It is a prayer
necklace, made from dragon scales. It will no doubt impress many in the Fire Nation, but I hope it
will also guide your further explorations of the element of flame."

Zuko's jaw dropped. Dragon scales?! A treasure like that could buy a whole Inner Island! *At least!*

Aang took with all due reverence. "I lost my own prayer necklaces that I got when I became an
Airbending Master. Thank you for this." He bowed again.

"Farewell, Avatar. We look forward to your continuing work in the world."

Soon after that, Appa had them airborne once again, flying over the ocean to rendezvous with Suki,
Mai, Sokka, Zhao, and the rest of the entourage on Ember Island.

It was Toph, of course, who spoke first. "Well, thanks for not embarrassing me, guys. I know it was
hard, but you managed not to look like the losers you usually are." She lounged in the back of
Appa's saddle, leaning against the boxes of supplies and opening what seemed to be a sack of dried
fruit.

On the other side of the saddle, Zuko held back a groan. "We witnessed the end of an era for a
whole civilization and the start of a new one. I've seen you commiserate with Aang and the Sun
Warriors! Do you still have to throw out this inane sarcasm?"

Toph put on a smug expression that wasn't quite aimed at him. "It's all part of being Royalty, Prince
Pouty. But I am glad I was able to help your people save something that they almost lost. I'll beat up
anyone who tries to hurt my nation, but no one deserves that kind of thing."

Zuko had only two words he could offer for that: “Thank you.”
They flew on, back to danger and hope.

TO BE CONTINUED
Chapter Summary

Mai deals with the fallout of everyone else's stupidity.

Even as High Sage of the Grand Capital Temple, it wasn't every day that Xinghao hosted a member of the Royal Family. Perhaps it presaged great fortune for him or his Temple.

More likely, it was going to paint a target on his back.

No appointment had been made. Xinghao had been meditating in his chambers when his secretary knocked on the door and announced, "There are two men here to see you, High Sage. They have gold."

Normally, the High Sage was officially too busy to meet with visitors, even those who lived here in the Caldera. However, it was understood that a proper 'donation' called for an audience in which Xinghao would express the thanks of the Temple. So he got up out of his lotus position, wondered what was going to be served for lunch in an hour, and went to meet with these generous visitors.

When he stepped out into his office, he recognized Prince Ozai himself standing there in a red and gold hooded robe.

Then he recognized Piandao Hundredslayer, standing next to the prince in a much plainer black robe.

Xinghao was halfway back through the door to his meditation chamber when Ozai said, "Piandao, go stand outside in the hall while I speak with the High Sage. Be polite, but kill anyone who attempts to enter this office."

Piandao was not here to kill Xinghao.

Piandao was not here to kill Xinghao.

Okay. Right.

Xinghao nodded to his secretary. "Please go stand outside with Master Piandao. Uh, do your best to keep anyone from causing our guests any- er, trouble." Because the last thing the Fire Sages needed at this point was someone being stabbed to death in the halls of the Grand Temple.

That was more something they did while Sozin still ruled.

Ozai kneeled down on one of the mats that had been set out, and Xinghao settled on another to face the prince. "How might I be of service, your highness?"

"It was truly a shame, that incident on Zennatsu Island. To think, a Weapon-class citizen interfering with an Agni Budokai!" Ozai's face was without expression. "I admire your integrity, returning my father's gold and lands to him in protest. I know the Fire Sages could have used such resources,
especially in these times."

Ah. So this would be a matter of treason. High Sage Xinghao tried to smile. "Your sympathy is appreciated, your highness. Of course, I do not directly blame the Fire Lord for Weapon Heiyaoshi's terrible actions, but there are pressures that the Temple faces, and a statement had to be made." And now this would be the part where Ozai would press on and try to convince Xinghao that direct treason against the Fire Lord would be in the Temple's best interests-

"Well, I admire you astute reading of the situation. So few would be able to navigate such a difficult position." Ozai shifted, reaching into one of his sleeves. "And so I brought a gift, in addition to my donation to the temple." He pulled his hand out and held something up.

The office was lit by fine gas lanterns, but the light they shed was dim and red, so it took Xinghao a moment to realize what he was looking at. It was a headpiece, a small crown meant to serve as the base of a topknot, with stylized golden flames on each side that rose up like wings. It seemed familiar, as though he had seen it before-

_In the few remaining images of Avatar Roku!

"That-" Xinghao's voice wouldn't quite work.

Prince Ozai nodded. "It was among the belongings of- of Princess Ursa when she- disappeared. It was originally a relic of the Royal Family, passed down through the Crown Princes until Sozin gave it to Avatar Roku. It is believed by all to have been lost when Roku died."

Xinghao cleared his throat. "Obviously, that is not the case."

"No. It is not." Ozai placed the crown down on the floor between them. "I give it to you, now. A secret gift."

Xinghao realized what was truly being said. This was a lost relic of the Royal Family, something of great importance and history, a discovery beyond price or reward. If no one knew how it came to be here in the Grand Temple, it would be easy enough to claim that it had been discovered in some dusty corner or archive, or was spotted by a traveling Sage in the possession of an oblivious peasant. There would be great prestige in restoring such a thing to the Royal Family. Even the Fire Lord would have to express profound thanks. No reward would be enough; the Fire Lord would have to owe the Sages a favor. (All unspoken, of course. Xinghao knew how the game was played.) To have the Fire Lord in the Temple's debt-

Xinghao's hands shook as he reached out to take the crown. "I thank you for this, from the depths of my Inner Fire. Truly, Prince Ozai, this is the greatest generosity I have ever witnessed." The prongs of the crown reflected dully in the light of the gas lanterns. Beyond it, Ozai was staring intently, and Xinghao remembered himself. There was no such thing as generosity. "Surely, there must be some way to express my appreciation."

"Iroh is active again," Ozai said without hesitation. "The way he is using my son is unacceptable. The Fire Lord is exploiting the situation, putting my whole family in danger. I would consider it a great favor if you could assure me, High Sage Xinghao, that no Temple will interfere as the Royal Family- as we bring our house to order."

So Ozai wanted to make sure that the Sages wouldn't side with Azulon or Iroh. Well, after their old political war, no Sage of any real power would want to support Iroh, so that was no great request. The Fire Lord had been a generous supporter of the Temple, so separating from him was something more worthy of the gift of Crown, even after the mess with the failed Weapon.
But the best kind of gift was one that benefitted the giver as much as the receiver.

Xinghao gave a smile, this one easy and genuine. "Your highness, I can give you that assurance, if it is what you want. But it troubles me, greatly, how-- well, how sloppy it was for the Fire Lord to bungle the matter with Prince Zuko on Zenmatsu."

"Troubles you?"

"He let the Avatar win favor here in the Fire Nation, and left his own interference in the matter visible to anyone with eyes. And then there is the unresolved trouble in the Colonial Continent, which demands ever more platinum without any sign of progress. Too many matters under the Fire Lord’s control are going poorly."

Ozai stroked his long chin-beard. "Some would say you are dissatisfied with the Fire Lord. But he has been free with his generosity to the Temples."

Xinghao shrugged. "Azulon, while a friend to us, is clearly getting old, and even his advisors cannot keep things running smoothly in these times. They are obviously war-time advisors, not suited to fogger times. Iroh is probably a traitor, and the Sages have never had much respect for him."

"But you, Prince Ozai- you are clearly intelligent and subtle. Your generosity speaks to your character. You have worked to make up for your past mistakes. If- the Fire Lord is old, and if something *natural* were to prevent him from ruling- or, flames forbid, bring him to his final rest- then I think *you* would be a much better man to have on the Flaming Throne."

Ozai's eyes went wide, and his hand fell from his beard.

Really, was the offer that surprising? Surely, the prince must have considered the possibility. He had displayed quit the ambitious streak, before Zuko's exile.

But Ozai quickly regained his composure, and bowed his head. "You honor me with your words. I see the wisdom in them, and I- I will consider them. I have not yet finalized my plans. But I am grateful for your friendship."

Xinghao bowed as well.

Friendship was another important part of being High Sage. Choosing who to offer it to was tricky business, but could be very profitable.

And even the Grand Temple had to keep track of profits.

Mai sighed. "Ember. Island. *Ugh*. Why couldn't the others be here to suffer through this, too?"

She was slouching with her elbows on the rail of the Earth King Toph’s steamer, watching as they approached the docks in the light of the setting sun. Zhao's navy cruiser was already moored, and she could see the Commander directing his soldiers around the harbor like a little boy playing with toys.

Suki came over and reclined against the rail right next to Mai. "What's so bad about Ember Island? It looks nice enough. No big cities, lots of nice houses-"

"And the most humidity of any island in the entire Fire Nation. It’s impossible not to sweat buckets here.” Mai straightened out of her slouch and stretched her neck.

"What's so bad about sweating?" Sokka leaned forward over the railing to look at their destination,
with Momo on his head copying the motion, going so far that Mai half-expected him to tip right over. "And why would having the Benders here make it better?"

"To suffer with me." Plus, Aang might be able to distract her from her suffering.

"Yeah, but I think Toph likes to sweat. It turns the dust she's always covered in to something kind like clay or mud. And Zuko is too cranky to sweat. I don’t even think he-"

"Never mind, then. I hope the three of them off of Appa and drown somewhere." Not that Mai really hoped that. But why did Toph get to just blow off this whole stupid political tour and go with Aang and Zuko, while Mai was stuck here playing Heiress with Sokka and Suki? Never mind having Zhao as a babysitter. "I wish we could have gone straight to the Capital."

Sokka shuddered, sending Momo to find a more stable perch around his neck. "I'd just as soon wait until we have some Avatar Power before we knock on the Fire Lord's door. Even Zhao seemed relieved that he was going to have his meeting with the military people here."

Mai decided not to admit that it was a good point. She was in no hurry to being within spitting distance of Azula. Or Piandao. Or whatever other freak-jobs Ozai was collecting. But neither Sokka nor Suki needed to know that.

By the time the ship was docked and Mai could disembark with the others, Zhao had procured a carriage for them. His face twisted as he laid eyes on her, as though he was in the process of trying to swallow a whole badger-frog. "Lady Mai. I see you survived the voyage from Zenmatsu. This carriage will take you to where you'll be staying. My soldiers and I will follow in a cart."

"And where might we be going? Not a lot of fortresses on Ember Island."

"No, you'll be staying as guests in one of the residences. Your hosts have no love for Azulon or Ozai, and they are capable of guarding you. I will be staying with a contingent of soldiers in a boat house on the grounds."

Mai was going to ask if it was anyone she knew, but Sokka cut her off with a groan. "Another guest arrangement? The last one didn't become enough of a disaster for you? Seriously, why can't Iroh just buy a house here of our very own and reinforce the walls with steel?"

"I understand your concern," Zhao bit out, "but this situation will be much more secure than what we had to deal with on Zenmatsu. There will be no servants on hand, here, and no other guests. You'll have to manage your own wardrobes, but I'm sure your safety is worth the hardship." He glanced at Mai, and some of his usual sneer lit up his face.

Meh. As if she hadn't spent much of the last year living on the back of a sky bison. "Why are we still here talking about this? Let's get going." She climbed into the carriage, and Sokka and Suki followed her, with Momo curling up on the cushion to nap.

It was a longer ride to their destination than she expected, and it proved to be as remote as civilization got on Ember Island. The carriage followed a winding path through grassy, sharply rising hills. Beneath the twilight sky, she glimpsed vacation homes in the distance, so far away that it was easy to mistake them for one of the many rock outcrops that stabbed up through the grass. In this area, they weren’t the small, clustered types that even your average noble family could afford on Ember Island. These were the isolated, sprawling places, the kind that had been in families for generations and could be sold for enough to buy a small island. But a place on Ember Island carried more prestige than a spot of sand in the middle of the ocean.
The carriage approached the coast, a private stretch of dark sand beach with a pier stretching out into the surf.

Sokka pointed out the carriage's window. There was a two-story structure at the closest end of the pier. "That must be where Zhao is staying."

"That's," Suki said, "a boat house? You could fit a Kyoshi Island neighborhood in that thing."

Heh, it wasn't even much of an exaggeration. Mai remembered being distinctly unimpressed with the construction on Kyoshi Island. "Welcome to Ember Island, playground of the Fire Nation's elite. (Although I have no idea why they'd want to sweat so much.) No reason to build a boat house just for your boats when you can add guest quarters, storage for all kinds of toys, and maybe a miniature spa so that you don't have to go all the way back to the main house to wash up and change your clothes."

Suki turned to her. "You don't approve? I thought you were all about decadent luxury and putting your feet up on the backs of peasants and stuff?"

Mai waved the teasing away. "If I had to learn use bushes for a bathroom, then I don't see why my old neighbors should get a break. Besides, I never understood the appeal of frolicking in wild water. Anyone who wants to get that close to nature should just have to deal with the whole package."

Suki leaned her head out the window. "I don't see the main house, though. Wouldn't Zhao want to stay close?"

Mai wondered about that. She didn't see anything else on this stretch of beach. Just a rise where the grass gave way to gray sand and the beach, crowned by series of rock outcrops that culminated in a massive blade-shaped peak.

But as the carriage rolled closer to the stone, she realized what she was actually seeing. The path curved around the stone, and the carriage turned to reveal the mansion nestled behind the natural fortification of the giant outcrop.

And it was an impressive mansion, indeed. Mai had never seen such a large home on Ember Island. The multi-story structure extended into two wings, and judging from the way it was all set off from the large outcrop, Mai guessed that the wings bordered a sizable courtyard in the back. She spotted plenty of walkways and balconies on the walls, but they were empty.

No other servants or guests, Zhao had said.

The carriage stopped at the base of the hill. So they would have to walk up the zig-zagging path up to front staircase. Great, that would be enough to work up a sweat in this humidity.

Zhao's cart came to a stop behind the carriage as Mai was disembarking, and two of his soldiers emerged with him. "I'll set my troops up in the boat house. You go on up. There's no need for me to make introductions."

That brought Mai up short as Suki and Sokka got out of the cart, the latter carrying Momo. "So I do already know them?" She didn't expect that to be a good thing; most of the people who knew her wanted her dead.

Zhao just smirked at her and led his troops across the beach towards the boat house.

Well, great.
"So," Sokka said. "Are we delaying because we're coming up with a plan of attack? Because I left some of my most fatal stuff in my luggage. I wasn't expecting to storm a manor when I was packing this morning."

Suki reached out to put a hand on Mai's shoulder. "Don't worry. Zhao's just winding you up. He wouldn't dare cross Iroh by putting you in danger."

Mai hated having Suki point it out to her. "And what if Zhao is an idiot who doesn't realize he's sending me up to room with an old school rival? Ju Lai grew up playing with knives, too, from what I hear-"

Suki moved behind Mai and began pushing her up the path. "Come on. Let's get this over with."

Mai sighed and started walking under her own power, following the path back and forth across the rise until they reached the stone staircase under the front door. Sure enough, by the time she climbed the last step, a sheen of sweat had accumulated on her brow.

The front doors opened on her first knock, swinging slowly to reveal a receiving hall lit by candles. There were wood paneling and beach murals and a nice carpet and no visible people.

Sokka set Momo down on the floor. "So, if no one's home, who let us in?"

Then two women stepped out from behind the doors, startling Momo (and Sokka), dressed identically except for the colors of their robes. Their faces were hidden in the shadows of the twilight, although the bright blue and yellow of their clothing almost glowed in the candle light. They each wore a pair of tonfa clubs on their belts.

The women walked past Mai and the others, approaching the center of the hall, even as another four women streamed out of a side door in a perfect line with simultaneous steps. These four, as well, wore the exact same robes as the other two aside from the colors. Green, purple, orange, and something like an aquamarine were joined by the blue and yellow to form a line of colors. All of them had tonfa at their sides.

The six turned to face Mai as one, revealing themselves in the candlelight, but she had already figured out who they were.

"Ty Lin," she said to the one all the way on the left, "Ty Lat, Ty Lao, Ty Lui, Ty Lum. Ty Woo." She bowed her head. "Thank you for taking my friends and I into your- uh, vacation place?"

Ty Woo, all the way on the right in the yellow robes, rolled her eyes. "Haven't been keeping up with the news while you've been traipsing around with the Avatar, huh? Mommy sold our half of our factories in the colonies to buy this place, and then sent us all to 'get away from the stress of the Capital' or some junk. We live here now. Really, the old wolf-bat couldn't look at our faces after we heard about Ty Lee."

Mai suppressed a wince, understanding their mother without harboring one bit of approval. Although the hair was different- these women all shared a short, puffy style that most would have considered cute- their faces were completely identical to that of their seventh, missing sister.

Ty Lee.

Ty Lee, who everyone in the Fire Nation thought to be a few fragments of charred bone in an Earth Kingdom ashland somewhere.
"As this is our house," Ty Lin said, "we welcome you for as long as you need to stay, and guarantee your protection for as long as you're here. Ty Lee loved you, Mai, and we will honor that love." Ty Lin reached to her belt, and took the pair of tonfa fighting sticks that hung there. Gripping the handles, she swung the tonfa so that the main shaft extended out past her fists, and she raised them above her head.

The five other sisters did the same thing.

Then, as one, they smacked their tonfa together twice, producing a sound that echoed through the hall like the rumble of thunder and sent Momo curling up around Suki's neck, and then they all bowed.

Mai bowed back. "We accept your hospitality. With me are Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe and Suki of Kyoshi Island."

After a moment, they all rose together, and the Ty-sisters returned their tonfa to their belts.

"Welcome," said Ty Lum, "Ty Lui will show you your rooms. Ty Lat and Ty Lao can get your luggage. Ty Lin and Ty Woo can finish preparing dinner while you refresh yourselves."

The colored line up of sisters broke up, and Mai went straight to follow the one in the light blue robe.

As they ascended a set of stairs to the second floor, Sokka leaned near her and whispered, "They're septuplets, right? How did you know which one she was talking about?"

Mai glared at him. He better not embarrass her. "She said Ty Lui would show us. I followed Ty Lui."

Suki leaned in from the other side. "Ty Lui always wears blue?"

Really? Even Suki? "No, they like to mix up their colors. They just never wear the same colors at the same time."

Sokka waved his hands. "So, telling them apart..."

Seriously? "I don't know, I just can. I guess it comes from knowing them for over a decade."

"And we're safe here?"

"If they say we are, then we are. And don't mess with them when they have their tonfa out. Ty Lee is pacifist of the group."

That quieted them both.

Finally, Ty Lui brought the procession to a stop in a hallway that had to be at the rear of the mansion, and turned to smile at them. "We've had to rearrange things a bit to fit everyone. My sisters and I are split between these two rooms. Feel free to come in and borrow anything you need, unless it belongs to Ty Woo, but even then she'll only say awful things about you."

So, business as usual, then. "Thanks."

"Mai, you and the other girls will have to share this room here. You should probably save the biggest bed for the Earth King, since she's royalty. Um, Sokka, is it?" Ty Lui's smile grew wider, and she leaned forward. "You get to have this room all to yourself until the Avatar and Prince Zuko get here."
Lucky you."

Mai glanced at Sokka out of the corner of his eye, and saw him smiling back with wide eyes. Typical.

Ty Lui's eyes lingered on Sokka for a moment, and then she turned back to Mai. "A message came for you about an hour ago." She pulled a scroll out from her belt, right near her tonfa, and held it out. There was a wax seal on it.

When Mai broke the seal and read the scroll, her doubts about being safe here- even protected by the infamous tonfa of the Ty-sisters- had returned. "I'm being summoned to a meeting in town this week."

Sokka and Suki exchanged glances. Sokka said, "Summoned by who? And can you bring backup?"

Mai snorted. "Backup won't make a difference. I'm being called to a meeting of all the surviving Weapons of the Fire Nation. Seems that I have to answer for Heiyaoshi's death.

"And I didn't even have the pleasure of stabbing her myself."

Azula had been standing in front of the palace for an hour when Father and Piandao returned from their meeting at the Temple.

She could tell Father was distracted by something as he stepped off of the palanquin, so she waited patiently until he focused his gaze on her. "Azula? Is there a problem?"

"No, Father. I just wanted to inform you that the 'spices' you requested have arrived." Father had said, weeks ago, that he wanted to know as soon as the special materials were on hand. Azula always did what he commanded.

His gaze sharpened at the news, and he gave a slow nod. "Thank you. We can finally get your brother back home. And our courier?" He began leading her back into the palace, while Piandao trailed after them in the proper fashion of a lackey.

Azula nodded. "The courier is on station and ready to go. I've also completed preparations for my own trip."

"Excellent. I have to thank you for all the work you've put into this. Your work, and your refinements to the plan, has been invaluable." Servants opened the tall double doors for them, and they passed into the Hall of Pillars, where dark columns representing the power of the Royal Family were adorned with golden dragons. It was an impressive sight, a sight Azula had long ago become so used to that she barely even saw it. "My own task went quite well, just now. I am more confident than ever of our path."

So the Sages agreed to stay neutral, then. That was good. It would make their plans easier, and Azula wouldn't have to slaughter every single Fire Sage in the Capital. That would be a tiresome task, and take far too long.

She was brought out of her thoughts by some movement ahead-

Li and Lo slid out from between two of the pillars. A step behind them, just like the servants he dressed as, came a stocky man with tattooed red writing on the skin of his face and hands- Mutan, Weapon of the Fire Nation.
Azula came to a stop and raised her fists, letting her Inner Fire flare. She was still formulating immediate tactics when there was a whisper of sound, and she glanced to the side to see Piandao standing in front of Father with his hand on his sword.

Mutan held up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

Li (or Lo) took a step forward. "Prince Ozai, it came to our attention that you were at the Temple for a meeting."

Lo (or Li) came to stand beside her sister. "You so rarely leave the palace, we thought your return worth our personal greeting."

Azula scowled. So the twins suspected that Father was trying to subvert their support with the Fire Sages. It was true, and apparently they weren't going to tolerate even a hint of action against them.

Father stepped out from behind Piandao and gave them a bland smile. "That's quite thoughtful of you. Did the Fire Lord have a message for me? It's been so long since I've had an audience with him."

Li and Lo stared at him for a moment, and then the one on the left said, "The Fire Lord has much that draws his attention."

And the other one added, "His mood is not helped by so much domestic tension."

As they spoke, Mutan started walking, almost casually, around the twins. His arms were loose at this side, but his movements were positioning him into direct line-of-sight at Father. Piandao shifted to mirror Mutan's path, putting himself between the other Weapon and Father like a good bodyguard.

Azula kept one eye on the Weapons, but didn't let them draw her complete attention. That could all just be a distraction from Li and Lo's true purpose here.

The first twin continued, "We think it wise if you have no more contact with the sages."

And the other sister concluded, "Or perhaps you will find that you know nothing of the Fire Lord's worst rages."

The two old women turned as one and strode away.

Mutan glanced at them, but remained where he was as he turned to Piandao. "You received the summons?"

Azula was surprised. His voice was softer than she would have expected of someone like him.

Piandao relaxed his stance and took his hand off the handle of his sword. "I did. Perhaps we can share a ferry?"

"That would be agreeable." Then Mutan turned and followed after Li and Lo.

At last, Azula dropped her own fighting stance and let her blood cool. "That was a rather bold confrontation."

Father nodded. "They are not fools. Too much boldness at this level of power can be disastrous, but no action can be even worse. They understand the threat we represent, especially after what they tried to do to Zuko. I think, for all of our safety, we might have to do something about their level of influence, soon. Azula, Piandao, I would like you think on the matter." With a heavy breath, Father
squared his shoulders and resumed the journey back to his rooms.

The little group was still in the Hall of Pillars when Azula completed her task. "I have it."

Father looked over with raised eyebrows. "Have what?"

"A plan for permanently removing Li and Lo." His blank stare made her stomach flutter. Had she misunderstood his command? "You said you wanted us to think on how to defeat them. That's what I did."

Father blinked. "So quickly?"

Azula could not lie to him. "It is a topic I have pondered previously. But your news about the Sages, and the conversation you just had with them, helped me finalize some important details in one of my plans."

Father stared at her.

Azula bowed her head. "I'm sorry. I will continue to think on the matter. I'm sure there's another angle I missed."

Father gave a laugh and reached out to put his right arm around her shoulders. "I very much doubt that. You are brilliant, Azula, and I'm sure your plan is close to perfect. We'll discuss it in my rooms, and see if Piandao or I have any additional suggestions." He paused, and then added, "I'm always proud of you. You have one of the greatest minds in the Fire Nation."

Azula bit down on her tongue to keep from smiling too broadly. "Thank you, Father. I'm sure I inherited it from you."

But he only gave another laugh as they continued on their way.

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Zhao rather liked Ember Island.

He had never visited before, but the last few days here had proven quite agreeable. After being stationed in the South Pole, he enjoyed the warmth and humidity, and it was steeped in the highest level of Fire Nation culture. It could have used a bit more structure and a military presence, but perhaps that could change once he accumulated more power.

Being appointed governor of the island as a reward for loyal service to Iroh, for example.

For now, that service involved temporarily increasing the military presence on the island in a very specific way.

In a rented meeting room in Ember Island's main settlement, Zhao looked around the table at the gathered leadership of the Fire Nation's army and navy. A dozen old men in dark armor seemed incongruous with the white walls and potted ferns, but perhaps that would shake them from their usual habits. "Gentlemen, thank you for coming. I'm sure this business will be more rewarding than the last time we gathered."

"As long as one of us doesn't wind up stabbed by Piandao," General Bujing growled, "it will almost have to be. Wouldn't it, Zhao?"

Well, Zhao was expecting the matter to come up. Might as well get it out of the way. "As you say, sir. I was sent word that Piandao and Mutan won't be leaving the Capital until tomorrow, so we
should be safe enough, here."

Admiral Li snorted as he stroked his long, bushy beard. "And are your people tracking all of the Weapons of the Fire Nation? Lady Caldera Yu Mai is here on Ember Island, and who knows who she's working for these days! Azulon has been fielding Weapons to manipulate Fire Rites. Ozai has been fielding Weapons to outright murder people, and Azulon can't or won't rein him in. This is madness! We no sooner finished the war than we're turning on each other, and we still don't have a handle on the monsters popping up across the Colonial Continent!"

Zhao nodded an acknowledgement of the point. "Things are becoming more chaotic at a time when we cannot afford to be weak. So many thought our work was done when we won the war, but it has proven to be the start of a new bunch of troubles."

General Shinu leaned forward. "So why are we here, Zhao? You offered us a chance for safety and power. I didn't leave the Capital to gripe and visit the beach."

"But you'll visit the beach anyway," General Mak said, "eh?"

Zhao waved the attempt at humor away. "You all know or suspect who I represent. Prince Iroh saved me from Ozai's killers by transferring me to his command, and I have been assisting him in bringing the Avatar to the Fire Nation."

General Bujing smashed a fist down on the table. "And yet you had us believing that Prince Ozai was the one colluding with the Avatar and the rebels! So much for your theories!"

Zhao shrugged. "I still haven't seen evidence that it wasn't the case, at one time. Ozai has definitely been breaking laws. He wouldn't have had Admiral Chan killed, and tried to have the same done to me, if there wasn't something to my claims. But for now, Iroh has convinced the Avatar and the new Earth King that peace with him is worth more than any other alliances they might forge."

Shinu squinted at him. "It's odd, how suddenly Iroh has gotten himself involved. We don't hear anything from him for years, and then he's sponsoring the Avatar's goodwill tour of the Fire Nation? What is he after, Zhao?"

"Well, you all know Prince Iroh's- uh, eccentricities. He needs the Avatar's powers for a special project. One I can't disclose right now." And the reason was that Zhao didn't actually know, but he was hardly going to admit that to this group. Iroh was guaranteeing his safety and further pursuit of power, and that was all he needed to know for now. As much as he might prefer otherwise.

He continued, "And it's become clear, as Iroh has attempted to end the conflict created by Azulon's hasty actions, that there is no true leadership left in the Fire Nation. Azulon grows in age as he shrinks in effectiveness. He strangles the people at the same time he loses friendship with the Fire Sages. Ozai committed crimes and killed his own countrymen, and then Iroh steals his alliances away without transgression or hesitation. I think it's clear that a new age is rapidly approaching the Homeland."

Li shook his head. "You're not saying anything we haven't already considered, Zhao. Things are happening, that much is clear. But you still haven't clarified what you want of us. I see no reason to launch a coup against the palace."

"Oh, no, sir! I would never advocate such treason!" Zhao hoped he sounded sincere enough. "In fact, that's the beauty of my proposal. It involves no risk for you, beyond what already exists. Prince Iroh is on the rise, and will most likely be Fire Lord before the change in seasons. On his behalf, I simply ask you to support him, to continue to do your jobs with your customary diligence despite a
change in leadership. To work towards the stability of the Fire Nation, no matter what happens."

Bujing looked around at everyone before he spoke again. "Are you saying that Iroh is preparing to
return to the Fire Nation?"

Zhao offered his most polite smile. "That is a good question, sir, and unfortunately matters require
Iroh's continued presence at the North Pole. That's the main reason why he wanted me to speak with
you. Should something happen to Azulon, whether his health fails or he abdicates, the crown will
pass to Iroh. Ozai will have to be dealt with. And it would fall to you, and your commands, to steer
the Fire Nation in Iroh's name and consolidate his rule. As soon as he can return to the Homeland, he
will, but until then, he would be counting on your loyalty and capability."

Silence reigned across the table. It was General Mak who finally broke it, saying, "I don't like this."

Zhao motioned around the table. "Hadn't we all agreed that it was our best course of action, the last
time I met with you? Admiral Chan certainly said so."

"And now Chan is a pile of ashes," Li said. "Back then, we thought we were simply removing a
treacherous prince from power. Now, we know that the whole Royal Family is playing games and
keeping secrets. We thought Iroh might be staying away because of some feud, but now he's making
plans with the Avatar. General Mak is right. There can be no good end to this. To any of it. Not for
us."

Shinu nodded. "I think we're all in agreement. I understand why you're doing what you are, Zhao,
but I cannot offer any kind of pledge or support to Prince Iroh until I know more. That doesn't mean
I'm declaring loyalty to Prince Ozai. And, of course, I will always serve the Burning Throne."

Bujing stood up. "Well said, Shinu. Now, there should be one more ferry running to the Capital
today. I think I will try to be on it. Until next time, Commander Zhao. If you live long enough."

The others rose and began filing out of the room. Zhao stood and watched them go, sensing that
even a farewell wouldn't be entirely welcome.

However, he couldn't say he was disappointed with this meeting.

True, no one had thrown in with Iroh, but for now, their reluctance to take a side was good enough.
Zhao would give it a little time, meet with some of lesser-ranking leaders in the Army and Navy, and
let the general situation grow more dire until even Iroh's mysteriousness would look good compared
to the alternatives. The Avatar's return, if he continued to win the civilian government to his side,
would strengthen Iroh's position.

It was a long, messy process, and Zhao couldn't say he enjoyed it, but without more empowering
paths open to him, it was what he had to do.

Besides, he had done his duty, but he wasn't exactly fond of Iroh, himself. The prince was simply the
one who could keep Zhao alive, for now.

But things change.

Life on Ember Island was unchanging boredom leading up to a brief period of terror.

But then, Mai hadn't expected to enjoy herself.

While Zhao went off every day on errands for Iroh, she had spent most of the week waiting for
Aang, Zuko, and Toph to return, and building her strength back up now that the stab wound she
gotten during the Agni Budokai was healed. Ty Lee's sisters had been more than happy to spar with
her, and Mai was grateful for that, as even a team of just three of them was definitely better practice
than Sokka or Suki could be.

In fact, Sokka and Suki had even asked the girls for fighting lessons. Mai knew they wouldn't be as
good as even a single Ty-sister without a lot of practice, but Sokka had managed to go a whole five
minutes without conking himself on the head with a tonfa by the time of the Gathering of the
Weapons. So he was obviously really taking to the style.

The Gathering itself was where the terror came in.

It turned out to be taking place in Lady Caldera Yu Gerel's vacation home, right in the main
settlement near the Theater district. Mai had expected to have to go alone, but when she tried to
sneak out, she found Sokka and Ty Woo waiting for her in the front hall.

Mai had stopped short when she saw them. "There's not going to be a fight. And if there is, you two
aren't going to make any difference. No offense."

Sokka had shrugged. "None taken. But you're part of the team, so even if I just go to confirm your
horrible, painful death, then that's what I have to do. Besides, you know you love my company."

Mai had sighed, and then turned to Ty Woo. "What's your excuse? We've never really been friends."

"Yeah, I know." Ty Woo had scowled at her, of course. "But you're our guest, so one of us should
go to show you around or something, and I drew the short straw."

So the three of them had taken a carriage to the main settlement. Mai's family had vacationed there a
few times, staying as the guests of some of father's coworkers, and she found that the town was fairly
unchanged. It was still one of the more unique settlements on the Fire Nation, with massive ornate
buildings sitting right next to random clusters of palm trees and little beaches. The few roads were
wide, plazas linked open-air dining opportunities, and walkways snaked over the undulating
landscape and through small patches of tame jungle.

Mai hated it. The sun shined everywhere and it was like it had all been built to maximize contact
with nature and other people.

The carriage let them off at the edge of town, the roads in the settlement only permitting foot traffic,
and so she, Sokka, and Ty Woo had to walk to Lady Gerel's house.

"I have to admit," Ty Woo said as they passed into the theater district, "I'm kind of jealous."

"Yeah, I know." Ty Woo had scowled at her, of course. "But you're our guest, so one of us should
go to show you around or something, and I drew the short straw."

So the three of them had taken a carriage to the main settlement. Mai's family had vacationed there a
few times, staying as the guests of some of father's coworkers, and she found that the town was fairly
unchanged. It was still one of the more unique settlements on the Fire Nation, with massive ornate
buildings sitting right next to random clusters of palm trees and little beaches. The few roads were
wide, plazas linked open-air dining opportunities, and walkways snaked over the undulating
landscape and through small patches of tame jungle.

Mai hated it. The sun shined everywhere and it was like it had all been built to maximize contact
with nature and other people.

The carriage let them off at the edge of town, the roads in the settlement only permitting foot traffic,
and so she, Sokka, and Ty Woo had to walk to Lady Gerel's house.

"I have to admit," Ty Woo said as they passed into the theater district, "I'm kind of jealous."

Mai quirked an eyebrow. "Of what?"

"You're going to a meeting of the greatest assassins in the Fire Nation. You got picked by the Fire
Lord himself as the best living warriors. Who wouldn't want that?"

Oh. Mai shrugged. "It's just another job. And you're never off the clock."

"But you've been recognized as the best! My sisters and I have practiced our whole lives to fight, and
nothing has come of it so far. But you and Ty Lee did an Agni Budokai, and you got handed it all!"

Mai just sighed. Some people couldn't be taught.

But Sokka piped up with, "Except it kind of ruined Mai's life. It's like when I was the smartest guy at
the station in the South Pole. (Smart guy here, feel free to take note.) I got picked to do jobs I hated, and no one cared what it did to me because I was effective. Mai and Ty Lee got used and used until they were used up. Much better to not be noticed. Especially by evil jerks."

Ty Woo rolled her eyes. "You're cute, but you're really stupid. Hey, is this it? Are we here?"

Mai nodded. This was it. They were here. She waved for Sokka and Ty Woo to stay in the street, and stepped forward to the open gate in front of Lady Gerel's building. A private guard stood on each side, but neither bothered Mai as she stepped through, where a servant met her to lead her into the house.

When she was brought into the dining room, she found that she was the last to arrive.

Scattered across the room were the five other Weapons of the Fire Nation.

Piandao, kneeling at the table and sipping tea, his sword at his side.

Bangfei, sitting on a cushion and throwing nervous glances at the others.

The Disciple of the Third Eye, standing silently against the wall with arms crossed and eyes closed, the strange tattoo on his forehead smooth and glaring.

Mutan of Lower Hu Sin, ugly with his own excessive facial tattoos, kneeling at the table and reading a book as he rapidly mouthed something he had to be familiar with.

And, of course, Lady Caldera Yu Gerel, their host, standing at the head of the table and nodding at Mai's arrival despite her large blindfold.

Mai herself made six. Heiyaoshi was dead, and Ty Lee was believed dead.

Gerel said, "Now that we are all here, we might as well begin."

Mai took a breath and squared her shoulders. "I didn't kill Heiyaoshi. I was involved in an Agni Budokai when the Earth King—"

"We know," Piandao interrupted. "We don't care about Heiyaoshi's death. The accounts are clear, and the Fire Lord is largely being assigned the blame. It is tragic, but hardly anything over which to get upset, in our line of work."

Mai blinked. She wasn't being called to account? "Then why are we here?"

Gerel kneeled at the table and reached for the tea pot, finding the handle without trouble despite her blindfold. "War is coming, and since we will probably be the ones to have to fight it, I thought it would be good to get on the same page."

Interesting.

Mai approached the others as Gerel poured herself some tea, casting her eyes over them. "So calling me out was a pretext. You didn't want anyone to know that Weapons can actually get thoughts in their heads. I suppose losing our mystique would make the war go harder on us."

Bangfei shifted on his cushion. "I thought we won the war."

Mutan closed his book and put it down, then turned his tattooed visage on the boy. "There is war and there is war. War was the crucible in which the Colonial Continent was purified and brought under the righteous yoke of the Children of Fire. War rages there still, on the unseen plane, as the spirits of
the people transform into what the Flames have always intended for them. The Land of the Sun is eternally at war, a war some call the Way of the Flame, in a beautiful cycle of strength and growth. That war is coming to another climax in its endless span, and that will spark a new war in which we will be the soldiers fighting for the cause of the future."

Bangfei blinked. "Okay. I- I require clarification of some of that."

Piandao set his empty teacup down. "Put simply, tensions have been growing amongst the leadership of the Fire Nation, and that will soon erupt into violence, in one form or another. And we're so much easier to deploy here in the Homeland than armies."

"Piandao is right," Gerel said. "Lady Mai, would you like some tea?"

"No, thanks." She glanced over at the Disciple of the Third Eye, and found his eyes still closed. She wondered if he needed to see to shoot explosions out of his forehead. "And, you know, there's a simple solution to stopping whatever war is coming. Just go on vacation until after Aa- the Avatar settles things."

Piandao quirked an eyebrow at her. "You would leave the Avatar's side?"

"No, I-" Mai suddenly understood what he was talking about. Those jerks. "You're saying Aang is the cause of it all. Tall, silent, and stupid over there tried to kill him once, already. So did Heiyaoshi. Gerel was nearly set up to kill Zuko, and probably had Aang on her list before we announced the Agni Budokai."

Gerel shook her head. "The Avatar was never a target of mine. But your point about Heiyaoshi manipulating me into the Agni Kai with Prince Zuko is exactly what we're talking about. We will be placed so that we have no choice but to strike at each other, more often and with more danger to those around us, until it truly is a war. Lady Mai, you will defend the Avatar to the death, correct?"

Mai folded her hands in her sleeves. "Well, you know, we hang out a lot. And he's kind of trying to fix the world."

Mutan's eyes snapped to her. "Speak not of destinies you don't understand. Even the Avatar must bow to the Way, and for him to stand against the flames will be to fall to them."

Mai fingered a razor disk. "He performed an Agni Budokai. That means your stupid flames stand with him."

Mutan's skin went as red as the text inked all over his face. The ground beneath Mai's boots seemed to vibrate-

"Not in my home," Gerel barked. "Bangfei, if anyone breaks the peace of this meeting, would you be so kind as to disable them?"

Bangfei nodded. "And there must be something we can do to prevent the greater fighting. Some of us." He looked over at the Disciple of the Third Eye, still meditating or something on the far side of the room. "Some of our techniques are more given to collateral damage. Are innocent people of the Homeland really going to die over all of this?"

"Heiyaoshi is already dead," Piandao said. He ran a hand over the handle of his sword. "A soldier can be innocent, too."

Gerel tilted her head towards him. "Does that include the soldiers who came to arrest you for desertion?"
Piandao didn't so much as blink at her. "Some of them, in all likelihood."

And what had happened to those soldiers was right there in the name most people used for Piandao: Hundredslayer.

But that wasn’t why Mai was terrified of Piandao. People called her cold and emotionless, and a lot worse, but she couldn’t hang out with Aang for a few months without nearly vomiting at the thought of betraying him to Zuko.

If Piandao felt anything when he killed, no one alive had a clue about it.

Bangfei stood up. "So, what can we do? Heiyaoshi being dead doesn’t mean we should give up already!"

Piandao also got to his feet, and slowly made his way across the room. "We can do nothing but refuse to fight. Those who do will certainly die."

Bangfei blinked. "Why?"

"Because the rest of us will be sent to kill them."

"But if we all-

"I," Piandao said, coming to a temporary stop, "will not stand down. Therefore, if I am ordered do something about any of you, it will not matter if you refuse to fight. But you would have my gratitude for sparing me time and effort."

Great. The most dangerous one of all was definitely ready to fight a war. Mai went over to take Piandao’s place at the table and poured herself a full cup of tea. "Well, you’ve all pretty much guessed that I’ll protect the Avatar, no matter what. Don't mess with him if the sight of your own blood gives you the willies."

Mutan glared at her. "You would stand against the Fire Lord? The purest expression of the Great Element alive?"

Meh. ‘Great Element.’ As if the guy wasn’t, beneath all his weirdness, an Earthbender.

Still, Mai maintained some survival instincts. "I never said anything about committing treason." Then she gave an innocent blink, or at least tried to copy all the innocent blinks that Ty Lee had given her over the years. Perhaps the obvious insincerity would make more of an impact.

Mutan actually growled at her.

Piandao passed behind him, shifted his sheathed sword. "And we have to consider the Ninth Weapon."

"Nine Weapons have named, starting when the Fire Lord called me to service. Ty Lee and Heiyaoshi have, unfortunately, left us. One is not present here."

Gerel tilted her head. "I have not heard of a ninth being declared. Who is it?"

"His or her identity is unknown to me, as well as any specialties. I only really know about it because of certain clues I've seen in the Palace. I'm sure Mutan has seen some of the same indicators."
Mutan straightened his back and put his hand on his book. "I am servant and bodyguard to the Fire Lord. Any information I happen to see is seen with eyes that do not belong to me, and the only knowledge I seek is that which brings me closer to heat and flame."

Gerel frowned beneath her blindfold. "He speaks the truth."

Mai wanted to busy her hands with a knife, but instead made herself sip her tea. So there was another Weapon, one who she couldn't see coming, one who wasn't even as social as she was. Hopefully, King Toph would be back soon; Toph was good at 'seeing' things coming that no one else could. On the other hand, that would mean Aang would be back, and Mai wasn't sure that he'd be safe next to her, now.

Bangfei groaned. "So there's nothing we can do? War is inevitable? We're going to have more people like Ty Lee burned for nothing? Then why are we even here?"

Gerel stood up. "So that we can all make our choices will full knowledge of their impact. And so that I can pass on a warning- the Fire Sages will be the next major disruption. Expect their interference in your lives."

The Sages, huh? That made sense, given the trouble Heiyaoshi had caused.

Piandao finally stopped his pacing, and Mai looked over to find a little smile on his face. He bowed to Gerel. "Then I suppose that concludes our business. Thank you for the tea and the hospitality, Lady Gerel. But I sincerely hope that we will not meet again for a long, long time."

Then he turned and walked out.

Mai knocked back the last of her tea.

The next to move was the Disciple of the Third Eye. He opened his eyes, and strode out of the room without a word. His metal foot clanked with every step.

Mutan left next, throwing one last tattooed scowl at Mai. She held up a gesture that was ten-percent rude and ninety-percent blasphemous, and his eyes went wide before he hurried from the room.

Maybe she should take her leave before she kicked off a war right here. She gave a bow and goodbye to Gerel, and was surprised when Bangfei followed her out, and turned to say "Do you need something?"

He actually blushed as he walked beside her. "I- I understand that you're staying with Ty Lee's sisters. They have- uh, refused my visitations. Could you pass on my condolences about Ty Lee's death?"

Mai gave that all due consideration. "No."

As they said, all was fair in love and war, and it looked like they would soon have a lot more of the latter.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Chapter Summary

The only people who can betray your trust are the ones you trust.

Trusted Betrayers

High Sage Xinghao of the Grand Capital Temple was not used to going out to meet people. 'People' usually came to meet him. The whole situation was backwards.

Also, the situation was going to destabilize the whole Fire Nation and maybe plunge the world into chaos.

Backwards.

Xinghao sighed as his carriage rolled to a stop. He looked out the window at Lower Harbor City, taking in the scenery. It had been years since he'd last been here, years since he came down from the Caldera to the home and workplace of those not quite good enough to be in the Royal Palace's shadow, but who were also far too good for filthy Upper Harbor City. But now even the residences and shops of Lower Harbor City seemed a bit more run-down, still comfortable and ornate, but covered in faded paint and marred by unsealed cracks.

He supposed it was hardly an uncommon state of affairs in the Fire Nation. Their victory in war was not yet even a few years old, and already the paint was faded.

The door to the carriage was opened, and Xinghao heaved himself down to the street. Two of the Temple Attendants he brought hurried to straighten his robes and hat, their practiced hands needing only a moment to have him looking almost regal. Taking a deep breath, he walked across the street to his destination.

The Central Command building of the Fire Nation's combined military loomed ahead of him.

The gates remained locked as he approached, and the eyes of the soldiers on guard duty followed him.

Well, at least they weren't attacking. "I require an audience with the Command Council on an urgent matter." He didn't bother mentioning that he didn't have an appointment, nor did he identify himself. The robes and hat of the High Sage of the Grand Capital Temple were more important than his name, here.

Hopefully the history books would be more concerned about his name, and it would be a favorable recounting.

The gate was unlocked and one of the guards ushered Xinghao and his entourage into the complex. Soon enough, he was seated in a rather nice office (not as nice as his own, of course) and told that representatives of the Command Council would be with him shortly.

He took the opportunity to have the Attendants re-fluff his cape.
He was the very picture of spiritual authority when three men in dark armor and capes entered the room and bowed one-by-one: scowling High General Bujing, in charge of operations on the Colonial Continent; young General Mak, commander of the Home Guard; and old Admiral Li, the longest-serving man in the Navy, if not the most powerful.

It was good to see that the High Sage of the Grand Capital Temple was still being taken seriously by the military. Xinghao gave a brief bow to them all.

"Your eminence," Bujing said, "you do us great honor with your presence."

Xinghao knew for a fact that Bujing lived a stone's throw from the Grand Temple but hadn't visited in twenty years. "It is my honor to be among those who guide our Homeland along the Way of the Flame. I have come on a matter of Fire Nation security, so I will get straight to the point. I believe there are traitors operating in the Palace, and the Fire Lord's life and autonomy are in danger."

Bujing, Mak, and Li all went stiff. Xinghao thought he heard Li grunt something that sounded like, "Zhao," but it was Mak who stepped forward to take the lead. "There has been talk about Prince Ozai."

"Prince Ozai's testimony and evidence confirmed my suspicions," Xinghao cut in. "No, my friends, this is about the traitors responsible for Weapon Heiyaoshi's interference in the Avatar's Agni Budokai. These traitors have been blocking the Fire Lord's true will and wisdom, and are no doubt responsible for so many of the troubles that plague our nation."

All three military men looked understandably wary. Bujing squared his shoulders and stepped forward. "I trust you are referring to non-military personnel."

Oh. They thought he had just walked into their secure headquarters to accuse them? Paranoia must have been running high. But then, wasn't there a saying about it not being paranoia if the danger was real? "Of course, my friends. Your loyalty and capability is exactly why I have brought my concerns here. I am hoping that you will accept my evidence and arrest the traitors."

All three men relaxed, as much as military types could. Mak said, "Then stop playing coy and get to the point. Who are you accusing?"

"The sisters Li and Lo."

Bujing, Mak, and Li all traded glances. Bujing stroked his dropping mustache and turned back to Xinghao. "Your accusations go quite high, then. You said you have evidence, but supposing it's all true, even we can't just march into the Fire Lord's offices and slap chains on his closest advisors. We would need a small army to get to those offices."

Mak frowned. "And they have that blasphemous Weapon guarding them all the time."

Li shook his head. "This is a weak ploy. Hardly a step above name-calling during a Council meeting."

Ah, Xinghao did love the theater of this, if nothing else. Had he not joined the Temple, perhaps he could have become a stage actor. "Gentlemen, I know your job is to develop strategy, but just this once you may rest your minds. I have come with a plan for arresting the traitors and putting this whole matter to rest quickly. All you have to do is agree, and then be in the right place at the right time."

Once again, Bujing, Mak, and Li traded glances.
Xinghao smiled. "Why don't I start by showing you the evidence?"

Mai was armed with a paper umbrella to block the sun, but it still wasn't enough to actually make Ember Island comfortable. She stood on the beach, the waves stopping just a hand-span from her boots, and stared out across the horizon. Her sharp eyes picked up nothing but clouds, blue skies, and the occasional crane-fish diving into the water to scoop up a beak-full of water and seaweed.

She didn't see a flying bison, or any signs of hazards that might delay a sky bison's arrival.

She sighed.

Aang, Zuko, and King Toph still hadn't come back from this mysterious mission of Iroh's, which meant Mai was stuck waiting here on Ember Island for them. Several days after meeting with her fellow Weapons, she was running out of things to keep her occupied. There was enough danger that she had to be on guard- she wore her full set of blades and robes despite the heat and humidity- but not enough that it was actually keeping her occupied. The days were filled with tolerating Sokka, training with Ty Lee's sisters, enduring Zhao's daily reports of meetings with old military men, and wondering why anyone thought it was a good idea to drag Suki along on this whole campaign.

That was the only real reason she was anxious for the others to get back. She knew that Aang and Zuko were perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, and of course they also had Toph to watch over them.

Mai wasn't worried about them. At all.

There was a sound of shifting sands, and Mai glanced out from beneath her umbrella as she let her sleeve fall to cover the blade she was readying with her free hand.

It was just Zhao.

Mai kept a hold of the blade. "Is there a reason you're bothering me?"

Zhao snorted. "I'm busy enough that there would have to be. We have guests back at the house. Fire Sages. I would guess that the situation in the Capital is getting more tense."

Although the meeting with the other Weapons had indicated as much, Mai was still surprised. With Aang gone, why would things be moving so fast? But then, she had never really been much for politics. "Let's go, then."

Despite her umbrella, the walk back to the home of Ty Lee's sisters never failed to work up a sweat. Mai dabbed herself with a borrowed handkerchief, and glanced at Zhao out of the corner of her eye. "So, this wouldn't have to do with all your meetings, would it?"

Zhao shrugged. "I doubt it, but who's to say? The Fire Lord has to know that Iroh and the Avatar are closing in on him. The Outer Islands would already support a change in leadership. I've been feeling out the military, and while they don't support direct action, neither are they opposed to Iroh. The Sages and the nobility of Capital Island are the only standing questions."

"So, theoretically, these Sages could be here to kill me."

Zhao barked a laugh. "Why bother trying to kill a Weapon when the boy she's protecting isn't even here? You're a servant, Lady Mai. No one really cares about you."

"My friends do." Mai stopped, mopped her brow again, and threw the handkerchief on the ground.
"How many of those do you have, now that you're just a servant to Iroh?"

Without waiting for his reply, Mai opened the doors to the house and sauntered in.

The Ty-sisters were already in the receiving hall, decked out in their matching but uniquely colored outfits, talking to a typical old-guy-with-a-chin-beard Fire Sage. Sokka and Suki, however, were standing apart from that group, and over their shoulders Mai glimpsed a bald head.

Aang?

No, too tall. Sokka caught sight of Mai, and turned to her with a grin. "Hey, look, it's someone we already met who never tried to kill us!" He motioned as Suki stood aside.

Mai could see now that the bald head belonged to a tall young man in the red robes of a- what had he called himself? Right, an apprentice Inferior Sage, because he couldn't Firebend.

She surreptitiously holstered the blade she'd been holding. "Oh, hey, it's you. Um- Kei Lo, right?"

He burst into a smile and bowed so quickly that she half-expected him to smack his head on the floor. "Yes! I'm so glad you remember me, Lady Mai. It's an honor- and a pleasure- and, uh, so nice to work with you again!"

The older Sage stepped away from the Ty-sisters and bowed to Mai as well. "I am Fire Sage Shyu, from the Grand Capital Temple. I apologize for the imposition, but I have come on a mission from the High Sage. Kei Lo is officially serving as my assistant, but he has been most eager to reunite with his friends."

Mai quirked an eyebrow. Kei Lo was a friend? Sure, he had trained her and Aang for their Agni Budokai, but she was surprised that she could remember his name. However, there was a distinct blush on his face as he looked at her, so apparently the partnership had been much more memorable on his end.

She looked back to Shyu. "And how do you expect us to be working together? Have you come to follow Aang?"

The smile that flitted across Shyu's face was almost as bad as Kei Lo's. "Ah, if only I could. My grandfather taught Avatar Roku, and it would be my honor to serve the child Avatar in some capacity. But I have another duty, for now. In light of Weapon Heiyaoshi's actions during your Agni Budokai, the High Sage felt that it would be beneficial if the remaining Weapons had advisors available who could guide you in the Way of the Flame."

Sokka scratched his hair. "Wait, if it was Mai's Agni Budokai that Heiyaoshi tried to mess up, then why does Mai need a babysitter?"

She nodded. "That's a good question."

Shyu shrugged. "I agree that this probably isn't necessary, especially given your close association with the Avatar. Kei Lo has attested to your character."

Kei Lo did another of his dangerously frantic bows. "Oh, yes, I can testify that Lady Mai is a good citizen and true patriot! Her Agni Budokai was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Uh, and the Avatar, too, of course."

Mai had to fight the urge to roll her eyes while some of the Ty-sisters giggled.
Ironically, it was Zhao who saved her, stepping over to Shyu. "What, exactly, does it mean to be an 'advisor'? This compound is secure, and while you've been approved as a visitor, the staff here is all under the command of Prince Admiral Iroh, not the Fire Sages."

Shyu dipped his head. "Quite so, Commander. I apologize if I gave the wrong impression. Kei Lo and I are lodging in the local Temple in town, and while we will present ourselves here daily, Lady Mai is within her rights to send us away. We are not spies or saboteurs."

Suki put her hands on her hips. "Not that spies and saboteurs would go around admitting it."

Shyu chuckled. "No, you are right. The world would be a much better place if we all said what we really mean."

It would be easier, maybe, but Mai learned long ago that few people wanted to hear what she really thought about things. "Well, thanks for whatever it is you do. We have no need of advisors today."

Ty Lui clapped her hands. "Oh, but we must have you over for dinner! It would be an honor to host a Fire Sage, and a cute apprentice, too!"

Sokka elbowed Kei Lo. "Isn't this place great?"

Mai sighed. She hoped the other Weapons were being just as annoyed.

Lady Caldera Yu Gerel, oldest known Weapon of the Fire Nation, was in her home, meditating before a cluster of fifty-four candles in her window-free meditation room, when she detected a heat source approaching. She turned to face the room's only door, and was ready when the servant entered and bowed. "My lady, a Sage from the Temple is here to see you."

Gerel nodded her assent, and she heard the servant depart as the warmth of his blood moved away.

While she waited for his return, she removed the black blindfold she had been wearing for her meditation and exchanged it for the red one painted with the golden character for 'dragon.'

She had a feeling this would be a business matter.

The Sage was warm in her perception when he arrived, but his voice was unfamiliar. "Fifty-four candles. An inauspicious number, according to tradition."

Gerel said, "Fifty-four is death, but death is ever close to us. I meditate on my trade."

She heard the Sage sigh. "I expect you know why I'm here."

"Would you care to meditate with me, then? I have no desire to interfere with politics."

The Sage warmed a bit in his chest. "Thank you, my lady. I would be honored."

Together, they kneeled before the fifty-four candles.

Bangfei, possibly the youngest Weapon of the Fire Nation, stood on the roof of his inn on Ember Island, feeling the sun and the breeze, enjoying the scent and sound of the lapping waves of the nearby beach, and threw a punch at the bricks he had stacked up in front of him.

His knuckles landed against a single brick in the arrangement, which crumbled to dust at his blow.
None of the other bricks so much as moved.

Bangfei nodded with satisfaction. He hoped he wouldn't have to do that to anyone's heart in the near future, but he was a Weapon, and he couldn't let his skills atrophy. He would have preferred to practice in his personal training room back in his family's Caldera estate, but business was keeping him on Ember Island for now.

A hand reached up from the edge of the roof, waved, and then grasped and pulled up what appeared to be a young Fire Sage. Bangfei took a fighting stance as the Sage climbed up onto the roof and said, "Hi! They- uh, they said you're Weapon Bangfei?"

He nodded. "I am. Do you need something?"

The Sage scratched his head. "Uh, this is going to sound odd, but I'm here to advise you?"

Bangfei supposed this was what politics looked like.

The Disciple of the Third Eye, possibly the most dangerous Weapon of the Fire Nation, was not hard to find. One just had to follow the sound of the explosions to the Caldera's public Agni Kai arena.

A Fire Sage stood outside the arena, listening for the booms, and decided that this constituted the extent of his duty in this matter.

The Royal Palace was visible in the distance. The Weapons Piandao and Mutan should be inside, but no one needed to verify it. Other systems were in place for that.

High Sage Xinghao went through the whole thing for the military, the 'evidence' they would use to justify acting against Li and Lo, and then the precise plan for their arrest. He, in essence, went step-by-step through toppling a government.

Bujing, Mak, and Li's faces remained hard. It was Bujing who finally said, "If you do this, you'll be seen as siding with Ozai."

Xinghao was careful not to nod. "Prince Ozai has expressed concern about his father, and I happen to agree with his doubts. Prince Iroh certainly has not shown interest in anything but the Avatar."

The military men exchanged glances, and despite his pretty words, Xinghao knew they were aware of his true loyalties. After the way Iroh had battled against the Sages' influence, decades ago, the Temples would never fully support him. And they didn't even know how friendly Ozai had been, lately. But Xinghao, in turn, knew of the meetings Zhao had been holding on Ember Island in hopes of courting the military to Iroh's side.

Here's where it came down to a decision for them.

Xinghao looked at the three men across from him. "Like it or not, the time has come to take action. The Avatar is coming, the Royal Family is on the brink of war, and order must be maintained. The Temples are most in tune with the people, and putting a strong, wise Fire Lord on the Burning Throne is what will give us the power to resist the Avatar and the darkness in the Colonial Continent. It is our duty to remove the fumbling corruption from the palace." He moved his gaze across his audience.

High General Bujing had clearly stopped paying much attention to the conversation several minutes ago. His bored, blank expression was one Xinghao often saw in visitors to the Capital Temple.
Admiral Li's face was coloring and he was biting his lip. Perhaps his anger came from remembering how Admiral Chan had fallen to Ozai's pet killer, Piandao, when the military tried to turn against him.

General Mak simply stared back with narrowed eyes. "Well, we appreciate your bringing these concerns to our attention. Thank you for coming, High Sage."

Xinghao nodded. "Thank you for listening. You all know what will happen, soon. I hope you make the right decision."

They all bowed, and then guards stepped forward to escort Xinghao back out.

Well, he had done what he could with the military. If Prince Ozai decided to go ahead with his daughter's plan, then all Xinghao would have to do was lure the targets out into the open.

And also try not to die when war erupted.

Sokka really liked Ember Island.

Sure, it was in the Fire Nation, but didn't have evil ugliness sprawling all over it. There were few soldiers, and no factories or mines spewing waste. The girls, although racist jerks who didn't even realize how racist they were, looked very pretty. And in this vacation spot, Sokka was able to take a break from having to be an amateur spymaster and watching for all kinds of enemy action.

Part of that came from Aang, Zuko, and Toph being away and probably getting into trouble without him, while Katara was off fighting a war against sexism.

So Sokka just tried to focusing on the fact that he was on vacation, and not that he was really a useless lump. The longer he was on Ember Island, the easier he told himself it became.

For now, though, he had to focus on not getting his bones broken.

He raised his borrowed tonfa sticks and crossed them to catch the staff coming in at his head. His defense was successful, but the impact dug his feet deeper into the sand of the beach. He tried to push back with his tonfa against his opponent, but Suki danced back again and twisted her staff so that one end was coming in low at his left knee.

Sokka dove to the right and ended up with a face-full of sand, which he decided was marginally better than getting his knee thwapped. He began to push himself up, but a warm weight came down on his back and smashed him back down into the sand.

When he looked up, the face of one of the Ty-sisters was smiling down on him. She was sitting on his back.

(Sokka couldn't yet tell the sisters apart. Well, except for Ty Woo, who was The Mean One. This was one of the nice ones.)

She said, "Why did you dodge?"

Sokka tried to twist to properly face her, but her butt was very effectively keeping him pinned. "Well, it has to do with his crazy strategy I like. It involves not getting thwacked with a stick whenever possible. I've found that it really works for me."

The Ty-sister giggled and lightly bopped the top of his head. (Definitely not Ty Woo, then.) "Silly,
you're using tonfa. You could have spun your right weapon in your hand to maximize its range, and then just blocked the staff without even reaching down much."

"Well, now that you explain it, I feel very silly." Sokka wondered if he would ever, at some point in any of his travels or life, meet a girl who couldn't kick his butt without even really working at it. Mai was so good she had a special title and everything. Suki had survived stuff that would have killed Sokka twice over, at least. Katara's Waterbending made her a devastating warrior, and she was out learning how to be even better. Ty Lee could kill with her bare hands, or something. Toph was worshipped as a god for her Earthbending. Slush, even Heiyaoshi had taken him hostage without trouble.

Not that Sokka really wanted to encounter a girl who would be entirely dependent on him for protection. No, that would still be a problem, because it was his own lack of ability that really had him down.

But he would keep learning. "So, uh, why did you girls pick the tonfa, anyway? You liked the sound of the name?"

The Ty-sister frowned, but not at Sokka; her eyes lost focus, and her gaze lifted a bit. She remained sitting on him, though, so Sokka looked to the other girls around him. Suki was leaning on her borrowed staff, her eyes curious for the answer as well, while the other sisters all traded glances.

It was Ty Woo who finally answered. "Our dad picked them. I don't think any of us really know why. But he was in the army, and he said that if he was going to be an ocean away, then we had to learn how to destroy anything that tried to hurt us. And we all had to learn the same weapon, so that we could fight as a perfect unit."

The sister on Sokka's back leaned over to rest her head on his, further pressing him into the sand. She said, "I never minded. It was fun fighting together, and it made Daddy happy. Ty Lee was the only one who hated it. She didn't like how a tonfa strike could really hurt someone. Daddy said she was stupid if she couldn't see why cracking a skull was a good thing in a fight."

One of the other sisters added, "Yeah, wasn't that when she quit and ran away the first time? Mai would know." There were sounds from the rest of dubious agreement.

Suki said, "Uh, is your dad still in the army?"

Ty Woo shook her head and scowled. "No, he's retired by way of being dead. One of those attempts to crack Omashu."

Sokka's first instinct was to say he was sorry, because that was what nice people said to pretty girls when they mentioned a dead relative, but he really wasn't sorry that some Fire Nation would-be conqueror had bitten off more than he could chew.

So Sokka just made a show of trying to get up again, making the sister on top of him giggle. "Can I get up, or am I going to be a permanent fixture on the beach?"

That's when he heard the sound of heavy boots crunching through sand, and Zhao's voice rang out with, "Where's Mai?"

The sister hopped off of him, and Sokka quickly got to his own feet and brushed the sand off his clothes. "She's off doing her Mai thing. Why?"

Zhao was standing there in his full armor, as always, the black metal bringing out the darkness of the sand and the harshness of the stones in a reminder that this paradise was right in the middle of the
Fire Nation. "An invitation came for her, and I need to talk her out of accepting." Zhao looked down at the scroll he was holding. "Is she in the house? I'll just-

Sokka skipped forward on the sand and snatched the scroll out of Zhao's hands.

Zhao's eyes went wide for a moment, and then he raised his fists-

And a pair of the Ty-sisters stepped forward to shield Sokka.

Zhao snarled, and then lowered his fists.

Sokka unrolled the scroll and read this supposed forbidden invitation. It was addressed with, 'Daughter.'

Oh.

So this was why Zhao wanted to talk her out of it.

Sokka nodded. "I'll take this to her."

Zhao said, "And?"

Sokka rolled his eyes. "And if you think anyone can talk Mai out of doing what she wants with this, then I'll just go ahead and save you from wasting your time."

He made his way back to the house, and headed straight for the bedroom that Mai was sharing with Suki. She had been sulking there all day since sending Shyu and Kei Lo away for the something-eth time this week. Sokka found the door open and Mai herself lying on her back on her bed, all kind of deadly sharp things sticking out of the ceiling above her.

Sokka knocked on the door-frame.

Mai glanced over at him. "Oh. Hey. Do you know if there's a ladder somewhere? I got bored, and now a whole set of my blades are stuck up there where I can't reach."

"I think getting them down is one of the services the sisters will provide to their guests." He held up the scroll. "You have more mail. Your parents are in town and want you to visit."

Mai sat up on the bed and scowled at him. "That's a terrible thing to joke about and you should feel awful about it."

Sokka tossed the scroll to her.

She caught it (easily) and unrolled it to read.

Then she kept reading.

Then she sighed. "I don't want to go."

"Fine by me."

"And, honestly, this is probably a trap of some kind."

Sokka nodded. "I think Zhao figured the same thing. He wanted to tell you not to go."

Mai tossed the scroll to the floor and climbed off the bed. Sokka followed her to where her big case
of knives was propped up on a stand, the same case she had hauled all the way from the South Pole. It wasn't in the best condition anymore, but still solid and functional.

Mai began grabbing blades. "My parents wouldn't seek me out. They know I'm deep into all this garbage politics and factions. They're not brave enough to interfere. So someone is making them."

Sokka had a good idea what he would do in that same situation, and thankfully had empirical evidence to back him up in the form of the whole crazy quest to find and save Katara. He was genuinely curious what Mai would say next.

She started slipping blades into her clothes. "At least it will be something to do."

"Sure." Sokka followed her as she stalked off down the hall. He hadn't been able to offer much when she had to go meet with the Weapons, and maybe he wouldn't be able to help much here, but he'd be there just in case. "How much back-up do you want?"

As it turned out, the Mai could command less backup than she expected.

"We apologize," Ty Lum said, out on the beach, "but our duties as hosts are limited to protecting you here. If you need a guide, I will be happy to show you the way through town, but we cannot travel with you as your guards or strike force."

Mai decided that it was only a mild disappointment. She turned to where Zhao was standing apart from the rest of the group and quietly fuming. "How many soldiers do you want to send along?"

He crossed his arms and scowled at her. "How many will it take to keep you here? Even if this really is your parents-"

"It is," Mai put in. The handwriting was so precise that it gave her flashbacks to Mother's calligraphy lessons and the sting of the switch that came with a sloppy stroke.

Zhao shook his head. "Your parents are opportunists with few scruples." Showing no awareness of his hypocrisy, he continued, "Did you know your father tried to sell your betrothal to me after Crescent Island in a bid to attach your family to my rise?"

Ty Lee's sisters all gasped. Of course, they had never been forced to deal with betrothals. They were expected to find spouses themselves who could manage the family's colonial factory holdings.

Mai didn't doubt Zhao's word for a second. "I'm sure you're so disappointed that it didn't work out." Zhao's grimace was a delight all by itself. "Regardless, I have been away from home for a long time, and a good daughter would be expected to account for such an absence. I don't expect this to take long."

Zhao stared at her for a moment, and then shook his head. "Let me put together a full security detail. I'm sure we can leave this place light for an hour or two, if our hosts remain attentive."

Ty Lui clutched her fists and nodded. "We promise this will remain a safe haven for you, Mai! And your cute Tribal, too!"

Mai glanced at Sokka, and saw his half-pained, half-flattered expression. She decided that he deserved it for encouraging these stupid girls.

To Ty Lui, Mai said, "Thanks. And we won't need a guide. I'm sure Zhao will want to stick us in a carriage and run this whole thing himself."
Sure enough, Zhao stuck her in a carriage with Sokka and Suki and ran the whole operation up to depositing her at her parents' address.

During the ride into town, Suki said, "I don't think I've ever heard you talk about your parents. Your title means they live near the Fire Lord's palace, right?"

Mai leaned back in her seat and gave a nod. "Mother is old nobility. Father is a newer player who worked with the military in technology development. He was sent down to run the mining colony at the South Pole, and that's how I wound up getting dragged into a life of adventure and stupidity."

"I recall." Suki smiled. "You told the whole story when you first came to Kyoshi Island, remember? Back when you were a liar who was planning to betray Aang?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot. It seems like such a long time since you barged back into our lives helping Zuko to hunt us all down."

Sokka groaned. "Ladies, don't make me separate you! We've been getting along so well since we got here. Let's not ruin that."

Suki gave a slow nod. "Sorry, Mai."

Ugh, that apology came too quick. "Yeah, me, too."

"So did your parents really betroth you to Zhao?"

Mai shrugged. "It seems like something they'd do. The South Pole debacle wouldn't have left them in a good position, and we've seen how messy the politics have been lately. I was only eleven when they betrothed me to Prince Lu Ten, and I don't think I had a conversation with him until after it was announced."

Suki blinked at that, and Sokka leaned closer to her to whisper, "That one fell through, too. She seems to have some trouble getting married."

It was enough to put a smile on Mai's face before they got to their destination. The smile quickly disappeared at that point.

The note had provided the address of their rental, and Mai got out of the carriage to find that she was standing in front of the smallest, dumpiest beach house on the entire island. Here, the coast had no sand or beach, just a long stretch of cliffs above the water. The houses here were just a stone's throw from each other, a far cry from the massive amount of land around the Ty-sisters' place, but the buildings themselves still proclaimed the wealth of their owners by rising up on massive stilts to extend over the ocean and reach down with extensive private piers. The homes themselves were multiple stories, and tall windows revealed the high ceilings of the interior.

But the address in the note was just a glorified shack so small that it almost disappeared into a crag between its two neighbors. The little place had its own pier, but it was a long walk across a path of rickety boards; the house itself didn't extend far enough to reach the ocean.

It still had to be a fantastically expensive rental, because this was Ember Island, but apparently Mother and Father saw no need to bankrupt themselves to visit their traitor daughter.

Mai waited with Sokka and Suki beside the carriage as Zhao and a pair of his soldiers knocked on the front door and pushed inside as soon as it opened. Half a minute later, one of the soldiers came back and waved to Mai.
All clear. Mother and Father hadn't set up a deadly ambush.

Yet.

Mai brought her friends in to see her parents.

What she saw first was a colorful streak that raced across the floor just as she passed through the curtain between the foyer and the receiving parlor. She was still reaching for a pair of razor disks when the streak struck her legs and let out a screech of, "MAAAAIIIIIIIIII!!"

She looked down to see her little brother, wearing a white and pink outfit that Ty Lee would have loved, clutching her ankles. "Hey, kid. Miss me?"

Tom-Tom gave her an open-mouthed smile that threatened to leave drool trailing down his chin, but then his face instantly scrunched up and he began crying at the top of his lungs. Through the choking sobs, he gasped, "You- you- leave- me!"

Mai was instantly out of her depth. She had never quite gotten used to dealing with Tom-Tom when he was crying. She looked to Sokka and Suki for help.

They were both gaping at her. "What?"

Sokka pointed at her. "You're a big sister?"

"Yeah? I never mentioned that?"

Suki blinked. "And he seems to like you."

Mai glared at them. "I don't think I appreciate what you're-" But Tom-Tom was still wailing, so she threw up her hands and looked around for other help.

Fortunately, Mother chose that moment to step forward and snatch Tom-Tom up. "I can believe that you never mentioned your family to your fellow criminals. You left us easily enough. Hello, daughter."

Mai dipped her head. "Mother." She looked past her to find Father standing at the back of the parlor with Zhao and the other soldiers. "And Father. And for the record, I'm no longer a criminal; I've been recognized as operating under Royal Orders."

"Yes, I know. I was addressing you all in a witty manner to provide amusement," Mother said. Tom-Tom continued wailing in her arms.

"Well, why don't we all sit down?" He motioned to some low couches arranged around a round table, and sat down in one. "Mai, I might as well start by saying we forgive you for lying to us and betraying us, considering that you were acting on the orders of Prince Ozai at the time. You will be pleased to know that we, ourselves, aided the prince in his work to bring his son home. And you seem to have made some fortunate alliances since then. Is this boy the Avatar?"

Sokka stiffened just as he was about to sit down. "Um, no, sir? I'm Sokka. I'm just a friend and ally."

Father leaned back in his seat. "You look Water Tribe. Are you one of the rebels who ran away from the South Pole?"

Sokka gave a little laugh that to Mai's ears was far too forced.
Mother sat down next to Father, Tom-Tom reduced to sniffling as she settled him on her lap and glared at Sokka. "Please tell us you're not sleeping with our daughter."

"Hey," Mai cut in. "That's unfair. You should at least ask Suki if I'm sleeping with her, too."

Suki's face went red. "What? I'm just working for Prince Zuko. I have no idea why I'm here."

Mother's face lit up. "Ah, a good Fire Nation girl! And another ally of the Ozai faction! At least my daughter is keeping some good company."

Mai caught Sokka giving her a 'is this for real?' look. In return, she gave him a 'welcome to my life?' grimace.

Tom-Tom started squirming in Mother's lap. "I want to go sit with Mai. Please?"

"Very well, if you promise not to cry again. Such displays of emotions in front of company are unseemly. Mai, take your brother."

Mai wasn't sure she was obligated to accept that order, but Mother thrust Tom-Tom out and she found herself taking him in her arms.

Tom-Tom got comfortable on her lap and looked up at her face. "Why did you leave me? Don't you love me?"

She decided not to fall for it. "I left because I had to go do a job. When a Prince or Princess tells us to do something, that means we have to, if we don't like it. So if Princess Azula told me to spank you, I'd have to do it. And if Prince Ozai told you to punch my nose, you'd have to do that, too."

Father grunted. "Mai, don't tell him such things!"

But Tom-Tom was staring at her with squinting eyes, and suddenly burst out laughing. "You're still funny!"

"And you still have a sick sense of humor," she retorted. Tom-Tom's cackling got even louder, but Mai was able to hear Sokka doing his own chuckling. She wondered if he was enjoying the joke or just amused at her awkwardness with her own little brother. She turned to Mother and Father. "So you're really just going to brush off what I did?"

Mother frowned. "Why not? You only act as we taught you."

Father nodded. "We were quite upset by what we saw as your betrayal, but Piandao explained the situation to us some time ago."

Mai wondered why she was surprised. She had only lied and abandoned her parents, fantasizing about having their assets taken away from them and given to her as a reward. Aang and Sokka had acted like she was the worst kind of person when she did the same to them, but Mother and Father approved of it all.

Why did she find herself preferring Aang and Sokka's reaction?

"Of course," Father continued, "officially we've disowned you, and you can't inherit anything of ours. We had been denouncing you in public until you returned to the Fire Nation with Prince Zuko, and now we've simply been refusing to talk about you. We haven't quite been able to determine what game you're playing with the Avatar and the Royal Family factions, so we didn't risk ruining things."
Mai shook her head. "I'm not playing a game. The Fire Nation has become too corrupt, and Aang-the Avatar- he's trying to fix things for everyone. Prince Iroh is helping us. Zuko is helping us."

Father stroked his beard. "And I assume they're attempting to remove Azulon from power."

Mai kept her face blank. "Those matters, if they are being discussed, have not involved me. Aang, Zuko, and Iroh are all honorable leaders, and I trust them to do what is best. She didn't dare tell the truth, and she told herself it was because Tom-Tom could hear and blab something treasonous to the wrong person.

Mother gave a bored gesture. "And what are you getting for your assistance? What are you, personally, playing for? Did Prince Iroh offer to restore your contract with Lu Ten? Or is Zuko now the prize?"

Tom-Tom raised a hand. "I want a prize!"

Sokka handed him what seemed to be some kind of food while Mai sighed and said, "I don't suppose you'd believe that I'm helping because I just want them to succeed and stay alive?"

Suki nodded. "These matters are very important to the world. The Ear-Colonial Continent has been troubled by creatures that can only be fought with platinum weapons. The ashlands are alive and trying to kill people."

"And then there's the Everstorm," Sokka added. "It's all being caused by this- this disruption of the world's natural balance. So unnatural things are popping up, like unending storms and monsters. Mai is helping to save the world."

Mother looked back and forth between them. "That doesn't really answer my question. But thank you for telling me, dears. That's very nice."

In Mai's lap, Tom-Tom swallowed whatever it was Sokka gave him and looked up at her. "You fight monsters?"

She nodded. "I killed undead Air Nomads with a platinum knife, and helped fight an ash-monster the size of a city."

Tom-Tom's jaw dropped. "That's the best story I ever hearded."

She had to bite back on a smile. At least one member of her family had his priorities straight.

On the other side of the couch, Suki leaned forward. "I think what we're trying to say is that the Avatar, Prince Zuko, and Prince Iroh all consider Mai to be a precious ally. They are all people who value loyalty."

Father gave a slow nod. "No small thing, that."

Mother turned to Mai. "At least see if you can get a betrothal contract out of one of them? Friendship is good, but hard deals are better."

Mai stared back. "Is that why you called me here? To make sure I'm getting it all in writing?"

Mother's lips quirked. "You are a magnificent warrior, and I am proud to say that my daughter is a Weapon of the Fire Nation, but you are young, and you ran away before you learned all your lessons. My advice to you, as a mother, is to negotiate a real reward for your work before you're no longer needed. And of course I wanted to see my daughter, too. Your form has matured nicely and
you've kept your hair well, but you should try to moisturize your hands more. They're looking rough, and no man likes that."

Suki glanced at Sokka. "Is that true?"

Sokka shrugged. "I'm more inclined to get lost in a pair of pretty eyes than examine a girl's hands, but I'm young yet."

Father chuckled. "You're witty for a Tribal."

Mai ignored Sokka's attempt to explain that it was an outmoded term, and leaned her head down on Tom-Tom's. She whispered, "Kid, you're my favorite family ever."

Tom-Tom giggled. "More," he whispered back, "than Mommy?"

Mai smiled. "Much more."

He shifted out from under her and plopped a wet kiss on her nose. It was sort of gross, but not nearly as bad as having a monster vomit coins all over her. Looking pleased with himself, he said, "I love you so much. Don't go away again. We can play on the beach."

She glanced at her parents, who were talking with Suki about her exact relationship with Zuko while Sokka tried to help her out.

When Mai was sure that no one was paying her any attention, she looked back to Tom-Tom. "I'll try to come back when I'm done with my work. But don't wait up for me. I have a lot more monsters to fight."

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High Sage Xinghao hadn't been in the Fire Lord's throne room for years. He supposed, in retrospect, that it probably should have been taken as a sign.

Regardless, he was doing something about it now. What were a few years of trouble, when he had lived so comfortably?

He stood in the center of the room, dwarfed by the lines of pillars on either side of him but also thrown into focus by the light of the torches attached to their bases. On the other sides of the pillars, an audience watched him. They were nobles and generals and admirals and sages and governors, most of them people who, like Xinghao, hadn't been invited to this room for a long time. Azulon had never been one to hold court, but he at least used to conduct his business in person.

Well, that time was gone.

Another sign of the times was the fact that the Burning Throne itself was dark, most distinctly not burning, and instead of the Fire Lord being seated up on the dais, the sisters Li and Lo stood in front of it.

Their pet Weapon, Mutan of Lower Hu Sin, stood off to the left, close enough to intervene in an assassination attempt but far enough away to make it clear he was just a servant. Xinghao thought it profane that he, an Earthbender, was even in this room, but it was an insult that would have to be tolerated for now.

But then, that was the key to being a successful High Sage. People thought it was about declaring what was supposed to be, but really it was figuring out when to turn a blind eye.
Li and Lo nodded to him, and spoke as one: "High Sage Xinghao, we recognize and welcome you, in the name of Fire Lord Azulon."

He took a deep breath. Hopefully this plan of Ozai's would work. If it didn't-

He forced a smile on his face and stepped forward. "The honor is mine. As agreed, I have come to restore something that rightfully belongs to the Royal Family." He had sent news of his ‘discovery’ on right after he met with the military’s central command, several days ago. Now, one of the two Great Sages standing behind him handed over the golden pillow with the headpiece of the Crown Prince on it-

-the gift that Ozai had handed over in his initial meeting with Xinghao to buy non-interference, now being redeemed as part of Ozai’s plan to steal the Fire Nation for himself. If this worked, Xinghao would always be able to call on the prince for a favor to the end of his days.

-a gift worthy of drawing Li and Lo to this throne room, and to pressure them into summoning an audience.

Xinghao took a single step forward and held the pillow up so that everyone could see the prize on top of it. "The Crown Prince headpiece."

Then he quickly lowered it and handed it to the other Great Sage. "This is an item representing the proper order of succession, of the strength of the Fire Lords and the way they embody the Way of the Flame." He looked straight at Li and Lo. "You have disrupted that, traitors, locking the Fire Lord away and stealing his power for your own corrupt ends! As High Sage, I name you traitors, and demand your arrest!"

The audience gasped.

Now here was the part where Xinghao might very well die.

He braced himself-

The old sisters recoiled in outrage, and the one on the left motioned to the ceremonial Crimson Guard lining the wall.

He prepared his Inner Fire in case they went ahead and attacked him instead of arresting him-

General Mak jogged out from between two of the pillars to stand in front of Xinghao. "Traitors, I place you under arrest!"

The last of his words were drowned out by the sound of boots on the wooden floor, and Home Guard soldiers in heavy assault armor raced into the throne room and began spreading out. Most blocked off the Crimson Guards, while a small contingent pushed to the front of the room and approached Li and Lo.

Xinghao gasped out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. General Mak! He'd gone for it! Yes!

And then Mutan of Lower Hu Sin stepped forward and the ground shook. Some of the soldiers stumbled.

Xinghao realized he had to do something if he still wanted to live. He hurried around Mak to stand in Mutan's path, raising his hands. "My child, in the name of the First Fire, stop!"
Mutan halted. "I ask you to move, High Sage. I cannot allow a coup."

"This is no coup! This is the will of the Flames themselves!" Xinghao's mind raced, as he tried to come up with something good. He looked at the red tattoos on Mutan's face, the quotes from the Nawaphon Hnangsux, one of the passages most often reproduced as propaganda during the war for its assertion that all other elements bow to Fire, and even the bones of the earth can melt. "The way of Fire becomes clear in conflict, and truth is revealed in strength. For too long, we have shrunk from the strength of Li and Lo, but if they are truly in the right, if they still truly do the Fire Lord's bidding, then they will prevail. If not, then they have fallen, and must be cast aside."

Mutan stared at him.

Xinghao nodded. "You, Mutan, are the greatest of your people. You have recognized the truth of the Way of the Flame, and your feats of Earthbending have reflected this. I need you, my child. As the High Sage, I need you to hold us all accountable, to watch us as we investigate the sisters, and to confirm that we are ensuring the Fire Lord's power. Will you answer my call, Mutan? Will you show us your true strength? Your true flame?"

He bit back a groan. It was the biggest bunch of slop he'd put into words since he first joined a Temple.

Mutan blinked, though, and a pair of tears ran down his tattooed cheeks. He took a step back and said, "I will answer your call, High Sage. The Fire Lord's will be done!"

"The Fire Lord's will be done," a voice echoed from above Xinghao.

He- and everyone else in the throne room- turned to see Prince Ozai striding out across the dais of the Burning Throne.

"You," one of the old twins snarled.

Ozai stood over them all with the true regality of a Prince of Fire, a master actor commanding the stage. "I thank you, Xinghao, and General Mak, for your actions on behalf of my beloved father. Guards, take Li and Lo to the dungeons. The sages and the military can investigate the claims and evidence, and make a pronouncement. In the meantime, I will take charge of the Fire Lord. I make this promise to you all- I will keep my father safe and healthy, and act only in accordance with his will. I swear this on my own life, on my own honor, and on the Homeland itself."

Xinghao clapped once, the prearranged signal, and the two Great Sages hurried over to present him with the pillow and crown again. He once more took it and held it aloft.

And this time, Prince Ozai received it.

The soldiers hurried Li and Lo away, both sisters calling out promises of retribution, while all of the generals and admiral and soldiers bowed.

Xinghao and his sages all bowed.

And then the nobles and governors and all the rest likewise fell to their knees.

Xinghao had just handed provisional control of the Fire Nation to Prince Ozai, having worked to get the military on their side and providing the lure to bring Li and Lo out into the open.

In other words, Ozai owed him big time.

Suki had been surprised at how quickly the visit to Mai's parents ended.
It seemed that Lord Ukano and Lady Michi had no sooner established to their satisfaction that Suki wasn't trying to seduce Zuko than they were standing up and wishing Mai good luck on her future endeavors. Mai had seemed surprised at the abruptness, but she didn't fight to stay. She had just whispered something to her little brother, handed him back to their mother, and bowed a goodbye.

On the way back to the house, Sokka said, "At least no one tried to kill us, right? That was easily the most awkward social event of my entire life, but now we know that awkwardness isn't fatal."

Suki laughed, because it seemed like something that should be funny, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something about the whole situation was really off.

The sun was setting when they got back to the Ty-sisters' home. Zhao's soldiers dropped them off at the bottom of the path, and then continued on to the boat-house. It wasn't until Suki and the others got further up the path that the first sign of danger was apparent.

All of Ty Lee's sisters were kneeling on the side of the path right at the base of the front steps, their tonfa sticks set on the ground on front of each of them.

As Suki, Mai, and Sokka approached, one of the sisters- the one closest to the house, wearing green robes today- said, "Mai, the beach is lovely tonight. Perhaps you would like to enjoy the setting sun with a walk."

Suki looked to Sokka, who seemed just as confused as she was. They both looked to Mai.

Of course, Mai had no expression on her face whatsoever. "I hate nature. And it's not like I can see a bison flying in, with the sky this dark."

The lead sister lowered her head. "Nevertheless, as your host, I must insist. I know the love that Ty Lee had for you, and I consider it my duty- as a sister, and a person- to make sure you properly enjoy it. Right now."

The other septuplets all bowed their heads in the same way.

Sokka threw his hands up. "Well, I'm still confused. Is this a Fire Nation thing? Is aggressively selling walks by the beach some kind of holy warrior rite?"

Suki shook her head. "Something feels really off about this." She looked to the lead sister. "What's wrong?"

The sister closed her eyes. "What could be wrong? If you and Sokka enter the house, I am confident, as your host, that you will be safe."

'...you and Sokka...'

Mai wasn't mentioned.

Mai herself got it, too. She traded a glance with Suki, and then shrugged. "I guess I'll take a walk. It's a nice night. I hope I find everyone alive when I get back." She turned and walked back down the path, her hands in her sleeves- and no doubt fingering blades.

Sokka groaned. "So we go in without the Weapon of the Fire Nation."

Suki grabbed his arm and dragged him along. "Our hosts said we're safe, remember? But be ready for something, anyway."
And so they walked up the steps and entered the house, leaving the Ty-sisters kneeling.

Candles were providing light in the receiving hall, but only one of the hallways was similarly lit. The rest were dark.

Suki moved slowly and silently down that hall, Sokka right behind her. At the end was a parlor with windows that looked out over the jungle behind the house. Suki slid open the door and stepped forward-

"Welcome back," said Azula, Princess of Fire. She was lounging on a couch with a cup of tea as though she owned the place, and standing behind her-

Suki couldn't stop herself from gasping.

Standing behind the princess, the uniform of some kind of Fire Nation soldier, was Kirai.

Suki's sister.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
**A New Sisterhood**

Chapter Summary

Azula advances her father's plans, while Mai and Suki bond over all the junk they have to deal with.

**A New Sisterhood**

Bangfei, Weapon of the Fire Nation, hoped that his Homeland was not about to fall into a civil war.

He was seated at a table outside an Ember Island eatery, surrounded by clusters of boys and girls his age talking and laughing and enjoying life. Did they not know about what was happening in their Homeland? The fact that he could sit here unnoticed was a sign of their ignorance. He wished he could have been like them, carefree and uninvolved, perhaps vacationing here with Ty Lee and falling in love. More in love.

But he and Ty Lee had destroyed that possibility when they each, separately and without knowledge of the other's path, sought the fighting skills that made them so useful to the people in power. The Royal Family had now reached out to Bangfei, and he had no choice but to obey his orders— even if those orders started a conflict that might spread to everyone in the Fire Nation. He was a Weapon, a tool to be used.

Ty Lee had tried to flee this life. It hadn't worked out for her. Bangfei did not want more beautiful Fire Nation treasures to be consumed by war, but Ty Lee's death had shown that there really wasn't any other path.

He put down his drink and headed for the cluster of beach-houses across the path.

He walked at first, and then began jogging, before finally breaking out into his fastest dashes.

Finally, he jumped.

He heard the people at the eatery raise a cry of shock.

As he arced through the air, he let go of all doubts and worries. He was a Weapon. He would not fail.

He landed on the slanted roof of the first house in a run, moving across the peak with total balance. It was a short jump to the next house in the line, and the one after that, and the one after that. His last jump took him to the smallest house in the line, little more than a shack on stilts clinging to existence in the shadows of its neighbors. Instead of landing on this place's roof, he instead dropped onto the balcony that faced the beach.

He did not look at the beach. He turned and flipped inside.

The man and the woman there screamed.

Bangfei had enough time to identify his true target as the child in the woman's arms before the man attacked. It was a clumsy charge, something Bangfei could have easily dodged, but he didn't want
the man to get himself hurt by making further trouble. Bangfei hunched low, putting himself fully inside the man's shadow, and then struck up on the inside of one arm—knocking it aside—and then the other. The man came to a clumsy halt as his arms fell uselessly to his sides, no longer obey his commands. Bangfei continued to jab a spot just above the man's right knee, bringing him down, and then stood up and delivered a hard nerve pinch to the side of the man's neck.

He went down like a sack of bones.

The woman had stopped screaming. As Bangfei turned to her, he tensed for an attack, but instead the woman merely stood and glared at him, holding the target—her child—out of reach.

Bangfei held out his hands. "I don't want to hurt you if I don't have to."

The woman snorted. "Do you have any idea who we are? I am Lady Michi, and you just attacked Lord Ukano. We are servants to Prince Ozai himself, here on his orders in an action against a Weapon of the Fire Nation. Leave now and maybe you'll live."

Bangfei sighed. "I could say the same thing. I am a Weapon of the Fire Nation, and I know that your daughter is Caldera Yu Mai. But I do not serve Prince Ozai."

Lady Michi's eyes went wide, and she turned to run—Bangfei had already somersaulted into her path. The child in her arm screeched as he jabbed Michi's arm at the shoulder, taking away its function and causing the child to drop. Bangfei caught the boy easily enough even in the crook of his left arm as he snapped out a foot to hook Michi's legs and yank them out from under her, and then he snapped out with his right arm right at her heart. She was already unconscious by the time he stood up.

That's when a pair of men in the armor—but not the helmets—of the Royal Crimson Guard thundered down the stairs from the house's little loft.

They were the elite of the Fire Nation's military, which meant that it took almost two minutes to defeat them while holding the child. The fight was a flurry of arms and legs and fire and fists, but armor could only protect the body from physical threats, and Bangfei's specific style of Qi-blocking could strike at more than the mere physical. The metal might stop his fists, but the force of the strike continued straight through the vulnerable bodies beneath.

The fight could be measured in a countdown of the limbs each guard had available for use. When the count reached zero, Bangfei took his leave with the child flailing in his arms. (What a little boy thought he could do against a Weapon of the Fire Nation, Bangfei didn't know, but he appreciated the effort.)

He plunged into the Ember Island jungle, retreating from the civilization he might have started to bring down.

Bangfei's Fire Sage 'advisor' would probably be quite put out when he didn't show up for their daily 'consultation.' But a Sage probably wouldn't have much advice about kidnappings, anyway.

Suki stared across the room at her sister.

Kirai used to look so grown-up to her, so capable and strong. When Suki used to imagine becoming an adult, becoming tall and powerful and beautiful, she had imagined herself becoming Kirai.

No beating, no betrayal, had ever really changed that for her. It wasn't until Kirai left that Suki's idea
of growing had finally touched on reality.

No, it wasn't that Kirai had left—she did so by selling the lives of the Unagi gang, the closest thing they had to family besides each other, and joined their oppressors in the Fire Navy. Kirai's last words to her made her think it was all her fault, that if she had been a better sister, no one would have had to die. Eventually, Suki realized the truth, but—

-she loved her sister-

-she hated Kirai.

Mostly, Suki felt like she wanted to throw up.

Kirai stared back with dead eyes and no expression.

But Suki hadn't survived on her own for so long by letting herself get lost in emotions. She exhaled and focused her attention on the real threat here, on the fact that Princess Azula herself was lounging on a couch with a cup of tea here in the beach house of the Ty-Sisters. And the Avatar's lemur was lurking under the couch, looking ready for action.

Suki sank to her knees and kowtowed. "Princess, it is an honor to be in your presence once again."

Beside her, Sokka was still standing. She nudged his ankle with her elbow, and he likewise went down on his knees. "Yeah," he said, "nice to meet you! I've heard such great things."

Suki peeked up to see Azula staring at Sokka. "Who is this Tribal?"

Suki lowered her gaze again. "This is Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe, an advisor to the Avatar. He is a survivalist expert, not a combatant."

She caught Sokka glancing at her, and she hoped he would play along. She didn't think it would be a good idea to link him to Water Tribe uprisings, escaped Waterbenders, or any of the other crimes he had committed as one of Aang's closest friends.

"Hm," was Azula's only response. "And where is Mai? I know she's staying here with you."

Suki rose to her feet. "We just came back from meeting with Mai's parents. She seemed a bit distracted afterward, and parted with us before we—" A horrible thought struck her. "Did you have her parents invite us? Just to set up this ambush?" Suki couldn't stop herself from glancing at Kirai.

Azula put her teacup on the table and stood up, and Momo crawled out from under the couch to investigate it. The princess stalked around the table. "Of course I did. Zhao would have tried to prevent me from calling on Mai, and defeating his security would have been tedious." Her expression grew tight. "I've _so_ wanted to discuss Mai's behavior with her." Her hands tightened into fists—and then it all passed, the princess relaxing once again. "A pity it couldn't work out, but I'm here on other business. Where is my brother?"

Zuko.

Suki knew she had to find an answer, to make nice to Azula, but she couldn't stop her thoughts from drifting to that time when Zuko found her sobbing in a stable, so struck by news of Kirai that she had been overcome with years of mixed emotions. Suki's eyes went to her sister, just standing behind the couch like any other paid bodyguard, seemingly indifferent to everything and everyone—

It was Sokka who finally spoke up as he stood up again. "Zuko's still away with the Avatar. We
don't know where they went or when they'll be back."

Azula stepped over to Sokka, her eyes intent.

Over at the table, Momo made a retching sound and scurried away from the princess's tea.

Azula frowned. "That is unfortunate. Father has lost patience with Uncle's games, and wants Zuko home." Azula turned to the back of the room, where the row of windows showed night falling on Ember Island. "But I'm needed in the Capital, and can't just wait around on the beach with you."

Suki said, "I'd be happy to pass on any message you leave."

Sokka nodded. "Yeah. As soon as he gets here, we'll tell him that it's past his curfew and he needs to go home. No problem."

Azula turned back to look at Sokka, a smile twisting her lips. "I like that. It implies that Zuko is too young to be out on his own." The good humor quickly fell from her face. "But I think we all know Zuzu is too stubborn to come when called. Especially since he thinks he owes something to Uncle. No, I'm afraid I'm going to have to take special measures. Kirai."

Suki's sister startled, and then bowed. "Yes, princess?"

"We're leaving. Finish that cup of tea for me. I'm no longer thirsty, but I don't want it to be wasted."

Suki watched from her knees as her sister shrugged, picked the cup of tea up, and downed it.

Azula brought her hands together in a clap. "Excellent. I slipped a poison in that." She parted her hands to reveal an empty glass bottle. "In a few days your innards will have dissolved unless an antidote is administered."

Suki wasn't even aware of moving. Reality blinked, and she was across the room, catching Kirai and blocking an attempted attack on Azula. She realized it was just like when they were children, when she'd step between Kirai and any friend who seemed to be in danger from her sister's fists.

Not that Azula was in any danger. Azula was the danger.

Sokka was the only one keeping his head. He scratched his hair and looked around. "Why would you poison your own bodyguard? I think I missed something, here."

As Suki struggled to hold Kirai back, Azula stepped over to Sokka and grabbed his chin. He grimaced, but didn't pull back, and Azula turned his head to look at one side of his face, and then the other. "Yes, you are a thinker, aren't you?" She let go and turned away from him. "But Suki hasn't given you all the clues, it seems."

Sokka blinked, and his eyes met Suki's. His gaze narrowed, realizing that more was going on than one of Azula's servants simply protecting her from the other.

Kirai made another grab for Azula, so Suki shoved her hard enough to knock her to the floor. "Cut it out!" Then she turned back to Sokka and bowed her head. "I'm sorry. This is my sister, Kirai. Her safety was my price for helping Zuko hunt the Avatar."

Sokka looked at Azula, and then rolled his yes. "Seems like you didn't get a very good deal for us, then."

Azula laughed. "True! But we can still make good on our promise, in the long term. Father has the
antidote in the Royal Palace. If you come *with Zuko* before the damage is fatal, we will give it to you, and consider your service to us at an end. Without Zuko, you get nothing. Except Kirai's agonizing end, of course."

Kirai tried to get up, but Suki spun to sweep her sister's legs out from under her.

(It felt far too good.)

Then she bowed deeply before Azula. "Please, we don't have Zuko! Kirai could die before he even gets here!"

Azula shrugged. "Consider that incentive to find him, then. It's ridiculous that you're so completely in Iroh's thrall you let Zuko go off without knowing where. That is done. Father wants his family home, and Father gets what he wants. If you let Kirai die, know that more lives will be on the line until Father's demands are satisfied. I promise you."

And then Sokka crossed his arms and stood to block the exit. "But you break your promises. And I'm thinking a little liar like you might have an antidote right now."

Suki blinked. Could Azula-

The princess held out her hands at her sides. "Just try and search me. Not only will I defend myself, but I am a guest in the home of Ty Lee's sisters. They'll protect me." She lost her cheer and clasped her hands together. "But I don't have the antidote. You all know that. It would be stupid to march into your clutches with the key to undoing Father's plans."

She was right. Suki knew it. Azula was too smart for that. "Let her go."

Kirai slammed her hands on the floor. "Suki-"

"Shut up," Suki said. She looked to Sokka.

He shrugged and got clear of the door. "You're the expert on Fire Nation royalty. But I agree that the logic works out."

Azula looked at them all, and then nodded. "Suki has consistently displayed intelligence, and now a Tribal as well. It's been a pleasure fooling you both." She glanced at Kirai, still on the floor. "If you live, I hope you learn to think from the others, here. Your sister is much better company than you."

She turned and made for the door. "Farewell. Tell Mai I'm sorry I missed her."

And so Suki let her sister's poisoner walk out of the house.

A moment later, Mai climbed in through one of the windows, several of her blades dangling from rings around her fingers. "Well, that was horrible, but at least I didn't need to start a fight. Now what do we do?"

Momo ran over to her and climbed up onto her head.

Zhao was preparing plans for yet another round of meetings to drum up support for Iroh when there was a knock on the door of his makeshift office.

He looked up from his stacks of reply letters, to see his aide leading one of the Ty-sisters (he had no idea which one, but she wore yellow robes and had her tonfa sticks at her belt) into the room. "Sir, our hosts desire a moment of your time."
Zhao put the letters aside. "Of course. What can I do for you?"

The girl twisted her hands together. "Princess Azula visited the house and now everyone wants to leave for the Capital? They said to-

Zhao was already to his feet and hurrying out of the office. "Azula is here?! Now?" He doubted he had enough soldiers to stop such a-

"No!" The girl and his aide were jogging behind him as he made his way out of the boathouse. "Azula left! But she left behind Suki's sister who's poisoned and..."

Zhao managed to get the whole story, delivered in a maddeningly non-linear fashion, by the time he reached the main house. He burst into the rear parlor to find Lady Mai, that turncoat Suki, a similar-looking girl who had to be Lieutenant Kirai, the mouthy Tribal, and all the rest of the Ty-sisters (minus the fugitive Ty Lee) gathered in an obviously ill mood.

Zhao stalked into the center of the gathering. "None of you are going anywhere. The Capital is too dangerous until we've gathered the proper assurances, and the Avatar and Prince Zuko will be critical to our arrival. This is not something I can make happen."

Suki crossed her arms. "Not that you're especially motivated to do anything that would help me. You framed me for murder and locked me up, but I bet you still hold a grudge for my escaping with Zuko."

Zhao waved the accusation away. "While I do intend to enjoy your bad fortune, that's merely a bonus to following my orders. Iroh's instructions to me are to keep the Avatar and Prince Zuko safe, and enable their mission. Approaching the Capital can ruin everything. I forbid you to go."

Mai did that insolent eyebrow-quirk she liked so much. "You. Forbid. I wasn't aware that we needed your permission."

Zhao ignored everyone else's glares and focused on her. "I provide your guard details. I arrange your travel. I manage your finances. I report back to Iroh. What can you do without me?"

Mai turned to one of the septuplets. "Ty Lat, can I borrow enough for a ferry to the Capital?"

"For you? Sure!" She looked at Zhao and cringed. "I'm not taking a side, but Mai's my guest, and she was my sister's best friend."

Oh, if only Zhao could reveal that not only was Ty Lee alive, but that Mai had been keeping that fact to herself all this time. But Iroh had issued orders to keep Ty Lee's survival a secret, and Zhao knew better than to tip the balance of the Weapons of the Fire Nation at this point in time.

Perhaps that was a balance that Mai had managed to miss. "And even if you can all get to the Capital on your own, what are you going to do? My understanding is that only Prince Zuko's presence will earn the antidote? What happens when Piandao Hundredslayer asks you where he is?"

"Speaking of which," the Mouthy Tribal put in, "I think it's time you told us where he and Aang and Toph went."

Zhao had to admit that the operational security provided by that secrecy was quickly expiring. And if it convinced these children to abandon their plans- "It's the island of the old Sun Warriors, up past the Boiling Rock. Some spiritualists can be found there who Iroh counts as allies. There is no telegraph station, and the area is not mapped."
Mai displayed her usual lack of facial expression, but she did shake her head. "That's not going to be a quick trip."

That's when Kirai stepped forward, clenching her fists. "So I'm just going to die? The princess poisoned me, the navy won't help me, and all my sister's worthless friends are just going to give up?"

Zhao couldn't help smirking at her. "Welcome to life as a pawn. What did you expect, when you enlisted?"

She was too well-trained, at least, to attack him. But she clearly wanted to.

Mai stepped over, standing at her tallest, and looked down her nose at Kirai. "I never claimed to be Suki's friend, and any worth I have might not be worth spending on you. Suki hasn't even asked me for anything, yet."

Interesting. Perhaps she was smarter than Zhao thought. He ambled back to the edge of the gathering and watched as everyone turned to Suki.

The Kyoshi girl slumped under the scrutiny. "I-"

Kirai came over and shoved at her sister. "You got me into this! I was doing just fine in the navy until you got me involved in this- this- whatever! You practically poisoned me yourself!"

"No! I-"

"Shut up!" Kirai threw a fist-

Zhao couldn't quite make out what happened next. Suki burst into a blur of motion, Kirai gave a pained cry-

And then Kirai was on her knees, Suki behind her and twisting her arm against her back.

Impressive. No wonder those Kyoshi rebels had given Yon Rha such a hard time.

Suki let go of her sister. "Don't touch me. Never again."

Kirai just panted in relief and cradled her arm.

Perhaps Zhao had overestimated this group's dedication to saving Kirai. He pointed down at her and looked around at everyone else. "That is what you would be throwing away everything to save. Do as I say, continue with Prince Iroh's mission, and you will get a chance to save your people. Go to the Capital, and you'd risk leaving Azulon and Ozai in power, all just for a dock-rat loathed by her own family. I think the choice is clear."

Silence was the only reply.

Zhao nodded, satisfied. It was good to see that even traitors and criminals could be practical. He turned to leave-

"I'm asking you all," Suki said into the quiet, "as my friends, to help me save my sister."

Suki looked around at everyone. Zhao was staring at her like she had just offered a personal insult (which she probably had), while Sokka, Mai, and the Ty-sisters all greeted her request with obvious wariness.
She knew the feeling.

Suki sighed. "I- I know it's asking a lot of you. I'm asking a lot of myself. Me and Kirai-" She looked down at her sister.

Kirai's eyes were scrunched in that same expression of confusion and annoyance that had so often met Suki's attempts to improve their lives.

Suki turned to the others. "You're all my friends. Yes, Mai, even you. We don't have to get along to be friends."

Mai clasped her hands in her sleeves. "I suppose that might be true. But then what makes us friends?"

"Respect." Suki nodded at her. "I respect how you've dedicated yourself to helping Aang and trying to restore the Fire Nation. I respect your skills. I respect your loyalty to people, because I have the same loyalty. We've both been put in positions where we had to betray friends to help save other friends, and while I don't agree with the choices you've made, I know I haven't really done better."

Suki looked to Sokka. "I helped your enemies. I tried to balance my loyalty to you guys with the deal I had to make to save myself and my sister, but I know I'm responsible for some of your hardship. I risked a lot to help you when you were trying to find Katara, but I know that doesn't make up for everything else. From what I've seen of your sister, she's wonderful, and you probably have no idea how I can want to help someone like Kirai, but-" Suki again glanced down at Kirai. "She's my family. I don't know what else to say."

Sokka blew out a sigh. "I get it. You think I wanted to collaborate with the Fire Nation down in the South Pole? I had to do what I had to do for my family. Also, you're good at giving speeches."

That got her to laugh, just a little bit, as she looked at the Ty-sisters. She still couldn't really tell them apart, but Mai had picked out Ty Lat, and Suki focused on her. "Please, I know your duties as our host don't extend this far, but any help you can give me and my sister would be greatly appreciated. Kirai and I only had each other, when we were kids."

Ty Lat nodded. "Sisters are unbreakable, no matter what. At least, that's what we tell ourselves about Ty Woo."

Ty Woo, the perpetually cranky one, revealed herself by holding up a gesture Suki didn't know, and then added, "I love you girls, too."

Suki smiled. "Thank you. Everyone."

Kirai made a sound of disgust as she finally got back to her feet. "Yeah, thanks so much for getting me out of this mess that all the rest of you got me into. No one was poisoning me before you all started dragging me into this ridiculousness."

Mai pulled a hand out of her sleeve to twirl one of her blades on her fingers. "Wow, you really showed me. I feel so guilty about everything." She yawned. "But seriously, that whole beautiful pledging of support was nice, but what are we actually talking about doing?"

Sokka stroked his chin. "We are currently down a Zuko, so we can't just hand him over."

Suki nodded. "So we steal the antidote."

Mai snorted. "Which means invading the Fire Palace. Which also possibly means invading the
Capital, because Ozai wanting us there doesn't mean that Azulon and the army do, and whether I'm actually allowed to go home is up in the air right now. As far as combat capabilities, I'm just a Weapon, not an entire siege army, and even six Ty-sisters aren't going to make up the gap. Especially if Piandao is there, like Zhao was whining about.

"He is," Zhao said in a heavy voice.

"Great, more sneaking." Sokka sighed. "I do like a good sneaking, but somehow we keep only making things harder on ourselves. We've gone from fenced-in compounds to walled fortresses to volcano-island fortresses to sinkhole fortresses, and now a palace."

Mai raised a finger. "Which is in a city in a very large volcano."

"Thank you, Mai. And now a city-volcano palace." Sokka rolled his head back and looked up at the ceiling. "But a city is actually good, because even a high-security city has things going in and out all the time. Mai, who's in charge of that?"

Suki looked over at Kirai and gave a tight smile. She wanted her sister to appreciate the expertise that was being applied here, and what these people were giving for her.

Mai twirled her blade faster while maintaining her slumped position. "Depends on what you mean by 'the city.' There's the Capital Harbor and Lower Harbor City, both of which are controlled directly by the Fire Navy. Upper Harbor City is where the- the workers and laborers live, and because it's so close to the Caldera itself, the Home Guard maintain gates into the volcano where everyone is checked to make sure they're authorized to enter. Shipments are checked as well, and-" She paused for a second, and then added, "Huh."

Sokka grinned. "That sounded like a good 'huh.' What did you realize?"

Mai snapped her blade closed and smiled. "Carts and open containers are searched, to make sure no one from the Upper Harbor sneaks in, but sealed containers that have been stamped as secured by the Navy are given a pass. That saves time for the Home Guard so they can keep traffic flowing through the gates, especially since the Navy is already doing the work a stone's throw away."

Suki liked the sound of this. She looked to Zhao. "Can you get us those stamps?"

Zhao sneered at her. "No, I can't. As you might expect, the Navy is very careful about that kind of thing, since so much security hinges on it. And right now, no one from Iroh's faction could even ask for such a thing without sounding suspicious. Azulon's pet Fire Sages paid a lot in political favors to get their own stamps."

Sokka clapped. "Great idea!"

Suki looked around, wondering if anyone else understood what Sokka was saying. Everyone looked just as confused as she felt, and Zhao especially seemed to be trying to work out if he'd been insulted.

Suki reached out and poked Sokka. "What idea?"

He winked at her, and then went over and threw an arm around Mai's shoulders. "Darling, I have a favor to ask you. I need you to ask someone else for a favor, actually."

Mai yanked herself free. "Who and what favor? And if it's not good I'm going to stab you."

Sokka backed away a step. "I was just thinking that if the Fire Sages have their own official
smuggling network, then we know one Fire Sage who practically worships the ground you walk on, and just so happens to be here on Ember Island waiting to advise you."

Suki gasped. "Kei Lo and- what was the old guy's name? Shyu! Maybe they'll help us!" She grinned at Mai. "Especially if an elegant and mysterious Fire Nation girl asks nicely."

Mai groaned, the Ty-sisters all giggled, and Sokka was giving himself approving nods.

Suki couldn't help looking back at Kirai and saying, "See how they come together to help? This is what the Unagi gang could have been to us. If you hadn't gotten them killed for a ticket of Kyoshi Island."

It felt amazing to say it, after all these years. To acknowledge the horrible things Kirai had done. To enjoy the new people Suki had found in her life. To be free, for a moment, of having to balance competing demands just to keep her friends and family safe.

Kirai rolled her eyes. "We'll see how well they do when they actually have to face the might of the Fire Nation. I'm not saved, yet."

It was a reminder Suki didn't really need.

"And," Zhao said, "I'm certainly not joining the rest of you on this ridiculousness. I need to report this situation to Iroh, but unless my orders change, you fools are on your own." With a last sound of disgust, he left.

Mai made the gesture at his retreating back that Ty Woo had made earlier, and Suki was willing to be there was none of the same sarcasm involved. "So, how do we make me into an 'elegant and mysterious' girl who can get us some help?"

Mai's first mistake was letting Ty Lee's sisters give her advice on what to wear.

True, she probably didn't need a whole concealed arsenal just to go ask Kei Lo and Shyu for help sneaking into the Caldera, and there was no other practical point to the various layers of all-concealing clothing that she normally wore. Still, Mai liked her regular clothes. She could hide in them, when she needed to.

Bare limbs and bellies were no good for hiding.

But this mission was about being seen, not hiding.

So she sighed as she led Sokka and Suki to the small Ember Island Temple. At least the road was empty right now, the only activity visible at this time of the night being what seemed to be a faraway crowd leaving the Theater's last performance of the day. But those people wouldn't be approaching the Temple; most would break up along the paths leading to the various beach houses near the settlement here, while a small contingent would no doubt head to the Arcade for the overnight gambling scene.

Really, the only reason there was a Temple on the island at all was for the sake of tradition and culture.

Part of Mai's unease was seeing Azula again. She had doubled back to the house as soon as Sokka and Suki had gone in, figuring that Ty Lao's suggestion to go for a walk was a warning of some kind. The light coming through the back windows had revealed which room she should check out, and she had hung outside just below view for the whole confrontation.
Mai didn't know the whole story with Suki and Kirai, but there were enough clues to figure out the important parts, especially having Azula right there with her manipulations and poisons to serve as a comparison. Kirai was to Suki what Azula was to Mai. Suki feared Kirai, but wasn't going to put up with 'antic's anymore. Mai feared Azula, but she was resolved to go down stabbing if they ever met again.

Mai would help Suki, and then they could both get rid of the people who made their lives into nightmares.

She glanced at Sokka and Suki as she approached the Temple's main doors, got their banal signs of encouragement, and went ahead and knocked.

She was on her third set of knocks when Kei Lo answered with a lantern in his hand.

Mai thought about trying to look sexy in the lamplight, but didn't actually know how to do that, so she just clasped her hands behind her back. "Hi. There's an emergency, and I really need your help. Desperately need your help. Yeah." She tried to smile. "Can we come in?"

Kei Lo's face went red, just as planned. Mai would have felt bad about manipulating the poor boy if this wasn't for something almost like a good cause. He finally stammered, "Oh, uh, y- yes," and backed out of the doorway.

Mai was about to step forward when Sokka shouldered past her and stepped right into the Temple, saying, "Thanks, bud, we appreciate it." If Kei Lo had intended to raise an objection to the others coming in, the time to mention it had passed.

Mai was still going to shove Sokka back, some time.

She plunged in after the boys, leaving Suki to bring up the rear.

Kei Lo led them all past the temple's alters and meditation rooms, up a set of stairs. Mai smelled something like incense as they ascended, and at the end found herself on what seemed to be a residential floor covered in a thin cloud. A series of small rooms lined the side opposite the stairs, while the rest of the area was given over to a little gathering space with sitting mats and a dusty tea set on top of a cabinet.

Sitting there already were two old men, trading intent whispers. One was Shyu. The other had a much more wrinkled face and puffed on a pipe. Both quickly ended their conversation when they realized they weren't alone.

Shyu rose from his mat. "I was not expecting visitors tonight."

Kei Lo bowed. "Apologies, master, but they are asking for our help."

The pipe-puffer's eyebrows jumped. "Help? Help with what? Who are these people? Are we in trouble?"

Mai gave her own bow. "I am Lady Caldera Yu Mai, Weapon of the Fire Nation. I need your help to save someone's life."

"Oh my." Shyu moved across the gathering area. "Please, take a mat and sit down, and you can tell us all about it. Let me open a window to clear this funk. Apologies, but Sage Guan's pipe keeps his nerves calm, and he is the Master of this Temple."

Guan sighed, made a Firebending hand motion, and instantly the glow in the bowl of his pipe went
Mai took one of the mats, but paused as she tried to figure out what to do with it while wearing a short skirt and a top that was missing its lower half. Sokka and Suki sat down on their own mats in what looked like comfortable positions, but Mai eventually elected to kneel.

A moment later, Kei Lo was kneeling beside her. "So, what can we help with? Whose life is in danger? Are you okay?"

Mai didn't count being half-dressed as 'okay,' but that was hardly relevant. "I'm fine. My friend here is Suki of Kyoshi Island, a servant to Prince Zuko, and it's her sister who's in danger." Mai went through the whole story, happily throwing Ozai and Azula under the charging rhino. It was a risk, admitting that they were asking for help against the Royal Family, but it wouldn't be possible to hide that fact for long, and better to get a refusal now then to be betrayed later. "So we need," Mai concluded, "your assistance getting our group into the Caldera, as quickly as possible. Hence our dropping by this late."

Kei Lo looked to the two older Sages. "Masters, can we help?"

Shyu rubbed at his fuzzy chin. Guan put his pipe back in his mouth and tried to puff, and then realized it was no longer burning and grunted with annoyance.

Shyu said, "We've just received some news that might change you plans."

Guan's eyebrows shot up. "You're going to tell them?"

Shyu shrugged. "I have not been instructed to keep it a secret, and I expect the news will spread soon enough." He looked to Mai. "Azulon's advisors, Li and Lo, were arrested by the military in the palace today for attempting to usurp the Fire Lord's authority. They are being blamed the interference in your Agni Budokai. Prince Ozai is taking charge of his father's office and protection. And he has the support of the Grand Temple; that's how we were notified."

Oh, ashes. Mai closed her eyes and massaged her forehead. "So Prince Ozai is effectively the Fire Lord right now."

Shyu nodded. "That's what we were discussing when you arrived."

Guan looked down at his pipe. "The telegraph just came in. This was my second smoke since then."

Sokka cleared his throat. "So, to us foreigners, what does this mean, exactly?"

Mai shrugged. "Well, for one, we're asking for help from people who are effectively working for Ozai."

"Second," Suki added, "we can expect the entire capital to be against us."

Sokka drooped. "Oh. Yeah, I was afraid of that."

Kei Lo smacked a fist into his other hand. "But there must be something we can do! This- this poisoning and extortion is dishonorable! These people are not to blame for Prince Zuko's gallivanting about on Prince Iroh's orders! If Prince Ozai has an issue with his family, he should take his issues to them directly!"

Shyu stroked at his beard. "I admit, this is behavior that we would decry as criminal in anyone else. I am not at all comfortable with a leader who acts this way."
Guan tapped his pipe in his hands. "Careful, that's treasonous talk."

"Is it?" Kei Lo leaned forward. "Prince Ozai is not the Fire Lord. Iroh is still the crown prince. I'm not saying I support one over the other, but surely giving these people a little help cannot be treason. If Prince Ozai burned down someone's house, and they came begging for food and shelter, would you turn them away?"

Guan barked a laugh. "If the beggar had been banished, then yes, I would be wary of breaking the law. They're asking us to smuggle them into the Capital."

"Hey, now," Mai put in. "That's not technically illegal. Not unless the Sages' operations themselves are illegal. We're just taking advantage of them. Big difference."

Shyu chuckled. "She has a point. Your ship is still Exempt, isn't it, Master Guan?"

"It is. Haven't used it in over a decade, though. It's probably leaky."

Sokka grinned. "Leave that to me. So what's this about an exempt ship?"

Kei Lo looked over to Mai, and she once again tried to smile for him. His cheeks colored, and the turned back to Sokka. "An Exempt ship can bypass inspections, and is met at the Harbor by a Home Guard officer who escorts the crew and cargo straight through the security checkpoints. It is meant to ease the travel of people who frequently come and go from the Capital on business."

Guan sniffed at his pipe. "I was one of the High Sage's mentors. After he got the title, he appointed me to this Temple as a kind of retirement reward. I used to visit the Caldera, but things are so much nicer here."

Mai looked at Sokka and Suki, and got their nods. She turned back to Guan and kowtowed to him. Then she remembered she was in a short skirt, looked back to make sure the kowtow wasn't doing anything obscene, and lowered her head again. "Can we borrow your boat?"

Guan snorted and glanced at Shyu. "What do you think?"

"My orders are to keep tabs on Lady Mai and advise her in spiritual matters," Shyu said. He smiled. "If she takes your ship to the Capital, I'll know where she is. As far as spiritual matters are concerned, I think that honoring friendship and fighting for the lives of others is in accordance with the Way of the Flame."

Guan rolled his eyes. "So is obeying the Royal Family to the point of death."

Mai stayed in her kowtow, but turned her head to Kei Lo. When she caught his gaze, she raised her eyebrows in a silent plea for help.

His eyes moved over her (he was probably enjoying her pose, the pervert) and he turned to Guan. "Master, I can go with them. I can even go to the Grand Temple, and present their petition for intervention with Prince Ozai to the High Sage. It is perfectly all right for a member of the Caldera clan to ask the Sages for assistance in matters where Royalty has issued an order that they cannot physically follow, and we are using the Exempt ship to bring them along because of the pressing nature of the poison. It is all completely legal and honorable."

Huh.

Kei Lo was smarter than he looked. And usually acted.
Mai was almost glad she was dressed like Ty Lee.

Guan groaned. "Oh, you're going to go far, young Inferior Sage. You have the knack for politics. Fine, whatever, take my ship. If you cause trouble in the Capital, I'll plead senility and deny any memory of ever meeting you."

Mai snapped up out of her kowtow. "Thank you. I'll make sure the Avatar and Prince Zuko learn of your assistance."

Guan shook his head and poked a burning finger into the bowl of his pipe.

It was worth ordering an overnight ferry back from Ember Island, as Azula was able to arrive just in time to see the sun rising over the Capital on the first day of Father's unofficial reign.

A contingent of the Crimson Guard met her at the Harbor with a palanquin. As she seated herself, one of the bearers asked, "To the Palace, your majesty?"

Azula hesitated. As much as she wanted to see Father again, she didn't relish telling him that she had failed to return with Zuko. True, she had implemented his plan for forcing Uncle's pawns to produce poor lost Zuzu, but results were not guaranteed. She believed Suki and that Tribal when they said that they didn't know where Zuko was, and more knowledgeable people such as Zhao wouldn't be compelled by any danger to Kirai.

It was Father's plan, and so Azula was sure that it would work, but she felt like her task was incomplete.

She needed to make sure that Father wouldn't see her as a failure.

An idea occurred to her. "Where are the sisters Li and Lo being imprisoned?"

The palanquin bearer blinked, "At the Capital Prison, it is said."

Azula grinned. "Then take me there. I have loose ends to clean up."

It wasn't a long trip to the stone prison, and when Azula arrived, the staff welcomed her with the equal mix of eagerness and fear that she was due. The order to take her to the traitors was obeyed instantly.

When one of the prison guards brought her to Li and Lo's prison cell, Azula was disappointed to find that it was quite comfortable, as far as cages went. Behind the line of bars, there were two large cots, plenty of blankets, a window that caught the breeze, and a bookshelf filled with reading material in good condition. The sisters were even wearing their own clothes. One was on a bed, reading, while the other seemed to be meditating on a mat on the floor.

At least they were sharing a cell. That would save Azula some time.

She looked to the guard. "You may go. We have matters of state to discuss."

The guard bowed and closed the door behind her.

Azula turned back to the caged sisters and let a smirk overtake her face. "Well, this is quite the reversal from our last meeting."

The sister on the bed (Li?) closed her book. "You will forgive us if we are not in a mood to kneel."
The sister on the floor (Lo?) opened her eyes. "We expected more respect when you finally returned to make a deal."

Azula snorted. Father had prevented her from trying to make peace with these two, but considering how things had played out, he was right not to want to bother. "I don't think we need a deal anymore. You couldn't keep your hold on your power, and you've lost it. You have nothing my Father and I want."

Li (or Lo) climbed down off the bed. "You must know that this cannot last. We held power too long to be removed so easily."

Lo (or Li) stood up from the floor. "Prince Ozai's grasp on power will not be solidified so breezily."

"Believe that if you want, you tedious rhyming crones." Azula stepped right up to the bars, and reached into her sleeve. "But there are no alternatives to his rule. Uncle is far away, and the traitors with whom he is consorting are in the process of failing right now. And you- well, that's what I'm here to take care of." She slid out the hidden bit of metal wire out of her sleeve and held it up in the light.

Li (or Lo) squinted at it and said, "What is that?"

Azula smiled, walked over to the swinging set of bars that served as the cage's door, and poked the wire into the lock that held it in place. She felt the tumblers moving within.

Lo (or Li) added, "You came to help us escape, and not to chat?"

The lock clicked, and Azula stepped back as the door swung open. Then she turned her head and called out in a clear voice, "No, stay back. Don't make me defend myself." There was no urgency, no emotion in the delivery, but that was all right. The words were all that was important.

The sisters both blinked at her. Simultaneously, of course.

Then Azula snapped her arms out to launch a pair of fireballs right into their hearts.

They both went down with identical rasps of breathless pain, but they were not dead yet. Azula hadn't had time to make the fireballs especially explosive. But now it was a simple matter to summon twin jets of flames from her fists, and methodically finish the job.

When she was the only one left living in the cell, she went over and knocked on the metal door.

The guard answered instantly. She would have been right outside the door, of course, and heard everything. She didn't so much as react now to sight of the cell, or the smell.

Azula clasped her hands behind her back. "You heard me. I acted in self-defense."

The guard nodded.

Azula smiled. "Excellent. Now, I'm done here. Take me to my palanquin. My father is eager to see me."

It was good to be the one in power.

And Father, no doubt, would be pleased at having this little loose end settled. Or, rather, a pair of loose ends.
The next morning dawned clear and bright, and Suki hoped it to be an omen for their infiltration of the Capital.

In the receiving hall of the Ty-sisters' beach house, the septuplets were once again lined up with their tonfa clubs in hand. Suki stood before them on Mai's left (with Momo on Mai's right), and Kirai waiting over by the door.

Suki bowed with Mai to the sisters. Momo copied their motion.

"Thank you," Mai said, "for your hospitality. We leave in peace."

The words were part of the ceremony, but Suki herself didn't feel like she had gotten much hospitality. Sure, the letter of the convention had been preserved, since Azula had only done harm to her own servant, but it had been a direct strike at Suki's emotions and responsibilities.

But she also knew that there was nothing the Ty-sisters could have done, even refusing to let Azula into their home, which would have prevented the princess from poisoning Kirai. They had simply done what they could in a horrible situation, saving Mai and trying to ride out the consequences.

Perhaps the sisters had only done what Suki herself had made a career out of.

The six Ty-sisters all bowed back to Mai and Suki, and then rose and lifted their tonfa above their heads. All of them smacked the sticks together as one, and then the sister on the far left said, "Your stay here has enriched our lives. You are welcome to come again." They all cracked their clubs together again. "Once you step outside, you will no longer be under our protection. May your flames burn bright in the wind."

And with that, the ceremony was over, and Suki found herself at the center of a storm of hugs. Sokka would be sorry he missed this. But someone had to go get Sage Guan's special boat ready.

The sisters' enthusiasm continued as Suki picked up Momo and they all headed outside, in the form of waving and jumping and calls to be safe and, in Ty Woo's case, an admonition of, "Try not to die in a stupid way like Ty Lee!"

As they got into the carriage, Suki looked at Kirai. "And yet Ty Woo is still closer to her sisters than we are to each other."

Kirai snorted as Mai got into the carriage and it bounced into motion. "Well, none of them got each other poisoned."

It was all Kira wanted to talk about. Suki couldn't imagine herself as dying and not wanting to make some kind of peace about their past together, but then, Kirai was obviously not someone who put much importance on sentimentality. So Suki said, "How are you feeling? It's been about twelve hours since Azula dosed you."

Kirai grimaced. "My stomach has been hurting since dawn, but I don't know if that's the poison or the stress. I had an awful time in the bathroom this morning."

"Thanks," Mai drawled, "for that vivid update."

Suki faked her way through a chuckle, but she didn't feel much like laughing. The rest of the trip to the pier passed in silence, and Suki stroked Momo's fur the whole way.

They arrived at a little marina to find everything ready to go.
The ship she saw as she emerged from the carriage was certainly impressive. It was a classic wooden junk, no engines or armor. Sokka waved from the deck, while a few men in fancy uniforms moved about untying robes. As Momo leapt out of Suki's arms to go greet Sokka, leading the way up the gangplank, Kei Lo, Shyu, and Guan emerged from below deck, the latter puffing furiously at his pipe.

Kirai grunted. "This looks workable. Should get us to Capital Island in a few hours. Then we'll see if the rest of your plan is any good."

Sokka rubbed his face wearily while Momo perched on his head. "Please don't say things like that. It's just asking for bad luck to come and mess with us. Anyway, Mai, I made sure everyone's luggage was stored below, but you might want to check things over yourself."

Mai quirked an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because you'll eventually feel the need to check anyway, and it's probably better for you to do it before you start getting seasick and stinky."

Mai snorted. "I hate how well you know me now." But she got moving, heading past Kei Lo to the ladder.

Kirai followed her. "I'm going down below, too. Better to stay out of the way of the people who are actually doing work."

Suki trotted at her sister's side. "I'll go with you."

"Why?"

"Do you really want to be alone, if you start feeling the poison more?"

Kirai grimaced, but didn't say anything.

The deck at the bottom of the latter was a collection of cabins. Suki spotted Mai ducking into the one where all their luggage was piled up and tied down; they couldn't leave their things with the Ty-Sisters, as no one had any idea where they'd be going after whatever happened with Prince Ozai.

Kirai picked a cabin seeming at random and slid the curtain closed behind her, leaving Suki in the corridor.

Well, that was just great.

Suki went into the next cabin over, wondering if she should maybe try getting a nap in. There was a plank made up as a cot, complete with pillow and blanket, as well as a-

Wait. What was it?

It was a package of some kind, the paper wrapping providing no clue as to what might be underneath. There seemed to be some kind of a quiet sound coming from within, but Suki didn't-

That's when the package exploded into a storm of white smoke.

She inhaled before she realized what a bad idea it was, and the constant echo of 'trap' in her mind was quickly dampened into a vague anxiety as her body crumpled to the floor. The smoky air stung sweetly in her nostrils as her vision turned black.

Yes, a nap was a good idea.
The last thing she heard before her senses completely left her was the distinct sound of a Firebender's jet of flames coming from somewhere on the other side of the world.

Zhao disliked being out of uniform, even in a respectable set of robes that wouldn't have looked out of place in his father's wardrobe, but it seemed that his duties now included covert fieldwork. At the very least, if he ever got out from under Iroh's thumb, he'd be able to brag about a wide variety of experiences.

At least the there was nothing particularly dangerous about this particular assignment.

And, he had to admit, it was nice beach, even if it was public-access.

Zhao stood at the edge of the beach, where the dark sand met the road lined by all manner of tourist traps, a single flowered sprig of jasmine in his hand. Around him, children and teenagers frolicked here and there, and thankfully none of their antics took them anywhere close to him. He was one of the few adults around at this time of the day, but no one had given him a second look. He was doing a convincing job of appearing to be just another vacationer enjoying the atmosphere of the shore.

And then a young man approached slowly from Zhao's left. Although dressed in shorts and a light vest, the youth wore a wide hat that hid the upper half of his face and a scarf around his neck that obscured the natural lines of his visage.

Zhao tensed.

The youth raised the rim of the hat to look at Zhao's jasmine flower, and then nodded. "I know someone whose favorite tea is jasmine, although sometimes he forgets that."

Good, this was the Bangfei, Weapon of the Fire Nation. Zhao replied, "The best cup of tea is that shared between friends." With the (hopelessly naive) counter-sign delivered, he summoned a flame to burn the sprig in his hands, and threw the ash to fall to the sand of the beach. "Lead the way."

Bangfei lowered the brim of his hat again, and then together they left behind the oblivious vacationers.

It was a short walk, here on Ember Island, to a spot of jungle hidden from view. Zhao followed Bangfei through giant fronds and under palm trees, until they came to a clearing where a large wicker basket waited. Without hesitation, Bangfei went over to the basket and lifted the lid to show the tied-up child sleeping within.

Zhao nodded. "Well done. That is indeed Caldera Yu Tomoshibi. 'Tom-Tom,' the family calls him."

He couldn't suppress a quirk of his lips. "If I had the boy in my possession yesterday, I could have prevented Lady Mai from running off to the Capital. But good timing isn't something that happens often in military service."

Bangfei took off his hat. "Mai is going to the Capital?"

Zhao shrugged. "She's going to try. And in doing so, she is no longer my responsibility. If she survives, her brother will be very useful leverage. If not- well, denying Prince Ozai two allies is no small thing."

Bangfei stood quietly for a moment, and then bowed to Zhao. "I think it is time for me to return home to the Capital as well. I doubt I'll be free to receive orders from Prince Iroh for a while."

Zhao nodded. "Yes, I expect that you're right." He lifted the lid of the basket, examining the sleeping
boy within. There were dried tear-tracks on his face; the child had probably cried himself to sleep. Zhao was thankful that he wouldn't have to deal with the child once delivered to the hired caretakers; then 'Tom-Tom' would be safely out of the way until needed. "Hopefully, at least, you'll survive. It would be a shame to lose a prompt and confident agent."

When Zhao turned to see if Bangfei had any response, he found that the Weapon was already gone.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Everyone's mistakes reach critical mass.

**Family and Flames**

The first Mai knew of the attack on their Magic Politics Boat was a solid gray cloud spilling through the door of the luggage cabin.

Stupidly, her first instinct was to grab a pair of knives.

She just barely had time to remember Azula's advice, that everyone always underestimated how important the simple act of unimpeded breathing was to a fighter, and cut off an inhalation just as the smoke's stinging sweetness blossomed in her nostrils. Even that small amount was enough to make gravity into a much tougher opponent. She dropped her knives and grabbed for the stacks of luggage to keep herself upright, and then shut her eyes as the smoke filled the room.

That left her with blind, dizzy, holding her breath, and trapped in a strange ship.

Okay. Mai had worked with less.

Then she heard the Firebending.

Well, ash this, then.

She turned around, stumbled over to the opposite side of the cabin, and traced her way along the wall to the door. She stumbled past the curtain, out into the little hallway, and got three dizzy steps towards where she remembered the ladder to the main deck to be when she realized that the curtain might work as a kind of face-mask. She tried to turn around, but her lungs were starting to sting and her legs were wobbly and she stumbled into the wall and slid to the floor.

Which direction was she facing, now?

She really needed to breathe.

Really really really really-

Then there was the sound of Firebending right above her, and she felt heat against the skin of her face. She didn't realize that she wasn't actually on fire until after she threw herself towards the source of the sound and stabbed with the first sharp objects she found in her sleeves.

The muffled voice of a man screamed out like someone had just jabbed a pair of razor disks into his knees. It wasn't a voice Mai recognized, so she continued stabbing. There were more screams and a heavy body fell down on her hard enough to make her gasp-

-NO cough it out cough it out cough it out-

-the floor shook with more impacts and she heard boots and voices and Firebending-
As soon as Azula stepped into the palace, a pair of the Crimson Guard came to escort her up to Grandfather's suite.

She smiled the whole way up.

The last time she had been in the ornate foyer of the Fire Lord's personal apartment, it had been for an audience with Li and Lo, and she had left being dragged prematurely out by Father. Now, Li and Lo were dead by her hand, and Father himself opened the doors to welcome her. "Azula! You're back safely!" He wrapped her in a tight hug. "But you've returned alone. Is Zuko okay?"

Azula seized on the chance to think about something besides what one was supposed to do when wrapped in one's father's arms. "Zuko was not on Ember Island, and no one but Uncle seems to know his location. I met with Suki and a clever Tribal the Avatar is keeping as a pet. They promised to pass on the message that Zuko is wanted at home."

Father released her, and gave her a familiar (and much more comfortable) analyzing look. "You used Kirai, then?"

Azula nodded. "Suki received her sister's poisoning with all due concern." Father had provided the poison itself, so she had no doubts as to its effectiveness.

"Then we'll just have to trust that this Suki of Kyoshi Island is as resourceful as she presents herself." Father turned away and began pacing across the room. "Everything is in motion right now. Did you hear about Mai's family?"

Mai.

Azula had been hoping to finally deal with that traitor, to take a little time for pleasure amidst all this busyness to personally boil her former friend's eyeballs into vapor, but it was sadly not to be. Father's mission was the priority. "I was told that Mai was out of sorts after their meeting. I assume there was some melodrama?"

Father gave a bitter laugh. "If you consider a kidnapping by a Weapon of the Fire Nation to be melodrama."

Azula frowned. "Mai kidnapped someone?"
"No, the description matches Bangfei, and the Fire Sage assigned to watch the boy has track of him. After Lord Ukano and Lady Michi met with Mai, Bangfei broke into their place and took their son. Ukano sent a wire about it, but I haven't been able to learn anything more. I can only assume that your uncle has a hand in this."

Azula nodded. It made sense. "It's a challenge directed at you, trying to demonstrate that you can't protect your allies. A clear statement, but rather weak considering he needed a Weapon to do it."

"As ever, I value your analysis." Father stopped his pacing and turned a smile on her. She received the praise with a bow of her head. "And how do you think this will affect Mai herself?"

Mai? Azula kept her head lowered so that she wouldn't accidentally show any expression that Father might misinterpret as disrespect. "I'm sorry, Father. I don't understand why this would affect Mai."

"Isn't Tom-Tom her brother?"

Azula had to remind herself that Father had barely interacted with Mai. "Yes, but that doesn't matter. Mai doesn't care about her family. Tom-Tom could die and she'd barely take notice."

Father was silent for a long moment. "Perhaps it is just as well that she betrayed us, then. Such a calculating ally could never be trusted. In any event, I have Piandao preparing to hunt the boy, and issued a proclamation summoning the remaining Weapons here in the Capital to my service. They will serve us now, and protect the rest of our allies."

Azula finally raised her head and grinned. "Having the Fire Lord's influence on our side is quite helpful. I see you've taken up residence in your new office?"

Father looked around the room, but he did not seem to share Azula's delight. "I have. Your grandfather is in his bedroom, and it seems that Li and Lo had remade rest of the chambers as their workplace. There are whole archives up here that I'll need to investigate." He closed his eyes and sighed. "The Fire Lord is in sorrier condition that any have imagined. I've never seen someone so gray. Even his skin. No wonder those old spider-snakes were able to act so brazenly. I don't think he even recognized me. I've summoned the Royal Physician to verify his condition and confirm the need for me to step in."

Ah, here was a chance for Azula to really shine! "Well, you won't have to worry about Li and Lo anymore, at least. I've taken care of that for you."

Father blinked. "Taken care of what?"

She smiled. "I stopped by the prison on my way here. Li and Lo died 'attempting to escape' when I confronted them with their crimes. I made sure the wounds were unquestionably fatal."

Father stared at her.

Azula nodded.

Father continued to stare at her.

Azula didn't understand. Hadn't she done well?

Then Father brought his hands to his face and moaned. "Oh, Azula. What have you done?"

Sokka hated sneak attacks. They were a slush of a time to pull off successfully, and whenever the
enemy managed to make one happen, it always completely ruined his day.

Sokka was on the main deck of Sage Guan's fancy above-the-law boat when the insides exploded with some kind of thick white smoke. Everyone out there with him- Guan himself, Mai's hot'n'bothered friend Kei Lo, that Shyu guy, and the crew they had hired- all cried out and moved around in confusion, leaving Sokka to try to do something. Unfortunately, his first instinct was to head for the ladder leading inside to find out if Mai and Suki were okay (oh, and Kirai, too, he guessed), but all that got him was a whiff of the strange-smelling smoke.

His legs immediately buckled under him and he dropped to the deck.

Knock-out gas. Several chemical possibilities occurred to him, given the effect and the strange sweet odor, and that was just from what he had managed to sneak-read while working in the South Pole Research Center. He held his breath and dragged himself away from the plume of smoke erupting from inside the ship. People were running around and it seemed like there were more people here than a second ago-

Wait. How had knock-out gas gotten inside the ship? Sokka had looked it over with Sage Guan last night, and then they'd hired a temporary crew and loaded up the supplies and luggage, and Sokka had overseen everything. Maybe one of the crew members had smuggled it aboard, or- well, Sokka had relied on Guan to show him around the ship. Maybe the old pipe-puffer had kept something hidden. Now where was that-

The ship was on fire.

Sokka waved his hand to clear away some of the knock-out smoke from his vision, and sure enough, Firebenders in black clothes with weird masks on their faces were standing on the deck and lighting things on fire. The white smoke was mixing with black smoke and some of the black was coming from inside- oh, no, were there Firebenders inside, too?

And where was the crew?

Sokka forced himself back onto his shaky feet. He saw Shyu lying motionless on the deck, as well as Kei Lo. He couldn't see Guan anywhere, or the crew. The guys in black were focused on setting every available surface on fire-

One turned and looked Sokka right in the eyes.

Slush.

He was still reaching for his knives when the Firebender dashed over and grabbed his wrist, twisting it in a way that painfully turned off his own gripping ability. Sokka tried throwing a fist with his other arm, but the Firebender easily deflected the blow, and then twisted him around and shoved him forward.

He wound up tumbling face first into one of the plumes of knock-out smoke.

He got a good lungful and choked on the acidic sweetness and his vision went black and his head struck something hard and he was flying and he splashed into some water and his arms wouldn't work and the water closed in over him.

The last thing he heard, muffled and made all squiggly by the water, was what sounded like the world's largest woodwind horn.
Azula’s stomach clenched at Father’s words. "I- I thought- I didn’t want them to make trouble for us. For you!"

He said nothing. He kept his face in his hands and completely ignored her.

It was the silence that Azula found most disturbing. She could understand rage, but this- was it disappointment? Disgust? Would he send her away? She dropped to her knees and lowered her head. "I apologize for my actions. I acted rashly and with an authority I did not have. I will accept any punishment you consider appropriate."

He finally lowered his hands and looked at her. There was no anger on his face. Instead, his expression was soft, his eyes warm.

Azula could read the emotion there easily.

Pity.

Father pitied her.

She gritted her teeth against the urge to shudder.

Father kneeled down on the floor beside her and put a hand on top of her head. "This is my fault, not yours."

Azula squeezed her eyes shut. She wanted to run away, but Father had not dismissed her, and so here she would stay. Any punishment would be better than this.

She was being treated as a failure.

"I used to be very different," Father continued, "before Zuko’s exile. Seeing what my mistakes did to him, and to you, made me realize that I had to take action. To become a new person. It still surprises people, and I still make mistakes, but I’m not who I once was. My strength is no longer defined by how much hurt I’ve spread. I act with purpose, now, even at my most violent." Father sighed. "But I’ve failed to teach these new lessons to you."

Failed. Failure. Azula had failed him. He would never be able to rely on her again. He already kept things from her, and now she’d never earn his full trust. He’d cut her out of his life and give his favor to Zuko and-

"You are what I made you." He moved his hand to pet her hair, making it tug at her topknot. "But I don’t blame you for it. I made you, and I love you, Azula. I always will."

No.

No, he had to be lying. This made no sense! He couldn’t love a failure! But why would Father lie? Was this part of her punishment?

"Azula," he said. "Open your eyes."

She always did everything her father commanded.

Azula opened her eyes.

Father was leaning down in front of her, his gaze fixed on her. "Look at me. I know how observant you are. I know how easily you see truth and lies. How you command them. Look at me when I say I love you, and that you’re not in trouble."
She always did everything her father commanded, and so she let herself see, let herself analyze. Everything from the steadiness of his eyes to the tone of his voice was collated with all of her observations of him, and people in general, over the years. She noticed all the little tells that no one could control. He wasn't trying to hold himself back, like Suki did with her every action and expression. He was being completely open.

And he was telling the truth.

The relief burst out of Azula with a gasp that almost became a sob before she bit down on it. She couldn't show weakness. She couldn't-

Father pulled her head over to rest against his chest, and he wrapped her in a hug. "It's okay, Azula. I know you're upset. It's okay. You'll be all right."

She hadn't cried since- since- She couldn't even remember right now. But now she couldn't stop herself, couldn't do anything to hold back the tears or her whining gasps. The lack of control filled her with rage, and if Father hadn't been holding her in place, she would have lashed out with her fire at everything around her.

"It's okay," Father repeated.

He kept repeating it until Azula finally defeated the swirl of emotions in her chest, hammering them down and choking the life out of them until they retreated into her darkest recesses. Less than perfect was less than acceptable.

She wiped at her eyes and tried to think of something to say.

Father finally let go of her. "Azula, I have a task for you."

A task?

A task!

She could still be useful! She could make up for her mistake! She could demonstrate her strength and show that she wasn't some mewling child in need of comfort!

She straightened her back and nodded. "I am yours to command."

Father smiled. "I want you to work on something for me. You are clever and powerful, and I truly think you might be the greatest warrior alive. So, the next time you face the choice of granting death, I want you think about whether it's really necessary. About whether you can remove the danger of your opponent without death. And if you can, I want you to try. I won't be mad if you- if it doesn't work out. We will likely have to kill the Avatar, after all, and maybe Iroh. I just want you to try. You've very smart, so I know you'll be fine. Is that okay?"

Azula wanted to shake her head. "Wait. So- so the problem isn't that you needed Li and Lo alive? You just don't want me killing people unless I have to?"

An expression moved across Father's face too fast for Azula to catch what it was, and he nodded. "That's right. I don't think that being so cavalier with lives is good for you."

She didn't understand; taking away the power Li and Lo wielded, even putting them in a prison, wouldn't necessarily prevent them from becoming dangerous again. It might take years, but better to kill now than be stabbed in the back in a decade. Yet, she hesitated to reveal her ignorance. She couldn't even fathom where this was coming from. Was this what it felt like to be stupid? "O- okay, I
understand. I will do as you say."

Father reached out to pat her head. "Good. I know that this is asking a lot, considering how I've taught you before now. And there will be the need to take lives, in the future. We have to get your brother home, after all, and deal with all those who have endangered him. But if Suki does bring him back, we will give her sister the antidote and then prepare to deal efficiently with our other enemies. And I will be here to help and guide you, Azula. I'll always be here."

"Okay." She bowed. "Thank you, Father."

She didn't understand, but if he would be here, she had every confidence that she could succeed.

Before she could straighten again, a cry sounded from deeper in the suite, a clear call in the voice of an old man:

"Ozai!"

Father blinked. "That was the Fire Lord. I wonder-" He got up off the floor and hurried to the back room.

Azula was not invited to follow, so she stood up and remained right where she was, ready for more orders. Father said he wasn't mad, but there was no need to try his patience with more presumptions of authority. She did take the opportunity to wipe at her eyes again, and then fix her topknot. Perhaps Father didn't mind her weakness, but she would murder anyone who saw her looking like a sloppy child and drink their blood as a warning to others, and Father said she wasn't supposed to kill people if she could help it.

She wondered what that old fool Azulon wanted. Probably asking where his nurses were so he could get a diaper change. It disgusted Azula to be named after him.

She was exercising her face with a good sneer when Father stumbled-

- stumbled -

- into the room. His face was pale and his features slack. His eyes stared into nothing.

Azula immediately tensed and prepared for an attack. "What's happening?"

Father focused his gaze on her. "Azulon's dead. The Fire Lord is dead."

She snapped her hands in the air. "I didn't do it!"

Aang's return to his friends was not the happy reunion he had anticipated.

He had followed the trails of his own connections to them, visible only when he immersed himself into the meditative state that Guru Pathik had taught him, looking forward to sharing his experiences he had with the Sun Warriors, and to working together again to try to save the world from any more tragedies like the deaths of the dragons. Those lines of invisible light had led him here, to what Zuko had called Ember Island, to what seemed to be a marina near one of the island's settlements.

And now, as Appa brought him to that very spot, he saw a thick smear of black smoke against the sky rising from his destination. "Um, anyone else seeing all the smoke coming from where we're headed? I think our friends might be on fire."

"No, I don't see it, but I do smell it." King Toph said. "And it makes sense. Things would probably
be dangerous and on fire around them."
Zuko leaned over the edge of the saddle, his one good eye wide. "We have to help them!"

"Right!" It was good to have everyone on the same page. "Appa, yip-yip!" Aang tugged Appa's reins to call of a rapid descent, steering towards the blaze.

The source of the burning was a boat, and in addition to the black smoke rising up from the fires, a strange white smoke was pouring out of every opening to waft heavily across the water. Firebenders in black tunics and masks were all over the scene, some on the ship setting new fires, some on the pier forming a protective perimeter. Someone- it was hard to see with all the smoke and fire- was thrown over the ship's side to crash into the water of the bay, and didn't float back up.

And then something small and white shot up from out of the traveling flames to flutter its way up towards Aang. He didn't recognize it at first, but Appa did, and the big guy roared a greeting as Momo flapped up and came for a landing in Aang's lap. The lemur grabbed at his shirt and wouldn't stop chattering.

Aang took that as a sign that things down on the ground were urgent.

He turned and handed Momo to Zuko. "Here, you take him, and guide Appa down for a landing. I'm going ahead on my own."

King Toph tilted her head. "What with the fire, I know how Princey is going to make himself useful, but what about me?"

Aang smiled, even though he knew she wouldn't be able to see. "There's a whole bunch of Firebenders down there, and Appa can't fight them all."

Toph grinned back at him. "Got it."

Zuko said, "But what are you going to-"

Aang jumped off Appa's head and let himself fall.

He had the winds slow his fall only a little, instead focusing his most of his Airbending on keeping himself vertical. He reached out a hand and pulled on the waters of the bay, raising it into a swell, but just when he was about to splash into it, he pushed it away again to match his falling speed even as he shifted his Airbending to start decelerating. What could have been a nasty impact against the surface of the water was instead transformed into a smooth dive that set him speeding under the waves like a dolphin-fish.

Aang spotted the person who had been tossed off the ship, and recognized the shape: Sokka needed help.

Aang kicked with his feet and pushed with his arms, shooting himself through the water to catch Sokka and carry his friend right back up to the surface. Aang burst out of the water with Sokka in his arms, and then kicked out a burst of air that launched them both back up over the rail of the burning ship to the main deck.

Aang landed right next to one of the Firebenders in black. The guy jumped in surprise, and then Aang spat out a burst of air that pushed the man back to tip over the rail into the bay.

A quick look found Zuko running up the ship's gangplank, already moving his arms to take control of the nearby flames. The fires stilled for a moment, and then shrunk into nothing.
Hey, that was good.

Aang ran over and dumped Sokka at Zuko's feet. "Here, keep an eye on him. I think the others must be inside the ship!"

Zuko nodded, and stretched out his arms towards another batch of flames. "Watch out for the white smoke. It smells like knockout gas."

Aang had to grin. "Sounds like a job for an Airbender."

He ran over to the one of the larger plumes of the white vapor and summoned a wind to help him jump high enough to clear its tallest curve. As he began to fall, he punched a fist down in a move more like a Firebending attack and unleashed a hard stream of wind. He kept it up as he dropped, pushing the fog down, and when he landed inside the ship, he slapped the wooden floor hard enough to send a burst of air outward to clear the immediate area of the gas.

It was just enough to see the start of a hallway, a ladder leading up that he had completely bypassed, and a cabin with a curtain over its door.

He heard the distinct sound of Firebending echoing down the hall, and there were flashes of color in the cloudy distance.

Then the fog began closing in again.

As Aang shifted into a real Airbending stance, he called out, "Mai?"

He hadn't seen her up above. If Sokka was here, then she probably was, too, but no one had bothered to toss her overboard so what if she had been-

".......'ello?"

It was quiet and gravelly and more than a little slurred but it could have been Mai's voice.

Aang windmilled his arms, putting all his focus into the movements to guide a fat stream of wind up from behind him, over his head, down to his chest, and then forward.

The wind blasted down the hallway, its twisting made visible by the thick white smoke, pushing and undulating and assaulting the knockout gas the way Aang himself wanted to. The wind ripped the curtains off the doorways of the cabins to reveal people- Suki and another girl who looked just like her but with darker hair- sprawled unconscious on the floor.

Aang also saw that more smoke was coming out of the cabins, the thinner streams being caught and carried away by Aang's Airbending, almost as if they were the sources of the gas.

No, not almost.

Aang moved forward one step at a time, careful to keep his airstream going no matter how much he wanted to find Mai. If he wanted to save her, he had to stay awake, and that meant keeping the bad clouds away. When he reached the first cabin, the one with Suki in it, he relaxed his stance and whirled to kick a leg right above her crumpled body. His foot didn't connect with anything, but the arc of wind it created picked up the smoking lump of something that was sitting on her cot. It flew up over his head and got caught in the airstream to be blasted down the hall.

He moved forward again, repeating the process with the smoking lump in the cabin with Suki's sister.
Then he took another step and nearly tripped over a bloody body.

It was another of the masked Firebenders from above. The legs of the man's tunic were all torn, and from what Aang could see through all the blood, so was the skin beneath it. There was so much blood that it was pooled on the floor, maybe too much for the Firebender to be alive. He wasn't moving, for sure, and-

-and there was another body under him.

Smaller.

With shining dark hair.

Aang's heart pounded as he let go of his airstream and grabbed for Mai.

He shoved the Firebender off of her, and to his horror found her also covered in blood. He couldn't find any wounds, though, and as he lifted her in his arms, his boots bumped up against something metal. A razor disk. No, two disks. Both with bloody blades. So it had been a fight, and maybe she won before she was knocked out.

Maybe she'd be okay. She had to be okay.

The thought reminded Aang that he needed to stay okay, too, but the fog was drifting towards him again. Yet it was moving much slower than before, so getting rid of those things in the cabins must have been a good idea.

He ran back to the ladder and skipped over it again with a wind-assisted jump. He landed on the deck to find that the fires were almost out, so he laid Mai down and said, "I'll be right back."

He dropped back inside to find two more of the Firebenders emerging from the clouds at end the hall. White and black vapors swirled around them to reflect the lights of approaching fires.

He could see their masks more clearly now, could see that there was more than just fabric to them. The Firebenders wore something heavy over their noses and mouths. Maybe that would block the gas in some way?

The Firebenders both punched flame at him.

Aang raised his hands to catch the fireballs, and let them extinguish in his palms.

The Firebenders had a moment to blink before Aang showed them that Air wasn't so easily deflected. The bursts he threw at them sent them careening back down the hall and tore their masks from their faces.

Soon, he had Suki and the other girl in his arms, and was carrying them both out in the daylight.

Zuko and Toph were waiting for him.

"So," Toph said as she cracked her knuckles. Aang spotted a whole bunch of masked Firebenders splayed out on the pier like the aftermath of a particularly wild Yangchen's Festival. "What do you guys figure this was all about?"

Aang could only shrug. And everyone who could tell them was unconscious.
hammering on the door to his quarters.

Perhaps the hunt for Bangfei had taken a new turn.

He grabbed his sword before answering the door, because even in the palace one could not be too careful, but his caller only turned out be Princess Azula, literally steaming. "My princess, how might I be of-"

"Shut up," she growled, and then she grabbed the front of his robe and dragged him into the hall. She was surprisingly strong for a little girl (but no, she was not so little anymore, was she?), and as a servant it was not his place to contradict royalty. So he offered no resistance as she pulled him to the Fire Lord's suite.

On the way, they passed the Royal Physician hurrying in the other direction. That was more ominous than Azula's sudden touchiness.

But when she pulled Piandao into the suite, he found that Ozai was waiting there, alive and seemingly well but pacing intensely. Azula finally let go of Piandao's robe, and he gave the proper bow. "My prince, how might I be of-"

"Shut up," Ozai growled. "Azulon is dead."

Oh.

The man who had ruined his life was finally gone. Piandao had just wanted to get away from the war, to remove himself from what he saw as a pointless exercise in bullying played out on a continental scale, but Azulon wouldn't allow it. The counter-argument had arrived on Piandao's doorstep in the form of one hundred soldiers, and he fought another war there to preserve his right to peace. It was a horrible battle, one that Piandao regretted every day, but he had consoled himself at the time with the thought that it was at least a war fought for a good cause, and the last war he would ever have to experience.

Then another one hundred men had shown up some time later, as well as a message from Azulon. The sentiment was simple: "They will come, one hundred at a time, until there remain no more men left to fight in my name."

And so the choice was Piandao's. He could fight one hundred men at a time, wave after wave, dealing out death for the rest of his life, or he could submit to Azulon. The result had been the creation of the title of 'Weapon of the Fire Nation,' and Piandao became the first citizen to bear it. He gave up his autonomy, and appropriately enough, he was labeled as an object for the use of others.

He wondered now if, despite the pointlessness of such a crass action, he might have the opportunity to spit on the old man's corpse before it got to the pyre.

To Ozai, who just lost a father, he said, "I thought you needed him alive."

But it was Azula who stomped her foot. "He died of old age, you clod! We didn't do it!"

Ah.

Convenient.

Or-

No, not so convenient. "So is Iroh the Fire Lord, now?"
Ozai shook his head. "The transfer does not officially occur until the Sages place the crown on the successor's head. High Sage Xinghao is ruler of the Fire Nation for, at most, the next twenty-four hours. The people of the Fire Nation have that long to swear allegiance to a new Lord, and if Xinghao doesn't crown someone by then, everyone is free to submit to their own choice of leader."

Piandao nodded his understanding. Ozai was talking about a succession crisis. "Do you need me to fetch Xinghao, then? It is fortunate that we acted when we did, or Li and Lo might be the ones in control of the situation."

Ozai and Azula shared a glance. The princess opened his mouth to speak, but then he father cut her off with, "Li and Lo died today. They were removed in such a way that leaves us at fault, and that is all that will be said about the matter here."

It didn't take a detective to see that Azula had been her typical bloodthirsty self. So Li, Lo, and Azulon had all died while within Ozai's power-

Piandao put on the politely blank expression of a servant. "I understand. In that case, I suggest just sending a messenger for Xinghao, while I will personally ensure that the military's high command comes here for a discussion." A thought occurred to him. "Unless- but no, the Royal Physician was leaving as I came in. Everyone will know, soon. Unless I chase him down and stop him from talking?"

Ozai said nothing, but Azula's expression brightened. "Father, that might work! We could keep Azulon alive 'officially' long enough to divert suspicion of foul play. It's not like anyone ever came in her to see him, so-

"Azula," Ozai hissed. The daughter immediately cringed at her father's tone, a rare display of weakness that Piandao found intriguing. "And what, exactly, does your plan say we should do with the body that's currently growing cold in the bedroom? Should we simply pretend that we didn't notice Azulon's death for a week, and ask the Sages to forgo an open pyre? We have no choice. Piandao, see to the military as you said. Azula, you go to the High Sage yourself. I'm going to active the other Weapons here in the Caldera. Gerel, Mutan, and the Disciple will be able to keep peace, if needed."

Even a man like Piandao, who had fought and defeated armies back in the day, had to pause in his consideration of the scale of force that Ozai was talking about. "How stable do you expect this peace to be, my prince?"

Ozai stopped pacing, and turned hard eyes on Piandao. "That depends on how successful you are in convincing the military to come and talk. Please, I need the best efforts of both of you, now. I expect that the politics are about to become messy."

Well, Piandao specialized in messiness.

Despite his best efforts.

Azula told herself that she was being asked to go fetch a servant who was already trained to come when called because the situation was dire, and Father absolutely needed High Sage Xinghao brought back to the palace safely.

The alternative was that 'go fetch' was about his level of trust in her, now.

She couldn't even complete the task as quickly as she would have liked. She had sped to the Grand Temple with the fastest set of palanquin-bearers in the palace, but once she arrived, finding the
Grand Sage had been surprisingly difficult. The Inferior Sages at the doors didn't know where their boss was, so they had to find proper Fire Sages who pointed to where his Secretary was taking lunch who claimed that the Grand Sage was meeting with a citizen in great need of spiritual counseling and absolutely could not be disturbed.

"This 'absoluteness' is a matter of opinion," Azula had said, summoning her blue flames to her hand and pretending to stare idly into the heart of heat and light. "I don't suppose you'd care to back your impression up in an Agni Kai?"

And so the Secretary went to fetch the High Sage, who was still chuckling and finishing off a bottle of lily-wine when he arrived. "Ah, Princess, to what do I owe-"

"Come with me right now to the palace or I will kill you and take your successor," Azula said in her most business-like tone. Father asked her not to hurt anyone if she could help it, but he never said threatening violence.

And the secret to threats wasn't to try to be menacing. That was what amateurs did. Azula found that simply being capable of following through, and making sure everyone knew it, was more than adequate.

Xinghao paled and nodded.

Azula made him run alongside her palanquin to help sober him up. He did surprisingly well at keeping up with the bearers.

By the time they arrived back at the palace, the Disciple of the Third Eye was already stationed in front of the doors. It had been quite a while since Azula saw him last, but despite the growing she'd done since then, he still seemed as big as a mountain. It amused her how traditional he was in his projection of strength, embodying every masculine notion with a shaved head, a trim beard, massive muscles put on display, the metal arm and leg, and even the tattoo on his forehead. He was a villain straight out of one of the newer Ember Island Players productions.

Azula, by contrast, was a girl still waiting to catch up to her brother in height, and a perfect princess in her looks.

She wondered who commanded more strength.

Who did Father trust more, right now?

She left the Disciple standing guard and brought Xinghao to the throne room. It was empty, and she made the High Sage wait in silence for the others.

Surprisingly, she didn't have to wait long for Piandao to return with High General Bujing, Admiral Li, and General Mak. He must have raced up from Lower Harbor City. The Army, Navy, and Home Guard were now represented.

No sooner had that group arrived than Father stepped out onto the dais of the Burning Throne. As he had when he executed his coup, he did not light the throne's fires, but still took his proper place above everyone else. Azula personally would have indulged in lighting the fires, if just to make a symbolic play to present herself as the Fire Lord's chosen heir, but perhaps Father felt that a more subtle strategy was needed.

He didn't waste time, at least. "Fire Lord Azulon is dead," he said. "He died of natural causes, and is at last at peace. We need to discuss what comes next, and I-"
"This is not our deal," Bujing interrupted.

Azula's Inner Fire flared. How dare this stupid old man interrupt Father!

But the general was allowed to continue, "I've heard about the stunt at the prison. Word of it has already spread to the Caldera! And now the Fire Lord? You said you'd restore Azulon's power and allow an investigation! Not scorch your way straight to the throne itself!"

Father, somehow, remained stoic in the face of such an accusation, fully and perfectly in control of himself. "General, I did not kill my Father. The Royal Physician can confirm it. I am as troubled by the timing as you are."

No mention was made of Li and Lo. Azula almost wished she could step forward and take the blame, but she refused to steal authority from Father again.

High Sage Xinghao gave a nervous laugh. "Well, you must admit, it looks- uh, somewhat like a-purge, you know. The populace-"

Father turned to him. "Is that not why I have your support? To keep the populace on my side?"

Xinghao giggled. "Well, yes, the Fire Sages have worked hard to serve as the moral authority of the Fire Nation, but- uh- well, the Fire Lord is- was? Well, for now he's still revered as an icon. They read storybooks about his life and celebrate holidays in his name. That's- that's not something that can just be reversed on a whim. It's why it was so important that you presented yourself as intervening on the Fire Lord's behalf-"

"I will not deploy soldiers against the populace to force obedience," General Mak interrupted. "My Home Guard will keep the peace, but our people are not Earth Kingdom swine to be beaten into submission."

Father held out his hands. "But would you be averse to locking down communications from the Capital for now? We don't want word to spread and cause a panic before we can properly present the news."

Mak was far too slow to nod for Azula's liking. "Yes, for a short while. I expect that announcing the start of an investigation with the news of the Fire Lord's passing would help soothe emotions. But the investigation into Azulon's death needs to be legitimate, and the succession absolutely must be unquestionable."

Succession?

Father said nothing, but he looked to Azula and raised his eyebrows, and she took that as her cue. "You don't seriously mean to hand the nation over to Iroh?!"

Admiral Li stroked his long beard. "He is the Crown Prince."

Azula glared at High Sage Xinghao, and he took the hint and added, "But he's not here! We have only a day to crown a new Fire Lord before people must declare their allegiance."

High General Bujing snorted. "Don't try to bully us! There have been cases in history where the military and Fire Sages held the crown while the next Fire Lord hurried home. The people need not wait to declare their allegiance to the heir who was supported by the rest of the nation's leadership."

"And that," Azula put in, "is supposed to be my father. You all supported him yesterday." She stalked towards them, putting a little menacing theatricality into her posture. It was a weak kind of...
threat, the kind she hated to use, but these idiots had somehow missed that she had waltzed into a prison and murdered a pair of her father's enemies without legal repercussion.

But General Mak turned to look at her with an expression of disdain that made her blood boil. "That was when he promised us stability. I arrested Li and Lo because they were undermining faith in the Fire Lord, and supported your faction over Iroh to save the Fire Nation from the Avatar's revenge. But within twenty-four hours everyone who stood between Prince Ozai and power died, and now we're discussing just taking the crown from Iroh? This isn't stability! This could destroy the Fire Nation!"

Azula took another step towards him, ready to remind him what destruction really looked like-

"Peace," Father said. "We all want the Fire Nation to survive. How can I earn your confidence once again?"

High Sage Xinghao inhaled and gave a clap of his hands. "An Agni Kai! If Prince Ozai and General Mak have an Agni Kai over the matter of Azulon's death, then that would publically give the prince a chance to clear his name!"

General Mak nodded. "I would be willing to fight an Agni Kai to determine the right of this matter."

Huh. Azula took a step back from the military men, considering it. She had no doubt Father would win, and it would be a compelling appeal to the populace. People might whisper, but no one could really accuse Father of killing the Fire Lord if he-

"No," Father barked. The sound echoed through the throne room. "I refuse."

Azula whirled to face him, but could find no further clue in his appearance. What was he thinking? She couldn't identify the strategy.

It was Xinghao was said it out loud: "Um, why not?"

Father glared down at them all. "That is none of your concern. Any of you."

Azula blinked. Even her?

Eventually, General Mak bit out, "Very well. I should see to deploying the Home Guard to maintain safety and lock down communications off the island."

Father nodded. "Yes, you should. You are all dismissed."

Mak and the other military men all bowed and filed out. Xinghao hesitated, but then made his own hasty bow and exit.

That just left Azula. "Father-"

"Mak will return to arrest me," he cut in. He paced across the throne's dais, not even looking at her. "We've lost the military leadership's support. We must act quickly to discredit them. I want you to go through the archives Li and Lo kept in Azulon's rooms to see if they had any helpful information on Mak and the others. If we can find something to make people doubt them, we can accuse them of treason and remove them, and then replace them with more loyal allies."

Azula nodded. That must be why he refused the Agni Kai; he knew those fools would plot against him regardless. "I can see to that. I've learned my lesson from Li and Lo, and can make it look like-"
"No." Father turned to look down on her. "Piandao can handle any violence we need, and we will use the other Weapons if necessary. I want you go through the archives. Do you understand?"

No.

She did not.

But she did know that she wouldn't fail him again. "Yes, Father." She bowed low. "All will be as you say."

It seemed to Suki like such a burden to claw her way back to consciousness, but she felt like there was something very important she needed to take care of. Not something she wanted, but something she needed. She groaned and forced her eyes open.

Zuko stared down at her, scar and eyepatch and all. A night sky was stretched behind above him.

She tried to say, "Hi," but it came out something more like, "Xryexx."

He smiled anyway. "You're awake." He turned and repeated, "She's awake!"

Soon, Aang and King Toph were leaning over her as well, and Momo came over to nuzzle her. Something seemed off about all of this, but Aang held a cup of water out to her, and she found that she was too thirsty to worry about anything else for now. She let Toph and Zuko help her sit up, and then drank slowly, letting the coolness help clear her head.

They were in a jungle somewhere with sandy soil. It looked like Ember Island. But hadn't they wanted to leave for some reason? She looked around.

Appa chewed on some palm leaves and watched her.

A campfire glowed at the center of a pile of rags and packs and buckets.

Kirai, Mai, and Sokka (with a bloody rag wrapped around his head) were all lying unconscious, lined up on blankets a short distance away. Sage Shyu and Kei Lo were arranged similarly apart from the others. Something told Suki that someone else should be there- another Sage- old and with a pipe-

Kirai groaned in her sleep.

And then Suki remembered.

She remembered the poison, the fires, the strange white smoke.

She tried to hop to her feet, sending Momo running, but her body was sluggish, reluctant to obey her commands, and she nearly toppled over before Zuko caught her. She shook her head at him. "Forget me. Wake Kirai up!"

Zuko looked over at the unconscious bodies. "So she is your sister-"

"And yours poisoned her! She's dying!"

There was a moment where everyone stared at her, and then they all moved. Toph crawled over and began smacking Kirai's face, eliciting another groan. Aang snapped into an arrow stance and moved his arms to pull a glob of water out of a bucket into the air. It flew and splashed right in Kirai's face.
She coughed and shook her head, and then blinked.

Zuko pulled Kirai to a sitting position by her shoulders, barking, "Wake up!"

Kirai groaned, coughed, and threw up blood all over Zuko's shirt. Her eyes blinked as she started to awaken.

Aang looked to Suki. "What happened?"

Suki once again tried to stand up. Her legs wobbled, and Aang ran over to grab her arms. She let him take her weight, preventing another fall, and immediately started hobbling over to Appa. "I'll tell you in the air. We're going to the Fire Nation Capital."

To their credit, the others didn't try to stop her. Zuko carried Kirai up Appa's tail into the saddle, and Aang got Suki herself settled while Toph raised a swell of sand to carry the others over. Suki looked over them again, her friends and the Fire Sages who had pledged to help them. "Where's Sage Guan? That was his boat we were trying to use."

Aang glanced back at her as he grabbed Appa's reins. "The only other people we found were those Firebenders. Maybe he was taken away."

Suki sighed. They had their first casualty in the quest to save Kirai.

Piandao decided to have his little chat with Mutan and Lady Gerel on one of the palace's higher floors. It was always better to have difficult discussions with an Earthbender while far above the ground.

It wouldn't help against the Master Firebender, but neither would it impede his own sword.

He was finishing with the commanders of the Crimson Guard when the other two Weapons arrived in the room, holding his sheathed sword behind him and saying, "There rebel elements will try to arrest Prince Ozai with no evidence, without the blessing of the Fire Sages. To preserve the legitimacy of the succession, however it plays out, we must protect Prince Ozai. Do we have your support?"

The soldiers, lined up so precisely, gave an enthusiastic cry at the same time they smacked their armored wrists together.

Well, that answer would suffice. But a nod would have been just as effective. "Dismissed," Piandao said.

And then he was alone with 'The Seeing Dragon' and a man so impressed by old spiritual texts that he had them tattooed across his body.

Piandao turned and offered a polite smile to his guests. "Thank you for meeting with me. I suppose you're aware of the general situation?"

Mutan rubbed at his eyes. "What crimes has our nation committed, that it should lose its guiding light and its people start to tear each other apart?"

Piandao could recite quite a list of the top of his head, and he personally was responsible for about half of it, but he was not so foolish as to get drawn into a conversation with a fanatic. "We can seek the answer to that after we've survived the week. Prince Ozai would like us all to assist in repelling antagonistic visitors to the palace."
Lady Gerel seemed to be staring at him, even though she was wearing her blindfold. "Speak more plainly, Hundredslayer. Is Prince Ozai ordering us into action?"

Piandao brought his sheathed sword in front of him like a shield. "He is."

Gerel sighed. "Then since I have no conflicting orders from the Fire Lord or Prince Iroh, I will go. But I do not know that there is any end to this that could be called a victory."

Piandao had long given up on victories. Certainly, he didn't consider his defeat of Admiral Jeong-Jeong to be one. "Thank you. For now, you may rest. You will be informed if you are needed."

The Seeing Dragon nodded, and then turned to go.

Mutan, meanwhile, stepped forward. "Hundredslayer, do you realize the crisis we are in right now?"

Piandao couldn't help but give a laugh. "I'm coordinating the defenses in case we have to go to war with our own military. Yes, I am aware of the crisis."

Mutan's face was almost white beneath the red text inked on his skin. "No, more than that. Our nation is close to death. And enemies have already entered it. The Avatar is approaching."

It was a fair point, if stated a bit dramatically. "The Avatar and Prince Zuko are off on a field trip, according to their compatriots. They are not expected to be a concern within the next twenty-four hours, which is my primary concern. I would actually welcome the Avatar's presence, as he might help to end hostilities."

Mutan's face twisted into an expression of disgust. "No true peace can come from outside interference. Especially not without a Fire Lord on the Burning Throne."

Piandao shook his head. "You are welcome to your opinion, of course, but it is still not an immediate concern. Once we get through the immediate trouble, I'm sure Prince Ozai will offer a strategy on this matter. Thank you for your concern."

Mutan didn't seem happy- hardly a new state of affairs- but he nodded and went off to make his own preparations for battle.

Well, that went about as well as could be expected. Now Piandao wouldn't have worry about fighting alongside traitors.

The echoes of a first explosion, somewhere outside, rattled the walls.

Zuko was going home, at last. He was on his way to see his father under a crescent moon. And it was all to save the life of a traitor.

It was crowded in Appa's saddle. They left behind of all the supplies that were left from the mission with the Sun Warriors, so that they could pack everyone in for the trip to the Capital. Aang was up on Appa's head with Sokka and Mai, while Toph, Suki, Kirai, Sage Shyu, and that Kei Lo guy were sharing space in the back. They had all regained consciousness, and shared the details of their difficulties. They were tired and sore and Sokka had a nasty bump on his head, but they were all committed to trying to save Kirai.

It was a poor army for invading the Caldera.

But Zuko would make it happen, regardless of what it took.
Over on the other side of the saddle, Kirai- Suki's sister, a dark reflection of a face that Zuko had come to know so well- went into another coughing fit, pressing her blanket up to her mouth. It had once been pink, something picked up from one of their stays somewhere in the Fire Nation, but it was growing increasingly darker. One could almost believe that the pattern was intended and not haphazard bloodstains.

Beside him, Suki huddled in on herself. "I hope we get the antidote in time. I can't believe we wasted a whole day."

Zuko bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I should have tried to wake you sooner."

She gave a one-shoulder shrug. "No, I'm being stupid. You couldn't have known."

But Zuko still felt the shame of failure. "We weren't sure who had attacked you, so we hid you in the jungle and waited for you to wake up."

"I know, Zuko. You saved us from- from whoever attacked us." She still wouldn't look up at him.

But Zuko could at least offer a part of an answer. "The Firebenders fought with a style I recognized. They were Crimson Guard."

Suki finally turned to him. "The who?"

"The elite soldiers who guard the Fire Lord and royal family." He couldn't say how or why they had been trying to kill Suki, Mai, and Sokka, but he at least could narrow down the choices. "To be deployed away from the palace, they would have to have been operating under orders from the Fire Lord himself."

His grandfather had tried to kill his friends.

His sister and father had poisoned a loyal soldier to get to him, and might have seized control of the Homeland.

What was he returning to?

Aside maybe from death.

He wished he could talk with Uncle.

He only became aware again of the people around him when Suki put a hand on his shoulder. He turned to find her smiling at him. "I want to say thanks, Zuko. I know this isn't the way you wanted to see your father again."

He shook his head. "It's fine. If he won't take responsibility for what he's doing, I will." He leaned back against the rim of the saddle. "I wanted to know the truth of what he's really like, if he might have- have hurt me on purpose. What's he doing to you is a strong poor first impression."

Suki shifted to lean back with him. "If someone in your family had been poisoned like Kirai," she whispered, "would you try to save them like I'm doing?"

He didn't even need to think about it. "Yes. I would."

"Yeah." She nodded. "You would."

They flew on through the night.
TO BE CONTINUED
The Fire Nation goes to war once more.

Azula awoke to the sound of explosions.

She wasn't sure when she had gone to sleep. She had been working diligently at her assigned task, sorting through Li-and-Lo's old records for blackmail material on various military leaders. It was a crucial part of allowing Father to seize the Burning Throne, so though it kept her sequestered, she gave it her best effort.

No amount of effort could make it interesting. Especially after the fighting started.

It was not disloyal to confirm, after some time had passed, that her task was still the most efficient use of an important resource like herself. Perhaps she would be needed to take command of the Loyalists (as she thought of the people supporting Father), so she put the papers down and emerged from Azulon's old suite to find Father himself standing in the hallway consulting with Piandao.

When he saw her, Father cut off his conversation. "Where are you going?"

"No." Father had sliced his hand through the air, but maintained control enough not to produce any flames. "It's too dangerous. Stay indoors, stay away from the windows and balconies."

She hated being coddled, but this was all her fault. She had killed Li and Lo right before Azulon had the poor timing to keel over of his own accord, and now everyone thought Father a clumsy firecracker when he had nothing to do with either death. No doubt he feared another of her failures.

"Very well, Father." She bowed at the waist. "I will do as you command."

His expression had twisted at that, as if something displeased him, but Azula couldn't bring herself to ask for specifics. She had turned around and gone back into L- and-Lo's makeshift office.

She had worked late into the night. There was the occasional explosion, but they were spread far apart. They could have been warning shots from the Disciple of the Third Eye. She wondered if she could finish her task before the fighting really broke out, but eventually she started nodding off as she read, and was forced to yield to her body's demands and folded a carpet over to use as a futon.

She didn't know how long she had slept. She just knew that now the explosions were coming in rapid succession.

The war was on, then.

Azula got up and rubbed her face. Was her work still needed, now? If the fighting had started in earnest, then a little blackmail material on General Mak was hardly going to settle things. But
perhaps he would die, and a subordinate would take command of the Traitors (as she thought of the people supporting Uncle Iroh) who they could coerce into cooperation. Her work still might be valuable.

First, she needed to freshen up. A princess could command no power if she didn't look the part.

She rang for a servant, but none came. How odd. She pulled her hair into a ponytail and went looking for someone who could at least set her top-knot and bring some breakfast, but the palace's whole residential tower was empty. She wandered deserted floors just long enough to wonder if Father had abandoned her, too.

Then she got to the main hall, emerging at the top of the staircase that looked down on the massive space, and found an army encamped in her home.

The Crimson Guard was scattered around as if they owned the place. There were spears and swords stacked up. Many of the soldiers were doing stretches optimized for Firebenders. Others were sitting around, meditating or resting or even dozing. Some were in conference over maps.

Azula was just wondering who she could snarl at- without looking like a little lost girl left behind by her daddy- when she spotted Father striding in from the throne room, followed by Piandao. She hurried down the stairs and ran over to him. "Father! What's- ah, I am here to report my renewed availability."

Father smiled at her and reached out to stroke her hair. "I'm so glad you're safe. As you can see, our former allies have made some poor choices. Mak led a contingent of the Home Guard up from Lower Harbor City to demand my arrest. I'm afraid the Disciple of the Third Eye was forced to use his power to discourage any further action. Piandao can explain it better."

At Father's wave, Piandao inclined his head. "It was a stand-off through most of the night. The citizenry began evacuating the Caldera after the Disciple's first warning shot, and Mak's forces allowed them to pass. I sent Lady Gerel out to bolster the defensive line that the Crimson Guard were setting up at the gate, but she disappeared sometime during the night. I hope she's merely a deserter. In any event, it was only with the dawn that Mak sent his forces forward."

Another explosion echoed through the palace walls.

Father sighed. "We also have the Crimson Guard out covering alternate angles. I don't know what Mak thinks he's going to accomplish. If he defeats us and arrests me, will the Sages declare me guilty of murder without evidence? Will Iroh return from his frigid playground? Will there be a Caldera left to rule from?"

Azula nodded. "Mak is short-sighted and acting on emotion. If I sneak up on him and take him out, I'm sure his forces will-"

"No!"

Heads turned at Father's outburst.

But he paid no attention to them, keeping his eyes locked on Azula with enough weight to make her want to hunch down. "Azula, it's a war out there. I won't have you running around. " He leaned over her. "You will stay here in the palace, where you'll be safe. In fact, I don't trust the palace's tower, either, given the firepower that's being thrown around. Have some soldiers move the records down to the third floor, and you can do your reading there."

Azula had to bite her lip to keep from saying what she thought of that. Father had given her orders,
and she always did everything that he commanded.

Even if she hated it.

Even if he hated her.

She bowed, and then spun on her heel and headed off without another word.

She wondered if Zuzu would have been allowed to go fight in this war.

Aang had never been the Fire Nation's capital before. He heard that it was a tranquil and beautiful settlement located in the caldera of a dormant volcano, a little hidden paradise from which the Fire Lord ruled. He couldn't help but associate it with Mai's beauty and grace and sophistication, since it was her clan name: Caldera Yu Mai.

So he was more than a little disappointed that when he first saw it, the place seemed to be in ruins and on fire.

There had been clues that something was wrong. Sounds like the crack of thunder had been echoing as Appa flew Aang and everyone- Mai, Sokka, Momo, Zuko, Suki, King Toph, and the Sages Shyu and Kei Lo- in towards the Capital Island while the sun rose behind them. The sky was overcast, leaving the sea below them looking gray and lifeless despite the dawn. When they got close enough to make out the island's bay, they saw that a mass of people were clustered in a giant plaza just past the docks.

Mai had shoved her way through all the people in Appa's saddle to lean over the side, Momo perched on her shoulder and looking down with her. "That's the Royal Plaza. What are all those people doing there? Maybe there's a mandatory presentation?"

Zuko had come up to join her. "I don't know. But it looks more like a refugee camp."

Mai shook her head, sending Momo scampering away.

As they flew over the scene, Aang noticed that more people were making their way down the zig-zagging path on the face of the volcano. "Look, more are coming down! Why aren't they staying in that settlement near the base of the volcano?"

Mai made a disgusted sound. "That's Upper Harbor City. Laborers and thieves live there. The people of the Caldera would never do more than pass through as quickly as possible." She leaned back into the saddle as the plaza passed beneath them, and Appa flew on towards the volcano.

They passed close enough to see over the rim, and got their first glimpse of the war in progress.

Aang could admit that, at one time, the city might have been beautiful. Now, whole blocks were on fire, and there were massive craters where mansions might have once stood. What buildings still stood were either stained by smoke or damaged by flying debris or both.

The streets were still in use, at least. There were people dashing down the lanes, but it was hard to make out details in the inconsistent light.

Naturally, it was Mai with her (literal) pin-precise eyesight who figured out what was going on. "Those are soldiers! Home Guard and Army and- wait, I think they're fighting the Crimson Guard!"

Zuko grunted. "That can't be. The Guard exclusively obeys the Fire Lord, and he's also the supreme
commander of the military. Even if they were confused, the palace is *right there*. It'd be easy to issue orders."

Suki said, "But you told me that the guys who attacked us Ember Island were Crimson Guard."

The Fire Sage, Shyu, nodded. "And there have been tensions here in the Capital between the Temple and the Military, with the Princes courting each to their own side. We heard that the Fire Lord's caretakers, Li and Lo, were arrested two days ago. Perhaps even such a simple chain of command is no longer clear."

King Toph slapped a fist into her other palm. "It's just like when Ba Sing Se fell. I'm not a- I mean, my family's connection to the previous Earth King was very distant, and some people wouldn't recognize it. Nobody wants to build on a shaky foundation, and feuding royals aren't all that stable."

Sokka waved for everyone's attention, and Momo took that as a sign to take refuge in his lap. "So, uh, that's great and all, but what does this mean as far as us landing goes? I don't want to accidentally put down next to the guys who want to kill us. Which may be both sides, for all we know."

Aang was really starting to hate politics. He already hated war, and it seemed more and more like the two were intertwined. "Our first priority is getting Kirai and Zuko to the palace."

"I'm not sure," Kei Lo said, "that would be a good idea. If the Crimson Guard is out here fighting, and we don't know who's in charge of the palace. I think we should go to the Grand Temple. We get the latest news and figure out a plan from there."

"Hrf." Everyone turned to where Kirai went into another coughing fit. She covered her mouth with her blanket, and when she finished, it was stained with more fresh blood. "So much yapping. Just get me to the palace. The Fire Nation is too strong for a stupid little rebellion to bring down the government. *Someone* is still in charge, and they probably have my antidote!"

She sounded so sure, but as Aang looked down again, there was a quick flash of light, and then one of the mansions exploded like a whole festival's worth of fireworks had gone off in its basement. He wouldn't have been able to explain it, but back on Zenmatsu he had experienced something all too similar. "Hey, guys, I think that weird person who thinks explosions at people is down there. What did Sokka call him?"

"Spark Sparky Boom Man!"

Mai groaned. "He's the Disciple of the Third Eye."

"Oh, sure," Sokka scoffed. "Like that's any easier to say."

"At least it's not silly."

"Says you." Sokka sighed. "I knew I'd eventually have to run into that guy. So, any idea who he's fighting for?"

Mai nodded. "Unless either Iroh or Ozai is down there leading the rebellion, the Disciple will be fighting for the palace."

Shyu added, "I agree. The Sages were dispatched to oversee the Weapons at Ozai's request, and Ozai is the one in control of Azulon, now."

Aang tugged Appa's reins. "So our safest bet is to probably head straight for the palace, like Kirai said. Appa, yip-yip!"
"Thanks," Kirai groaned, and then coughed into her blanket again.

Kei Lo huffed, but Suki bowed her head in obvious gratitude as Appa roared and swung straight towards the palace. It looked like they were about to save the day!

Then there was a flash of light that resolved into a line pointed straight at them-

-and they blew up.

Piandao was on a balcony, taking stock of the state of the Caldera, when he spotted the strange white shape moving through the air. With his mind preoccupied with thoughts of urban warfare and siege tactics, he needed a moment to realize it was a flying furry animal, and another to peg it as the Avatar's rumored sky bison.

A sky bison!

To think he should get to see one soaring through the air.

Prince Ozai came up behind him, also transfixed by the sight. "Is that-"

Piandao nodded. "Indeed."

"-Zuko?"

Oh.

Well, Piandao could hardly fault his master's priorities. "Most likely, yes. The word Azula brought back was that Prince Zuko was off with the Avatar. I can't imagine that the last Airbender would be parted from his sky bison. It seems the gambit with Kirai worked. We just-

An explosion lit up the sky, right where Piandao had been staring. When it cleared, there was nothing but a drifting haze of smoke.

The Disciple of the Third Eye had shot the sky bison down.

"ZUKO!!" Ozai almost flung himself over the balcony, as if to run out into the empty air, but Piandao grabbed and held him back. Ozai tried to yank free, and then spun on Piandao with murder written all over his face. "What was that?! Why would he attack Zuko?!

Unfortunately, Piandao could figure out exactly why it happened. "Our orders to him were to repel all comers. We didn't make exceptions for Zuko's likely avenues of approach." It was a detail of which he had completely lost track, with all the surprises and complications. He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and prepared to be struck down in a blaze of fire for his failure. His only regret was that he was going to do for a foolish error in his service, and not for refusing to cross a moral boundary.

Something thumped to the floor, and Piandao opened his eyes to see that Ozai had fallen to his knees.

The prince's eyes were wide and unfocused. "This is my fault. I just killed my son. My poor baby boy- he- he never got to come home-"

Somehow, Ozai was still finding ways to surprise Piandao. "My Prince, we don't know anything for certain. Perhaps we-" He went to help Ozai up, but his hands were slapped away.
Ozai stood suddenly, his gaze still pointed at nothing in particular. "I need to find Azula. I need my daughter." He hurried out of the room, leaving Piandao alone on the balcony.

He looked back over the balcony to the war that was still going on. Soldiers of the Home Guard were making another rush at the palace. "I'll just take command of the defenses, then."

The first step was probably to get some revised orders to the Disciple of the Third Eye and everyone else who might want to take a shot at the Avatar.

Zuko seemed to be making a bad habit of getting blown up.

The first time had been on Crescent Island, when the Avatar had done something in the Fire Temple there that left Zuko at the bottom of a cliff in a very sore state. He had been unconscious for that experience, so he couldn't say how he had survived.

He seemed to be getting better at exploding. This time, he woke up while he was still falling.

As consciousness returned, his senses were overwhelmed with the roaring of wind. No, not wind; the air was still, and he was the one rushing through it. He looked around, hoping to see a sky bison swooping down to catch, but all he saw was smoke and the ground and-

-and the girl whose arm he had a death-grip on.

Suki's eyes were fluttering, and she didn't seem to be awake yet, but her other hand seemed to be clamped around Kirai's belt. Even explosions and unconsciousness couldn't stop either Zuko or Suki from holding on to what was important.

So they were all going to die together.

But Zuko wasn't just going to give up, even in the face of certain death.

As they fell, he pulled Suki and Kirai closer to him, wrapping his arms around them. He also curled his legs and searched for his Inner Fire. If he could aim and unleash a burst of Firebending with the right timing, maybe he could slow their fall enough for Suki and Kirai at least to-

Then through the smoke and darkness, Zuko spotted wings of orange swooping towards him. It was a glider, riding its own set of winds to arc upwards again, revealing a boy hanging from its underside.

A boy with an arrow on his head.

Zuko went ahead and kicked downward, creating a blaze that pushed back against his fall. It jolted his body and strained at his grip on Suki and Kira, but it felt like they were all slowing, at least for a moment, and maybe the Avatar could-

Aang slammed into them with enough force to knock the air right out of Zuko's chest.

He lost track of everything but his own desperate gasps and the girls in his arms. They were tumbling and the wind battered at them and something clamped around Zuko's waist and everything was spinning and he was being yanked all around and Suki moaned and Aang screamed and-

They crashed.

Things gave way as they tumbled and Zuko still couldn't catch his breath and every impact hurt, but that eternity lasted for no more than a few seconds, and then came to painful, thumping stop against a
Zuko finally relaxed his body, but he still couldn't catch his breath. His vision was going dark and-
-and sweet, cool air forced its way in through his nose and he greedily accepted it.

When his breathing was normal again, he turned his head to find Aang lying right next to him, a
tattooed hand still poised from whatever Airbending trick it had just performed.

Zuko said, "Thanks."

Aang smiled, winced, and then settled on a feeble grin. "No problem."

So he was back at war. Zuko couldn't say he had missed it.

Mai had spent far too much of her life wondering what she'd do if a little line of light traced its way
through the air in her direction. She had gotten to test those possibilities on Zenmatsu, during the
Disciple of the Third's attempt to kill her, Aang, and Toph while they were out on an excursion.

It turned out that what she would do was dodge a lot.

Sure enough, when she saw that same ray of light streaking through the sky towards Appa, she
reflexively made a tackling leap out of the saddle to where Aang sat on Appa's head. For her trouble,
she knocked away the only human in their group who could fly and got herself tangled in the reins.

Apparently, her instincts thought saving Aang was more important than anything else. Stupid
instincts.

Her getting caught in the reins, at least, prompted Appa to veer away just before the ray of light
became sound and fury and fire, so instead of being reduced to bison-meat hash, the big guy was
only (only!) batted out of the sky with the speed and force of an angry dragon. Mai was dragged
along for the ride, but she heard familiar screams go whipping past her as (some of?) her friends and
at least one lemur were flung out of the saddle.

Appa roared his displeasure and Mai silently agreed. She didn't dare untangle herself because she
couldn't fly, and that left her nothing to do but try very hard not to be sick through the tumbling and
twisting and swooping and all the other movements.

It all came to an end when they crashed.

It wasn't so much of a crash as a series of crashes, hard impacts against solid objects of some kind
that made Appa give out pained grunts. Each one crumbled against his weight and absorbed some of
their speed. Mai felt every impact down to her bones, and after an eternity of jolts, there was one last
very loud, very final crash and Appa came to a stop. Mai came to her own stop a moment later when
the reins she still wrapped around her snapped taut and nearly broke some of her ribs.

Appa moaned.

Mai did, too.

Something nearby fell apart with a clatter.

Then Sokka's voice slurred, "Sacred slush."

"Never," came Toph's voice in something like a pained reply, "again."
Mai blinked to clear her vision and looked around.

Sokka and Toph were indeed both still in the saddle, one of each of their arms practically wrapped around the grip-holes in the side, their other arms wrapped around each other. Between them, Kei Lo and Sage Shyu had been pinned in place.

Zuko, Suki, Momo, and Kirai were all gone. Aang, too.

And around them-

The Grand Temple?

Sure enough, Appa had come to a very disruptive landing in the center of what Mai had always thought of as The Big Room With Lots Of Statues. The floor was buckled beneath them and a lot of the statues seemed to have been knocked over, if not outright demolished. Mai looked up to find a sky-bison-sized hole in the ceiling, and through it, she could see the remains of what had once been the Temple's central Dragonspine Tower. So that's what those other impacts had been.

Mai pulled one of her larger knives out of her belt and began sawing at the reins that were still wrapped around her. "Well, Kei Lo, I have good news for you. We wound up landing at the Temple, after all."

"I changed my mind," he groaned as Sokka and Toph disentangled themselves and let him go.

Toph immediately climbed out of the saddle to the ground. "Never again. I am never leaving the ground again. When I die, have my corpse dipped in lead so that it'll be too heavy for anyone to lift."

Sokka, however, was patting himself down in what seemed to be good humor. "Hey, as far as crashes go, that was one of my better experiences. Last time, I did it without a sky bison, and broke a rib for my trouble. Remember that, Mai?"

She did, having taken that fall with him back in the awful underground sinkhole fortress, but she felt no need to relive that experience. With a grunt of triumph, she cut through the last of Appa's reins and climbed over to the saddle. "Anyone not named Sokka hurt over here?"

Kei Lo looked down at himself as if surprised by what he saw. "I'm going to be bruised all over, but I seem to be okay. Sage Shyu?"

The older man seemed content to just lay in the saddle forever. "I don't believe I have any broken bones, but my hands won't stop shaking."

Mai nodded. "That's just the result of the sheer terror you experienced. It'll pass, eventually." She leaned over to pet Appa's head. "How about you, big guy?"

Appa gave an expressively 'done with this' snort and closed his eyes.

Yeah, Mai figured he had earned the right to sit the rest of this out. He'd make too big a target for this kind of situation. But that left them without an easy way to go looking for their friends. If said friends were even alive.

She looked over at Sokka. "I don't suppose you saw what happened to everyone else?"

He winced and opened his mouth to speak-

And Toph said, "First I think we still need to figure out what's going to happen to us." She pointed
across the room, where a whole bunch of Fire Sages, ranging in expressions from angry to confused to cynically unsurprised, were coming into the room.

Mai raised her hands to show that she wasn't holding any of the blades she was famous for. "Sorry about the mess?"

Sokka snorted. "See, you should have said that you were sorry for dropping in like this. Because we fell out of the sky through their roof."

Without making any sudden movements, Mai leaned over and slapped his head.

Azula had surrounded herself in the Informal Dining Room with neat clusters of papers listing blackmail material for various military figures who were probably already dead, a stack for each name. Unsorted and unread papers were piled behind her, almost like the backdrop to a throne.

Father scattered them all when he burst into the room and ran over to wrap his arms around her. "Oh, Azula! Zuko- your brother-"

Azula didn't know what to do. She just let herself be squeezed.

Father pulled back and looked her in the eyes. "Your brother might be dead. The Avatar's sky bison-it- it was shot down by the Disciple."

Azula gave a laugh before she could help herself.

Father blanched and let go of her.

She'd failed him again, hadn't she? That wasn't what he wanted from her. She quickly forced her amusement down and put a solemn expression on her face. "My apologies, Father. I was just amused at the thought that Zuko could be killed so easily. Yes, he's survived an exploding volcano and a monster made from all the ash that is now Ba Sing Se. He crawled across the Colonial Continent for years with nothing but his wits to keep him alive. Unless you saw his body, I would not take his death as certain."

She left out how funny she found it that another incident of 'friendly fire' would be responsible for Zuko's death, after Father's own friendly fire had ruined Zuko's face.

Father took a shuddering breath, and when he spoke again, his voice had lost its strain. "You really think your brother still lives?"

Azula had not said that, but the idea of seeing Father on the verge of tears again made her stomach clench. "I could go out and look for him, if you-"

"No." Father whirled away from her, starting to pace across the room. "I can't risk losing you out there. It's a war zone, and there's so much chaos! I-" He came to a stop and let his shoulders sag. "I've ruined everything. I tried to keep my family safe, and all I've done is endanger everything."

"No! Father!" Azula started to move towards him, but stopped herself short and bowed her head in deference. "You- you're just- under stress. We knew that seizing power could get messy, but we-"

"Who cares about power?" Father closed the gap and grabbed her arms. "I only wanted you and Zuko to be safe, here. All of this was just to defend ourselves against the ones who would use and harm us!"
Azula blinked. But- but didn't they deserve to rule? Wasn't Father the only one with the strength and vision to lead the greatest nation on all the earth? Wasn't she his chosen, the one he was grooming to serve him and inherit all that he built?

She forced a smile on her face. "You must be tired. I got some sleep, but you've been dealing with everything- quite ably, considering the circumstances- since yesterday. I can go look for Zuko, or take command for you-"

"Azula" Father leaned down over her. "Please, I know you want to help, but I will not risk you. You- I- you are my most valuable asset, and not to be thrown away lightly. Do you understand?"

It made logical sense, although the possible fall of a government seemed like the exact place one would want to use one's best asset.

But she always did everything her father commanded.

"Of course, Father. I will get back to work, and I'm sure Zuko will turn up soon."

Everything he commanded.

For now.

The explosions and commotions almost seemed to form their own music, a harmony of violence with its own tune, but Suki refused to submit to that lullaby. She pushed away pain and shock to force her eyes open, and found herself in the middle of a ruins-lined street that could have been a part of any of the world's war-ravaged cities until one looked closer, saw the size of the half-collapsed buildings and the remnants of once-ornate decorations.

Aang was crouched atop one of those buildings, the sky above him still gray with rolling clouds where it wasn't streaked by black smoke. He seemed to be looking around, and then rolled down the slanted roof and hopped his way to Suki's side.

She pushed herself to her feet. "Where are the others?"

Aang shook his head. "I couldn't spot them, and things are so out of balance here that I can't trace my connections to them precisely. Even Appa and Mai. But I can feel that they're alive."

Suki took what comfort she could from that. Hopefully they'd all live long enough to reunite. "And my sister?"

Aang nodded towards something behind her.

Suki turned to find her sister propped up against one of the shattered buildings lining the street, Zuko checking her out by the light of the flames in his left hand.

In the light, Kirai's face and clothes glistened with blood. She met Suki's gaze, and then let her eyes drop down to her lap. "I got sick on myself when I woke up."

Zuko let his flame go out. "No other injuries. Her only hurts have to be inside."

Suki knew that 'hurts' were an understatement. Who knew what their latest adventure had done to Kirai's insides, on top of the damage from the poison? It was possible that even the antidote wouldn't save Kirai, now.

That didn't mean Suki wasn't still going to try.
She had already lost her parents. She had lost the Unagi Gang. She had lost her fellow Kyoshi Rebels. Even the Fire Nation didn't want her as a servant, anymore.

Kirai might very well be the least of the things left in Suki's life, compared to people like Zuko and all her other friends, but she wouldn't give her sister up on someone else's terms. She was done with having things taken from her.

"Come on," she said as she pulled Kirai to her feet. "We can't carry you." She did support her sister, though, as they got moving.

Zuko took the lead. "The palace is this way. We'll avoid the main lanes; that's probably where most of the fighting is happening. When we get to the palace, I'll go out ahead to make sure we won't be attacked."

Kirai coughed again as they walked, and flecks of blood splattered on the street at her feet. "Good job of that so far."

Suki squeezed her eyes shut and fought back against the urge to make a retort. Why couldn't her sister just save her strength for her survival?

Maybe that's what went wrong, all those years ago with the Unagi Gang. Kirai thought that surviving was about lashing out, even at the people who wanted to love or help her. It was like how the Fire Nation saw its path to greatness in forcing its dominion on the rest of the world.

Suki wished she could have traced that to some trauma, some misinterpreted lesson in Kirai's past. But their parents had died because of a stupid accident, and life in the Unagi Gang had been as much about treating each other like family as it had been about defending their neighborhoods from the Fire Nation. There was no excuse.

"Wait," Aang said, coming to a stop. Suki nearly stumbled with Kirai's weight leaning on her, and her sister groaned.

Zuko's body tensed. "What is it?"

Aang closed his eyes. "I feel something. Something not right. It's- it's in the ground."

Kirai grunted. "I'm an Earthbender, and I don't feel anything. Stop wasting time."

Suki looked to Zuko.

He nodded. "Aang learned a lot about Earthbending from King Toph. If he's worried, I'm worried."

Aang's eyes snapped open. "I'm worried!" He pointed with his staff. "Quick, this w-" And then the building in the opposite direction as he was pointing began collapsing towards them.

Suki yanked Kirai into a run, and Zuko grabbed Kirai's other side to help them along. Aang spun and swung his staff at the wall tilting over them, knocking it back for a critical moment, and they all managed to outrun the debris, although not the cloud of dust.

Aang twirled his staff, and the dust whipped away to reveal a robed man standing atop the ruins of the building. Suki thought he might be sunburned, at first, but then she realized that the redness of his skin was really words tattooed over every inch of his face and hands.

"Weapon Mutan," Zuko bit out.
"Welcome back to the Caldera, Prince Zuko. I am sure your father will be happy to see you, for it is written that Fathers honor the Sons who carry their Flames to new vistas, while Sons must honor their Fathers, for their Flames have been passed down through the generations, and proper Respect must be paid for what is Given."

Suki couldn't keep from looking at Zuko's eyepatch. She didn't think it earned Zuko's father any respect.

Zuko, though, stepped forward with his hands raised in surrender. "I'm trying to get back to my father. This woman here was poisoned, and I've been charged with bringing her to the palace. Please, help get us there."

But this Mutan guy didn't move. "You have the Avatar with you."

Aang smiled. "That's me! Nice to meet you?"

Mutan took a step down from the rubble. "Prince Zuko, what are you doing? Have you not heard? The Avatar's poison has finally reached the heart of the Fire Nation!"

Everyone exchanged glances. Suki began inching off behind Zuko and Aang, but Mutan snapped a fist into the air, and a wall of stone rose up to cut off the entire street.

Mutan continued climbing down towards them. "You brought the Avatar to the Fire Nation and started our decline, and now you bring him to the palace! Don't you understand any of it?"

"I understand that you're committing treason," Zuko growled. "If you won't help us, at least let us pass."

Mutan balled his fists and actually roared. The ground shook beneath them as he said, "Treason?! Everything is treason now! Azulon is dead and we're fighting the start of a civil war!!"

Zuko's jaw dropped. "Grandfather is- is-"

"The rightful flame of the Fire Nation has gone out and it's the Avatar's curse on us!" Mutan threw his fists out, and a large stone flew up from the ruins of the building to streak towards them.

While Zuko and Aang dodged to either side, Suki pulled Kirai into a dive out of the way. They struck the ground hard, and Kirai let out a heavy groan and pulled herself into a shaking ball. Suki could only just kneel at her sister's side, trying to figure out what to do while the sounds of a fight came from behind her.

Then she heard Mutan cry out, "Enough!" The ground shook again, and Suki turned just in time to see him slap both of his hands to the stone at his feet, and for the street between him and Aang to burst up into-

-into a wave of lava.

Toph could feel people fighting and dying all around her, and every explosion made her stop and cringe.

She couldn't tell the different soldiers apart. Mai claimed that some were 'Crimson Guard' and some were 'Army' and some 'Home Guard,' but they were all just people in Toph's Earth-sense. They all wore armor, all moved quickly through the streets, and they fought and died the same way. Some moved in groups, others alone, and when they encountered an enemy there would be the chaos of a
brawl and pulses that faded away.

Sometimes there would be an explosion, an unexpected crack that split the air and rattled the earth and made a whole group of people just go away. Toph thought she hated feeling someone bleed on a stone floor, but something about a life just winking out in an instant made her shudder.

Of course, Sokka had decided that their group needed to take out this 'Sparky Sparky Boom Man.'

Only the Fire Sages had been able to put up an argument. But the thrust of their logic was more along the lines of, "But Prince Ozai is fighting off a rebellion!" and, "People are getting killed out there!"

It was the first point that Toph found more interesting. Finally, they got some real information about what was going on. It was the usual stuff- royals running circles around each other, flunkies switching sides every time the mud bubbled, soldiers told to stand peacefully in places where they were about to be attacked- but it brought the full picture into relief.

"So the guys trying to invade the palace are, nominally, on our side," Mai had whispered to the group while the Fire Sages cleaned up debris. "If they're trying to arrest Ozai, Iroh will become Fire Lord, and we'll have held up our end of Aang's bargain. He gets the throne, and we get a freed Earth Kingdom."

Toph had nodded. "So we storm the palace. Simple. Sokka, tell me why it probably isn't simple."

But Sokka had given a hum that wasn't his usual gloominess. "Aside from the chance of dying, I actually like the idea. Randomly searching the city for our friends isn't going to find them any quicker than randomly fighting around, and making a spectacle of ourselves might even help them find us."

Kei Lo's pulse had been hammering ever since the other Sages had explained what was going on and helped move Shyu away to recover, but he had nevertheless apparently decided to stick around to help. He had joined their little cluster of conspiracy over by Appa. "We need to slip away carefully. If High Sage Xinghao is still at the palace, the Temples are definitely supporting Ozai. They won't like us going off to attack him. And your sky bison doesn't seem up to flying away again."

But Sokka had perked up. "Maybe not towards the trouble, but-" He went over to stand in front of Appa. "Hey, buddy, do you think you can go find Momo? Stay low and keep away from the palace? I bet Momo is hiding somewhere safe, and then we'll come find you when things aren't exploding anymore."

Toph had seen Mai plead with this pack animal before, back at Ba Sing Se, and once again Lady Gloomy reached out to rub Appa's fur and said, "That's a good idea. I know you're strong enough to do it. We'll find Aang for you, okay?"

Appa had given one of its roars, and then flapped its tail to float- slowly, awkwardly- up through the roof and out of sight.

Thankfully, there had been no immediate explosion.

And so Sokka had said, "Okay, time to go invade the people who decided to invade my home!" And so it they left behind the safety of the Temple.

With Mai's help, they stuck to the smaller lanes and covered ground quickly. Toph could sense soldiers before the rest could see them, so she was able to warn when to move and when to hide.
It was actually going fairly well when Toph sensed a familiar figure on the roof of a nearby mansion. It was distant, almost at the edge of her Earth-sense on top of a building with little stone in it, but there was a grace and steadiness to its heartbeat that was familiar.

Lady Caldera Yu Gerel was above them.

And even though the figure wasn't positioned to be looking at them, Toph had the distinct impression that she was being watched.

"Hold up." She held out a hand to the others, bringing their little procession to a halt at a street-corner. She felt Mai going for some of the blades beneath her clothes, while Sokka's pulse quickened.

Kei Lo looked around as if expecting something to be on the street with them. "What is it?"

And the darkness that was Toph's vision lightened a bit as though the sun was rising above them.

Betting that it wasn't the sun, she twisted and pumped a foot to send a pulse of earth back at her friends that pushed them out of the way of the firestorm coming down on them. Toph raised her fists at the same time to pull the bricks of the street up to form a shield over herself, but she still felt the heat of the attack nearly singing her skin.

As soon as she felt the heat go away, Toph ripped a chunk of the ground up and sent it sailing towards her attacker.

Or, rather, the building the attacker was standing on. The load-bearing columns stuck out against the flimsier material of the walls, and one particular column in particular was the conduit through which Gerel's movements and vibrations were being carried down to the earth. Toph sent her attack straight at that column, and she was rewarded with a nice cacophony.

"Gimme eyes," she barked.

"A wing of the mansion is collapsing," Sokka immediately answered. "That side of the roof is coming down and- sacred slush someone is sliding down towards us shooting fire!"

Toph could feel the heat. There was a lot of it coming down, and she was reminded of Gerel's Agni Kai against Zuko. Princey-Pants had been overwhelmed with a whole sustained conflagration that, he later theorized, Gerel had been able perceive and navigate with a precision no other living Firebender could manage. It had made sense to Toph, as Gerel had already demonstrated that the blindfold she always wore didn't hamper her perceptions in the slightest. Toph could 'see' with her Earthbending, and there was no reason a Firebender couldn't manage something similar.

But Toph couldn't see Fire, and Gerel wouldn't be able to see Earth.

Should be fun.

"Get out of here," she shrieked as she kicked at the ground right in front of her to rip a tunnel open. Three bodies- Mai, Sokka, and Kei Lo- dashed into the safety of the underground, and Toph followed just far enough to get a roof over her head. Then she stopped and threw her fists forward again, extending the tunnel down another city-block. Her friends kept running.

Toph stayed put.

While the others continued on towards the palace, Toph lifted her arms above her head and began punching the ceiling of her tunnel. The force sent shockwaves all through the street's topside,
revealing Gerel in all her stupid physical glory and creating people-sized columns of earth to stab upward, forming a maze of stone. When Toph judged that she had created enough interference, she stomped the tunnel floor and raised one last column to carry herself back to the surface. As she passed through the stone of the street, she drew her arms close, calling the earth to her and fusing it together into full-body armor. Toph covered everything, from her head to her toes, leaving just enough gaps in the stone plates to allow her to move and breath.

The rock felt cool against her body.

But then, that was the point.

Between the obscuring columns of stone and the armor, Toph was betting that she was pretty close to invisible to Gerel.

When Toph reached the surface, she found a blaze of fire waiting for her, and Gerel moving quickly through it in an erratic path. Toph was tempted to try to follow it, to come up from behind, but she knew that Fire didn't stay put like Earth. The paths would be changing by the moment.

So Toph slipped between columns and tried to circle around Gerel, hunting like a pack of wolf-bats running down an isolated baby badgermole, preparing a strong strike to take out a Weapon of the Fire Nation with one blow-

-and Gerel spun and punched out a thin spear of a blazing fireball that broke through columns to strike Toph right in the center of her armored chest.

Oh.

Right.

Gerel heard Toph coming.

Good to remember.

The stone burned against her.

Zuko was having a hard time keeping his mind on the Lavabender who was trying to kill him.

It was just that it was all so wrong. The Caldera, one of the most perfect places in the world in Zuko's memory, was being ruined. It smelled of smoke and soot and fire and violence, akin to the reek of one of the Earth Kingdom's Ashlands. The sight of the ruined buildings could have come from any number of colony villages he had passed through during his exile, places that the Fire Nation had attacked in their efforts to spread peace and civilization.

Now it had all come home, straight to the center of the Fire Nation. Peace and civilization.

And it was all Father's fault, according to Mutan's ranting.

Zuko darted across the cracked courtyard of some abandoned manor, away from a flying rock that was half-melted into glowing lava. It struck the carriage house behind him to immediately set the building's outer walls on fire, and he grabbed at the newborn flames without breaking his strike to toss them back at the Lavabender.

Hopping out of the shelter of the half-crumpled manor behind him, Aang added to the attack with his own fireball and a block of stone he lifted up and sent sailing with a swipe of his staff.
Zuko hoped that Aang had been able to hide Suki and Kirai somewhere safe. Suki was a fantastic warrior, but there was little she could do against lava.

Mutan defended himself by arcing his forearms and pulling columns out from the courtyard to swipe across the path of the attacks. "Prince Ozai delivered us from the Heretics, and it is only by Faith in Fire can we be saved." He let two of the pillars remain standing, and pushed with both hands as if hefting a sandbag, using more power than Zuko had seen in any other Earthbending style. The columns collapsed forward as they melted into lava. "The military and the people have lost their Faith, and only the Fire can restore it in a Baptism of pain and blood."

One pillar groaned as it tipped towards Zuko, and the liquid portion popped and splattered even as he tried to leap clear. The glowing lava sprayed into his path-

The air turned solid at Zuko's side and shoved him to safety.

Zuko skidded across the ground even as Aang dashed past him and spun his staff into a glider. The Avatar flew over the lines of glowing lava that crisscrossed the street and courtyard, but Mutan slapped both of his hands down on the ground at his feet, and the sitting lava boiled and bubbled and the air shimmered with the heat of it. Aang cried out as his glider suddenly sailed upward, dragging him along on a current of hot air.

Mutan gasped out the most humorless laugh that Zuko ever heard. "All other elements are under the dominion of Fire! Water, Earth, and Air all fall before it, and bow in their allegiance to it, for the Fire came before all when it lit the Void and gave Life to the world!"

This was what Father had unleashed on his own people, on his own home. Grandfather was dead (murdered?), the military was in rebellion, and the Capital was burning. The Weapons had been sent out to destroy homes and take lives in Father's name.

Zuko had wanted to come home to discover, for himself, if Father really was capable of burning him on purpose, if the fireball that had taken his eye and half his face had been more than an accident. He thought he would have to look his Father in the face, talk to him, immerse himself in their relationship.

But, really, this was answer enough.

All of it was.

Mother's disappearance.

The way Father had used him as a distraction at the walls of Ba Sing Se without telling him.

What Azula had been raised to be.

The mysteries around the burning of Hira'a.

The poisoning of Suki's sister just to force Zuko to come home.

He knew what he'd see when he finally got back to the palace. He'd see a man capable of attacking his own son in a fit of fury.

Mutan moved like he was shoving again, a fluid motion so unlike either Firebending or Earthbending but with a sluggishness that couldn't be of Water or Air. The ground beneath his hands lit up with an orange glow and erupted into a geyser of lava, and then he pushed down to send the surge flowing out in a spreading wave.
Zuko shook himself from his thoughts again and moved to avoid the latest attack, but as he began to move, he realized he had let himself get boxed in. Half-cooled lava still lay splattered in his path, a mix of runny stone and dancing fire, and when he turned back the other way, he found that a pool of even more lava oozing towards him-

-Mutan's wave was coming down towards Zuko's head-

-he twisted and threw himself back towards that first direction, where the lava was almost solid again, and kicked out with his feet to extend his Inner Fire out to the ground. His boots had barely cleared the ground when the fire struck against the stone and exploded, the shockwave flipping him into a spin through the air.

He tucked his arms and legs in-

-felt the heat of the gooey rock beneath him-

-and his back struck a spot of the courtyard that was only slightly warm. He had never been so happy to crash to the hard, ragged ground.

Aang landed in a crouch beside him.

Zuko scrambled back to his feet. "We're running out of room."

Aang nodded. "Got it."

Mutan was still crouched down, hands against the ground, and the hot glow was continuing to spread out across the whole area.

Aang reared back, inhaled more deeply than Zuko would have expected of that little body, and then leaned forward to exhale a gale at the same time he pushed out with both hands in a kind of undulating motion.

Crystals formed just past Aang's hands and flew out to tinge all of the air beyond. The atmosphere grew chilled, and Zuko found himself instinctively hugging himself at the sudden cold. Aang grinned as the lava in front of them cracked and cooled. "Learned that one from Katara."

Zuko was starting to understand how Waterbenders had thwarted Azula at Crescent Island.

Mutan backed away, his body tensing, but Zuko leaned forward, stoking his Inner Fire and preparing to bring it forward in as many attacks as it could fuel-

-and the ground rose up to trap Zuko's feet and lock him into place.

Aang tried to jump, but his feet were trapped, too.

Zuko heard movement behind him, and looked to find Kirai stumbling out from the ruins of the manor, her arms bent at her side and her legs settling into something almost like a horse stance despite her obvious pain.

She grinned through the dried blood that stained her mouth. "Hey, Lavabender. Prince Ozai wants Zuko and me at the palace. The Avatar is a curse on the world or whatever. I've captured them for you, and request safe passage to the palace." She coughed, and spat on the ground.

All thoughts of Father flew from Zuko's mind.

Betrayal was good at focusing him.
Mai emerged from the dark underground onto the street right in front of her parents' mansion.

She was so surprised by the sight of her home that it was Sokka who had to point out, "Hey, where did Toph go?"

Mai tore her eyes away from the past and looked around, and sure enough, only Sokka and Kei Lo stood behind her. Well, as far as she could figure, there were two possibilities. One was that the Earth King who made up for her blindness with super-Earthbending or something had gotten lost in a straight tunnel. The other was proved true when a light like bonfire burst into being several blocks back in the direction of Toph's escape path.

Right, stupid rearguard action it was, then. She pulled a pair of razor disks from her sleeve. "We need to go back and help her. Gerel is too good even for-"

And then she saw the line of pure light extending from up from the gate of the palace and oh ash she forgot she lived across the street from the Fire Lord and she grabbed Sokka and Kei Lo and dove behind her home's outer wall-

-and then her home blew up.

Suki was sick of her sister hitting her.

She had been watching the fight that Zuko and Aang were waging against the Lavabender, trying to find some way to help them. She wished, for the first time in her life, that she was Mai, detached and deadly and able to throw knives faster than a diving cheetah-hawk.

But Suki was just Suki, and the only thing she had was a terrible sister.

The blow had come out of nowhere, and explosion of pain and darkness right at the base of Suki's skull that sent her into darkness. She never quite lost consciousness, not with the threat of pain to anchor her to reality, and managed to force her eyes back open to find the shattered remains of a rock on the floor around her that looked to be about the size of Kirai's fist.

She crawled back the way Aang had led them before, towards the fight and the heat of lava.

She found Kirai standing just outside a hole in the wall of what seemed to have once been a music room. Beyond her, the Lavabender was walking across a field of black lava-rock, crunching with each step. "You are an Earthbender?"

Suki spotted Zuko slashing at his feet with spikes of fire, chipping away at shackles of stone that held him in place. The rock was too dense and strong to yield, just like an Earthbender could make it with a little effort.

Kirai nodded, her back still to Suki. "An Earthbender who knows that Fire is superior."

Next to Zuko, Aang swung his fist up, but no element responded to his movement. He tried again, the stone covering his own feet rattling a bit, but he remained trapped.

Kirai's fists shook as she kept them tight.

A smile twisted Mutan's tattooed face. "I greet you, Sister. Hold your captives for another moment, and then I will rush you to the palace myself." He threw both of his arms out, and the blackened field of rock in front of him lit up with the heat of lava. It flowed towards Aang-
Zuko roared defiantly.

Suki stepped right up to Kirai, grabbed her shoulder to spin her around, and landed a solid palm strike straight into her abdomen.

Suki had not held back. As she always did, she struck as though aiming at a point beyond her target, and Kirai's stomach collapsed against the blow.

A wave of blood burst past Kirai's lips.

Her face went pale.

She blinked as though surprised by what she was seeing.

She coughed.

Her eyes went dull.

Kirai fell to the ground at Suki's feet.

It seemed to have taken an eternity, but it was all over before the rock at Aang's feet finally exploded to dust and he leaped above the wave of lava, snapping his glider out to ride the hot air to safety.

Suki turned and caught the shock on the Lavabender's tattooed face. "Deception? But-" And then Zuko's fireball hit that face, blowing the body back. Good. Zuko and Aang were safe.

Suki looked down.

Kirai wasn't moving. Her eyes stared at nothing. She didn't seem to be breathing. Knowing what she would find, Suki crouched over her sister and checked for a pulse.

There was none.

Suki had just killed her big sister.

She closed Kirai's eyes.

It was the poison that had really done it, of course. Suki was no practitioner of the Death Touch. It had been a blow that, on anyone healthy, would simply stun for several moments and leave a sore stomach for a while longer. But the poison had been eating at Kirai's insides, and Suki's blow had hammered at exactly that weak point.

She wished could say it was an accident.

She hadn't made a conscious choice to kill her sister, but there had been an immediate need to strike hard and fast enough to save the boys, and she had satisfied that need according to her warrior's instincts.

Suki had suffered one last blow and one last betrayal from her sister. But now it was done.

She didn't come back to reality until Zuko's hand came to rest on her shoulder. Aang stood behind him, the Avatar's face reflecting the feelings in Suki's gut.

Zuko nodded at her. "I'm sorry."

She forced herself to stand up, leaving Kirai on the ground. "No, I am. I knew what she was like.
We-" She made herself say the truth, "We never should have- should have tried to save her in the first place."

Aang gasped.

But Zuko just looked at her with understanding in his single eye. "My Father will answer for this. I promise."

That, Suki could accept. "Okay. What next?"

Zuko turned to a dark, sharp spire that rose up in the distance. "We go home and end this."

TO BE CONTINUED
The Fall of the House of Fire

Chapter Summary

The end of all things- for Act 3.

The Fall of the House of Fire

Mai was so sore that she didn't immediately realize she'd been impaled.

She shifted to get off of Sokka and Kei Lo, having ended up on top of them when she yanked them all to safety. There was pain as she moved, but considering that she had been close to the Disciple of the Third Eye's explosions twice now- once when he tried to blow Appa out of the sky, and now he had just destroyed her parents' mansion in an attempt to explode her directly- she couldn't muster up any surprise.

Then she shifted her weight onto her legs and the only thing that kept her from screaming was her inability to catch her breath.

She collapsed to her right, spinning as she fell to land against the outer wall of her parents' mansion. She had tackled Sokka and Kei Lo here to hide from the Disciple, and now it was the only thing left standing on the property, Mai herself included. The mansion had been reduced to a cloud of dark smoke and a few small pieces of wood, some of which were still on fire.

The jagged wooden rod that had impaled Mai straight through her right thigh was, thankfully, not one of the burning ones.

From over the wall, the clank of metal on the stone street echoed. The Disciple was coming.

"Mai?" Sokka got up from the ground, Kei Lo a moment behind him, and when he spotted her, his eyes went wide and he sucked in a breath between his teeth. "Oh, slush, that looks bad!"

Mai examined her wound. The rod was fairly smooth and maybe about as wide as a coin, with its current length a little shorter than her arm, although the sharp jagged end was testament to a larger origin. She could probably slide it out, although it would be both agonizing and a good way to bleed to death. As it was, her dark pants obscured whatever bleeding she was doing.

The Disciple's metal leg again clanged on the street.

"Bad or not, we can't stay here." She tried pushing herself up with her arms, hoping that keeping the weight off her leg would allow her to move. "We need to get-

The jagged end of rod nudged the ground, and the pain that exploded out across her whole thigh ripped away her strength and left her slumped back against the wall.

Another metal footstep.

When Mai could speak again, she gasped, "On the other hand, I like it here. I grew up in that pile of rubble."
Sokka leaned over to examine the wound.

On her other side, Kei Lo hugged his legs to his chest. "We're going to die here." Sweat was glistening on his shaved head. "Without you, we don't have any way to fight the Disciple."

Sokka snorted. "Don't worry, we're good at running away. I think we can carry Mai along if we cut this rod down."

Mai nearly choked at the thought. "But I'll bleed-

"Not if we leave the part that's all jammed in your leg. I'll just cut the ends off, so you won't wrench your wound." Sokka pulled his knife out of his belt, and looked to her. "Okay?"

Mai sighed. "Ffffine."

"Um, sorry in advance because this will probably hurt like crazy."

Mai tugged off her left glove as another footstep echoed, and even that much movement created waves of discomfort. She folded the glove over and over. "Even if this goes- ugh- well, I'm not walking anytime soon. And neither of you will- nh- be able to outrun an explosion with my weight on top of you."

Kei Lo perked up. "I can carry you by myself, if something distracts the Disciple."

Sokka blinked. "So that leaves me to set a trap for Sparky Sparky Boom Man's attention." He blinked again. "Well, that's not going to be fun."

Even in pain, Mai could do the math. Kei Lo was just an apprentice Inferior Sage, not a warrior. Sokka was more capable, but he was still talking about making himself a target for a guy who could blow up buildings with a thought.

She looked back at her childhood home, now reduced to a small pile of chopsticks. "This whole situation licks ash."

Sokka nodded again and brandished his knife. "Ready? We need to make this quick."

Another footstep. Good thing the big guy was never in a hurry.

Mai stuck her folded glove between her teeth and bit down on it. "Rddy."

He began sawing.

She had to wrap her arms over her mouth to stifle her shrieks.

By the time it was done, she felt like she had squeezed her eyes dry of tears.

She took her glove out of her mouth and hissed, "Slush, that hurt." Huh, it actually felt good to say. Maybe she'd pick it up. "Slush it, let's get going."

Kei Lo helped her up, and her thigh felt no better, but at least the stick still stabbing all the way through wasn't knocking against anything with its shorter length. It also felt like the area around the wound was wetter. Hopefully, she wasn't losing blood at an especially fatal rate.

Once she was on her feet and leaning against Kei Lo, Sokka gave her one last nod. "If you find Toph or Aang or anybody, feel free to send help. I- uh- well, I'm not so much hoping to win against this guy as not lose, you know?"
Mai understood. Resting her full weight on Kei Lo, unfastened the bolt-launcher she wore on her right wrist and tossed it to Sokka. She followed it up by removing and giving him the other one as well. "I expect those returned in working order."

Sokka didn't say anything, but he did grin as he clipped them on.

Mai nodded to Kei Lo. "Now we can go. There's a servant gate around the other side of the house-er, the ruins, I mean." They got moving, and Mai heard the sound of Water Tribe boots against the street.

Then the air cracked with the sound of an explosion.

Kei Lo kept them moving.

Sokka's voice echoed from down the street, "Have you ever thought about a career in demolition- yyyyyyyikes!" His scream diminished as he apparently ran like the wind.

The air cracked again as Kei Lo dragged Mai along.

By the time Zuko arrived at the palace, the blasting had moved.

For a while, the sound of the explosions had eclipsed the din of other fighting, and for all the death it portended, it was a helpful thing. Each boom that reverberated from the palace district was an opportunity for Zuko, Suki, and Aang to make a dash to the next bit of cover while their own noise was inaudible. In the quiet moments, they used the sound of swords and Firebending and shouts to identify what areas to avoid.

It took longer, but now that they were no longer rushing to try to save Kirai, they could make a proper effort to avoid the fighting across the Capital. They had even taken the time to scrounge a dao sword for Suki from the detritus of some earlier fight.

But in a few cases where they did encounter an unexpected soldier, no matter whether it was Crimson Guard or Army or Home Guard, they acted together to disable the soldier quickly and quietly.

After Mutan, they no longer trusted anyone to be on their side.

After Kirai, they couldn't.

A last burst of explosions had enabled them to make a long run for the palace district, but all they found when they arrived was more rubble and smoke. The Disciple of the Third Eye wasn't anywhere to be seen, and the sounds of his attacks were coming from elsewhere; he must have been drawn off or forced into a retreat by someone.

That left the Proud March, the massive space between the rest of the city and the palace's outer walls, empty of life. The smooth brick ground was pock-marked from the Disciple's work, but beyond it all, beyond the outer walls, the palace stood undamaged and unblemished.

On the other side of one of the twelve segments of the Proud March, Mai's house was smoking ruins. Zuko wondered if that meant she was no longer of the Caldera clan.

He waved Aang and Suki forward. "Come on. Almost there."

Zuko led them across the Proud March, to the outer walls, to the gate that had been left open. He
paused there, crouching at the edge and peeking out to see what waited beyond the walls. He heard the boots on the path before he saw anything, and ducked back as a six-person squad of Crimson Guard jogged out and took positions on the Proud March.

Not seeing any reason to bother the Guards while their backs were turned, Zuko waved Aang and Suki to follow him through the gate. They were able to walk straight up to the palace, and Zuko opened the doors to find two startled Crimson Guards caught mid-step.

He snapped into a Firebending stance.

The Guards took defensive postures.

Suki lifted her sword.

One of the Guards took a step-

"Hold up!" The Avatar put his staff on the ground and raised his hands. "This is Prince Zuko! We're not here to fight!"

The armored helmets turned towards Zuko. He nodded at them. The helmets turned back to Aang, and one Guard said, "You're the Avatar."

"Sure am."

"We weren't told to let you in. And who's this girl?"

Zuko nodded at Suki. "She's with me. My bodyguard."

The Guards turned their helmets to glance at each other, and one said, "I think this is going to be a problem."

Aang lowered his hands. "Are you really going to attack me?"

The Guards were very still. The leader said, "Um-

Zuko snorted. "I hope you brought back-up, because that's the Avatar. You know, the Bridge Between Worlds, Master of the Four Elements, a thousand lifetimes worth of fighting experience? He completed an Agni Budokai, just to prove he doesn't need any Bending. Do you really want to fight him?"

The two helmets turned to face Aang.

The kid actually grinned and shrugged.

The helmets swiveled back to face each other.

Suki added, "You know, if you wanted to go and ask, maybe things have changed, and it's okay for the Avatar to come in now."

Zuko nodded. "It's likely."

Aang casually leaned against the door. "I don't really want to fight anyone, so I think it's a good idea. And I don't mind waiting."

The two helmets nodded, and then the leader ran back deeper into the palace.
Zuko maintained his stance and waited.

A few minutes later, the Guard returned and said, "It's okay! They can all come in! Piandao's waiting in the hall."

Aang smiled and used his Airbending to pull his staff back into his hands.

Zuko relaxed out of his stance. "Take us to him." As the Guards escorted them through the Hall of Pillars, Zuko leaned towards Aang to whisper, "How did you know that would work?"

The kid shrugged. "I figured it was worth a try. I'm really tired of fighting people I don't need to."

It had been years since Zuko had been in the Hall of Pillars, but after a statement like that, the mood of the whole thing had been ruined.

Not that Zuko could really muster the proper mood. The dark pillars and the carved golden dragons had once consistently impressed him with their majesty and symbolic power, but now he just found it sinister. He had nearly starved during his journeys through the Earth Kingdom, and he had seen more than enough to know that it was hardly an uncommon plight. The war had used- or destroyed- food and supplies for both the colonists and the natives, so there wasn't always enough to go around. The colonists were always favored, in those situations, but some still went hungry or without a home.

And yet this gold all stood here, doing nothing.

Zuko knew that opulent palaces had their purposes, that impressing people with wealth and refinement could stop wars before they started, but what was the point of this excess when they went out to conquer the world anyway, when war had already engulfed their own capital?

Zuko and his friends were led into the main hall to find the remains of an encampment. A few members of the Crimson Guard were scattered around, the injured on pallets and the rest moving around on one task or another. In the center of it all, Piandao Hundredslayer stood speaking with a man in especially ornate Sage robes.

When Piandao saw them, he broke off his conversation and bowed low. "Prince Zuko, welcome home at last. It is very good to see you in fine health. Allow me to offer my sincere apologies for the circumstances." He straightened and produced a glass vial from his belt. The clear liquid within glistened in the light of the lamps. "I was told to give this to Kirai of Kyoshi Island."

The pretty words and polite tone couldn't stop Zuko from clenching his fists as he glanced at Suki. She completed wilted at Piandao's words, and Zuko worried that she wouldn't be able to remain standing. He tried to dismiss the matter with a wave. "That is no longer necessary. And I intend to have words with my father about it."

The Sage scampered back a few steps, but Piandao's expression didn't change as he bowed to Suki. "I am truly sorry for your loss. As far as I know, Kirai served loyally before any of this started, and she was ill-used."

Suki inhaled deeply, and then once again stood like a capable and dangerous warrior. "I don't care what you have to say. I'm here to help end all this awfulness."

Zuko stepped over to stand beside her, and he heard Aang taking up a position behind them. "Where is my Father?"

Piandao inclined his head. "Once again, I must apologize. Prince Ozai is getting some sleep, and left orders that he is not to be disturbed for any reason. In the meantime, I can get you some food and a
place to rest for yourselves. We don't have much, but-

"I don't want food or rest!" He couldn't help recalling his most vivid memory of Piandao, of the last time he saw Mother. Zuko had been out in the rear courtyard of the palace, practicing his Firebending even after the sun had gone down. Mother and Piandao had emerged together in hooded cloaks, no entourage with them, not even a torch to light their path.

When Zuko had tried to find out what was going on, Piandao's tone had remained reasonable as he answered, 'This has nothing to do with you, my Prince. Go back inside, go to bed, and everything will be fine.'

But the next morning, Mother had been gone, and she never came back.

She had said, 'Don't worry yourself about me. Good night, Zuko. I will always protect you.' But it had been a lie. If she was alive, she was far away. Perhaps she had burned with Hira'a. Perhaps Piandao had just stabbed her and left her in a ditch somewhere to rot.

Zuko was not going to let Piandao once again keep him from doing the right thing. He let his Inner Fire flare, and brought flames to life with a snap of his hands. "There's a civil war just outside the palace! I'm going to stop this right now! Where is Father?"

Piandao frowned. "I am sorry, my Prince, but I fear I was not clear. Prince Ozai left orders that he is not to be disturbed. I am overseeing things in his absence, and am responsible for enforcing his orders. The matter is closed."

Around the hall, most of the standing members of the Crimson Guard shifted, centering their weight and taking positions that would allow them to fight at a moment's notice. The rest moved to help the injured out of the room. No doubt they all wanted to be subtle, but a full set of armor could only be so silent. They were preparing for a fight.

Piandao's glanced at the guards, met Zuko's gaze, and shook his head with a smile. "My, everyone is so tense. Please, let's all just relax. We don't want any unpleasantness here in the palace."

"Yes," a voice rang out that sent shivers down Zuko's spine. "Even though a war is raging right outside, we must keep things pleasant, hm? It would be ever so crass to clobber each other right here in the front hall."

Zuko looked up to see Azula striding down the hall's central staircase, rolling her eyes at them all.

Mai's first instinct, without her own home to offer her shelter, was to head to Ty Lee's place. Not that anyone would be there. Ty Lee was traipsing around with Katara, somewhere, and her sisters were all back on Ember Island. Their dad's bones were probably lost in a canyon near Omashu. And judging from what she had seen while flying in on Appa, their mom was probably camped out in the Royal Plaza outside the volcano with the rest of the Caldera's evacuees.

But Mai knew the place as well as her own home. She preferred to go to ground on her own turf.

The manor was scorched in places, but still mostly intact. Mai let Kei Lo practically carry her up the front steps, and then leaned on him just long enough to get through the doors into the foyer. Once they were out of sight, she finally let herself collapse, leaning against the closest wall and sliding down to the floor. It was only slightly agonizing, and then she could at last just stay still and rest.

She hoped Sokka wasn't dead. She hadn't heard an explosion in a little while.
Kei Lo sat down beside her. "How's your leg?"

Mai didn't bother looking at it. "I think I impaled it on something. Go find a healer for me."

He blanched. "Um- I- I don't know if- maybe back at the Temple, but-"

Mai groaned. "Oh, knock it off, I was joking. It's how I handle blood-loss."

"Oh." He leaned back against the wall, but his eyes stayed glued to her. "So, uh, what is the plan? Just wait here for someone to find us?"

Mai kept her face blank. "Who would know to look for us here?" She sighed, pulled one of her razors out of her sleeve, and whipped it at a hanging mural on the other side of the foyer that Ty Lee's mom particularly loved. "Slush. We're out of the fight. Not that you were ever in the fight, but there's nothing either of us can do now. The Temple is too far with all the fighting, and we didn't find any sign of Aang or Zuko. Or Suki, either."

Kei Lo was quiet for a moment. "So, we're just hunkering down? Together?"

Mai said, "Slush," again. It was really habit-forming.

"And you're sure no one can find us?"

If only. She could only hope that Aang wasn't depending on her to come and help him.

Kei Lo leaned towards her. "You know, I'm really sorry about this. You probably noticed, but I find you very impressive." His cheeks colored, and he smiled. "And attractive."

Mai blinked. Was this moron really doing this now?

And then Kei Lo leaned towards her-

She had a blade up to his neck before he could blink. "I changed my mind. I'm hunkering down. You're going back to the Temple. Right now."

She never saw his hand move. One moment he was looking at her the way most boys looked at Ty Lee, despite the fact that she was threatening his life. The next, pain exploded from her thigh and she was squealing and dropping her blade as he used one hand to press down on the stick impaling her. Then he was putting his other forearm across her throat and pushing her against the wall and pressing and she couldn't breathe-

She gagged, unable to ask the questions that burned in her chest.

But Kei Lo must have seen them in her eyes, because he shook his head as he choked her. "I would have liked to keep you alive. To court you, even, if there had been the opportunity. But the Avatar saved you from my trap and the knockout vapors back on Sage Guan's ship, and now that the F-" He blinked, his voice failing, and tears ran down his cheeks. "Now that the- the Fire Lord is dead- There's no other choice."

Mai tried to say something, to insult this moron and ask him what he was talking about and scream for help, but all that emerged from her mouth was a rasp. If he had sabotaged their plan to get smuggled aboard Sage Guan's ship, then he was the one ultimately responsible for all her friends who had been hurt today, for Aang if-

-if-
Kei Lo sniffled and he looked at her with something like understanding. "Azulon lifted me from darkness, made me his Weapon and gave me a purpose. First to spy on the Sages for him, and then to deal with the Avatar."

Weapon?!

The *Ninth-*

"Now, I- I-" His breath hitched, and then he snarled and twisted her to the ground hard enough to slam the back of her head into the floor.

Reality swam.

She needed to breathe.

Through a ringing in her ears, she heard Kei Lo whisper, "I cannot allow any of the traitors responsible for his death to live. I'm sorry."

The Weapons were all experts in something. Kei Lo was a master of *being underestimated*-

She tried to squirm free, but she couldn't find the strength. Kei Lo kept his very solid forearm pressed against her throat as his salty tears splashed on her lips.

Darkness swarmed at the edges of her vision.

Slushing ash.

Azula couldn't deny that she loved a dramatic entrance. She took her time coming down the stairs while everyone—Zuko, Piandao, the Avatar, High Sage Xinghao, the leftovers of the Crimson Guard, and even little Suki—stared at her.

The Avatar tilted his head. "And who are you?"

"You don't see the family resemblance?" She grinned at him as she took the last steps. "Maybe if I poked an eye out?" She shut her left eye and made a scowling face.

Over behind his pillar, Xinghao made a choking sound.

Zuko squared his shoulders and glared at her. "What do you want, Azula?"

She walked across the hall and moved her gaze to Piandao, taking her time. She didn't want her guests to think she answered to Zuzu. "I convinced Father to take a nap, but he didn't come back upstairs. So he must be on the first floor. The Throne Room is hardly comfortable, nor is it *secure*. But I do remember some rooms around here, hidden little alcoves behind the walls where a person can isolate herself in her own world, even if invaders stormed the place."

Piandao said nothing, but his eyes were hardly friendly. But that was okay with her. After Father had agreed to get some rest, Azula had expected to be placed in command, but it was Piandao who remained in charge of the war.

True, Piandao had more military experience than her, but he had been up all night with Father. Azula, on the other hand, had been preparing her whole life for leadership on the battlefield, but was still the one member of the Royal Family who had never been tested in war. She had been called a prodigy in every field of endeavor she tried, lauded as the member of the family with most potential for greatness.
And she was still left to read the spy-notes of a pair of old women who hadn't seen their death coming.

She wasn't even angry with Father. She had failed him, had caused this whole horrible situation. It was understandable why he wouldn't want to make use of her.

It was the fact that he was lying about it that really ate away at Azula.

The lies and secrecy- the frequency with which he banned her from his suite, the way he hid his past dealings with Lady Gerel, the frequent deflections from a real explanation about what had changed for him when Zuko was banished- had been going on since long before Azula messed up with Li and Lo.

She always did everything that her father commanded.

But she was hardly a fanatic. She turned to Zuko and winked.

Then she snapped back and grabbed for Piandao's face with a flaming hand.

Before her palm or any of the fire reached his skin, though, he broke into a blur of motion that somehow smacked her arm aside even as he drew his sword and she stepped backwards and started to sink into a sweeping flame-kick but there was a sound of scraping metal and a flash of reflected light and a coldness at the end of her left arm-

And Azula realized that the blade of Piandao's sword was sticking straight through her left shoulder and cleanly out the other end.

She blinked at it.

He had stabbed her.

Right behind Azula, there was the sound of a drop of liquid on the floor. Probably her blood.

Analysis: no damage to the bone, not enough blood for a major artery to have been cut, and her armor was still intact. A minor wound, except for the fact that she was still skewered. And it was starting to hurt.

Piandao, too, stared at the blade and blinked. His facing turned thoughtful as he no doubt went through the same analysis. Was he surprised? Had he simply acted on pure instinct, her danger too close and fast for him to even think?

The thought warmed her against the cold steel piercing her flesh.

Careful not to shift her body at all, lest the wound be made worse, Azula arched her head and passed her gaze over everyone in the room. "This fool just stabbed a member of the Royal Family. Does anyone have an opinion on that?"

The various members of the Crimson Guard still around all moved in towards Piandao, flames coming to their hands.

Mai was afraid that her last sensations would all be about that rat Kei Lo, that she would die with his voice in her ears and his forearm across her throat and the smell of his sweat in her nose.

So she didn't argue when, as the darkness was about to take her, she heard something like Ty Lee's voice ring out in fury.
Then all the weight on her was removed, including her throat, and she sucked air in desperately as she tried to get up. But everything was still going dark, her head still spinning dizzily, and she felt her body twist as she fell again.

She couldn't have been out for more than a moment, because when she opened her eyes again, Kei Lo was behind her, propping her up and holding a knife- one of her knives, from the feel of the blade's shape- against the skin under her chin.

And in front of her, Ty Lee and Katara stood side-by-side, tensed in attack stances and looking very, very angry.

Suffering from both oxygen deprivation and shock, it took Mai a moment to realize what was going on. "W- wait, am I a hostage?"

Ty Lee's fierce expression twisted into something like a smile. "Well, yeah? Sorry, I should have hit him instead of yelling for him to get off you."

Katara nodded.

Mai luxuriated in the ability to breathe, not at all concerned with the feel of steel on the skin under her chin, even though she had no opportunity to try to pull free. She must have fallen on her left leg when she blinked out for a moment, because it was pinned underneath her. Her right leg throbbed, and she remembered that it still had stick impaling it. "Well, I wasn't expecting you to actually be here, so I forgive you for-"

She dropped the thought and leaned back on Kei Lo, using the leverage he provided to life her butt off the floor as she stretched her left ankle in a certain way. The bolt-launcher around it clicked, and with her leg twisted beneath her, it was perfectly positioned to shoot a small, very sharp stick straight into the guy trying to hide behind her.

Kei Lo made a high-pitched sound, and the knife dropped from his hand.

Mai wondered how he liked being impaled.

She put her weight back down on her left hip and pulled away from him again, flexing one arm so that a razor-disk dropped into her hand and bending the other arm so that she could pull a stiletto from a hidden pouch.

She slashed the razor-disk across Kei Lo's throat, and the finely-sharpened blade slid easily through with a spray of blood.

She jammed the knife into Kei Lo's chest, angling up through his ribs to puncture deep.

Kei Lo fell backwards, hands flying to his throat, and he managed one long, wet wheeze before he quieted and his body slumped over. A red puddle quickly accumulated beneath it.

This Weapon, apparently, wasn't so good when the fighting started.

Mai tried to push herself away, but that shifted her weight back on her right side, and her impaled thigh radiated pure hurt. She bit down on the urge to cry out, and then looked over to Katara. "A- as long as you're here, I could use some Water-healing."

Katara and Ty Lee both blinked in unison, and then moved.

Ty Lee dragged Mai away from Kei Lo's body, into what looked like it might have been a parlor.
before the ruckus of the war outside the mansion had knocked over all the furniture. Katara followed as she stretched her arms, and some water floated out of the pouch on her back.

Ty Lee laid Mai down and looked over her. "Where are you hurt?"

"The stick in my thigh. Goes all the way through."

Katara bit her lip as she kept the water suspended in the air. "I'm going to start healing, but I'll need the object pulled out before I can finish. Don't worry, I'll fix you up quick so you don't bleed out, but I can't put back the blood you've already lost."

Mai gave the best shrug she could. "Fair enough. I'm the one who left it lying all over the place."

Katara shuddered and looked to Ty Lee. "Keep Mai distracted while I start the healing. When I nod, pull the stick out." She looked back to Mai and shrugged. "It's better if you don't know it's coming."

Mai could only groan at the thought.

Katara moved the water down to Mai's thigh, and it began glowing with that otherworldly light. The pain immediately eased, and Mai very deliberately turned her gaze away to Ty Le. "So, um, how are you two here?"

Ty Lee gasped and clapped her hands together. "Katara and I have been trying to find you! We learned some things about Prince Iroh we really need to tell everyone, but you guys have been on the move and we tracked you to Ember Island and my sisters were really surprised to see me alive-thanks for covering for me-but they said you were going to the Capital so Katara can do this thing to make a boat go faster even than the Navy's motor-wings so we came to find you and maybe provide back-up but everything was all a war and things were exploding and we met some nice soldiers who after I paralyzed them said they saw a flying buffalo get shot out of the sky so we were worried and decided to organize a search but we'd need a meeting place and so I came home but saw some creep trying to take liberties with you so I said, 'Get off her you meanie!' and he--"

"Now," Katara said.

Ty Lee yanked the stick out of Mai's thigh.

Mai screamed as Katara's healing-water flared.

Sokka's people were hunters, before the Fire Nation forced them into a ghetto and made them labor for food-tokens.

But somehow Sokka kept ending up as prey.

It had been what some people would call a 'merry chase,' leading Sparky Sparky Boom Boom Man (okay, maybe it was kind of a mouthful) away from the Palace and Mai. When he had taken Mai's wrist-shooty-things (he forgot to ask what they were called), he had imagined a glorious running fight with the big half-metal Weapon Guy, dodging explosions and shooting back sharp sticks that would slowly wear away his opponent's ability to fight.

But it turned out that explosions weren't so easy to dodge. They were big, and even being close to one was enough to knock Sokka off his feet. And, at this point, whole blocks of this stupid Caldera city had crumbled into underground caverns, making travel tricky. It wasn't until he realized he could use the wrist-shooty-things to cause noise in places where he wasn't that his life was no longer in constant imminent peril.
So he would shoot a sharp stick high into the air, angling it (the tension in the cuff’s springs was adjustable, and then it was just simple parabolic motion) to land on other side of a street or something with a clatter. Explosion Guy (...eh, not bad, but lacking something) would explode the spot where noise came from, and Sokka would get into position to once again show himself for a quick peek and then hide and prepare to do the whole thing over again.

Good thing Master Ignition (hm, on the right track) was so aggressive.

Except Sokka was running out of sharp sticks in his cuff-shooters.

The left was completely empty, and he had only four sticks in the right.

Then he shot another one into the leaves of a tree leaning over a wall, setting them rustling, and was down to three.

The tree was briefly painted with light and then exploded.

Sokka took off running down the street, looking around to identify hiding spots and access points and distraction-worthy features and-

-and he stepped on a stray bit of rubble that flew out from under his foot to trip him.

Sokka slammed to the street, and Ignition Man's (nnnnnot quite solid enough for such a big muscly guy, but almost there) metal footstep echoed behind him.

Sokka looked back, and found his opponent staring at him. The Ignition Man inhaled-

-Sokka lifted his right arm and decided to aim for an eyeball with his last three sticks-

-and then a team of girls in brightly-colored robes leapt down from the rooftops to surround Ignition Man and beat at him with sticks.

Sokka blinked.

It was the Ty-sisters!

He had no idea how they had gotten here or why, but they were attacking with their all. He had sparred with them, back on Ember Island, and seen one or two at a time demonstrating their fighting style, but none of that had prepared him for the sight of all six fighting as a single unit.

It was like they were in constant communication, one moving in as another faded back, leaping over each other and ducking under each other and constantly staying in motion, while the entire time at least two sisters were stabbing or swinging or spinning their tonfa-sticks into their target. But the girls didn't make a sound as they fought, didn't speak or so much as give a war-cry. The only sounds were the meaty impact of their weapons against flesh and muscle and metal, and the wooshing of their quick movements.

And yet they weren't winning.

Ignition Guy (no, that's a step backwards) was taking all that punishment, even moving fast enough to block some of the worst hits with his metal arm and metal leg, and refusing to succumb. And as Sokka watched, he gave up on trying to exchange blows with the quicker girls. He stood up straight-taking another rain of blows across his body in exchange- looked at a nearby wall, inhaled-

-Sokka scrambled across the street to a heavy-looking piece of rubble that might have once been the
head of a dragon statue-
-and the explosion sent the Ty-Sisters flying, but left their bigger opponent nothing but windswept.

Sokka braced himself behind the stone dragon-head, and when he felt the air slowing, he pulled himself up and aimed his cuff-shooter again.

He aimed for an eye-
-Combustion Man (yes, that feels right!) turned to look at him-
-and fired.

But Sokka missed.

The sharp stick struck Combustion Man in the eye-like tattoo on his forehead, sinking only a little bit and sticking out of the guy's head like a tiny horn. A trickle of blood began to run down Combustion Man's face, but he didn't seem to be otherwise inconvenienced. He inhaled-
-Sokka quickly tried to aim for a real eye this time-
-exhaled-
-Sokka fired, but the cuff on his wrist gave a hollow click and oh, he had miscounted how many shots were left. He should really stop relying on Mai's cast-offs and get some of his own weapons-
-and then the air in front of Combustion Man cracked a few times before he blew himself up.

Sokka blinked.

Well, that was convenient.

When the smoke cleared, there was no more Combustion Man. And so soon after Sokka had found the right name, too.

Well, he was alive and the enemy wasn't. Everything else was just a minor concern that he would forget as soon as the next life-threatening crisis lumbered along. For now, he figured he should make sure the Ty-Sisters were okay, and then go find Mai and Kei Lo and make sure they hadn't discovered the next bit of trouble on their own.

Of course, the first sister he found was Ty Woo, discernable by the ever-present scowl on her face even as she seemed to be trying to shake away a concussion.

Sokka helped her to her feet. "You okay?"

"I don't know, stupid, does a persistent ringing in my ears mean I'm okay?" She looked around. "What happened to the big freak?"

"I think I accidentally made him blow himself up."

Ty Woo blinked. Then she blinked again. Then she snorted. "Wow. Okay. Good job, Tribal."

Sokka looked around for the other five sisters. Their bright robes stood out against the smoke-stained city. "Thanks. But, um, if it's not too much trouble, could you never call me a 'Tribal' again? I kind of hate it." He glanced at her to make sure she wasn't about to hit him with a tonfa.
Instead, she gave the first genuine smile he had ever seen on her. "No problem. Oh, hey, there's Ty Lin! Let's go help her."

But before they could move, a figure in dark Water Tribe blue ran around the corner at the other end of the street.

It couldn't be.

But Katara's happy cry echoed, and she ran to Sokka.

He ran to meet her.

They met in a hug that nearly knocked the air from Sokka's lungs, but that was okay. He didn't know why his sister was in the middle of this warzone and not learning up at the North Pole, but that was okay, too. After nearly dying on his own, he was gaining allies, and the most important one of all had just arrived.

He started to say, "How-"

But Katara cut him off (of course) with, "Mai and Ty Lee are going to find Toph. Who else do we need to save?"

Good question.

Ever since killing Heiyaoshi, Toph had privately been wondering if the Weapons of the Fire Nation were all they were cracked up to be. Sure, there was the Disciple of the Third Eye doing his thing, and all of the Weapons who Toph had seen in action were really good, but Toph was Toph. She just had to be in their level, if not above most of them.

After all, what could even a Master Firebender do against the Greatest Earthbender Alive?

Ask a stupid question-

Toph skated across the stone street, doing her best to navigate the inferno around her by sound. It wasn't easy, because it seemed like the crackle-roaring was everywhere, but the stone armor that she had over every bit of her body would heat up when she stumbled into the heart of a blaze, and that was a good clue to get out quickly.

With every movement, Toph's chest tugged painfully. Her armor had protected against the fireball that Gerel had hit her with earlier in the fight, but it had warmed the stone up enough to cook skin. And that hadn't been the only fireball to hit. Stiff, agonizing spots and stripes all over Toph's body were a testament to the limited protection that the stone of the street could provide against concussive fire.

Toph skated up to a wall that seemed to be the only thing remaining of a larger building, and then up the wall, adding her momentum to the pull she exerted on the stone, overcoming gravity, and came to a stop on the top. She perched like a bug, free of the worry of fire for a moment, and reached out with her Earth-sense to find her opponent.

Lady Caldera Yu Gerel, Weapon of the Fire Nation, was moving with her usual precision through the shifting maze of fire that covered the entire city block.

There was no sneaking up on Gerel. The fires around her were a great defense. She could hear even subtle shifts in sound despite the roar of her flames, and could sense changes in temperature in any
direction. Plus, she was way too fast for an old lady.

So Toph needed to use strategy.

She kept her perch, waiting.

Waiting.

Gerel came to a stop, and Toph could read confusion in her body language, in the tilt of her head and the frown beneath her blindfold.

And then Gerel twisted and shot a fireball behind her. Toph was nowhere near it, and it sailed for a distance before bursting against some statue. Gerel continued throwing flameballs in random directions, obviously trying to spook Toph into revealing herself. The noise was almost deafening.

Toph decided it was time to move.

She kicked her heal against the wall beneath her, crumbling it, and as soon as she sank to the ground, she took a low stance and reached out with her Earthbending. All of the noise was lost in the sounds of Gerel's fireballs. Instead of going for something heavy, something that Gerel could have easily dodged or destroyed, Toph limited her control to the surface of the street, to the smaller bits of rubble strewn around, and to the clay tiles that covered so much of the buildings around here.

Then she pushed her arms forward with all her strength and sent everything flying. She didn't bothering aiming, because it wasn't meant to hit Gerel.

The stuff she was throwing was all the stuff that Gerel's fire was resting on.

And so when Toph threw all that junk, it was like she was throwing a whole section of the inferno away. Specifically, the one between Toph herself and an old lady who deserved a good punch to the jaw.

Before Gerel could replace it, Toph was in motion again, kicking up heavy rocks towards her enemy and punching small walls up from the ground and forward like battering rams. She put enough power in each strike for the rocks to break bone when they landed.

But Gerel moved with a precision and efficiency that could have come from one of the Fire Nation's machines, dodging each and every rock with sometimes just a hair's width to spare, throwing out more fire to light up the street once again with each movement.

Somehow, Gerel could sense Toph's attacks coming.

And Toph realized that she was starting to feel warm in her armor, moving around so much and calling on so much strength. Gerel couldn't see the rocks, but she could sense Toph's body through its heat, and discern all its movements.

And Toph couldn't sense the fire again with all the noise she was making-

Concussive flames impacted against the stone armor over her left arm and popped with enough force to crumple it. Toph was no stranger to pain, but this felt her skin was being ripped free and used to lash her muscles. She immediately tried to stop moving it, but that barely made a difference. The pain wouldn't fade, either, taking up residence like a badgermole in a dry hole.

Toph let her attacks die and stomped with both feet. The street behind her collapsed, revealing one of the tunnels that she had carved earlier, and she hopped down and used her good arm to cover the
hole behind her. She let her armor crumbled to dust.

Toph sat down and let a squeal come up from the back of her throat. It didn't help with the pain at all, but it made dealing with it easier, somehow.

And she could deal with anything if she could just win this fight.

She put the palm of her good arm down on the tunnel floor, reaching out with her Earth-sense. Gerel's footsteps above were easy to find, and weren't quite overhead yet. Toph forced herself up and was taking a stance to try to rip the ground out from under that blindfolded jerk's feet, but then Gerel moved, and-

-and a portion of the tunnel ceiling exploded.

Toph cringed through the echoes, but kept her stance. She raised her arms- oh that hurt that hurt that hurt-and seized control of the earth between her and Gerel-

-but there was the oh-so-annoying sound of a massive amount of flying flames and the air in the tunnel immediately grew warm and Gerel was flooding the tunnel with fire!

Toph shifted her stance and stomped for a column to carry her up and clear. Somehow, the air didn't grow any cooler and the sounds of fire didn't diminish, and she realized she had let herself be herded into a trap because Gerel could sustain more flames than any other Firebender.

Toph tried to jump clear, but the roar of the flames shifted, and the air grew hot again, and the column beneath her was hit by something.

Pain exploded in Toph's feet with such force that it barreled up through her body and burst out in a scream that scorched her throat raw.

Her feet were burned.

She landed hard on the street, and this time it wouldn't yield to her. In fact, it was completely dead to her. She could hear things burning and could smell soot and smoke and her own cooked skin, but she couldn't feel anything but pain. She twisted and writhed, trying to find a part of herself uncooked enough to feel the subtle play of vibrations.

But with all her hurts, with pain being the only thing she could feel, Earth King Toph was reduced to what she never wanted to be:

A helpless little blind girl.

But she could only lie on the ground, wheezing for breath with a sound that was far too close to sobbing, and wait for whatever came next. She didn't even realize that Gerel had approached until the old gasbag said, "Were you Fire Nation, I might be content with your defeat. But you claim to be the Earth King."

Toph pointed a finger in the direction of the sound. "I am the Earth King! I worked hard to get those acknowledgements!"

"A little to your left."

Toph adjusted her pointing. "Thanks."

"It is no trouble. But considering what the Fire Nation has suffered today, I think perhaps that the
death of the 'Earth King' can only help us."

Toph lowered her arm. "Then stop yapping about it and go ahead. I'm not going to act all scared so
you can get your jollies."

Gerel sighed. "It is a shame to lose one who so young and full of vigor. You are a but a small child
to one of my years."

Toph snorted. "And like all old people, you're just wasting time like you have too much of it. Hurry
it up before you keel over of old age or something."

Gerel did not say anything more. Toph could only hear the old Weapon's breathing slow and grow
heavier-

"Stop," a girl's voice rang out.

Toph frowned. Had she heard that voice before?

"Lady Caldera Yu Ty Lee," Gerel said. "I thought you were dead."

Ty Lee- Mai's friend Ty Lee?!

"Not dead," the unexpected Ty Lee called back. "I was just kind of like a deserter. Please don't tell
my mom! And please leave King Toph alone. She's really neat and everyone says she's a good
person and we need her if there's going to be peace."

Gerel's reply betrayed confusion: "You would risk yourself for a barbarian king? You're too far
away to mount an effective attack against me, with your chosen style. I would kill you before you
halved the distance."

"I'm not going to fight you," Ty Lee said. Toph wished he could get her Earth-sense to work,
because it sounded like the truth, and that couldn't be. "But I'm going to be very upset if you try to
hurt Toph."

Toph frowned. What kind of rescue was this?

Gerel's breathing intensified again. "So be it." There was the sound of a small wind that Toph took to
be Gerel moving in preparation for more Firebending-

-and another little whistle of air too quick to identify-

-and then Gerel gave a grunt. She huffed out one last breath in a very soggy-sound way, and it was
followed by the distinct sound of a body collapsing, a sound Toph knew too well. More bubbly
gasps came from Gerel.

And Toph heard Ty Lee say, "Mai, um, I think you hit some important arteries. I think- I think Gerel
is dying."

And Toph heard no regret in Mai's reply of, "Oops. Guess my aim is off from all the blood loss."

She didn't need Earthbending to know that wasn't quite the truth.

Gerel stopped making noises.

It was still too painful for Toph to move, so she stayed still and indulged her Royal Right to be
carried around by other people. As the other girls came over and helped her up, Ty Lee said,
"Katara's going to meet us at my house. She'll heal these burns right up while they're fresh."

Toph nodded her Royal Approval. "Sounds good. But how did Mai sneak up on Gerel? Her Firebending lets her sense heat! Even I couldn't sneak up on her!"

Mai gave a dark chuckle. "Gerel always said my blood ran cold. And I lost a lot of blood tonight. Standing pressed back-to-back with Ty Lee- well, it seemed like a good way to just disappear. When Ty Lee crouched, I had my shot."

"I told Gerel I'd be upset," Ty Lee added.

Despite the pain of her burns, Toph grinned. "Not bad, Lady Caldera Yu Mai. Keep this up, and I may just appoint you as my Royal Bodyguard."

Zuko wasn't quite sure what was happening anymore, that Azula would attack Piandao and force him (on purpose?) to stab her, but he knew that an opportunity had just been handed to him.

Zuko rushed in at Piandao, just a step behind the Crimson Guards. They attacked as a group, sending out flames at maximum range, the best strategy for dealing with a Weapon of the Fire Nation armed only with a sword.

But Piandao whisked and used a one-handed yank on his jian sword to pull it free of Azula's shoulder in an arc that passed through the incoming flames with such speed and force and that the fire was yanked along to merely circle him. When he had completed a full circle, he shoved Azula- who still hadn't even had the opportunity to move- hard into Zuko's path, and used the counter-force to propel himself towards the closest of the Crimson Guards.

As Zuko caught his sister, he heard the sounds of a blade whistling through the air and an echoing cry of pain- several cries- from someone in a full set of armor.

The guards wouldn't last long against the first Weapon of the Fire Nation. The only thing that would save their lives was Piandao's mercy.

But even that mercy wouldn't leave Zuko much time.

He let go of Azula. "Where's Father?"

She wiped at the blood oozing through the neat cut in her shoulder armor. "I don't know which hidden room for certain, but the quietest and most defensible is the one in the gallery hall." She was moving even before she was finished speaking, taking off in a run.

Zuko took off after her, Aang and Suki on either side of him.

As they ran, Aang said, "So, um, how come you don't know where these secret rooms are?"

Zuko grimaced. "Azula loved to go exploring when she was little. Eavesdropping was one of her favorite games."

Suki snorted. "Doesn't surprise me in the least."

They turned a corner, into the wing opposite the one containing the throne room. At the end was the Royal Agni Kai Chamber, an arena reserved solely for when members of the Royal Family wished to settle a dispute away from most of the public. Azula was slowing far short of the entrance to the Chamber. The hallway leading up to it had been made into a gallery of portraits, each one more than
five times as tall as a person and depicting a stylized representation of a Fire Lord.

Zuko had always found this place both inspiring and intimidating, an imposing representation of the legacy of the Royal Family and what it could achieve, but today he found it completely sinister. The dark portraits evoked the colors of smoke and embers, a reminder of what had been done to the Capital outside the palace. The legacy of the Royal Family was, at this point, nothing but war. And his father had been its latest contributor.

Azula came to a stop in front of Azulon's portrait, the last portrait in the gallery. She turned her head to throw a smirk at them, but the motion made her wince and shift her shoulder. "Hn. And aren't you all lucky that I didn't waste time playing with toys and turtleducks like Zuzu, here." She walked up to the portrait and over to the column that separated it from Sozin's, and bent down to the base. "It's strange that this switch, of all in the palace, doesn't require Firebending. I wonder what Sozin was thinking when he had it installed."

She leaned over, blocking Zuko's view, and pressed something that made an audible click. Then she rose and gingerly stepped back.

Azulon's image slid forward, and swung like a door on a hinge to reveal a mess of shadows inside, the light of the gallery's hanging lamps not quite reaching beyond the massive portrait.

Zuko raised his hand and was about to summon a flame to see by, but before he could, there was a sound like a gasp, and then a flash of blue light seared his eyes. He blinked his way back to sight, past the after-images that twisted like monsters made of nothing, and then looked up.

His father stepped into the light, eyes wide and jaws slack. "Zuko?"

After all this time, all this effort, all the anticipation and recriminations and righteous yearnings, Zuko didn't know what to say or do. His limbs were frozen and his stomach was clenched; he felt like the only thing he could do right now was throw up. This was Father, the man he had tried to be for so long, the man who might- no who did- light his face on fire simply for not being good enough in unfair circumstances.

Zuko had been sent by his father to lead what turned out to be a distraction against the Outer Wall of Ba Sing Se, retreating when he realized that his supposed mission could not be completed. Once he realized what was really going on, he had rushed to help Father's own assault, and for his trouble had lost an eye and half his face.

Zuko finally found his tongue. "Did you really do it to punish me for failing to provide the distraction you wanted, or did you just hate me?"

Father stopped short, wincing. "Zuko-" He reached out.

Suki yanked her salvaged sword from its sheath and held it out between him and Father. "Keep your distance, Prince Ozai."

Father looked at her, almost uncomprehending, and then sagged and nodded. "I understand. I can offer no defense for what I did. I can't even explain it. It is all completely beyond my understanding."

That's it?!

That was all Father had to say about it?
Zuko ripped the eyepatch off his face, revealing the empty eye-socket to everyone. "Are you really going to look at the damage you've done and just shrug it away? Don't you have any honor?"

Father shook his head. "I admit that it is my fault. You never did anything to deserve such hurt and betrayal. But I cannot explain it. I will never be able to understand it." He looked up, meeting Zuko's gaze, and blinked tears from his eyes. "If you need to find meaning in it, know that it is what changed everything for me. I only want to protect you, now. You and your sister."

Zuko didn't know what to say. He wanted to rage and sob and hurl more accusations. But his Inner Fire was cold in the face of this- this unbelievable contrition. How could Father say and mean these things while standing at the center of a civil war he had engineered?

He heard Azula mutter, "That was anticlimactic."

At the end of the hall, the sound of hurried footsteps echoed, and then Piandao turned the corner at a run. His sword was drawn and colored with something dark and wet, but the man himself seemed completely unharmed. He slowed when he saw everyone standing around, and was nearly struck by a man in sage robes- no, the robes of the High Sage, so this must be Xinghao.

Piandao bowed. "My Prince, I can only offer my apologies for the disturbance. And- and for Azula's injury, though she did attack me first. But I should have found more control."

Father blinked, and then looked to Azula. He must have seen the dark red stain on her shoulder plates, the neat little cut in the armor where Piandao's sword had stabbed straight through.

And then Zuko saw the father he recognized.

Father's face twisted, jaw clenching and eyes flaring. He whirled on Piandao, raising fists so tight that the knuckles were bone white. "You stabbed my baby girl- !"

Piandao remained bowing.

Xinghao backed away.

Zuko expected to see the same fires that had nearly killed him, but instead Father pulled a knife from his belt, stalking towards Piandao, foots falling heavy on the hard ground. He raised the knife-

-Zuko spotted the Avatar trotting up behind Father as if playing a prank of some kind-

-and Aang reached around and yanked Ozai's beard.

What?!

Then there was the same flash of blue light that had presaged Father's appearance.

And the truth was revealed.

Aang had thought he was suffering from some kind of double-vision.

When that portrait of Azulon was slid open, that flash of blue light had nearly knocked him off his feet. It wasn't a normal light, nothing that even the brightest crystal or hottest lantern could produce. It was a light that had form, had taste and smell and thickness, a light that didn't belong in this world.

It wasn't just light; it was life. And it revealed a shadow.
The shadow had seemed super-imposed on Prince Ozai. As he walked and moved, as he spoke with Zuko, the shadow moved with him, reproducing every gesture and shift exactly.

Aang wondered, at first, if the flash of light had affected his sight, like staring at the sun for too long.

Then he noticed the ghost with five faces.

While the shadow fell on Ozai from the front, the ghost loomed up behind him. It was tree-like, as tall as the portraits of the Fire Lords, with a crown of branches. Between each wooden spike, an eye-less face poked out. But for all that it lacked eyes and seemed to be looking in many directions at once, it was looming, leaning over Ozai, completely focused on the prince.

Then it noticed Aang.

As Ozai wailed apologies to Zuko, the ghost opened its mouths, and they spoke in sequence:

"This one-"

"-took my gift-"

"-and burned my forest. Avenge me-"

"-Avatar. Take back-"

"-the face-"

"-it asked of me."

Take back the face?

And Aang saw it. There was no source-less shadow being cast on Ozai. The shadow was within Ozai, an actor in a costume, and like any actor playing an inhuman part on a stage, this one wore a mask. It was a living mask, a crafting of energy that channeled a real person, but it was a mask all the same.

So Aang stepped forward with all the lightness of an Airbender and yanked at the mask by its false beard.

It resisted his grip, but the ghost came down upon Aang and melted into his body. He could feel the ghost's essence flowing through his Qi lines, and his tattoos began glowing with the power. He found himself speaking with both his own voice and the reality-ripping sound of the ghost: "Defiler! The Forgetful Valley- my home- burned on your command! Hira’a, your home, burned on your command! You are no longer worthy of the gifts of the Mother of Faces!"

Aang pulled again at Ozai's beard, but it was like when he first tried Earthbending, as resistant to him as a rock a thousand times his own weight. He closed his eyes- seeing the same light that had been emanating from his tattoos now splashing against the back of his eyelids- and reached into his Qi to become one with the ghost. The Mother of Faces.

And Ozai's face came off in Aang's hands.

He opened his eyes to find that standing in Ozai's place was a woman, small enough that her robes now hung awkwardly on her frame. Her face was lined from years of suffering, dark hair streaked inconsistently with gray and white.

"Justice," hissed the Mother of Faces in Aang's mind, and then she fled from his body. In her place,
there was the weakness of mortality, a weakness that was his normal existence but now felt like weights hanging from his limbs. A wooden mask fell from his hands to clatter to the floor, and then he collapsed, darkness swirling in at him.

Before he fell into the emptiness of sleep, he heard Zuko hiss, "Mom?!" and Azula screech, "No!!"

Azula was a genius. She knew this, had proven it, and even her failures didn't change the fact that she was operating on a level beyond that of everyone else.

But she couldn't make this add up.

Father was Mother. Mother was Father. Father had crafted Azula to be perfect. Mother thought Azula was a monster. Father knew Azula to be a failure. Mother said she loved Azula. But Father was Mother, and Mother was Father. Mother had been the one speaking the words all this time. Father had never said he loved Azula, and Azula never failed him.

But hadn't Azula failed him, by letting Mother wear his face?

Mother had been the one saying that Azula was loved, all this time.

What did Father even think of Azula? Was Father even real? Had he ever been real?

It had been Mother all this time.

But it couldn't have been. Mother had never liked Azula. Mother hated strength and power and pain and everything that was necessary to thrive. Mother hated Father, and Father had been the one who really made Azula. Mother favored Zuko-

Zuko.

Father had wanted Zuko back. Father had sent Azula to bring him back. They had worked so hard, taken control of the entire Fire Nation, to get Zuko back. It had all been for Zuko.

But Father said he loved Azula, and Father was Mother.

Was it a lie?

But Mother was a terrible liar.

That was why Father wasn't really Father. Why there were secrets, why his actions made no sense, why Azula had never quite been able to understand.

So if Father had said that he wanted to keep Azula safe, and Father was Mother, and it had never made sense, and Mother was a bad liar, and Mother was Father, then-

But Mother didn't love Azula. Mother thought Azula was a monster.

But Mother was Father.

Azula tried. She really did. She put all her mental power into trying to get it all to work-

But her thoughts were a sparrowkeet in a storm, and she was swept away in the winds.

She could only stare, blinking, as Mother turned away from Zuko, running back to the secret room behind Azulon's portrait. Mother had her hands over her face, as if she could hide who she was. Silly
Mother. Zuko finally moved, reaching out, but Mother disappeared into shadow, and the portrait slid back to block the way. Azula knew how to open it again, but she couldn't make herself act. She wasn't sure she wanted to. She wasn't sure she wanted to breathe. She'd have to figure that out after she finished trying to figure out why Mother was Father and Father was Mother.

If she could.

The enormity of the task was like a crown on her head, or perhaps a chain around her feet, and she sank to the floor, or maybe both and neither. She would have to figure it out after she worked out how Mother was Father and Father was Mother.

She knew one thing for certain- she was a fool, a failure, and neither Mother nor Father could want her.

She heard herself moan as she slid into a slump, and then she just-

-just went away.

Away.

Maybe she'd never come back.

Bye-bye, mom.

High Sage Xinghao was only starting to grasp the enormity of the mistakes he'd made, but he hadn't gotten this far in life by wallowing in failure.

He knew what he had to do.

While everyone else tried to break their way into the secret room behind the portrait, Xinghao slipped away back to the front hall of the palace. He didn't know all of the building's secrets, and he was sure there were a few even in his own Grand Temple that had been lost to the ages, but that was fine. He knew enough to be aware of the nature of architectural sneakiness. That little room behind the portrait wasn't just a place to hide or store things. It was right next to the Fire Lord's personal Agni Kai arena; what good would it be to a nearby Fire Lord if he could only trap himself inside?

It was part of a network.

And a woman who had made heretical deals with Spirits and managed to masquerade for years as her husband-

Well, a woman like that was no ordinary fool.

Xinghao passed through the front hall and made straight for the stairs, ignoring the armored, bloody bodies of the last of the Crimson Guard lying around. At this point, even Piandao's handiwork was a minor concern. Xinghao climbed the stairs, passing into areas where no one but the Royal Family and their personal servants were allowed, but there was no one to enforce that isolation now. Xinghao hurried as he emerged on the top floor, the floor with the private Royal Residences, and peeked around until he found the suite he was looking for.

Princess Ursa- for it was her, returned from wherever she had disappeared to- was crouched in Prince Ozai's parlor, holding her head in her hands and staying as still as the Princess Azula had been when Xinghao had taken his leave.
He cleared his throat.

Ursa looked up. Her eyes narrowed as they focused on him, and all weakness left her body.

Xinghao found himself cringing. "Iroh will be Fire Lord. He'll have us all killed."

Ursa stood up. "I will not allow my children to be harmed."

Xinghao wondered what she was really saying. Did she still have a way to fight Iroh? Thinking about it- "Did you kill Azulon?"

Ursa shook her head. "It really was natural. If he hadn't died- it's all gone so wrong."

"It went wrong when you made a deal with a monster." Xinghao couldn't help but laugh at his own wording. "Or when I did. But surely you killed Prince Ozai?"

Ursa's hands clenched into small, tight fists. "He deserved it! Did you see Zuko's face? What kind of a monster can do that to his own son? He died quicker than he deserved, and I've hidden his ashes so that his Po spirit will never know peace!"

Xinghao took a step back. Princess Ursa was no Firebender, but the venom in her voice made her seem capable of anything.

But then, they were steeped in evidence of that, weren't they?

"Could- could what you used against Ozai- perhaps against Iroh-" Xinghao couldn't put his plan into words, because in truth he had no plan. Killing Iroh would just put the crown on Lu Ten's head, and if they killed Lu Ten, Zuko couldn't inherit unless Ozai's whereabouts could be explained to the military. And the Avatar had taken the- well, whatever it was that let Princess Ursa appear to be her husband.

Xinghao had to lean against the doorframe to keep himself upright. "We're ruined. There's no way out for any of us."

For a long moment, there was no reply.

Then Princess Ursa drew herself up into the very picture of Royalty, despite her low birth. "We managed to make a deal before, Xinghao. It was you who wanted to put me on the throne, remember? I can make another deal, if it will protect my children."

Another deal? "How do I know I can trust you?"

Ursa smirked at him. "Because you're going to be the hero of the Fire Nation who cast an evil Spirit out of the corpse of Princess Ursa. The valley near my hometown was known to be a haunted place. No one will doubt your commitment when you yourself burn my body. And in exchange, you will protect my children from Fire Lord Iroh and Prince Lu Ten. Whatever you have to-" She abruptly stopped talking, and her gaze lost focus.

Xinghao risked stepping closer. "What is it? A complication?"

Ursa turned to him. "No. A strategy. Zuko and Azula will be neither a threat nor an asset to Iroh if they're removed from the Burning Throne's succession. And the High Sage can arrange such a thing, yes?"

Xinghao couldn't stop a giggle from escaping. "After claiming that their mother's corpse was
possessed by a Spirit that ate and impersonated their father? I'm not sure anyone would ever accept them as Fire Lord."

Ursa nodded. "So they will live. And, frankly, I think they will be better off without the throne."

Xinghao nodded back. "So, uh, how are we going to do this? Whose corpse will we be using as yours?"

Ursa turned to look at a cabinet on the other side of the room. "Oh, we'll be using mine. Just give me a moment. You can come to collect my body with witnesses. Bring the Avatar to confirm everything."

*Her corpse? But-*

She was willing to *die* to protect her brats?

But then, she had put every other life on the line, at one point or another. Her own was the only one left to her.

Xinghao would have preferred to avoid the Avatar, but the boy had seen through Ursa's disguise, and so could provide credible testimony to Iroh. "I'll do as you say. We can make things neat. I'll claim you killed Azulon and schemed to destroy the Fire Nation. We'll display your body at Azulon's funeral, hold it as soon as possible, and I and all the sages will confirm Iroh as the next Fire Lord before the people. Zuko and Azula will be disavowed and banished, and given safe passage out of the Fire Nation."

Ursa sighed, and moved towards the cabinet. "It is a pleasure dealing with you once again, High Sage. I just wish I had a chance to say goodbye to my children." She produced a key from her sleeve, and unlocked the doors. Within, on one shelf, were glass vials filled with liquids of various colors. A lower shelf supported bowls and bottles containing plant clippings. "Now, if I could have a moment to myself?"

Xinghao hurried out, already thinking of the details for defeating an evil spirit-

He nearly tripped when he encountered Prince Zuko on the stairs.

---

Zuko hadn't known what to do.

Father- Mother- he didn't know what was going on.

Azula was just sitting on the floor, staring at nothing.

Aang was out cold and Suki was trying to wake him up.

And Piandao-

"What," Zuko had said as they tried to find the switch Azula had used to open the hidden door behind the painting, "do you know about this?"

Piandao had, for the first time Zuko could remember, looked sick. "Very, very little, my Prince. I- I thought it was Ozai all this time."

"You were the last one to see her." Zuko huffed, and smashed a flaming fist against Azulon's portrait, scorching it. "I saw you take her away and no one would even mention her after that!"
Piandao had closed his eyes. "The one time I went against my orders. Your parents' relationship had deteriorated. Princess Ursa had defied him one too many times, trying to keep you and Azula from being trained for war. She accused Ozai of trying to use you two as pawns to try to make himself look better than Iroh. Ozai told me to take her somewhere outside of the Caldera and kill her."

Zuko would have liked to be horrified at that, but he accepted it as sadly in character for the father he was finally letting himself know. "That's when I saw you."

"Yes. And after leading a condemned woman past her innocent son, I couldn't kill her. I took her out of the Caldera, and told her to go to the colonies. To take a new name. To become someone else." Piandao had shaken his head. "It seems almost tasteless to say I didn't expect her to take me literally."

Instead, she had gone home. To Hira'a. To the 'Forgotten Valley,' no doubt somewhere in the forest around the village that had been burned down by Gerel. To that Spirit that Aang had channeled. Zuko could even claim to himself that he had any idea what kind of a person his mother was, that she could come up with such a plan and then- and then murder Father, pretend to be him for years. All of this that had happened in the Capital- the manipulations, the poisoning of Kirai, the death of Grandfather.

Was his mother any better than his father?

But Mother, at least, hadn't hurt Zuko. There was no doubt in his mind of her love. He couldn't fathom what had driven his father’s actions, but Mother's- had it all been for love?

With that thought, Zuko realized where she was. She wasn't hiding in a secret room. She hadn't hid when Piandao told her to. She had tricked everyone, had come back to the palace to protect her children.

He ran out of the hall, leaving Suki's calls for him to echo unanswered, and ran for the palace's tower. He wasn't sure where to look exactly, but he knew his mother had to be somewhere.

Then he ran into Xinghao, coming down the stairs from the residential floor.

The High Sage nearly tripped, and his mouth worked soundlessly for a moment before bursting out with, "I tried to stop her! She insisted she had to protect her children, and-"

Zuko grabbed the man by his ridiculous robes. "Where?"

Xinghao swallowed. "Ozai's suite."

Zuko ran with all his speed.

But he was still too late.

He burst through the doors of his father's old residence to find Mother sinking into a couch with a moan, a golden goblet falling from her hands to spill a splash of crimson wine to the floor.

Zuko was at her side in an instant.

She blinked her eyes until they focused on him, and then she smiled. "Zuko. I'm glad I could see you, one more time."

One more- "Wh- what did you do?"

She nodded at the goblet. "My mother was an herbalist. I'm g-" She coughed, and her eyes fluttered.
"Good at poison. I'm so sorry for everything. I made many mistakes. And now I've agreed to pay for them. Iroh won't have to hurt you, once I'm gone."

Gone.

Gone.

He looked around, trying to find a way out of this. "Is there an antidote? I- I just found you, and- and I don't care about mistakes! I've made mistakes! I've- I-"

She raised her hands to cup his cheeks. "We all have. And I know you'll try to do better." Her breathing grew heavier, and she closed her eyes. "I know you can do better. You- you never give up." Her hands fell away from his face, and she was lost to a short coughing fit.

No! This couldn't be happening! None of this could be happening!

But he couldn't find the strength to fight it. He didn't know how to fight it. He rested his head down on his mother's shoulder. "Where do I go from here?"

Mother's lips curved into something like a smile. "Help your sister. I- I know your father did a- a horrible thing to you, b- but sh- she really had- had the worst of it. And draw str- strength fr- from your friends. They're very tough. I- I couldn't stop them." Her face twisted, almost as if in pain.

Zuko raised his head. "Are you okay? Does it hurt?"

She breathed in and out, so slowly. "I m- mixed it well." She breathed in and out again, and her voice came as a whisper, "As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle-" She trailed off.

Zuko's heart burned. "Mother? Mom?"

Her eyes opened, and focused on him. "Look out for your sister." Her body relaxed, and she took in another breath. Her words came out like a sigh: "Everything I've done, I did to protect my children."

Her eyes closed.

She did not draw another breath.

Zuko held his mother's body as it grew cold, tears running down from his one eye. He felt like he wanted to cry, but couldn't find the strength.

Piandao made a point to find the magical mask, the strange creation of a Spirit that had let a Princess masquerade as her husband. He found it in the Royal Gallery, where the Avatar had dropped it.

It was such a simple thing, to see it lying on the floor. It seemed to be an opera mask, wooden in construction and painted in a stylized imitation of Prince Ozai's face. It might have looked comical, in the right lighting.

Yet it had nearly destroyed the Fire Nation. And the Homeland's survival wasn't even guaranteed, yet.

Piandao drew his sword and stabbed straight through the mask.

It withered to dust before he could even pull the blade up out of the floor.

And then Piandao took his leave from the palace and decided to retire from the Weapons of the Fire
He had other things he needed to do, and it was time he gave his service to a true cause.

At one time, according to Air Nomad lore, Airbender monks had been paid by the people of the other nations to take corpses to proper burial grounds. In any age when even the biggest roads were unreliable, and civilization clung to just a few safe enclaves, Airbenders were the only ones who could ensure that unbalanced ghosts didn't spring up wherever a life was lost exploring.

Aang never expected to take up that duty for Zuko's mother.

And he certainly couldn't understand Zuko not wanting to go with him. If it had been Monk Gyatso-

"I need to take care of my sister," Zuko had simply said. They had laid Princess Azula on her bed in her room. She continued to act as though asleep, but her eyes were wide open.

Suki had stayed behind, too. But Aang had expected that.

And so it was just Aang, High Sage Xinghao, and the body of Princess Ursa on a cart that descended into a series of caverns below the palace. The High Sage said that secret passages ran all through the volcano, but many of their entrances were lost. If Aang had known, he never would have needed to fly in on Appa, wouldn't have lost all his friends somewhere in this warzone. Now, at least, he could use his Earthbending to rip a hole right there in the palace, and quickly found a route that Xinghao said would take them were they needed to go.

They traveled beneath the city, until Xinghao said they had reached Grand Temple. They took a set of stone stairs up again, where they picked up a dozen more Fire Sages, an additional cart of supplies, and the body of Fire Lord Azulon.

One of the Sages had spoken to Xinghao, and the High Sage had turned to Aang with something that was almost a smile. "It seems we have some good news, Avatar. Your friends and your sky bison landed here in the Temple, and all were unharmed before they departed. Unfortunately, the palace was their destination, and we certainly didn't see them there, but my sages also heard that the war is over. The supporters of Iroh are asking for a truce to begin further negotiations."

Aang had frowned in his confusion. "But Iroh is going to be Fire Lord. We know that already."

"Ah, but they don't. You and I are the ones carrying the news of what happened in the palace. I'm sure they'll be happy to learn that they won, anyway, but it's good that they want to make peace even before they know of their victory."

Aang supposed he should be glad that someone wanted to stop the fighting. Maybe soon he could find his friends. But after so many had already died-

He was relieved when they finally emerged into daylight, at the gate at the foot of the Capital Volcano. The sun had finally broken through the clouds, lighting up the noon hour a bit.

But the sky was still tinged with the soot of the war that had been fought in the Caldera.

Most of the Fire Sages ran ahead with their carts of supplies, while a group of men in the armor of the Fire Nation's military came forward to meet them. Before they could introduce themselves, a young man in what seemed like beach clothes stepped out from their midst and bowed.

Aang thought he recognized this person. "You're- um, Bangfei, right? A Weapon of the Fire
He nodded. "I'm glad to see that you survived, Avatar. Do you know how many of my- uh, fellow Weapons are still around?"

Aang could only shrug. "I'm sure Mai is still alive. But the Caldera is such a mess-" He couldn't finish the thought.

Bangfei sighed. "Well, I hope I've been able to help. The original leaders of the military here- High General Bujing, General Mak, and Admiral Lee- all died during the fighting. I- well, I disabled their successors until a group could take command who wanted to make peace."

That brought a smile to Aang's face. "Then it sounds like you're not much of a 'Weapon' anymore."

"Does it?" Bangfei looked dubious. "Weapons can make peace in addition to war. We just only hope it's a peace that lasts. But, unfortunately, I won't be able to stay and help with that. I have- um, duties that take me elsewhere."

And so Aang had bowed. "Thank you for your help, and good journeys."

"Don't thank me, Avatar," had said as he turned away. "I've done just as much evil as good, if there's even a difference anymore." And then he ran into the 'Lower Harbor City,' on the other side of the gate, quickly disappearing from view.

By the time Aang and Xinghao reached the Royal Plaza- the huge forum between the harbor docks and the Capital settlements where he had seen the citizens gathered like refugees- a large funeral pyre was set up on a tall, makeshift stage. Aang just had to stand there as the bodies of Azulon and Ursa were put in place, and gongs called for the attention of the people.

He continued to stand there as Xinghao recited the list of crimes being attributed to Princess Ursa, and nodded his head when Xinghao named Iroh as the new Fire Lord.

Aang could only hope that this was all worth it.

He would make sure, though, that Iroh kept his word about freeing the Earth Kingdom and restoring balance to the world.

It seemed like hours passed as Xinghao spoke, but finally it was time to light the pyre.

Aang looked away.

The people in the Royal Plaza bowed.

And then, impossibly, the roar of a sky bison and the trill of a winged lemur rang through the air.

Aang looked up and saw them flying in towards the stage, maybe drawn by the smoke of the pyre. "Appa!" He spun his staff and flicked out the wings, summoning a wind to take him up to his friends.

Below, the crowd gasped.

Aang swooped up into a loop that took him directly over Appa's saddle, and then closed his staff to drop right into it. Momo came in for his own landing on his shoulder, and Aang leaned over the side of the saddle so that he could pet both of his furry friends at the same time. "I'm glad you guys are safe. And if you are- do you know where Mai and the others are?"
Appa gave a neutral lowing. Momo started cleaning himself.

But with the relief of knowing that Appa was okay, Aang had an idea about what he could do. He crossed his legs into a lotus position, closed his eyes, and reached into himself.

Then he reached out.

The energies of the Caldera had been a mess, a storm of darkness and pain and confusion, keeping Aang from tracing any connections, even his own. But now, sitting atop Appa, he could push out with his spiritual senses to feel a sense of positivity below him. It was the people. The citizens of the Capital, gathered at the funeral of their Fire Lord.

Some measure of peace had been restored to them, and Aang rode it into the maelstrom of their home, the Caldera itself, and pushed through the stink of wrongful death to trace his connections. It led to a specific mansion, and continued on- slowly- towards the palace. He found Mai, and Sokka, and Katara, and Toph, and Ty Lee, and others who had come to help.

They were tired and hurt and darkened by the deeds they had been forced to do, but they were pushing on towards the palace in the hope of finding him there.

He intended to make that certain. "Appa, yip-yip!"

As Appa turned back towards the volcano, Aang spotted a familiar Fire Navy ship pulling into the harbor.

Zhao had finally arrived. But he could wait.

By the time Mai got Katara and the others to the palace, it seemed to be all over. The palace was still standing, everything was quiet, and no one seemed to be home.

Well, there were the dead Crimson Guard bodies in the front hall. That was creepy. And bloody. But Mai had already seen a lot of blood today. She had even shed quite a bit of it, both her own blood and that of her enemies.

She had taken to war quite easily, once she herself came close to death. She knew she was already responsible for many Fire Nation deaths, in all her adventures with Aang, but today she had killed individually. She had killed people she knew. She had killed people who were just doing the same job she had once done.

And she wasn't even really bothered by it.

Would Aang be?

They continued their search for some clue of their friends, and by the time they reached the Throne Room and Sokka set himself down to lounge on the Burning Throne (that wasn't currently burning), Mai had decided on a course of action. "You guys all wait here. I'll check the upper floors."

Ty Lee, of course, said, "No! You'll need back-up!"

But Mai didn't have time to spare her friend's feelings. "And what if we find Azula, and she sees that you're alive?"

Everyone- Ty Lee, her sisters, Sokka, Katara, and Toph- all winced at the thought.

"Exactly." Mai took out the same razor disk she had used to slit Kei Lo's throat and twirled it on a
finger. "I'm in a mood for settling debts. Just protect everyone here, and come find me if anyone shows up who I actually want to see."

So she had climbed the stairs into residential floors alone.

And for all that build-up, all she found was Suki pacing outside Azula's bedroom. "Mai!"

"Suki." She endured an unexpected hug. "Where's your jerk sister?"

It was apparently the wrong question. Suki's expression fell like a dead body as she stepped back again, and it was a moment before she spoke. "Zuko's in there with Azula. You're in no danger. You should see them."

Mai could hear what was unsaid.

She left Suki behind and went into Azula's suite.

She found Zuko and his sister in the bedroom. Azula was lying on her back on the bed, hands folded on her stomach and eyes staring straight up at the ceiling. Zuko sat at her side, and he didn't notice Mai until she poked him.

He turned and blinked at her. He was missing his eyepatch, and the darkness of his empty socket matched the shadows around the room. "Mai! And the others?"

"Sokka and Toph are fine. Katara and Ty Lee and her sisters showed up to help us. They're all downstairs." She looked at Azula, and waved a hand in front of her old friend's face. There was no reaction. "What happened?"

Zuko shook his head. "I don't even know where to start. I- We- we learned things about our parents. Terrible things. And now both of them are dead."

"Dead?" Mai sighed. Today was a day for the demise of enemies, it seemed. Well, except for one. She looked back at Azula. The princess seemed so-so wrong just lying there like that. Mai had seen Azula sleep, but this- with the open eyes-

Azula was trapped in her own mind. And Mai couldn't imagine a scarier place to be.

She leaned back again. "It would almost be a mercy to kill her."

Zuko stood. "I'm not going to let anyone hurt her. My m- I promised to protect her."

"Then have fun with that. This is too depressing for me." She gave Zuko enough of a smile to hopefully let him know that she was (partially) joking, and made her way out of Azula's lair.

She stepped into the hall to find Suki talking with Aang, and she was so relieved to find him unharmed that time seemed to stop for an eternity before he ran over and lifted her in a hug.

Finally.

Now they could call it a victory.

Standing at the city gate, Zhao couldn't say he was pleased to find that the Caldera had been half-reduced to rubble, but he hadn't been present for any of the unpleasantness and things had finished with Iroh declared Fire Lord and both the military and the Fire Sages falling in line, so he decided to count it as a victory anyway.
Any war he survived was a victory, in his book. Achieving his objective was really just a bonus.

But, as any military man knew, the end of the war didn't mean the end of the work.

He turned to his aide. "Well, I suppose it's time to open the contingency orders." He handed a key over. "Go back to the ship, and retrieve the papers in the lockbox in my cabin. Bring them to me at the telegraph station here. It will look better if our routing codes include the Caldera."

The aide bowed. "Yes, sir!"

Zhao turned back to the city as the aide ran off. Most of those orders were smaller matters, things Zhao had prepared under Iroh’s supervision, for Iroh to certify and approve, to begin the transition away from Azulon’s cult of personality. It was better to put them into motion as soon as possible, along with the word of Azulon’s death. The Avatar had helped begin the work by getting the Governors on Iroh’s side, and now with the Fire Sage’s support, the work could begin on the populace.

As for the Avatar himself, those prepared orders included him, too.

Iroh wanted the Avatar up at the North Pole as soon as possible. If the boy resisted, then he and his friends were to be made aware that Lady Mai’s brother was in a hidden, secure location and in good health for the time being.

Of course, Iroh wouldn't be here for the immediate reaction to that news. Zhao, on the other hand-

Well, the path to power always led to difficulties. And if one Fire Lord could be brought down in a matter of months, a second shouldn't be too hard.

Zhao smiled.

Some time later, on the island of Zenmatsu, in a village still recovering from an attempt by the Disciple of the Third Eye to assassinate Avatar Aang and Lady Caldera Yu Mai, the people had gathered to hear the latest news.

It was being delivered by a contingent of the Home Guard- one big man to read the news so that the whole gathering could hear, and two dozen more in case peace needed to be reestablished. The speaker was currently silent, waiting- as per his orders- for the crowd to process the news of the death of Fire Lord Azulon.

It was a long wait.

Eventually, the noise dulled enough for the big man to continue, "Fire Lord Iroh, chosen of Azulon and hero of the Homeland, has declared a period of mourning. During this time, we will show respect for his father's passing by not bowing to the portrait of any Fire Lord, symbolizing his absence from our lives. Additionally, to symbolize one last gift from the ruler who gave us dominion over the world, portraits of Azulon can be brought to any Guard station and traded for a family-portion of fresh meat. May the Fire Lord's flame ever burn!"

Every member of the crowd bowed at the proclamation, and a new Fire Nation continued to be born, village by village, person by person.

END OF ACT 3: Baptism by Fire

TO BE CONTINUED SPRING 2018 IN ACT 4: "Spirit Purer Than Snow"
Ash and Aftermaths

Chapter Summary

Now that everyone has what they want, it's time to figure out what's next.

(Trouble. The answer is trouble.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ash and Aftermaths

"I do hope you'll pardon the intrusion," says the giant bug with the Noh-mask for a face. The voice echoes through reality itself.

Mai gives a noncommittal grunt to cover the tempest within.

She has never had the slightest fondness for insects, and certainly does not enjoy the sight of such a massive one clicking and curling around her little spot in the dark cave. Her first instinct is to lash out with her weapons, to put on the indifferent lack of expression that is her battle-face and start putting sharp bits of metal where they'd do the most harm. But the bug is speaking politely, and the firmness of Mother's hand has conditioned Mai how to respond to politeness.

"Perhaps you could tell me where we are?" She knows she looks the same exchanging greetings as she does shedding blood, so there's nothing to prevent her from making the transition at any moment. "And why you are calling on me?"

The creature smiles at her as it arcs to bring its white face even with her own. "Our location is a matter of some ambiguity; there is no firm border between the Spirit World and dreams." The face drifts only a bit as it talks, despite the body climbing the cave walls until it is hanging from above. The whole time, the face never stops staring at her. "As for why I'm here, I suppose we can call it professional interest, but the truth is that I wanted to meet you. I've heard so much about you and the Avatar, and you seem quite different from the kind of company he normally keeps."

"In what way?" It is entirely possible that she is being insulted.

"Well, most importantly, none of the others have been able to converse with me even this long." Then the bug-flesh around its face blinks like an eye, and now its face is that of a Water Tribe woman, hair sweeping through the air as though caressed by a breeze. "You are indeed a precious little girl."

Mai cannot feel any breeze. "Am I supposed to find that flattering?"

She recognizes the bug’s action as a threat of some kind, although she does not understand the exact danger. Perhaps she should attack, put a blade somewhere around the face. She reaches into her sleeve for a knife-

-and discovers that the sleeve itself is made of knives.
She hadn't realized it until now, but the entirety of her clothes are interlocking blades - razors and carvers and needles and broad flat stabbers - that ripple and shift like cloth. Only the darkness of this cave keeps her from shining. Only her natural stiffness prevents her from slicing all her skin off with a casual movement.

Mai sinks deeper into stillness. She could be a statue. Or dead. Mother would be so proud.

The bug laughs, skittering along the ceiling so that it circles her even as it continues to face her. Just before it passes beyond the edge of her vision, there is another blinking shift, but it is gone before she can see the new face. "How far does your confidence extend, I wonder? Can you hide your feelings for the fall of your nation? Can you hold back a smile while your Avatar seeks your pleasure? Do you refuse to shed tears, in the loneliest stretch of the night, when you remember that you've betrayed everyone and everything which ever cared for you?"

The bug's face moves back into sight, having circled around her, and now she sees that it has the visage of a blue dragon. The snout extends almost to brush Mai's nose, and she can see the hairs on its chin undulating like the sea.

Her gown of knives is cold against her skin. "I don't see how any of that is your business."

"Oh, but it is. Traitors are what I do, you see. An Avatar who betrays her duty. A soldier who deserts his nation. A bird that pushes its eggs out of its nest. Even a warrior who purposefully chips away at the pride of his Tribe for a laugh. I am an answer to those things. Not necessarily a good answer, granted, but sometimes the only answer there can be." The dragon face opens its mouth wide to reveal an array of teeth that reminds Mai of her personal arsenal. "Allegiance is part of identity, the greatest gift of all. It should not be thrown away so carelessly."

"So you're just another slave to the cosmic bureaucracy?" Mai pulls her hands into her metal sleeves, and runs her fingers over sharp edges until she finds a loose razor. "You're trying too hard to be frightening for me to believe that."

The bug laughs, the dragon face making the sound into a roar that shakes the whole world. "Well, I never said I don't enjoy it. You get used to it."

Mai is practiced at hiding her disgust, and slides into it without a thought. "Then try not to have too much fun with my punishment. It would be unbecoming of a classy bug like yourself." The razor she's been working with a finger seems looser, now. Perhaps if she can get it free, she can show this talkative insect what she enjoys about her own job-

"Now, who ever said that you're the one to be punished?" The face shifts again, now to an old woman whose hair has been shaved from the front of her head to reveal a blue arrow. "The Abdicated Avatar has made some fairly drastic mistakes, you know."

The razor flips free of the rest of the network, but before Mai can grab it, the net of blades starts to unravel, every slicer and carver and needle and broad flat stabber. The cold settles even deeper into her flesh- but no, there is nothing into which it can settle. Her flesh falls with the blades.

At least the metal is sharp enough that she feels no pain.

And so she is able to keep an indifferent lack of expression as she dies in front of the creepy bug.

The face of the Noh mask returns to the bug, and it gives her a nod. "Well done, Lady Caldera Yu Mai. I hope we see each other soon."

The creature rushes at her-
Mai snapped awake, slapping at her sheets, her sleep-sluggish mind convinced that a giant bug was sitting on top of her. In short order, she realized she was waging a war that no one else had shown up to.

Then she saw the opulent, moonlit room around her, and remembered where she was.

What had happened.

What she had done.

She was in the mansion belonging to Ty Lee's family, in the bedroom of Ty Lee's mother. The woman herself was, if she was alive, somewhere in the refugee camp that had sprung up in the Royal Plaza when a small civil war popped up in the Caldera yesterday. The mansion itself was serving as a hostel for Mai's friends, allies, and benign acquaintances, but thanks to her In with the owners, she herself had been given the rare treat of a massive room all to herself.

She wondered if anyone else was jumping awake from nightmares tonight.

But then, none of the others had just murdered enemies who had once been coworkers, with or without a good reason.

Mai laid down and tried to go back to sleep. It was a while before her pulse returned to normal.

When the morning came, Aang still thought the air smelled of smoke and death.

His nose just wouldn't get used to it. The scent was an alien invader to the breezes that floated in from the sea, a taint that wouldn't go away but he couldn't accept as normal.

He hadn't slept well, and as soon as the dawn came, he had stepped outside to look over the devastation to the Fire Nation capital. Now, from the roof of the home of Ty Lee's family, with Momo on his shoulder, he turned his gaze over the splintered remains of vast mansions, over whole little neighborhoods fallen into old caverns, over roads melted and cooled by lava flows into chaotic lines like a sand garden raked by wild lemurs. Smoke still hung over the Royal Caldera; there must have been fires still burning somewhere. The light of the dawn sun was rendered thick and yellow, nearly concealing the soldiers and engineers who were still working to assess the damage and danger.

The Royal Fire Palace was one of the few buildings left unmarred, one of the few with visible signs of life. Even at this early hour, Fire Sages stood holding sacred torches in the places where yesterday there had been armored guards. Supposedly, they were purifying the place from the influence of 'the Witch Princess' Ursa.

Zuko was in there, despite the rumors about magic curses, with his sister. (Perhaps she would wake up today. But Aang had never seen anyone sleep with their eyes open like that.) The prince had made it clear, yesterday, that he wasn't interested in the company of his allies right now.

It was just as well. The new Fire Lord was up at the North Pole, at the center of an empire of his own making. No one knew if he intended to return to the Fire Nation. Aang hoped so, but Katara had said, before everyone pretty much collapsed from exhaustion yesterday, that she had her own news about Iroh. She hadn't said it in a happy voice.

Well, the new day was here. Time to find out what was going on.

Aang floated himself down from the roof, sending Momo fluttering away. Aang made a quick stop at
the small stable on the property to confirm that Appa was still sleeping, and then went back into the
mansion.

He found Ty Lee's sisters already assembled in the foyer. They looked nothing like Air Nomads -
they had hair, for one, even if they wore it shorter than most women - but the uniformity of their
appearances reminded Aang of being back in a Temple. He bowed to them. "Good morning!"

They all bowed as one. When they rose, the sister in green (whichever one she was; only Mai and
Ty Lee herself could tell them apart) said, "Good morning, Avatar. The others are up, and Ty Lin
and Ty Woo have prepared some breakfast. It's just breads and preserved sausages, I'm afraid. No
servants showed up with the fresh fruit delivery. But, well, there was a war yesterday."

Aang could only nod. "Breads are fine, and Sokka will love the sausages. Thank you for sheltering
us." He had been grateful to find that Mai, Katara, and the others had set up a camp here. Zuko didn't
want anyone else in the palace. The Fire Nation military were only barely tolerating his presence and
definitely didn't want his company.

It was sad to be in a ravaged city, especially the gilded capital of the Fire Nation, but - even in one of
the few undamaged structures - it was the best option right now.

He found his friends gathered in the dining room.

Mai. The most amazing girl in the world, one of the last Weapons of the Fire Nation. She was
dressed in fine Fire Nation reds, no doubt with all her blades just out of sight, but her hair was simply
tied back in a sloppy bundle. Aang considered it a rare treat to see her relaxing her usual elegance,
and hoped it wasn't a sign of trouble. Ty Lee was sitting next to her and didn't seem worried at all,
chatting excitedly despite the early hour. That was good, even if Aang still wasn't quite sure what he
thought of Ty Lee, yet.

Sokka. The boy from the Water Tribe was as happy as he could get in the mornings, chomping away
at a dish of komodo sausages. He was sitting close to his sister, their shoulders touching, and Aang
had no doubt that having her back was part of the good mood.

Katara herself wasn't wearing the hat she usually took everywhere, but Aang realized that this might
be the first time he had ever seen her indoors in a real building. She smiled at her brother's sloppy
eating, but there was something holding her back from fully relaxing.

Aang was sure it was the matter that had them all meeting this morning.

Toph. The Earth King, recognized ruler of the Earth Kingdom resistance against Fire Nation rule,
was grinning over the crumbs left on her own plate. Next to her, Suki, their rebel ally from an island
in the Southern Seas, was saying, "I'm not sure there's still a rebellion on Kyoshi that I can pledge to
your service-" Suki alone of the gathering was dressed in black. Everyone else wore the colors of
their nation.

Aang walked into the room, and Katara immediately waved to him. He waved back, grabbed a
sweet-roll from the side table, and sat at the table (that Ty Lee's family ate their meals in *chairs*
showed their wealth) between her and Mai. "Hey, everyone."

Mai flashed a smile. Sokka said something that was lost in his chewing. Toph pulled her finger out of
her nose and flicked it in his vague direction. Ty Lee raised both hands and said, "Hi, I hope you
remember me, I'm Ty Lee and I'm an Airbender, too!"

They were all his friends, more or less. Aang felt lighter just being near them.
Katara reached out to him. "It's so great to see you again, Aang. I-" She withdrew her hand before he could take it. "I wish it was for better reasons."

Aang nodded. "Thank you. We're all listening, now. You can go ahead, if you're ready."

Katara gave him a flicker of a smile, and with the scrape of her chair, moved to stand at the head of the table. "Iroh promised us that if we helped him become Fire Lord, he would restore the Earth Kingdom and Water Tribes. He- he would free us. But Ty Lee and I discovered evidence that he might have lied. Jet died to get it to us, and we crossed the world to bring it here to you."

Jet was dead? Aang made a sign for peaceful rest, despite everything. Jet had been so awful to Mai, but she really had been planning to betray them at the time, but Jet's methods had just led to more trouble, but- It was confusing. And if Jet died to help them-

Aang could at least be grateful for it.

And Katara went on to detail the full extent of Iroh's actions.

Her Waterbending master, Pakku, had worked with pirates to steal platinum from the Fire Navy. That platinum was going to a secret military installation in the former Northern Air Temple. Long Feng, the guy who had used a forbidden (evil!) ceremony to turn the Ashland that used to be Ba Sing Se into a giant monster, had been secretly taken to that base. From the temple, Jet stole a map detailing an invasion of the Earth Kingdom, and was killed for it just after passing it to Katara.

The whole time, Aang's stomach grew heavier, even though he had barely touched his sweet-bread. The tension rolled throughout his whole body, and several times he had to force himself to unclench his hands. How could Iroh do this to them? He had seemed so nice! And he really was worried about his sick son! Even Zuko believed him! This was- This-

And to be perverting an Air Temple like that! "I can't believe it! I said I'd help him and he's using an Air Temple to hurt more people?!!"

Ty Lee shifted in her seat. "Um, we're- uh, not sure why he was at the Air Temple, exactly."

The words reached him, but he couldn't think what she meant by them. There was a pain rising from deep within him that filled his head with heat and noise. Why did this keep happening to him?! It was like he couldn't trust anyone! People smiled at him and promised to help but they did nothing but stack lie on top of lie and treat him like a fool and use him for their own selfishness!

Suki sat up in her chair. "He has to be hiding this from the rest of the Fire Nation. No one would think to look in an Air Temple."

Aang shook his head. It was getting so hot in here. "I should have. They belonged to my people. They still should." The air was thick and heavy, like it was being pulled down-

Down.

Beneath the city.

Something was down there. Something alive. Something old. Something hot.

Something that found an echo within Aang. He had to move, had to stand up and use the fountain of energy within to keep it from burning him up. "Why didn't I visit the rest of the temples? Why didn't I make sure they were all right?" The heat was crawling through him, through his chest and arms and legs and head. It came from within and without, his heart and the depths of the city.
"I've just-" It was an old heat, somehow. Older than Aang, even though he knew it was part of him. But some parts of him were older than he was. "I've been running around doing all the wrong things. This is my fault."

Sokka's reply was muffled, almost lost in the roaring in Aang's head, as he said something about the visit to the Southern Air Temple not being encouraging.

And Sokka was right. The monsters they had found there- things that had started as the disrespected bodies of Aang's people, of the friends he had known and loved- Aang panted for breath, finding the air too hot to nourish him. Why wasn't anyone else having trouble? He reached out for answers-
-reached beneath the city-
-where the heat echoed his call.

He could breathe again if he just wiped out this city. The Capital of the Fire Nation. A yoke on a volcano, a civilization capping an expression of the fury of the earth itself. The volcano was alive, but it had not erupted in so long, had been forced to idle while the people lived above it. They had done something. Aang could feel the yoke, a twisting of energy that kept the lava and fumes benign.

He could untwist it. He could free the volcano. He could let it do what had wanted to do for so long. The Caldera, sitting atop all the heat, was empty, but there were people in the smaller cities at the volcano's base. The heat would spread if Aang unleashed it. The volcano-
-the volcano could explode-
-just like on Crescent Island-
-and he would feel-

Cool hands touched his shoulders.

Aang snapped his gaze up and found himself looking at Mai.

The heat was sapped away from his body as if by a breeze, but Aang felt no movement of air. "Mai? Why-" The tension in the air was gone, but he could still feel the distant solidity of the volcano's yoke. What was it, and how had it come to be? "What happened?"

She pressed the back of her hands against his cheeks. "Are you okay?"

"Me? But- Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"Well, you were kind of getting flushed, and then you started to glow."

Aang jerked out of her reach. He'd gone into the Avatar State! He'd almost- his friends- all those people near the volcano-

Mai turned his head so that he was looking in her eyes again. "We'll make this right." Her stare was as sharp and cool as one of her knives, yet Aang could recognize the life in it. The color of her eyes was usually so hard to tell, hiding somewhere between gray and gold and brown, but now they glistened like the metal of her knives. "I'm sorry this happened. That we didn't help you see it. But we'll make this right."
And then Sokka was beside him. "This isn't your fault, Aang. This is what fighting looks like. It's nasty. We do the best we can, and our enemies do the same. But we have to make sure we keep fighting them. That's- that's what we all signed up for. Because of you. Mai and I will help you fight. We all will."

Aang caught Mai throwing a glance at Sokka that wasn't entirely friendly, but then Toph called out from the table, "Yeah! Freedom through violent uprising!"

Aang could only smile at everyone's concern. He took a deep breath, held it long enough to make himself one with the air, and then let it out with all of his negativity. "Thanks. But maybe there's some hope that we don't have to fight. Even in all the warfare yesterday, Zuko and I found a moment where we were able to solve a problem peacefully. We can hope for something like that, but- you know, be ready in case we have to fight."

Over at the table, Ty Lee and Suki were helping Katara to unfurl a map that covered its whole width. Katara slapped her hand down on a drawing of a Fire Nation warship. "This is how we start. This is what Jet gave me. This is what he died to protect."

Sokka immediately trotted over to it, and Aang threw a grin at Mai that she returned with a roll of her eyes. Sokka really liked maps.

He looked like he had just gotten a gift as he said, "Ooh, it's the southern Earth Kingdom. I've seen enough maps to know that. But I'm not familiar with the area that's at the center of all the ominous arrows. Hey, Toph, do you recognize what Iroh seems to be planning to invade?"

The little Earth King gave a big smile. "Absolutely! It looks like Fire Lord Iroh is coordinating an assault of the big gaping empty space between your big ears!"


"Good one, Toph!" Aang chuckled as he came over with the others, already feeling better, and looked down at the map. He found that he was familiar with the shape of the land beneath the arrows and listings. "Hey, I've passed by this area a few times, back when- before. I think it's forests and swamps and wetlands. Barely any people there." Even as he said it, he wondered if it was true.

Sokka frowned. "Those are some pretty fat arrows drawn in. Fat arrows are never good. And all these listed forces! That's more soldiers and war machinery than they had at the South Pole. This is a real, major invasion. Like when the war was going hot. No one invades random bits of empty swampland for no reason. Maybe Iroh has another super-secret base? But no, why invade his own base? Are we sure this is real?"

Ty Lee glanced at Katara, and then nodded. "It's real. They fought too hard to stop us."

Mai said, "I believe them. Aside from trusting Ty Lee, Iroh cracked the North Pole after over half a century of other people's failures. He does things like attack places that no one expects and then somehow use that to win a battle. It's why he's always been popular with army types."

Toph shifted in her chair to put her feet up on the table. They landed on one of the larger arrows on the map. "Sounds like you're not going to figure anything out by staring at a paper, and part of my kingdom is in real danger."

Aang needed a moment to understand what she was saying. "You want to go there?"

Sokka stroked his chin. "It's a good idea. This is all valuable information for confronting Iroh, but the most effective way of putting Katara's warning to use is probably to stick an army of Earth rebels in
place to counter these plans before they begin. Then when we talk to the new Fire Lord, we can be all, 'Oops, we're in the way of your army. How clumsy of us!' And then hopefully he continues being a guy who likes plans and favorable odds, and holds back from whatever he's doing, instead of throwing an army at us and hoping for the best. That won't be fun for anyone."

Aang could see the logic in it. Appa was well enough again to make the journey across the ocean, back to the Earth Kingdom. Iroh was supposed to free the whole continent, and had even said to Aang that he expected it to help with whatever was wrong with his son, Lu Ten.

But if that had all been lies, then going back to the Earth Kingdom to help Toph with the fighting might be the best path. Sticking around the Fire Nation wouldn't accomplish anything, not with Iroh up at the North Pole, and going that far and leaving the Earth Kingdom on its own was dangerous. Especially with those 'telegraph' lines that let them send orders faster than even a sky bison could fly.

Confronting Iroh might have to wait for the next time he visited Aang in a dream.

He looked around at his friends. "It sounds like we have the start of a plan. We need to see what will happen as Iroh begins his rule as Fire Lord, but we should start getting ready to leave for the Earth Kingdom."

And then Suki said, "I'm not sure I can go with you guys."

Everyone looked to her. She had moved to stand over against a wall, and she was gazing down at her feet, not meeting anyone else's eyes.

Aang's immediate thought was that this had something to do with her sister. His second was that it might have to do with Prince Zuko.

Then one of the Ty Sisters walked in, bowed, and said, "Commander Zhao is here to see you."

Aang had just enough time to frown when the man himself walked in, grinning in his Fire Navy armor.

He didn't even bow his head before saying, "Well, I see that you've all survived yesterday's unpleasantness. That makes my job easier. I am collecting the Fire Nation's remaining figures of authority to bring them to the North Pole for Prince Iroh's crowning as Fire Lord." He looked straight at Aang. "That includes the Avatar, the Earth King, and Lady Caldera Yu Mai. We will be leaving tomorrow. It's time to deliver on the deal you all made."

Zuko kneeled in the corner of Azula's bedroom, behind the obscuring screen, and tried to summon fire in his joined hands. He breathed, in and out and in and out, seeking the element within, and sent his energies without.

A little flame, like that of a candle, uncurled between his palms. It did nothing against the shadows here behind the screen.

He hadn't lost his Firebending. And yet this was the largest flame he could produce right now.

"I am finished," came the old voice from beyond the screen, and Zuko let the flame wink out. He rose and stepped from behind the screen to find the old Sage woman pulling a blanket up to cover his sister. "I applied some ointment and changed the bandages of the Princess Azula's wound, but it seems well. Piandao Clanless made a clean cut. I also lit some Purity Candles, in case your mother put a hex on the child."
Zuko felt heat flare in his chest, even if he couldn't release it. "Just get out of here!"

The Sage bowed, and then glided out of the room.

And so Zuko was once again left alone with Azula.

He looked over at his sister, lying flat on her back in the bed, just as she had since Zuko brought her here following Fa-
-Mother-

Azula had been this way since yesterday, when the Avatar uncovered the truth of their parents. Breathing but not moving, making no sound. The only difference was that, at some point during the night, she had opened her eyes to stare vacantly at the ceiling.

Zuko liked that less than when she wouldn't wake up.

And they both had twenty-four hours, from dawn to dawn, to find a way out of the Fire Nation and a destination to head towards. Those were the terms of their banishment, earned by the actions of their mother.

At least this time Zuko was being banished for a good reason.

High Sage Xinghao stepped into the room, his hands folded in his sleeves. "If you keep shouting like that, you'll have the other Sages convinced that you're cursed, as well."

Zuko snorted. "Let them light as many candles as they want, as long as they stay out of my way. Why are you here?"

"Commander Zhao dropped by, representing your uncle."

Zuko's fists clenched. Of all the times to be without his Firebending- "I don't want to see him."

"Then you're fortunate, because apparently he didn't want to see you, either." Xinghao unfolded his hands from his sleeves to reveal a small wooden chest. "He delivered this, a gift of gold from Fire Lord Iroh and a message. You can read it yourself, but the sentiments are condolences on your mother and father, a promise that you will be protected in lands of Fire Nation influence, thanks for your help dealing with the Avatar, and confirmation that the deal will be honored."

Zuko closed his single eye. So Uncle wouldn't be intervening in Zuko's new banishment. He was surprised to find that he didn't feel anything in reaction to the news. Uncle was up in the North Pole, and even this latest message didn't say if he'd be coming back. Mother and Father- there was no family left here in the Fire Nation, not with Azula banished as well. Really, aside from the rush, the banishment was no inconvenience to Zuko.

Father was long dead, and there would be no confrontation over the fire he threw at Zuko at Ba Sing Se. Mother had returned from the shadows only to poison herself, leaving Zuko wondering if any of what he knew about her was true. It turned out that, after working so hard to end his first banishment, there was never a real home he could return to.

He didn't feel a need to make a new one, either.

He just wanted to stay safe and alive.

And honoring his last promise to Mother. No matter what she had turned out to be, he believed that
she had loved him. His little sister needed his help, now. It didn't matter what Azula was like, how much they had conflicted. She was literally the only family Zuko had left, and right now she couldn't protect herself. Even his supposed friends were more loyal to the Avatar. And it was the Avatar who had started Mother on the path to poison.

There was maybe one person left who might offer Zuko a connection.

He looked to Xinghao. "The Sages will watch over Azula for today?"

The High Sage shrugged. "It is our pleasure to make sure you are able to leave as soon as possible. Keeping the princess here is part of that, especially given how closely she worked with your Fa- M- given everything."

Zuko nodded. He didn't care why, so long as it was done. He had to go talk to someone, and then find a way off this forsaken, worthless rock.

A way out of the Fire Nation, one last time.

While everyone else got into a big argument with Zhao, Mai sat down at the table with Katara's stolen map and took out a hinge-blade to play with. Normally, she'd be all up for telling Zhao where to put his 'invitation' to Iroh's crowning and exactly how deep, but that seemed like a waste of good anger.

The map revealed no new insights to her quick glance, so she looked over to Suki. "You're not signing on for this next adventure, huh?"

Suki had also declined the opportunity to vent on Zhao and was leaning on the table, her chin propped up on her hands. "I only stayed away from home this long because of my sister. I hope you all succeed and free the Earth Kingdom and- and restore balance. But Kyoshi Island needs me."

The argument was getting loud. Katara's voice was among the loudest.

Mai ignored it for now and nodded. "And we don't."

Suki gave her a look.

Mai returned a single shoulder's shrug worth of an apology. "No offense. You've been a help, even when I wanted to knock some of your teeth out. But I think we're past the point where leg-breakers like you and me can make much of a difference."

Suki raised her head. "But you do more than that. You and Aang- he obviously needs you. Just now, I think you saved the whole Fire Nation capital by calming him down."

Mai didn't quite know what to say to that. She certainly didn't feel helpful, saving the Capital or not. She was the one who had let things get to this point. It seemed like Iroh had tricked them all, and she was very much annoyed at herself for missing it. Aang, sure; he wanted to trust anyone. Mai was supposed to be savvy and cynical, and unlike Sokka she had grown up where betrayal was something everything did for fun. Not that she expected to be able to play on Iroh and Azula's level, but recognizing her own limitations was no comfort when Aang was so upset about it.

She couldn't protect him from the threats he faced now. She was just a goon with a knife (well, okay, lots of knives), and Aang didn't need that. There was no one she could stab to make things better. Not even Zhao, as fun as that would be. There weren't any little cultural tricks like the Agni Budokai that could fix things.
Mai indulged in another sigh and began twirling her knife around a finger. "Well, whoopee, I guess I earned my pay for the day. But what about you and Zuko?"

Suki went very still. "What about him?"

"You were working for him back in the Earth Kingdom, right? He's being exiled, now, so-" Mai waved her spinning knife in what could be either a threat or a vague admission of confusion, depending on her mood.

Suki's eyes went to the map. "I-

And that's when Zhao said, "Enough of this! Either you all come to the North Pole and show your support for Iroh, or Lady Caldera Yu Mai will never see her brother again!"

In the ensuing silence, Mai snapped her knife closed.

She looked over to Zhao.

She rose from her seat.

She said, "What?"

Aang, Sokka, Katara, Ty Lee, and even Toph were all backing away from Zhao. All of them (minus Toph) were looking at her with uncertain eyes. And Zhao stood at their center, his face red with anger, slowly putting a smirk on display.

He flashed his teeth at her. "We have Tomoshibi. He is safe, and in a secure location. One I don't know right now, and the information has been kept limited, for obvious reasons. Forces under my command took him from your parents on Ember Island. Once the Avatar arrives at the North Pole, the Fire Lord will have the boy returned to your parents."

Tom-Tom?

He had been taken?

She'd just seen him on Ember Island, when her parents had drawn her from the safety of the Ty Sisters' home there so that Azula could set a trap for her. Mother and Father had given their loyalty to the Ozai faction, while she had been working for Iroh. Just business, nothing personal, just setting our daughter up for a killer princess. And now Ozai - or Ursa, whoever had been really in charge on that side - was dead, and Iroh was in full control.

Iroh's betrayals weren't limited to international politics, it seemed. But Mai was sure that he would characterize it as perfectly benign as long as she did as she was asked. After all, that's how Azula would honey it.

Mai kept her face blank and said, "Keep him. I never cared for that little leech. My parents will just have to get over it or get a replacement."

Aang, Sokka, and Katara were all aghast.

Only Ty Lee and Toph didn't react to her words. But then, they each had their own kind of faster-than-thought insights into the matter.

Zhao shook his head. "I could almost believe you. But that decision isn't mine. My orders from Iroh explicitly say to consider any such responses from you to be a bluff. And even if you don't care, I'm
sure the kind-hearted Avatar could never let the family of such a close friend suffer."

Mai glanced at Aang. He no longer looked like she'd just insulted Appa, but he was still upset. Not that she needed to see him to know that Zhao was right.

"Whatever," she said, cutting off anyone else from chiming in, and sat again at the table.

"Exactly." Zhao clasped his hands behind his back. "Now, tomorrow I will have a ship here to take the Avatar, the Earth King, and Caldera Yu Mai to the North Pole with the other attendees for the coronation. No others are invited. So long as everyone behaves, Caldera Yu Tomoshibi will not be harmed, and once the Avatar has fulfilled his side of the bargain to Fire Lord Iroh, I will order the release of-"

That's when Mai lost patience, flipped her hinge-blade back out, and threw it.

"-the boy-" Zhao trailed off as he realized what had just happened.

His topknot tumbled down from the top of his head to drop into the hands he hastily brought up.

He looked down at the little bundle of gray hair, and then at Mai.

She kept her expression blank and met his gaze. "Oops, that was clumsy of me. Good thing I didn't hit anything vital."

"You-" He took a step forward, and everyone moved to block his path.

Mai waved them off as she leaned back in her chair. "Go ahead, Commander. Explain to the Fire Lord that I can't attend his coronation because you set me on fire. Or just annoy me more to see how far I'm going to take this. Hey, why not mess me up enough that the Avatar will destroy the Fire Nation? You know, like he did Crescent Island."

Aang blinked. "I-"

Sokka cut him off with a laugh. "Well, yeah, I mean, if we care enough about Mai to actually let ourselves be blackmailed with an evil Fire Nation toddler, we care enough to be touchy about her safety. That's what Iroh's counting on, right? I guess either he wasn't bright enough to see how we could turn things around, or he doesn't care about his toady, here."

Toph snorted. "I know which one I'm going with."

Zhao looked around at everyone. Aang. Sokka. Toph. Katara. Ty Lee (who was growling).

His fist closed in on his amputated topknot. "Tomorrow at dawn. At the docks." Then he spun on his heel and marched out.

Everyone was gathered around Mai in an instant. Ty Lee even hugged her.

As if she could feel better about letting them down yet again.

It was King Toph who brought sanity back to the proceedings by saying, "So I'm guessing this changes our plans a little."

It was the lemur that clued Zuko in to the location of the Avatar and his allies. The creature was fluttering above the mansion that belonged to Ty Lee's family, and the emptiness of the ravaged Caldera made spotting such a little thing easy.
It was the only thing moving in the sky, the only thing making a sound.

He was brought up short by the women fighting in the mansion's courtyard. It took him a moment to realize that they were sparring with their tonfa sticks, not really trying to hurt each other. It was another few moments before he saw that they all had Ty Lee's face.

By then, they had noticed him.

Now, what were their names? Azula had never befriended them the way she had Ty Lee, so Zuko's contact with them was infrequent and usually at a distance. He was pretty sure all their names started with 'Ty,' but-

They saved him by bowing together. The one on the far left, wearing green, said, "Welcome, Prince Zuko. You just missed Commander Zhao."

Zuko scowled. "No, I didn't. I came for another reason."

The green Ty Sister nodded. "The Avatar is in conference with his friends. Shall I bring you in, or do you wish to be announced, first?"

Zuko knew he should go inside, should talk to everyone. But-

The Avatar was the one who had unmasked Mother. Zuko knew the truth needed to come out, but-

"I- I just need to talk to Suki. Maybe I could wait here?"

The Ty Sisters all stared at him. One smirked, but then the rest broke into smiles that he didn't like at all.

The one in green nodded. "I'll ask her to come down. Just a moment, please."

Zuko nodded as she dashed for the mansion. He turned away from the grins of the other sisters, and reached for the thin object tucked into his belt to confirm that it was still there. His stomach was tight, and he had to suppress the urge to pace.

It was forever and too soon when the green Ty Sister returned with Suki.

For the first time since coming to the Fire Nation, she wasn't wearing the unmarked scout uniform that had allowed her to pass as part of his official retinue. Instead, she was covered in a plain black robe.

Seeing the question on his face, Suki said, "Black is how people on Kyoshi Island show mourning."

Ah. The Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom both favored white for that, but black was a somber color and, from what Suki had described, the people of Kyoshi Island would favor more practical ceremonies. It was hard to keep clothes white.

Zuko dipped his head. "You- are you- okay?" He realized something, and his face warmed. "I- I'm sorry, but with everything- yesterday- your sister- your sister's body- did you-"

The Ty Sister in green cleared her throat and trotted away to join the others.

"It was gone when I went looking for it." Suki's gaze fell to the ground. "The army had been clearing the bodies that could be reached. She must have received a basic Fire Nation mass funeral. She might even have liked that."
Suki's sister Kirai had been poisoned in a ploy to bring Zuko back here. And it had been his own mother who had masterminded it.

Zuko decided the best thing was to just push on with the matter. "I'm leaving. Azula and I have been banished from the Homeland. I'm not really sorry to go."

Suki nodded. "I heard. From Aang. I tried to talk to you yesterday, but-"

But Zuko hadn't really been in a state to notice. "Sorry. We've all had a-" How to possibly describe it? "-rough time?"

Suki snorted. "Yeah. We have." She looked up again. "So where will you go?"

Zuko swallowed. This was it. "I- uh, I was wondering where you're going. I know- the Avatar- but Azula still won't move, and- and none of the servant girls will come, and-"

"You want me to be Azula's caretaker?" Suki's brows drew together. "She's the one who poisoned Kirai!"

Zuko hadn't really thought about that. "I didn't just want that. I- I'm not going to have anyone else, and I thought you- you-"

Suki sighed. "Zuko, I'm going back to Kyoshi Island. Alone."

She-

Oh.

Suki turned to look at the spire of the Fire Palace. "All of my life, I've been pulled in two directions. Sometimes more than two. I've had to balance helping these people with helping those people, but helping one always meant risking the other. All my life! Kirai or my old friends. The freedom of Kyoshi Island or the safety of Fire Nation tyranny. Kyoshi Island or the rest of the world. Zhao or the Avatar. You or the Avatar! My sister or my new friends!"

Zuko understood all too well. "I'm sorry for my part of that. I didn't mean-"

"I know, Zuko. I'm not blaming you." She finally looked to him again. "I'm the one who tried to make it all work. I lied to everyone and did whatever it took and in the end your family still killed my sister. And now there's nothing forcing me to be pulled like that anymore. I need to go home and figure out what's left. And figure out what I can- want- to do. And it's better for all of us if you're not a part of that." Her lip quirked. "I don't think you'd like it if I decide I want to strangle Azula."

Zuko would honor Mother's last request to look after Azula. But- "She'd deserve it. I think lots of people would want to strangle her. But I- I have my duty." And he had his answer. Suki- her time in his life had come to an end.

Zuko brought his hands together in the sign of respect, and bowed low at the waist. "Thank you for everything you've done for me. And my deepest apologies for everything my family and I have done to you."

Suki lowered her own head. "Thank you. I wish you luck."

Zuko knew he'd need it, but how much luck would he have without a friend like Suki? He reached to his belt and took out the object he'd brought from the palace. "Here, this is my gift to you. One of the secret passages we found yesterday contained- um, trophies, and- according to the label, this- this
belongs to you. Er, your people, I mean.” He held it out, and the gold glinted in the sun.

Suki blinked. "Is that-" She took it from him, and with a click, she unfolded the metal war fan. "Oh. Zuko."

"I know it's not much, but I wanted to give at least something back to you. It's the least of what you deserve. And-" He tried to marshal his words, to find the combination that would give Suki the relief that she was owed, but he knew that this was one failure he would just have to accept. "And no one could have balanced everything that you were forced to. But you did better than anyone else could have. I'll always be grateful to have met you."

She raised the fan to her face, covering it as she rubbed at her eyes. "Me, too. Thank you."

Zuko instinctively raised his hands to reach out to her, but then remembered himself. He gave one last nod.

And then he turned and left.

She remained standing behind her fan.

Zhao was still furious by the time he got down to the Capital Harbor. He clutched his severed topknot during the whole rickshaw ride to the Royal Plaza, imagining all the various things he'd do to Lady Mai if Iroh hadn't ordered him to leave the children alone-

And then the rickshaw got to the gate to the Royal Plaza, and the guard on station bowed to him. "Commander, sir! Your soldiers left a message for you." She offered a scroll.

Zhao took it without getting out of the rickshaw and unrolled it to read.

And a smile returned to his face.

Well.

It seemed he would be able to clean up an unexpected loose end. And it would be quite the poetic way to end this latest visit to the Capital.

He nodded to the guard, and she passed his rickshaw through the gate into the Royal Plaza, so named for the size and grandeur that made it an ideal place for the Fire Lord to address his people. Normally, though, the massive space was used to unload and search cargo brought through the Capital Harbor. It could also serve as an important part of the Caldera's defense, the long space functioning as a killing box for the turrets that stood vigil all along the plaza's walls.

Today, though, it was a camp for mewling refugees, the nobles who had fled the fighting in the Caldera.

As his rickshaw skirted the edge of the plaza, following a path defined by guards lined up to keep civilians away, Zhao kept his eyes off the former elite who were getting a taste of the peasant lifestyle. Some soldiers, acting on the instructions Iroh had wired sometime during the night, were passing out relief supplies. Military engineers were even now up in the Caldera to determine what areas, if any, were safe for habitation, but at least some nobles were about to lose the status of a residence within sight of the palace. Perhaps they would go to other islands, or maybe Upper and Lower Harbor Cities would be joined at the base of the volcano by another, more upscale settlement.

No matter the outcome, none of it was Zhao's concern, and he no longer had a need to curry the
nobility's favor. He took his orders personally from the Fire Lord, now. Perhaps, if the Caldera could be rebuilt, he would be awarded a manor near the palace. All his gambles had paid off.

He squeezed his fist around his severed topknot.

Mostly paid off.

His mood darkened again until he passed through the plaza, leaving the refugees behind, and reached the command tent set up by his personal marines near where his flagship was docked. He tucked his topknot into his belt as he stepped inside.

He found his father kneeling on the floor in the center of the tent, a map of the Capital hanging behind him. A guard stood on each side of Zhao the Elder.

Zhao the Younger kept his expression professional. "Lord Zhao. I take you haven't heard the news?"

"Commander Zhao. I can only assume that Prince Ozai has come to some misfortune, and so soon after Azulon's passing." Father looked especially old and tired today. His face, so similar to Zhao's own, was a dire future that had been safely avoided. "I can't imagine what else might cause this misunderstanding."

Zhao barked a laugh. "Misunderstanding? You were Prince Ozai's agent while the Avatar and Prince Zuko were on Zenmatsu Island. Ozai - or the person we thought was Ozai at the time - killed Fire Lord Azulon, among other treasonous activities. Your arrival in the Capital today is highly suspicious, wouldn't you say?"

Father blinked. "Ozai was not Ozai? What madness is this?"

Zhao could only shake his head. "I scarcely credit the stories I've heard, myself, but the Avatar and High Sage agree. The magical imposter is dead, at any rate. Iroh is Fire Lord. And I am a leading figure of security in the Capital, now."

"Are you?" Father's eyes narrowed. "Then you have the power to resolve this."

"I do." Zhao stepped over to the old man and leaned to look down on him. "You undermined me on Zenmatsu. You chose Ozai over me."

Father shrugged. "I acted out of my friendship to Piandao, more than anything. But I merely conveyed information, and I gave you fair warning about it."

Zhao snorted and straightened again. "Is that how you excuse it?"

"What is to excuse?" Father finally got to his feet, earning the guards' renewed attention, but he merely stood so that he was looking Zhao clear in the eyes. "Don't pretend what I did was a real betrayal. I merely acted in accordance with my position, trading influence like anyone else. Like I taught you to do, although you never really picked up on the necessary restraint. My connections benefitted you, in the past. You can hardly take offense when they also extracted a price."

Zhao ran a hand over his head, the absence of his topknot feeling so alien. "You're right, Father. I never took any of it personally. But you're also right that I've never been as restrained as you. Which is why you lost, and I am now ridding myself of an impediment who backed the wrong prince."

He turned and head for the tent's exit.

Father called out, "Zhao!"
Commander Zhao turned to glance at the guards. "Lord Zhao is hereby guilty of treasonous actions. Under my authority, he is to be executed."

And then he stepped out into the sunlight.

Within the tent, Father gave a cry, and then there was silence.

Zhao would need to have his hair trimmed, if he was to look as good as possible when he arrived in the North Pole for Iroh's coronation. He'd have to see to that, before the departure tomorrow morning.

---

Aang opened his eyes, letting the soothing cool presence of Mai shrink back from being the whole of his world to resting in the body of the young lady in front of him. They were alone on a balcony in the mansion of Ty Lee's family, hiding from the sun in the shade of an overhang.

He looked right in Mai's eyes, now a dull gold in the shadow. "I couldn't find your brother."

She face didn't change, but she did sigh. "My connection to him isn't strong enough."

Aang wanted to deny it, to affirm that she had to love her brother enough to trace the connection to Tom-Tom's location. Even the slightest bond should have been enough to at least get a direction, a path to follow in the same what that the Guru Pathik had taught. But he had traced his own rushing connection to Mai, and then tried to follow her ribbons of influence to where Zhao might have hidden her brother away.

And he couldn't find anything.

Yes, Mai was connected to him, and Sokka, and Ty Lee, and Katara, and Toph. Those glowing paths went right to the other rooms in the mansion. He had followed a path down to the courtyard to Suki, and a jagged, fraying path to the Fire Palace, to a small dying ember of a presence. He followed another path down out of the Caldera, to Zuko's bundle of frustration and need.

And two little shreds led to the refugee camp at the base of the Caldera, twin pinpricks of panic. Mai's parents, probably.

And yet nothing to her brother.

Aang shook his head. "I don't think you can be less connected to him than your parents. There's something wrong, here."

"Something or nothing, it doesn't matter. We're stuck in Iroh's trap." She stood up, and somewhere in the motion she produced a needle that she began twisting between her fingers. "I can't provide what we need, and now Zhao- Iroh- whoever has us on the end of a leash." She looked to Aang, and he could see something in her eyes that wrenched at his heart. "I- you- you don't know Tom-Tom-" She mumbled her next few words and bit her lip.

She couldn't bring herself to say them.

She couldn't tell him to forget about her, and her brother, to do what was necessary.

Aang could only smile at that. "I'll save him. I want to save him. Helping people is what I do. And I really like helping you."

At one time, he might have felt too vulnerable to admit such a thing, but after all they'd been through,
he could say it with pride.

Mai nodded, but her gaze fell. She still wasn't happy, and he could understand why.

But maybe he could cheer her up-

"And I think I know what's going on," he continued. "It's not that you don't have a connection to your brother. Remember what Katara told us? Iroh took Long Feng, and he's stealing platinum from the Fire Navy."

Mai's eyes snapped up. "You think he's hiding Tom-Tom with platinum?"

Aang shrugged. "It makes sense. The Guru told us that platinum is something not connected to any element, and it disrupts spiritual energy like the Línghún. Maybe it can block the energy of our connections enough to keep me from sensing it."

Mai was twirling her needle again, fast. "So how do we get around that?"

"Uh-" Aang could only shrug. "I, uh, don't know. I mean, I can't imagine that Zhao put your brother in an airtight platinum box, so maybe there's some way to find a trace of energy, but I was trying really hard just now, so-"

Mai stilled her needle and twisted it to grasp in a fist. "So unless you get some kind of new lesson from a convenient mentor, or an upgraded spiritual engine or something, there's no..."

She was no doubt saying something very pessimistic and witty, but Aang had stopped listening.

Upgraded spiritual engine?

Maybe-

"An upgrade, huh?" Aang looked over to Mai, and then out across the city. This balcony wasn't very high, but with the damage to the city, there was enough of a view for him to make out the broken towers of the Capital Fire Temple.

And he remembered what happened earlier in the day, when his feelings of betrayal had resonated with the power of the volcano beneath their feet, as well as the 'yoke' that stifled its energies and kept it from erupting.

Instead of letting volcano and snowstorms draw strength from him, maybe it could be the other way around.

"I think I have an idea." But he'd need everyone's help to do it. As usual.

He turned back to Mai, and found her clutching her needle between two fingers. She met his eyes, and raised a questioning eyebrow.

He shrugged. "We better get the others. This is going to take one of those crazy plans we always wind up barely making work."

"Oh." Mai snorted. "One of those."

Still, Aang liked to think that it meant they were back on track.

TO BE CONTINUED
Chapter End Notes

Traitor's Face has a TVTropes page now!
Burning Bridges

Chapter Summary

The war against Fire Lord Iroh begins.

Burning Bridges

Zuko pushed the coins into the center of the table, the noise of the tavern covering the clinking.

The scruffy sailor on the other side of the table squinted at the coins. "Aye, that's fair price for two passengers, and use of a servant." He looked up again at Zuko. "But I know who you are. Why you need to leave."

Zuko leaned over the table. "You'd extort from the banished, Captain? Is that the honor of a sailor from the Homeland?"

The man's fists clenched. "Not extortion! But I have a crew who trust me to lead them across the seas, and other passengers who are paying to put the Capital behind them." He waved a hand at the coins and sat back in his chair. "What would they all say if they knew the children of the Witch Princess were aboard my ship?"

Zuko was on his feet before he even knew what he was doing. "Do not say that name again!" His fists came down on the table, and it was only the dimness of his Inner Fire that kept any flames from scorching the wood.

Around him, the noise of the tavern dimmed.

Zuko looked around. Stares met his one-eyed gaze, but slowly everyone returned to their own concerns. He made himself sit back down. Threats wouldn't help with this, even if they came all too easily to mind. "Fine. I can pay more."

This was why Uncle Iroh (Fire Lord Iroh) had sent the gold. Zuko was sure he could make it last for a long, long time. Back during his bani- his first banishment, he'd had to stretch his copper coins, thrown at him by people who pitied him, as far as they could go. After that practice, a chest of gold should last him a lifetime, but he himself had never actually been in control of a fortune, before. As a Prince, everything was simply provided to him. When Azula came to help him hunt Aan- the Avatar, she'd been the one controlling the gold.

And so Zuko had no idea how to give someone a ridiculous bribe. A gold piece should be enough to buy anything from people like the sailors who visited the taverns of the Capital's Lower Harbor City. (It could probably buy all of Upper Harbor City.) But how many more such bribes would Zuko need to give out before he and Azula were safe? Should he find someone to trade a gold piece for bags of silver, and then use those to make the ridiculous bribes?

But there was no one left to guide him. Azula was sick, Mother and Father were both gone, Uncle was far away and now responsible for the fate of the Homeland, and Suki-

Zuko reached meaningfully into his pocket, as though ready to produce more coins in an instant.
"How much are we talking about?" Hopefully, that sounded more savvy than pathetic.

The captain stared at him for a long moment, and then shook his head. "Gold doesn't float, your highness. What good would riches do me if the Spirits were against my voyage?" He pushed the coins at the center of the table back to Zuko. "Good luck making other arrangements."

Zuko didn't let himself slump until the man was gone.

It wasn't the first time he'd heard that, today.

But it was an entirely new experience when someone sat down in the sailor's place, seemingly of their own accord. Zuko looked up, ready to push his spending money back into play.

It was an old man with a cup of tea in one hand a Pai Sho tile in the other. He didn't look like a sailor.

Zuko sat up and put his hands flat on the table. "What do you want?"

The old man smiled. "Your uncle sends greetings. He asked me to help you out."

Mai looked up, over the apprentice sage attempting to 'guard' at her, past the outer gate of the Capital Grand Temple, to the temple's Dragonspire Tower. It was, of course, still from when Appa - and Mai and assorted company - had crashed into it yesterday.

She folded her hands in her sleeves and looked back at the would-be guard. "You're denying the Avatar entrance to your fragile temple? Interesting choice of action."

Behind her, Aang 'tonked' his staff against the ground. "Please, let's not be aggressive about this," he said slowly, no doubt because he had only just memorized the worlds a few minutes ago. "I'm confident that I can solve the problem without any violence."

The young apprentice was no older than Kei Lo had been (and Kei Lo would grow no older, because Mai had killed him), and quick to bow at the waist. "Yes, no violence! I would never dream of denying the Avatar entrance to our facilities. It's just- uh the temple has a confusing layout, and I'm just, um, waiting for a, uh, escort?" He looked up to see if Aang and Mai were buying it.

Mai, for her part, was not buying it, but that had been predetermined. Aang had his own plan for finding Tom-Tom, but he said he needed unrestricted time in what was probably a very secure area of the Grand Temple, and Mai and Sokka in turn had concocted a plan to get that for him. As Azula had always said, the first move in taking something that no one wanted to give you was to act like you had already earned it.

Mai was a bit ashamed of how much she enjoyed acting like Azula. "You incompetent fool! This is the Avatar. You're making us late for an important spiritual obligation." She moved to push the apprentice out of the way-

The gate opened just enough to allow High Sage Xinghao to come running through them. "What is the problem here? Wh- Avatar Aang?!" The old man went as white as his beard.

That made sense. According to Aang, the High Sage had been present yesterday when whatever had gone down with Ozai/Ursa had- well, gone down. It was the stuff of nightmares, which was always good for intimidating politicians. Mai gave a quick nod to Aang, pushed the High Sage out of the way instead of the apprentice (the blasphemy gave her a little thrill) and began stalking across the front courtyard of the Grand Temple.
Aang marched behind her, and Xinghao wound up trotting next to him. "Thank you for your accommodation. It does you credit that you g- er, so responsibly guard such an important artifact. Yeah."

Mai glanced back to enjoy the High Sage's look of confusion as he said, "It does? But, ah, which artifact?"

She returned her eyes forward and continued stalking to the Grand Temple as if she actually knew the answer. "The thing that's keep the volcano docile, of course. You have checked on it today, haven't you?"

Xinghao came to a halt. Mai and Aang stopped as well.

The High Sage's eyes were narrowed in thought. Finally, his ponderous response was, "Do you mean the Lava Arch?"

Mai caught Aang eying her a question. She elbowed her reply.

Aang drew himself up to his full height and said, "Yes. That."

Mai nodded. "Take us there right away!"

Sokka watched through his telescope as an old guy in too many red robes brought Aang and Mai into the temple, and then the view was cut off by those unnecessarily intimidating black stone walls that so much stuff was made of around here.

He lowered the telescope and looked to his only companion up here on the roof of the Ty Sisters' mansion. "Well, Momo, they're in. Good thing I wrote that script for Aang, huh?"

The lemur stopped licking its own armpit and chittered.

Sokka shrugged. "Hey, you think you can write better under this kind of pressure, you can do it next time. I had a lot to plan out. If this works, and we do end up going to war with the new Fire Lord, we need to start on the right foot. I think I can be forgiven some shaky dialogue, if everything else works out."

He was about to raise the telescope again - and get on with all the boring monitoring he'd have to do while waiting for any potential disaster - when he noticed movement below. Everyone else in the house should have been preparing to leave, so there shouldn't be anyone out there now. Katara and Ty Lee would loading up Appa for a quick exit, and even the Ty Sisters were planning to find their mother in the refugee camp and head back to Ember Island.

But when Sokka looked, Toph was lying on the stone of the front walkway, slapping her feet against the ground in some kind of pattern.

Maybe that was how Earthbenders staved off boredom.

As Momo scuttled over and settled into his lap for a nap, Sokka got back to his peeping on the Fire Sage neighbors.

The five dragon heads loomed over Aang, no less intimidating for being made of dead metal.

The path High Sage Xinghao had revealed went deep beneath the temple. It started with a hidden
door set in the rear courtyard of the temple, a door that could only be opened by Firebending, and continued down into dark depths. Aang had accompanied Xinghao through a similar set of secret passages yesterday, when they needed to bring Zuko's mother's body out of the palace, but these spiraling tunnels were different. They went deeper, for one, and the glimpses Aang got of the branching hallways revealed decorations made to look like dragon bones.

At least, Aang hoped they just looked like bones.

The double-door he stood in front of now had been at the end of the lowest path. The walls were broken up by small openings into massive side chambers that glowed with flowing lava, removing the need for torches or lamps. Instead of bones, a series of five dragon head sculptures guarded the door, set in front of a complex mechanism of gears and slots.

"Only an Avatar who has come fully into his power can open this," Xinghao had said. Some of his fear melted away with a twitch of his mouth as he added, "Without help, that is. I would summon other Sages to assist with the Firebending lock, but Avatar Laotsu himself charged that only the greatest Flame Masters could enter into the Chamber of the Lava Arch. I trust you won't have any trouble."

So now Aang needed to figure out how to produce five steady streams of Firebending at once. So far, five minutes of meditating had not helped him work up the confidence to try.

He breathed in and out again, trying to put the locks themselves out of his mind.

This place felt weird. It was like the abandoned temple of Crescent Island, a nexus of energies through which he could sense the pulse of the volcano. But unlike that one, this volcano didn't have the same life. He touched it earlier in the day, when news of Iroh's betrayal had nearly sent him into the Avatar State, and the angry essence had been unmistakable. But here, there was something like tranquility, but no peace to go with it. An imposed tranquility.

That confused Aang, because up to now he thought tranquility and peace were pretty much the same thing.

What was this place?

He had sensed something like a yoke before-

"Yes, Aang," Avatar Roku said. "Peace through tyranny, the way of the Fire Lords."

Aang's eyes snapped open.

No longer did the locked double-doors stand before him. Now, the glowing specter of his previous life sat facing him in the dark.

"Roku! I- I need-"

"I know, Aang." Roku's bearded face twisted with a smile. "Rare is it when I can directly give you help, but I am happy to say that this place makes it possible."

Aang had only ever directly spoken to his predecessor once before, back in the Southern Air Temple at the beginning of his quest, what felt like a lifetime ago. It had been before Mai's betrayal, before Katara, before finding the new Airbenders, before the monster of Ba Sing Se, before Iroh and the Fire Nation and brief civil war and- and everything.

He had to smile back. "I'm so happy to see you. Can this- can this place really help me find Mai's
brother?"

Roku nodded. "There is power here that you can use. Once it is awakened, it cannot be put back to sleep, so will finish the task of restoring balance to this city of corruption and terror. So much evil has started here in this caldera. But first, you need to deal with a lock, am I correct?"

"Yeah, that would help."

Roku reached out with both of his hands, and Aang took them. A feeling of warmth and completeness filled his body, and beneath this illusion of a meeting, he was dimly aware that the tattoos on his body had begun glowing in the dim tunnel.

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Zuko stared across the table while the noise and activity of the bar continued. "My uncle sent you?"

The old man put his Pai Sho tile down on the center of the table, where Zuko's coins had recently been piled. It was the White Lotus tile. Just like that 'philosophy club' that Uncle Iroh claimed to be part of, the one that connected him with sages and wise men across the world.

Zuko nodded. "Why didn't he just send Zhao, like the way he sent the gold?"

The old man gave a thin smile and stroked the long white beard that hung from the tip of his chin. "The Fire Lord is under no illusions about Commander Zhao's diplomatic skills. But carrying gold around is a risky venture, and so better left to the military."

"Is that why you're here? Diplomacy?"

"In a matter of speaking." The old man took the White Lotus tile back and slipped it into his robes. "My name is Asahi. I was asked to coordinate your departure from the Fire Nation, if you have no other plans."

"Coordinate?" Zuko felt his Inner Flame stir. "You mean you're going to help me get out of here?"

"And give you somewhere to go, yes." Asahi took a sip from his teacup. "Everything has already been arranged. You need only be at the ship by sunset."

"But-" This didn't make any sense to Zuko. "I was just given my banishment. How-"

"You are aware of Fire Lord Iroh's access to the Spirit World, yes?"

Zuko had met Uncle there, along with the Avatar. It was where they had hatched the plot to remove Grandfather from the Burning Throne. "And he said he could enter dreams, too."

"Precisely. Dreams are one of several points where the Spirit World overlaps with the Material World. Is it any surprise that after yesterday's events, our new lord was up all night calling in favors from all over?"

Zuko supposed that made sense, as strange as it might be. Even after all these months, he was still having trouble with the revelation that Uncle hadn't been as isolated at the North Pole as everyone thought. It seemed strangely- strangely busy for someone as- well, relaxed as Uncle. "And I can bring Azula?"

"You can." Asahi's eyes sharpened. "There hasn't been much word about her, but I notice that she's not the one trying to find you a ride away from here. Is she all right?"

"She's not feeling well." It was true enough, and Zuko couldn't quite bring himself to try to explain
her condition. "And we'll be safe at the North Pole? I promised I would take care of my sister."

Asahi blinked. "The North Pole?"

Zuko could feel his Inner Flame flickering in the face of the man's confusion. "Isn't that where Uncle is? That's what he told me, and that he couldn't leave yet." Not while Lu Ten was still sick, whatever the ailment. Maybe it was the same thing as Azula.

There was a lull before Asahi raised his eyebrows. "Ah, I understand the confusion. Yes, the Fire Lord is at the North Pole, and soon the Sages and military will leave to witness his crowning, but your uncle arranged something else for you. A member of the White Lotus in the colonies will host you on his estate. You will have your own little house with a small staff of servants, from which you will be free to come and go. I'm told it's near some scenic mountains. Quite pleasant."

Zuko had spent years in the Earth Kingdom, but he couldn't make himself imagine it. Uncle Iroh didn't want Zuko to come up north? He and Azula were being sent into retirement in the colonies?

Would he ever see Uncle again? Was he expected to become some kind of secret agent for this White Lotus club?

Or was this to put him and Azula somewhere so that they could be safely forgotten?

"I'll have to think about this."

Asahi's brow scrunched. "Do you- ah, understand what is being offered? Safe, reliable passage. Protection. Sanctuary. I know this is a difficult time for you, and- well, I'm sure events must seem like they're closing in on you. But your uncle wants to take care of you, now. There's no reason not to accept."

No, Zuko supposed that there wasn't. This didn't feel right, but- it all just seemed like a bad dream. The Capital, Father, Mother, his former friends, another banishment. Maybe there was too much shadow in his heart for him to realize a good opportunity when it came along.

"Okay." Zuko nodded. "I'll do it. Where is your ship docked?"

Mai's whole body had tensed when Aang started glowing, straight down to a painful cramping of her toes. But the flash of light in the dim tunnel left an afterimage with a shape not entirely unlike that of a statue of an old guy that had once stood in the Southern Air Temple, so she supposed it was okay.

To her relief, Aang had moved into a Firebending stance so precise that even Azula would have been jealous, and proceeded to moving through a sequence of punches and kicks that put five streams of flame into the dragon-mouth repositories of the door's lock.

High Sage Xinghao gasped. "I- I didn't think he'd be able to do it!"

Mai hadn't been entirely sure, either, but of course she didn't let that show. "After everything, you still doubt the Avatar? You're pathetic." And there wasn't a bit of hypocrisy in that statement.

The large doors swung open, and the passage was filled with a mix of heat and light that almost felt solid.

Mai deigned to acknowledge it with a squint.

Aang was walking straight into the light.
She followed, of course. Xinghao, notably, did not.

The room beyond the doors definitely looked like a part of the temple. It was impractically tall, for one thing, the ceiling high enough that there was probably dust up there that hadn't moved in centuries. The walls were covered in sculptures of dragons, because there was nothing so intimidating that it couldn't be improved with the face of a giant snarling lizard.

The only parts of the decor that really stood out as unique were the thin moat of lava that circled the whole room, and the giant paifang - a symbolic gate formed by twin pillars and an arching, layered roof - that stood in the center.

Mai was willing to bet that this was the imaginatively-named 'Lava Arch.'

Aang, still glowing, walked straight up to the paifang and sat down in a lotus position right between the pillars. So, he seemed to know what he was doing, then. That was good. Probably.

Surprisingly, Mai knew what she was supposed to do, too. She was just a thug, a living knife, and a burden; she had no place in matters that had the Bridge Between Worlds glowing. Yet she didn't feel awkward here. After all, this was, in a way, all for her. She went right over to Aang, crouched beside him, and took one of his hands in hers. He was so warm.

And then Mai was struck by lightning.

At least, that's what it felt like.

Her whole body buzzed and every single one of her hairs stood on end. She didn't feel any pain, exactly, but her whole body strained in a way that didn't seem to be using any muscles. She was being pulled and torn somewhere beyond any physical place she could actually pinpoint, even with her smallest pin. If this was what magic stuff felt like, she would be happy to never do it again.

But she was pretty sure she needed to do this for Tom-Tom and Aang.

So took the blank face she so easily used to cover her every feeling and applied it to her heart. She pushed down at every bad feeling and sensation until there was nothing left but the platonic ideal of Herself, and then she squeezed Aang's hand.

That's when the earth shook.

Literally.

Zuko wasn't sure he was being followed until he got to the edge of Lower Harbor City.

He'd left the tavern right after confirming the details of his journey with Asahi, intent on making the most of his time left here on Capital Island. He'd need to pack whatever he could carry, help prepare Azula for transport, and take one last look at the parts of home that he might actually miss, and he only had until sundown to do it all. He'd hurried through the streets of the city, trusting in the visible presence of his nation's soldiers to protect him, but-

He kept seeing the same woman out of the corner of his eye.

Even here in the heart of the Fire Nation, the ruby brightness of her lips stood out. And, once he started paying surreptitious attention to her, he noticed that her feet were bare.

Earthbender.
But he'd been mugged and attacked often enough to have learned a few tricks about pursuit. He plunged into the densest parts of the moving crowds, which was easy enough today. Some of the refugees from the Caldera had overflown here into the safer of the two Harbor Cities, and with the military's Command Center also here, everyone seemed to be hurrying to get somewhere. Once Zuko was sure that he out of sight of his pursuer, he slipped into a thin alleyway, hopped up onto a stack of crates, and turned back to watch the way he came.

He wasted almost half an hour before he decided that his ambush had fizzled.

At least he didn't see the woman again during his trip back up the slope of the volcano to the Caldera.

It wasn't until he was passing Ty Lee's home, the temporary camp of the Avatar and his friends, that the woman made her reappearance. And then she was standing right at the mansion's gate, next to Earth King Toph, smirking at him.

Toph had the same smirk. "So, my spy Jojo here says you've found yourself a new home. Congrats."

Zuko was almost grateful for the distraction from the ruin that sprawled across the city. "You have Earthbender spies here, and one of them followed me? So my uncle becomes Fire Lord, and things change very quickly."

Toph stuck out her bottom lip and tilted her head almost like Azula used to when luring him into a trap. "Aw, don't be mean, Hot Stuff. You know I love you. But my spies only just caught up to us after all the fun we had yesterday, and you never visit, you never write, and now you're running off with people who work for your traitor uncle. I had a spy following you because I'm worried!"

Zuko would have expected to feel angry at the insult to Uncle Iroh, but it was too nonsensical an accusation to touch his Inner Fire. "A traitor? What are you talking about?"

Toph grinned again. "This is what happens you skip club meetings. You'll never guess what Ty Lee told us this morning..."

Under Roku's guidance, Aang's blood was singing with the power of the Fire Nation's Capital Volcano. At least, he thought it was. It was kind of difficult to tell, what with his spirit being out of his body.

His physical self was still sitting beneath the Lava Arch, right next to Mai, but somehow the rest of him was elsewhere. With the strength of the volcano - a strength that the ancient Fire Sages had tapped into and then clamped down when the Arch was first raised, a strength that Roku had guided him to touch and feel and become - he had been able to find Mai's connection to her brother. With his hand in both of hers, he saw the full web of life that surrounded her and connected her to all things.

He'd have to tell her about it later. He got the feeling that she sometimes felt more alone than she really was.

With that web full laid out before him, Aang focused on one particular connection, a ribbon of struggling light with more resilience than its thinness should allow. It was a silent thread, unlike all the others that echoed with their twists and turns and ends. The only way to follow it was to pull himself along, pull until he emerged from his own body and rode the pulsing, stifled needs of the volcano. He pulled himself up through the ground, into the Capital Temple proper, then into the sky, gaining speed as he went along. He was riding the line of light now, just like his glider, swooping
out towards the sea.

And then Aang was flying, wrapped in the essence of Mai herself.

His previous experiences with spiritual connections had all been more abstract, more about lights and feelings, but as he flew up through the ground and out over the sea, the spiritual and material worlds overlapped for him. The spray of the seawater went right through his Spirit-form, but he could smell the tang, taste the salt, and feel the coolness. Islands passed by at a speed like Appa's steepest dives, and the wind pushed back against his flight. He was used gliding through the winds, but now it went even deeper, with the winds gliding through him in turn.

And yet he wasn't really present. All of this had to be an illusion, but if so, didn't that mean that the world itself was an illusion?

Aang flew on, following the struggling line of light.

He didn't know how long he flew. It could have been hours or minutes. The light in the sky was no clue, because the sun seemed so much brighter than it usually was.

At last he came to a ship. A metal Fire Nation warship, sleek and strong, tethered to the horizon by that weak line of spiritual connection. Aang willed himself to set down on its deck, just like he was coming in for a landing on his glider, and the metal plates felt solid under his ethereal boots even though he made no sound on impact. An invisible infiltrator, he hurried into the ship, following the light.

The only thing he felt was a rising heat, feeding into him and then out again. With every pulse, Mai's connection to Tom-Tom glowed again. It was feeding on the energy that flowed from the volcano and out through Aang, just as he was.

He walked down the halls of the ship, and though they echoed the thrum of the engine, the sounds of the crew, and whistle of the winds, his own footsteps were silent. He could smell the burning coal, and the light of the gas lanterns allowed him to see. Sometimes, the trail led straight through a wall or floor. The first time, Aang had been cautious in his attempt to will himself through a solid object. It became much easier after that.

He hurried along, and nearly jumped out of his body (well, figuratively speaking, since he was already kind of a ghost) when he encountered a wall of pure shadow that blocked his way like he once again had physical form.

He bounced off, and landed next to a glowing blue figure that looked like an old man.

It wasn't Roku.

"Aang," Fire Lord Iroh said. "I'm sorry we have to meet this way."

Zuko found that the only reply he could make to King Toph's accusations was to shake his head.

Well, that, and to also burst out with, "None of that makes any sense!" Uncle Iroh planning to invade the Earth Kingdom? Kidnapping babies? Hiding away the man who had made that awful monster out of Ba Sing Se's Ashland? That wasn't the uncle he knew.

Toph leaned against the outer wall of the Ty Sisters' estate, completely relaxed despite the devastation of the surrounding neighborhood, and shrugged. "Yeah, that's what we all said. But we trust Katara and Ty Lee, so what can you do? I mean, besides track down Mai's brother, prepare for
war, and maybe have Earthbender spies follow around whatever members of the Royal Fire Family are still hanging around."

The spy Jojo had already left, but Zuko wasn't going to let that go. "Well, congratulations! You've discovered that all he wanted to do was help me after the Avatar ruined my life!"

Toph didn't say anything right away. She didn't look at him, of course, but he could tell she was concentrating on something. At last, her voice came out small and flat with, "You really believe that."

Zuko crossed his arms and nodded. "Shouldn't I? I was there when Aa- the Avatar attacked my mother. He just revealed her, and now my sister will only stare at the ceiling, and I don't have- there's no one- I-"

"Zuko." There was no teasing in her tone. "You know the kid as well as I do. Yeah, he doesn't stop and think, but he doesn't try to hurt people. He tries to help them. It gets complicated, but he only does what he has to do."

Zuko turned away from her. She was just a child. What did she know? "Well, it doesn't matter. I'm leaving at sunset, and I'll never have to worry about any of you ever again."

"Unless you come with me, you mean."

Zuko blinked. Come with- He spun to face her again. "What?"

She stood up straight and stepped away from the wall. Her eyes were closed, but she held her head up with the same regality that Azula cultivated. "Prince Zuko, your family and nation have treated you like a bunch of jerks, so I am offering asylum for you and your sister in my Royal Court."

Zuko repeated, "What?"

The ceilings and floor were still the same dull gray color of Fire Nation metal, and when Aang turned around, the wall there was as well. Yet the final wall was so black that might have just been a void where light feared to go, even though the ribbon of light that was Mai's connection to her brother led straight into it.

Straight into it, and right past Iroh's spirit projection.

Obviously, Aang wasn't the only one who knew this trick. "You lied to me!"

Iroh's glowing, transparent form sighed. "Really, this is just a horrible misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding!" Aang wasn't sure whether he was glad that neither he nor Iroh were physically present. Attacking the man probably - probably - wasn't a good idea. "So Katara and Ty Lee found someone else's spooky fortress in the Northern Air Temple?!"

"No, of course not. That was my facility, staffed by my naval command. The map that the Blue Spirit Jet stole and passed on to your friends was mine as well; I even created the strategy it details." Iroh shook his arms in something like a shrug. "I told no lies about any of that, and I gave you the honest truth about my motivations. I want to save my son, and restore balance to the world."

Aang shook his head at the contradictions. "Then why invade the Earth Kingdom?"

"That's merely a contingency. It's my worst case scenario, actually. There is a path before us so
horrible, it may require me to use the forces under my command to secure a certain spot of the Colonial Continent. All of those forces aren't to fight natives, young Avatar. My strategy expects my own nation's army to primarily oppose me. Becoming Fire Lord was a way to help prevent that, but it is still not certain.

Aang took a step back. The notes on the map hadn't said anything about who the enemy would be, at least not in a way that he or any of the others understood. "What would you be protecting?"

Iroh waved the matter away. "A spiritual nexus of a kind. Even your friend Long Feng didn't consider it worth his efforts."

If Aang had a body, the thought of Long Feng being his friend would have turned his stomach. "Long Feng was evil! And you were playing with his ceremonies in the Northern Temple! And- and you killed Jet when he found out, and kidnapped Mai's brother so you could threaten us! You're just as evil as him!"

Iroh actually chuckled. "If doing whatever it takes to save my son is evil, then I will accept the Avatar's judgement. I predicted that your friends' discovery would inspire you to resist my summons, so I acted to force your compliance."

Aang snorted. "Oh, is that all?"

"I do regret that it came to this point, but I will save my son, Avatar. I am an ambitious man, and I apologize for that, but I cannot change it."

"Why, have you tried?"

"Heh." Iroh really did look amused. "I'm loyal to my family, Avatar. It's the same loyalty that turned your friend Jet to violent rebellion. It pulls you, too. If your friends - if Lady Caldera Yu Mai - were dying, would you stop at anything? Not all of the past Avatars could make the selfless choice. Not even all Air Nomads. Loyalty has a dark side, but it is still considered a virtue. I told you that Lu Ten's affliction is spiritual; the experiments being conducted in your people's temple are helping me to understand the full nature of the trouble."

Aang thought about that. Katara and Ty Lee said that platinum was being stockpiled at the Temple, too, which fit with the idea of researching the Spirit World like a science. In fact-

"The wall here is platinum!" Aang ran up to it again and pressed his hands against it. The shadow was as solid as rock, but it wasn't really a shadow, was it? It was a void in the Spirit World, or at least the part that overlapped with the material world. "That's why I couldn't trace where Tom-Tom is! You hid him behind platinum!"

"A failed experiment, it seems." Iroh turned to look at the wall of shadow. "I was surprised when I felt you passing into the Spirit World. Had I not been reaching out to others in the White Lotus, I might not have noticed it. You are much more advanced than I realized, young Avatar. It gives me hope that you will be able to save my son."

Aang blinked. "You still think I'm going to help you?!"

"The child is still in my power." Iroh drooped. "If I cannot have your help through the good of your heart, I will have it through the hardness of mine."

Was Iroh right? Had all of this been for nothing? Aang pushed against the wall again, but it wouldn't yield. He stepped back and tried to summon his most powerful air blast, but his element didn't respond to his motions. Maybe it was because he didn't have his body?
He had harnessed the power of a volcano, flew as a ghost over the ocean, snuck into a warship, and argued with a Fire Lord. And still it wasn't as good as-

Oh.

Yeah, Sokka's plan was still an option, wasn't it? Aang felt dumb for forgetting about it.

He turned his spirit form to Iroh and smiled. "Only if you can keep Tom-Tom here. But I know where he is now, and I have a flying bison and a lot of really tough friends. I will see you soon, Fire Lord Iroh, but you're not going to like it."

And Aang closed his eyes, breathed, and sought out his body.

The world rushed around him, and he dimly heard the terrified cries of people in echoing armor before he was once again flying over the seas.

Zuko knew there had to be a catch, somewhere. "You're going to give me somewhere to live. Keep me safe. And the same for my sister. Azula. Who everyone hates because she's awful."

Toph held her hands out wide. "The Earth King is as generous as she is awe-inspiring!" Her voice echoed through the empty, devastated city.

Zuko shook his head. "I don't believe you." He turned to leave.

"Hey! You callin' me a liar?"

"I think you're crazy!" Zuko too his first step, but as soon as his boot touched the ground, the stone shifted under him and once again he was looking at Toph. "Let me go!"

"Fine!" She put her fists on her hips and stuck her chin out. "Go enjoy the cottage your uncle is throwing at you! Pretend he cares about you, and that you don't care about anything else, and that you won't want to run away a week after your stupid sister wakes up and starts being her stupid self again! What do I know?"

"That's right!" Zuko turned around again. "What do you know? You grew up in the lap of luxury and then became a king! You don't know what it's like to be unwanted!"

The ground twisted again, and Zuko was once again facing Toph.

Then she punched him in the stomach.

Pain exploded in Zuko's gut, and radiated so far outward that he fell to his knees with an urge to be sick. Toph plopped a foot down on his right shoulder, and pressed down so that it was like he was clamped into place.

"You're just seeing what you want with that one eye of yours," she hissed. "I've told you my parents were so ashamed of me that they locked me in my home and didn't even tell anyone I existed! You think that if I gave up like you, I would have escaped the Fire Nation burning Gaoling? And do you think anyone liked the idea of a blind dirty girl becoming king? Shut your stupid face. I know just fine about being unwanted."

Zuko wasn't sure if her foot or the weight of her words was heavier. But it couldn't be wise to turn away from Uncle. He was Fire Lord, now, and wise and powerful.

But he didn't want Zuko around, apparently.
In the silence, Toph said, "If you decide to go with the White Lotus, I better not ever see you again, Hot Stuff. My poor broken heart wouldn't be able to take it."

He was still trying to figure out how to respond to that joke when the ground shook, a terrifying vibrating that he knew all too well.

He felt it on Crescent Island.

Toph swung towards the Grand Temple. "I guess it's time to make a decision. This city isn't going to last to the end of the day."

Zuko jumped to his feet. "An eruption?"

"I don't think so." Toph frowned, and closed her eyes in concentration. "But the volcano is coming back to life. You picked a good time to get yourself banished."

Zuko couldn't bring himself to disagree. But that was mainly because he was already moving towards the palace, to get his sister out of here.

He was surprised to hear bare feet slapping the ground behind him.

Mai knew Aang was back by the sound of his gasp.

She was already grabbing his arm and yanking him to his feet even as his eyes were opening. "Come on!"

"Mai, what-"

The ground shook again.

Aang looked down. "How long has it been doing that?"

Mai was already dragging him in the beginning of the retreat as she nodded at the Lava Arch. "Since the pillars started cracking." She couldn't even say when the damage first appeared, not with the weird lighting of the bubbling lava. She had first noticed when she realized that the quick, echoing snaps weren't just the regular sounds that room with a lava moat made, and even her raven-eagle eyes had trouble picking out the hairline cracks. At first.

It wasn't hard anymore.

They were halfway to the door when the air was broken by a stony clap so loud that it made Mai wince.

She and Aang turned to the source, and saw that the Lava Arch was split right through its center. The ground shook again, and the columns on either side grew fuzzy at their edges-

And then the whole thing collapsed.

Mai and Aang took off again, and when a burst of Airbending came up from behind to speed their retreat, she was grateful enough to not care how it battered at her hair.

"Avatar Roku," Aang mumbled as they passed through the door, into the dark tunnels beneath the Temple. Of course High Sage Xinghao was nowhere to be seen. "He said this would bring balance to the capit- oh."
Mai couldn’t say she was impressed by the warning. "Typical Fire Nation sense of humor."

Aang didn't reply.

Mai’s boots hit the first set of steps when the lava began flowing out from the former resting place of the Lava Arch. If it really had, as Aang said, been the yoke that tamed the volcano, then she very much wanted to be elsewhere.

Still, she couldn't stop herself from asking, "Did you find Tom-Tom?"

Aang’s smile was all the answer she needed.

Sokka was still on the mansion's roof when Aang and Mai came tearing out of the Temple. The Fire Sages had all already evacuated the place, which was surprisingly sensible of them. Sokka would have bet on them trying to stop Aang from escaping, or fixing whatever the problem was.

He reached up to the top of his head, where Momo was holding on, trembling. "Okay, buddy, now we can go. Let's load up Appa and get out of this dumb nation."

It was with a mix of joy and sadness that Ty Lee once again took the skies with her friends on the back of a giant fluffy cow-thing. "So what's going to happen to the Capital? There's barely anyone in the Caldera, but there's all those people down at the base! The Harbor Cities, the docks, all the refugees in the Royal Plaza- oh, Mommy is probably down there!"

It was crowded in Appa's saddle as he flew up over the rim of the Caldera. Aang was steering, of course, and Mai and Sokka and Katara and Suki were all up the front. Ty Lee and her sisters were crammed together in the rest of the saddle, which was kind of like her worst nightmare except that there were bigger things going on so she tried to ignore it. Even Momo had decided to fly alongside them, rather than deal with so many people.

It was good that Sokka's plan allowed had Toph going her own ways. She was small, but it still would have been a tight fit.

Aang turned around, and Ty Lee was grateful that his eyes didn't take long to focus on her face amidst all her sisters. "I'm not going to leave anyone to get hurt. We need to spread word that the volcano is dangerous now, and help get everyone away."

Katara leaned out over the side of the saddle. "That's a lot of people. Two whole cities..."

"The Fire Sages are probably already causing a panic," Mai said. "And we don't need to take responsibility for organizing a mass evacuation. There's a Fire Nation commander down there missing his topknot who seemed very proud this morning to be in charge of everything. Let's give him something to think about besides the fact that we're on our way to rescue my brother."

Ty Lee enjoyed the way Mai's aura went violet at that. It was a very complimentary color for her.

As Appa swooped down the slope of the massive volcano, Ty Lin pushed her way past Ty Lee to point ahead. "You can let me and my sisters off down in the plaza. That's centrally located, so we can help spread word to the Harbor Cities and the refugees. I'll talk to Commander Zhao for you."

Mai turned around. "Sisters?"

Ty Lee's stomach tightened. She knew everything behind the question, but also knew that Mai
wasn't really looking for an answer. They knew each other too well. Mai was just poking with a sharp edge to make things happen. She liked to do that.

And most of Ty Lee was relieved.

Ty Lin's eyes flicked to her for a second, and there was no missing the bright searing yellow of her aura. "As many of my sisters as want to stay in the Fire Nation."

"I-" Ty Lee found herself having to blink back tears. "I'm sorry, girls. I can't stay. I-"

"Yeah, we know," Ty Woo groaned. "You have to go be free and an individual and junk. You argued with Daddy enough about it before he died. We weren't expecting you to stay. Glad you're not really dead or whatever, and congrats in advance for marrying the Water Tribe guy or whatever."

Ty Lee shook her head over the sound of Sokka's squawk. "I love your sense of humor, Woo, but I can't joke with you now. I- I don't think I'm ever going to come back. I'm an Airbender now, and- and I never really fit in here."

She never really wanted to, and she could see that fact reflected in the eyes of her sisters.

Ty Lee bowed her head. "I'm sorry. You can tell Mommy that I'm alive, if you want. Azula can't hurt me, now. And tell her anything else that you want. I'm being selfish, so you should be selfish, too."

The saddle was silent, except for the whistling of the wind as Appa came in for a landing in the Royal Plaza.

And then Ty Woo groaned and pulled Ty Lee into a hug. "Oh, knock it off with the emotions. Yeah, you're selfish, but it's not the worst kind of selfish that we've seen. Right girls?"

Ty Lin, Ty Lat, Ty Lao, Ty Liu, and Ty Lum all managed sounds of agreement, some more reluctant than others. But that was better than Ty Lee could have hoped for. Her own aura began glowing pink at the edges, coloring the world with a bit of happiness.

Still, she let Katara hold her as her sisters leaped and flipped out of the saddle like the precise unit of warriors that they were, and then Appa rose again into the winds.

Ty Lee tried to see if she could pick out her mother amongst the refugees, but never managed it.

Mai wasn't even looking for her parents in the plaza when she caught sight of them passing underneath Appa.

They were looking up at the ten-ton bundle of fur flying overhead, just like all the other noble refugees from the Caldera. Their faces twisted in the same surprise that Mai herself felt as their gazes focused right on her.

Mother called something out, but Mai didn't bother asking Aang to stop or slow down. The words were lost in the winds and the rumbling of the volcano, but her eyes were good enough to read the lip-movements that could only go with saying, "Tom-Tom."

Mai gave an exaggerated nod to convey her understanding and promise to address the matter, and then let her parents pass behind her.

That was all she really needed to say to them, anyway.
There was no one visible when Zuko finally dragged his stolen rickshaw off the slope of the Capital Volcano. "I thought you said they'd be here."

King Toph shrugged from her seat in the back of the rickshaw. "Are you sure they aren't? I can't see in this thing, and you're just a Firebender." Next to her, Azula sat quietly, eyes still staring at nothing, seemingly in another world.

Zuko decided both that Toph was being sarcastic and he should just ignore her. He put down the rickshaw's handles and stepped away to look back the way they came, up a side of the volcano that boasted no formal roads. He used to enjoy coming to the rim on this side to watch the sun set over the ocean, and had been relieved to find that the paths down the slope he'd discovered as a child were still viable. Now if only Toph's spies were where they were supposed to be.

He caught something moving through the sky above the now-smoking caldera, and realized it was App- the Avatar's sky bison. As he watched, it swooped down over an area where the air was especially distorted by the heat of whatever was going on in there. It dipped below the rim, and then a second later, the air visibly calmed. So the Avatar was working to keep the volcano tame until everyone could get out.

Zuko grunted. "If he's so concerned, maybe he shouldn't have unleashed the volcano in the first place."

"Not his fault," came Toph's voice. "And come on, we're ready to move out."

"We are?" He turned back from the volcano-

-and found that a team of men and women, all wearing brown and walking with bare feet, had already raised the rickshaw on a sled of earth and were taking up position on the back. Earthbenders.

The woman with the red lips, the Jojo who had spied on Zuko earlier, was here, and she winked at him when she noticed his gaping.

Azula was reacting to none of it, but Toph was grinning.

Everyone just had to look clever, didn't they? Zuko hopped up on the sled, crouched beside the rickshaw, and nodded.

The Earthbenders kicked off, and then they were in motion, gliding around the edge of the volcano towards the bay.

It had been King Toph's idea to avoid all the roads on their way to the Royal Harbor. Those were overflowing with people from the Upper and Lower Harbor Cities, both heading towards the harbor to find ships as well as making for the longer roads to more distant settlements on Capital Island. It was a big landmass, so the loss of the capital itself would be no great burden.

Except against belief in the Homeland, of course.

It would not be a good start for the new Fire Lord.

Toph slipped out of the rickshaw to stand on the sled beside Zuko. "Ah, that's better. I can see you now. Okay, people, what's our status?"

Jojo leaned forward. "Your royal barge is set to go, and Lee is creating an entrance through the walls of the harbor facilities. We'll be able to just walk right in and up the gangplank. And we spotted Prince Zuko's ride nearby, secured and fully crewed."
Toph tilted her head towards him, but of course didn't turn to face him. "Don't worry, Growly, we'll help you get your sister to your ride before we leave. You're a good egg when you're not in a terrible mood, so we're looking out for you."

Zuko decided that didn't require a response.

It wasn't a long ride to the field around harbor, where an Earthbender man was waiting for them beside a small sloping tunnel. The earth-sled wouldn't fit into it, but Jojo grabbed the handles of the rickshaw and pulled it into the tunnel right after her compatriot. Zuko followed in a run, and Toph and the rest were right behind him.

The path was just long enough to get dark, and then Zuko heard the unique sound of stone moving against its will, and sunlight flooded the tunnel. Zuko emerged into the Royal Harbor behind the rickshaw to find himself surrounded by armored Firebender soldiers.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Zhao said, "Prince Zuko!"

"Zhao!" Zuko turned to find the commander at the rear of the formation (of course). For some reason, he was no longer wearing his hair in a topknot. Had he cut it? "Tell your soldiers to back down!"

Zhao took a long look around. "Given the situation, I don't think Fire Lord Iroh would object to my detaining the Earth King and her- unregistered guests for disturbing the security of the capital."

Toph, of course, didn't look the least bit frightened. "Maybe, maybe not. But then you'll have to explain what you're doing here instead of commanding the evacuation. Hey, do I feel people near you not wearing armor?"

Zuko craned his head, and sure enough, High Sage Xinghao and several men and women of obviously noble background were grouped behind Zhao. In fact, some of the soldiers were wearing armor that was far too ornate for regular use.

"Oh, you're leaving for Iroh's crowning already?" Toph's attempt at a surprised tone was terrible, but Zuko suspected that she wasn't trying very hard. "I thought you weren't leaving until tomorrow."

Zhao crossed his arms over his armor. "I suppose you're not here to comply and join the ship."

Toph took a low stance and raised her hands in her unique Earthbending style. "Not really. Are we going to fight about it?"

Zuko took his own Firebending stance. Whatever happened here, Azula would need protecting.

Zhao, amazingly, shrugged at Toph. "I've followed my orders. If you and the Avatar wish to put Mai's brother in danger, that's your choice." He made a motion, and all his soldiers relaxed from their own stances and moved away, forming up around the nobles and officers and moving to one of the military ships still docked.

Zhao did throw one last scowl at them, though. He wasn't failing to follow orders, but clearly he wasn't happy about having to let them go.

Zuko thought about everything Toph had told him about Uncle Iroh. He hadn't thought she was lying, exactly, but- well- believing it-
Zuko still hadn't learned the last lesson his parents had given him, it seemed. People could hide what they really were. And for Uncle to use Zhao this way- it said a lot.

He looked past Zhao's retreating forces, to where one last civilian ship was docked. He recognized Asahi of the White Lotus standing on the deck, looking back at Zuko and waiting. Zuko shook his head and turned back to Toph. "You'll take care of my sister?"

"I have no reason not to, and I want you to like me. That's royal diplomacy. So, you coming with?"

Zuko sighed. He knew Toph could be sincere, and maybe he'd get used to how rarely it happened. "Let's get out of here. I accept your offer of asylum."

Mai was staring down from Appa's saddle, forcing herself to really look at the pool of glowing lava below, when Aang returned on his glider.

He snapped it closed and landed on Appa's head, who groaned a greeting. Momo immediately ran up to him climbed his staff, but Aang ignored the lemur's antics. "Everyone is gone. I didn't feel any heartbeats with my Earth-sense in either the Harbor Cities or the paths. We couldn't save the settlements, but the people- most of them- at least- well-

He couldn't finish the thought. Mai thought it was pretty nasty of Avatar Roku to sneak in the destruction of the corrupt center of the Fire Nation without asking first. Even with an effective evacuation, people would be hurt. Some might have died already. The nobles of the Caldera were losing their homes, but so were the less connected folk in Lower Harbor City, and the laborers and criminals in Upper Harbor City. It was a ruthless strike at the enemy with no regard for collateral damage.

It was the kind of thing Mai would do.

She lifted her eyes from the lava. Appa's circling was taking them closer to the bay again, and she could see that the last of the ships were well on their way to Ember Island and beyond. And the people who had left on foot were all already hidden by the undulating landscape, even from this height.

On the other side of the saddle, next to Katara and Suki, Sokka stretched. "I guess that's it, then. Congratulations, everyone. I think we just won the Battle of the Caldera."

Suki stared at him. "What battle? There was no fighting."

"And yet we won, anyway. It was very efficient."

Next to Mai, Ty Lee shuddered and said, "How long until it erupts?"

Sokka rubbed his chin. "Hard to say. This is spirit stuff, which always messes with things."

Aang said, "I don't think Roku wanted to kill anyone. This will just become another active volcano. One day it will erupt, but there's not going to be any dramatic vengeance. The volcano is just taking itself back, and taking from the people who took so much from others. Maybe if I had been angry, like I was before, then it would be- different." He drew in on himself, hugging his legs to his chest.

Well, this was depressing. Mai took a deep breath. "Okay, then. Let's make a note to not mess with volcanoes anymore. But for now, there's something else to take care of."

Katara nodded. "Your brother."
Everyone sat up straight again. Even Aang.

He grabbed the reins and said, "Appa, yip, yip."

They flew out past the harbor, over the fleeing ships. Mai thought she might have spotted Toph's barge, the old civilian steamer that had brought the little Earth King to the Fire Nation in the first place, but she wasn't sure in this light. The sun was almost done setting, and all that staring at glowing lava had messed with her night vision.

She shut her eyes so that they'd adjust again for what was coming next, and crawled up to the front of the saddle until she could hear the wind of their speed rustling Aang's clothes. "You know where you're going?"

"It went by fast, and I think I was a spirit, but I could see everything on my way to Tom-Tom. When you do a lot of traveling in the sky, you learn how to pick out landmarks."

Mai decided to take his word for it. She'd done quite a bit of sky-journeying, but she'd mainly spent it trying not to see where she was going. Things were no different for the entire journey to Tom-Tom, what with trying to cultivate the ability to see in the dark.

She opened her eyes when Katara called out, "I see a ship! Look, the wake is glowing!"

It was full night by then, and when Mai followed Katara's pointing finger, she did indeed see the wings of a blue arrow-head glimmering on the waves. That sometimes happened with ships at night, when they were really running their propellers. She had asked about it, during her family's journey to the South Pole all that time ago, and some of the crew said it was just churned sea muck while others said it was the spirits of drowned people.

Dead people or muck, it meant this crew must have been working their engines hard, and so knew that Aang was coming.

It hadn't done them any good.

She checked her knives. "How are we doing this?"

Suki stood up from her place in the saddle. "Appa swoops, and we jump. Fighting in corridors can get tricky, so advance only on my command. We'll have to take out any defenders we encounter, and do it fast. Speed is the key, here, and-"

"Actually," Aang interrupted, "I think there's another way to do this. A safer way." He tied his glider-staff to one of Appa's horns with the reins, and crossed his legs to assume a lotus position. He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

And then a blue light - so much brighter than the glowing wake of the ship below, brighter even than the lava had been - rose up from Aang and started to reveal a shape-

Oh.

Wow.

Aang was floating above himself.

Or, rather, his spirit was floating above his body.

Momo screeched and ran to the other side of the saddle.
Mai could dimly see the stars through his form as he looked at everyone and said, "Roku showed me how to do this before. As long as someone stays to keep an eye on my body, I can show you all the way."

The echoes of his voice faded, and then Sokka groaned. "Yeah, I'll stick with that. Better than following a ghost around. Why does everything just keep getting weirder?"

Mai shrugged. "Who cares? Let's get my brother."

And with Aang's guidance, it really was that simple.

Appa dove down towards the ship, startling the guards on the deck, and they barely had a chance to cry out before Ty Lee was pounding at their Qi-points. Aang's (spirit? ghost?) essence flew into the ship, guiding the rest of them as they ran along behind it. He'd disappear into a wall every now and then, only to reappear with a warning about an ambush around the corner, and several times while he was gone there'd be the shrieks of grown men who sounded like they'd just seen a ghost. Those soldiers were always easy to take down.

Mai didn't even need to kill anyone. This time.

Between her blades, Katara's water-whips, Ty Lee's fists, and Suki's new war-fan, they had no trouble keeping up with Aang.

She didn't have time to start enjoying herself properly before they passed down to another deck and found Aang floating in front of a door that gleamed in a different way than the rest of the metal ship. It was made of platinum.

Aang pointed, even though he didn't need to.

Suki and Ty Lee turned the wheel on the door, and Mai kicked it open. Inside, she found a harried-looking servant woman holding a toddler who immediately clamped down on what sounded like it had been an epic tantrum.

He sniffled, looked at her, and gasped. "Mai!"

She allowed herself a smile. "Hey, squirt. We're leaving."

Apparently, things could almost sometimes work out, more or less a city or three.

Aang found Toph's ship off the coast of the Island of the Black Cliffs, just as they planned. Sokka had done a good job keeping track of details like that, even with the surprise volcano in the middle of everything.

They followed the shining lanterns down to a spot on the wooden main deck, and Appa touched down as the crew offered them waves and cheers.

King Toph stepped forward and gave her own wave (in the wrong direction). "I hear the snuffling of a sky bison, so either my crew is cheering on the weirdest pirates ever, or we actually pulled one over on the Fire Lord. I hate not being able to feel anything. That you, Aang?"

"Yep!" Aang floated himself down to the deck. "I'm glad you got out okay. Are you going straight for the Southern Earth Kingdom?"

Toph shook her head. "I need to scrape together more fighters than I usually run at one time."
Besides, I have some guests to get settled, right?"

Aang looked back to where Mai had disembarked from Appa. She was holding her brother, saying to him, "You need to go with the nice stinky Earth rebels, now. They'll keep you safe, and Sokka's grandmom will take care of you, while I go stab the mean people who took you from Mother and Father."

Tom-Tom, in turn, shook his fists. "Wanna stay with you and the bat-thing!"

"I'm going where it's cold and snowy and dark all the time. You hate being cold and you always think there are monsters in the dark waiting to get you."

"...wanna go anyway!"

Aang turned back to Toph. "They'll- uh, probably just be a little longer."

And then a familiar voice said, "Avatar. So you're going to war against my uncle?"

Aang startled as Zuko stepped forward into the light. "Oh, uh, hi! I- uh- wasn't expecting you. I'm- well, you see, your uncle, he-"

"Toph told me all about it." Zuko took a deep breath, and stood tall in front of Aang. "You've hurt my family, but- but my family has hurt you, too."

Aang hesitated. "I don't want to hurt anyone. I just- I want to bring peace and balance. If your uncle won't stop-"

Zuko nodded. "I can't just forget all the damage that you've done. But these months together in the Fire Nation- you have honor, Aang. I trust you to fight responsibly. Just- no more volcanoes, okay?"

Aang wasn't sure whether to smile or frown. "I completely agree. Thank you."

Zuko bowed to him, and Aang returned it.

Mai finally came over, leading Tom-Tom by the hand. "Okay, my brother is ready to go. And behave himself. Right?"

Tom-Tom growled, but nodded. "Bye, Mai. Now you promised!"


She rolled her eyes, sighed, and leaned over to kiss her brother on the top of the head. "There. Bye, now."

"Yay, kiss from Mai!" Tom-Tom did a little dance there on the deck.

Aang couldn't help but be a bit envious of the kid. "Bye, Tom-Tom! It was nice meeting you!"

Toph took the boy by the hand and started leading him away. "Hi, I'm a King. And guess who's going to watch out for you on this ship? Come meet my one-eyed friend Zuko who owes me. Now where did he go? I hate being on a ship..."

Aang chuckled, and looked back at his remaining friends. Sokka, Mai, Katara, Ty Lee, and Suki were all waiting by Appa. "Okay, everyone ready? We'll drop Suki off on Zenmatsu Island, and then- and then it's to the north."
Sokka raised a hand. "North-ish. We're going to need some special supplies if we're going up to the North Pole."

Mai snorted. "Like a shirt for Ty Lee that actually covers her belly?"

"I can't wear this to the North Pole?" Ty Lee looked down at her clothes. Momo crawled up to her shoulder to join the examination. "How cold does it get up there?"

"Cold," Katara said.

The talk continued as they got back up on Appa, and all took off into the night sky.

TO BE CONTINUED
The Survivor

Chapter Summary

The journey to the North Pole starts in an unexpected way, to Sokka's chagrin.

The Survivor

The sky was dull with the threat of rain as Sokka made one last stroke of ink on the paper. He took a moment to confirm that everything that was there was supposed to be there, that everything that was supposed to be there was there, and that he knew the difference.

Then looked up and around at everyone else in Appa's saddle. "Okay. I think I've compiled everything we'll need for our heroic, daring raid into the north. Who's ready to review-" Here, he stood up and announced, "The Shopping List!"

Aang ignored him and continue to steer Appa through the gray clouds. Mai groaned and shifting her lounging so that she wasn't facing him. Katara twitched and let out a snore from beneath her new hat. Momo bounded over, sniffed the paper, and then ambled off with disinterest to curl up in Katara's lap.

Only Ty Lee scooted over to kneel in front of Sokka. "I love shopping! But I've never tried it with a list before! Is it better with a list?"

The force of her enthusiasm would have been intimidating, if seeing her so excited wasn't such a pleasure.

Sokka sat back down to meet her gaze. Having her as part of the team was a new experience for him, but so far he had no complaints. In fact, he had the opposite of complaints. Sure, she was an optimist, but at least she gave Sokka the respect he deserved for being pessimistic and concerned with practicalities. "It is always better with a list. And the first item is- well, I don't want to bore you with talk about rope- no need to get into the compass- and next is coats! So, there are five of us - humans, that is - and I already have a parka. Aang can do that breathing thing that keeps him warm, but you- I mean, you haven't- uh-"

Ty Lee sighed and leaned back a little. "I've tried, and I checked and I'm still an Airbender, but the only thing that happens when I try to breathe like Aang taught me is that I get dizzy and think Mai's hair-bun things are hilarious."

"Don't worry," Aang called from up on Appa's head, "you'll get it!"

Sokka cleared his throat. "But, until then, we'll get you a coat. Okay?" He looked to get her approval.

And she smiled at him so hard he was nearly knocked out of the saddle. "Get me a nice warm coat. Or someone will have to cuddle me to keep me comfy."

He did his best to keep a straight face, took out his brush again, and wrote, 'Warm coat or cuddle buddy.' He blew on it to dry the ink, and held it out for Ty Lee to see. "There! I made a note."
And she laughed, officially making this a good day.

The sound startled Katara awake. She pulled her new hat off (which warmed Sokka's heart, although he noticed she had to take a breath and work up the strength to do it) and looked around as Momo shifted in her lap. "What's so funny? Are we there yet?"

Sokka gave her a glare of 'You're Not Being a Good Little Sister' levels. "My sense of humor, and no, in that order. We're trying to go over my shopping list, which is important because we don't want to be navigating glaciers when we realize we don't have enough food. If you could kindly keep awake, we'll try to get this done as quickly as possible." He cleared his throat. "So, starting over: three coats, with one being especially warm or else Ty Lee will need a cuddle-buddy."

Katara blinked, and then looked over to Mai. "Is he being serious?"

"That's it. I'm done." Mai sat up and held up her hands. "I just hit peak boredom. Sibling antics and Ty Lee's reflexive flirting are not enough to keep me alive. Aang, tell me we're approaching something interesting, or I am just going to drop dead right here of Not Caring."

"Oh, well, we're actually coming up on Jinchu City. Is that good?" Aang pointed ahead to a change in color on the horizon, something other than the usual green forest and sandy shores and blue ocean.

Everyone crowded at the front of the saddle to look.

In the distance, the ocean coast they had been hugging was giving way to the mouth of a massive river and the sprawling dual settlements split across both banks. Both sides had towers and warehouses, neighborhoods and markets, industry and entertainment, all of it under a mild haze that was the sign of all the most advanced civilizations. The half of the city on the west bank might have had taller buildings, maybe, but the east bank definitely had a dark Fire Navy base marring it. A stunning network of piers and docks extended from both sides across the river and out into the bay.

Best of all, Sokka could see large cargo ships - both the metal Fire Nation kind and wooden civilian craft - setting out into the ocean, even as more were coming down the river towards the city. This was why Team Avatar was here. They had come right from the Fire Nation (after dropping Suki off) in order to get supplies for their trip to go straighten out Fire Lord Iroh, and Jinchu was the biggest trade-center in the northern Earth Kingdom. The city would definitely have most of the stuff they needed, and some of the traders and ships might have even made the journey up to the North Pole.

Sokka had 'Charts of the Northern Water Tribe territory' in big characters on his list.

As Aang steered Appa towards the evergreen forest that insulated Jinchu City from the distant mountains, Mai leaned forward to put her hands on his shoulders and gave a smile, one so warm and unabashed that Sokka barely recognized it. "My sweet, sweet Aang. Yes, that is Not Boring. You have saved my life. Congrats."

Aang, for his part, didn't blush, but he did look inordinately pleased with himself. That, too, was very different. Their time in the Fire Nation had changed their little group.

Hopefully, that was a good thing.

Sokka waved the list so that the paper rattled noisily in the wind and turned away from their destination. "Okay, we have to get through this in a hurry. We need plenty of jerky, and- wait, Ty Lee, are you a vegetarian? I don't actually remember seeing you-"

And then he noticed that she was no longer next to him.
Instead, she was standing beside Aang on Appa's head, holding her arms out like they were wings or something. "Wow! Jinchu looks so different from the sky! When I came here with the circus, we arrived by boat." She capered over to the left, grabbed Appa's horn, and pulled herself up to hang from the side, kicking out into the open air. "Wee!"

Mai shuddered and turned away. "My stomach doesn't want to see this."

Sokka didn't mind watching Ty Lee's more athletic antics, but he still had a list to go through. "So, did you eat any meat on that ship, or did they keep fruit for you, or-"

"Well, we had to stay below decks because the boss said that tolls were unharmonious tyranny and paying them would ruin our circus." She twirled so that she hung closer to Aang, Katara, and Sokka. "And then when we unloaded everything we had to do it at night, but Beaky the lion-vulture wanted to sleep so she got really cranky and then Quan dropped his zarkunichord and the noise startled Beaky and she flapped around like this and attacked the bars of her cage and- whoops!!"

And Ty Lee let go of the horn to flap her arms and dropped like a rock over Appa's side because she wasn't a bird.

No one reacted for a moment.

Then Aang was scrambling for his staff and Sokka ran to the supplies at the back of the saddle for some rope (as his list went flying away on the wind) and Momo was chittering and Mai was blinking and Katara was speed-crawling to the edge of the saddle-

And Ty Lee's voice wafted up from out of sight with, "I'm holding onto a giant leg and I don't know what to do!!"

Everyone froze again.

And then Appa snorted.

Sokka wasn't sure if the big guy was actually reacting to Ty Lee or just clearing his sinuses, but it got Aang laughing. Mai was muttering a bunch of words that would probably be considered lethally obscene in most nice places.

Katara let out a heavy breath and leaned over the edge of the saddle. "I see her! She's hanging onto the fur!"

Sokka nodded and finally found a nice length of rope. He pulled it through a few tangles, turned around to start directing everyone in the rescue operation-

And watched as Ty Lee climbed up a ladder of fresh ice and into Katara's arms.

Well.

Okay.

He said, "Good effort, team." No one paid much attention to him, but that was okay, they'd all just had a scare, and now it was time to get back to the shopping list-

-the shopping list he'd let fly out into the sky and was now gone-

Sokka sat back down and closed his eyes. It was going to be one of those days, wasn't it?
Katara stuck close to Ty Lee until they were all back on the ground, hidden in the forest a little way up-river from Jinchu City. Just to be sure.

She had been tempted to put her hat back on, the sky's vastness once again apparent after seeing Ty Lee tumble into it and then dangle over such a faraway landscape, but she didn't want to give in to the weakness. So what if her heart was still hammering, even after they had disembarked from Appa? That was just her body's reaction to fear, getting her ready to fight or run or whatever. She'd calm down once her body realized that there was no danger.

Well, no more than usual.

"Okay, we all know how this goes," Mai said as she lugged her case of knives down from Appa's saddle. "We're back on the 'Colonial Continent' and probably wanted by the Fire Nation again, so we make sure we don't look like our Wanted posters and we *definitely don't let Momo steal enough fruit to get us arrested, Aang.*"

Katara wondered about that story, but Aang just shrugged and made a sound almost like a laugh.

Oh well. Katara moved to unload some of their supplies. "At least we have plenty of disguise material. It would have been a shame to let all those nice clothes burn up in-" And she suddenly realized what she was yammering about. She quickly turned to Ty Lee and bowed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be so dismissive of your home being- um-"

Ty Lee wasn't even looking at her, being more concerned with stretching one of her legs up to touch her forehead. "It's okay! My home burned up in a volcano. I wasn't going back, anyway, and that's better than Mai's house getting blown up and a piece of it getting stuck in her. And my mansion and bedroom died so that Mai could rescue her brother, a very pink and worthy sacrifice."

Mai snorted as she sorted through her knives.

Katara decided to take that all at face-value. "Okay, then. We should, ah, you know, get our disguises ready. Right?" The thought brought a smile to her face. *I finally get to get do a disguise mission with you guys! Infiltrating a Fire Nation fortress wasn't any fun, but this can't be anywhere near as bad, right?"

Sokka winced. "Don't say things like that."

Ty Lee gasped. "Ooh, I get to do a disguise mission, too! I mean, I've done disguise missions before, and pretended to be a nun on Pakku's ship, but now I get to do one with friends and it's not just me and Mai sneaking out to try being teenagers! *It's dress-up time!*"

What followed finally got Katara's heartbeat down to something like a pleasant flutter. She, Ty Lee, and Mai took an entire sack of assorted clothes deeper into the forest to disguise themselves. Ty Lee, of course, made a game out of it, dressing in some ensemble and taking on a demeanor that supposedly matched it, only to suddenly change her mind and dive back to the piles of clothes to start over, tossing her discards to Katara or Mai to try. Of course, Ty Lee made everything look good.

The fun only came to an end when Ty Lee pulled out a voluminous white robe. "Oh. This."

Katara straightened the flared shoulders on her own brown vest and began fastening it closed over the gold tunic she'd picked out. "That's what you wore when we were on Mas- Pakku's ship."

Ty Lee nodded, her eyes locked on the robe.

Katara slipped her waterskin on so that it hung at her back. "If you don't mind- um, I was wondering
why you dressed that way. I mean, the ship was crewed by the Fire Navy, anyway, and I know you didn't want Azula to know about you, but-

Ty Lee blinked and finally looked up. "I could have worn anything, as long as I wasn't me."

Mai was tying her own gray robe closed with a red belt. "That looks like what the nuns wore. You know, Mother Malu and Sisters Whoever and Whatserface and so on. And I distinctly remember that they didn't like you much."

Katara winced. Leave it to Mai to not bother with delicacy. "But that sinkhole fortress was very stressful-"

"No," Ty Lee interrupted, laying the robe down on the pile with all the other clothes. "Mai's right. I- I want people to happy- I wanted to make everyone happy by performing at the circus, but- I never thought about the war. I didn't even think about thinking about it."

Mai shook her arms. Loose white sleeves flopped out from under the robe, but any knives she was wearing stayed in place. "Neither of us did. Now look at us."

"That's right." Katara motioned around them. "Now you're helping us save everything. You've opposed two Fire Lords, now. Maybe even three! (Things were confusing the other day.) I don't think you need to hate yourself or dwell on the past. You're trying to do the right thing, now."

Mai fished a red scarf out of the clothing pile and draped it over her head like a hood. "Pretty words, but that's not what Ty Lee is worried about, is it?"

Katara looked to Ty Lee, only to find that the other girl had drifted away to tug at the branch of a squat little tree.

Ty Lee turned to face her, letting pine needles fall to the ground. "I didn't fit in back in the Fire Nation, especially not as a Weapon. I didn't want to be just another part of the matched set my parents made my sisters. I thought I found a place in the circus, but that was ruined by the Comet, and now I'm an Airbender. But- but I'm not like the nuns, or Aang. I don't even really know what the Air Nomads were like beyond that, because of the Fire Nation's lies!"

Mai nodded. "Turns out they didn't steal even one baby. Aang confirmed it."

"Exactly!"

Katara finally got it. "You don't want to be in a matched set, but you do want to belong somewhere. But- but you're with us now!"

Ty Lee smiled. "And my aura finally became pink again when we became friends! I love you all! But I'm still discovering what that makes me. I- We dress like what we are, so I tried being like the nuns. Now I'm going to try to be like all of you. I'm seeing what fits." She let out a breath, and gave a shrug that was somehow both sloppy and graceful. "Maybe someday I can figure out why I got Airbending."

Katara came over and pulled Ty Lee into a hug. "Well, thank you for being you, whoever you decide that is. I wouldn't have been able to go with Pakku without you, or escape him, or find my friends again."

"Aw, Katara." Ty Lee hugged her back.

It wasn't long before both girls turned to Mai.
"Come on," Katara said.

"Pleeease," Ty Lee added.

"No." Mai tied her improvised hood behind her head so that it covered her hair and cast a shadow over her face. "Now pick a disguise and let's get moving. I bet the boys are dying of boredom back there."

Ty Lee laughed as she and Katara separated, and Katara couldn't suppress her own giggle.

It was good being with her family again.

Sokka wished there had been more colors to choose from, but the Ty Sisters predictably hadn't accumulated a lot of blue or green items. Still, he put together that almost worked, matching a gray shirt to his blue pants and finishing it off with a black poncho that he tucked to that it ruggedly only covered his right arm.

"There," he declared. "Now I know like I know my way around a port."

"What about me?" Aang bounded over to show an almost-fashionable outfit of browns and golds with a red bandana tied over his head to fully cover his arrow tattoo, and a- a yellow band tied crooked over his forehead so that it covered his left eye?

Sokka pointed. "You're missing an eye."

Aang grinned. "Now I look like a proper sea-pooch! Aarrrr! And Momo can sit on my shoulder."

Before Sokka could address the whole 'sea-pooch' thing or the idea of taking Momo along after all the trouble on Kyoshi Island so long ago, the girls returned in their disguises and it was time to get going.

As Aang gave last instructions to Appa to stay hidden here in the forest, Sokka took a moment to admire Ty Lee's style, especially. She was wearing a light pink hiking-dress over brown leggings, and she'd changed her braid into a long ponytail. She didn't look like a circus acrobat or Weapon of the Fire Nation, but even a plainer look didn't make her any less eye-catching.

But she was still probably their best fighter.

They set off through the forest, making their way to the banks of the big river and following straight it towards Jinchu. It was a bit of a hike before they came to the edge of civilization, but unlike a lot of the places they had been to, Sokka was surprised to find that the city didn't really have a border or walls. It just kind of eased into being, with roads and piers intertwining with scattered warehouses and residences, until it all swelled into an urban mix.

To Sokka's pleasure, they didn't have to go far before they found a ferry that would carry them downriver to the denser part of the city. He, Aang, Mai, Katara, and Ty Lee boarded a large, flat boat with quite a few other passengers (and three pony-goats), and soon they were drifting along the west bank in the company of all kinds of other watercraft, from one-person rafts to massive cargo ships. The docks and piers grew more extensive around them, and the city grew thicker and taller.

Soon enough, the ferryman pushed the boat back up along the piers, and called out, "Coin-Clinker Marketplace! Down that lane there! No shovin' when you get off! Stay aboard to go to the outer piers."
Sokka clapped his anticipation as he led Team Avatar back onto land with most of the rest of the passengers. "Okay, everyone! Are we ready to do some shopping?"

Mai twirled a knife she had been playing with and made it disappear back into her sleeve. "I'll play bodyguard and watch out for the usual thieves, pickpockets, and troublesome lemurs."

"Hey!" Aang almost managed to sound wounded as he trotted along, the lemur perched on his shoulder. "Momo's learned a lot since he got us in trouble on Kyoshi Island. He'll be okay! Right, Momo?"

Sokka glanced back to see the Momo react to his name by abandoning his attempt to grab a coin purse from the belt of a nearby pedestrian. "Mai, you have my permission to almost not miss if Momo is being bad."

And with that, they passed into what must be the Coin-Clinker Marketplace.

The noise of the city streets almost exploded to new levels, with all kinds of people - some looked like professional merchants, others like sailors or vagabonds looking to unload some knickknacks, and most like bargain-hungry customers - moving and shouting and bargaining.

"Spirit salt," one woman hollered, an elaborate headdress intertwined with her hair, walking around with a blanket sagging between her arms, a pile of what looked like crystalline pink pebbles in the middle. "One handful thrown to the water will appease the spirits before your next voyage!"

"Fruits from the Fire Nation!" People were hurrying over to a man surrounded by baskets full of colorful melons. "Ripe today, everything must be sold! Taste something new and exotic!"

"Weapons! Swords!" A group of young boys who looked enough alike to be brothers danced around a shop with gleaming steel hanging from the outer walls, harassing everyone who passed with promises like, "Gently used against people only and freshly sharpened!"

There were stalls and boutiques, well-stocked stands and piles of merchandise just dumped on the ground around their seller. Those without a spot of their own walked around with baskets and blankets and crates and backpacks full of their wares, sometimes literally chasing down customers.

Sokka felt someone pressing against his back, and turned to see Katara holding onto him. "You okay?"

Her eyes darted all around. "This is- is so much. There were a lot of people at the Spirit Festival we went to, but this- this is crowded."

Ty Lee stepped over, and started rubbing a hand on Katara's back. "It's all right. I'll keep people from touching you. And if you need to leave, I'll get you out of here. Mai, come stand here and help make some space."

"Right," Sokka said. "Stay between me and Ty Lee, and holler if you feel too closed in. Okay?"

Katara nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, that's fine. Thanks."

Sokka gave his own nod, and then turned to Aang. "See what we need, yet?"

Aang gave a hop - startling Momo, who was balanced on top of his head - and pointed. "That stall there, they have coats! Furs, too. (If you like that.)"

Sokka unhitched the little sack that held the group's money (nice and heavy, thanks to a donation
from Ty Lee's sisters) from his belt, and got read to haggle.

The stall was made up of a formation of tables piled high with the coats and furs Aang had spotted, and the merchant was a bearded man with a gleaming red fur jacket draped across his shoulders. He could have been a few years older than Sokka or as old as Bato, but it was hard to tell beneath all the human and animal hair.

Sokka stood up as straight as he could and put a little extra deepness in his voice. "We need warm, waterproof coats. What do you have?"

The man's eyebrows rose. "Taking an early winter, are you? Well, you're in luck! Fox-Tail Cong is my name, and I just this morning bought a supply of goods that originally came from one of the Northern Water Tribes! They've gone quickly, but I have two parkas left that will suit your needs. Water Tribes make the best, warmest stuff, you know."

*Water Tribe parkas!* Sokka had to grin. "They do, don't they?" He jingled the money bag, thinking about his lost shopping list and how far he wanted this money to go. He pulled out a stack of coins and held them up. "This seems like a fair amount."

Cong frowned. "More than double that for two good Water Tribe coats. We don't get a lot coming down, since the Fire Navy took control up there."

Sokka added a few coins to the stack and held it up again. "Which means they're probably used, already. How about this, then?"

Cong gestured a dismissal, making his jacket flap. "Get out of here, if you don't really want to pay fair price. I'll still sell them within the hour."

Sokka was about to add another few coins when Katara popped up over his left shoulder and said, "How do we even know they're really from the Water Tribe, huh?"

"Knock-offs," Katara repeated with a nod. "And see how heavy our coins are? They'll buy more than most of the money being passed around here."

That was a good point. Sokka took a coin off the top of his stack. "Don't want to overspend, considering our budget."

"Hey!" Cong crossed his arms over his chest and leaned forward. "I'm not some rube you can just roll over with some quick wits. I know I have a good product and know what it's worth. Now, are you interested, or not?"

And then Ty Lee stepped out from behind Katara. She was holding her hands together under her chin. "Please, let's not fight. Maybe we can see the parkas? Please? And then we can work out a nice deal that will make us all happy."

Cong froze. He was, not very subtly, staring at Ty Lee.

Sokka glanced back at Mai and Aang, who were enjoying the show. He winked at them, and then stepped over to nudge the merchant with his elbow. "My friend is right. We're not enemies. Let's see the items, and we can work out a fair price."
"Right!" Cong smiled at Ty Lee, or at least it seemed that way with the way his beard stretched and bristled. "I'll show you. Fine Water Tribe craftsmanship!" He turned and went to one of the back tables, where coats and furs were piled high. He dug around for a bit, and Sokka caught a glimpse of something blue-

The merchant spun around with a parka draped over each arm, dark blue in color and lined with white fur. The color was a richer, deeper shade than Sokka had ever seen before, but it was nice. There also seemed to be some decorative patches on the sleeves and chests, moon motifs from what he could see, but that was a good sign. Sokka knew all about how the moon worked on the tides, and how important both were to the Water Tribes. Back when his people had sailed and hunted, the tides were one of the most important forces in their lives.

Still, he made a show of checking the coats out, confirming the construction and thickness of the lining, and that the materials would repel and not absorb water. Then he nodded at Cong and turned back to pull Katara and Ty Lee into a huddle. "They look good. I'm thinking Ty Lee should make the next offer."

Katara giggled. "I can be upset that she's offering so much! This is fun."

Ty Lee smiled for a moment, but then lost her cheer. "So, how much should I offer? I've never actually haggled before."

Sokka was about to tell her, but he was cut off by a commanding voice calling out with, "Hey, those are good coats! I'll offer silver for one of them!"

Sokka looked up with annoyance. A young man walked into the stall, taller than Sokka and clean-shaven. His clothes were old and faded, their original color lost to time. Some of his hair hung to frame his eyes, but the rest was pulled back and tied in a short ponytail.

In fact-

That was a Warrior's Wolf Tail.

Sokka had to fight back the urge to grab his own Wolf Tail. This guy- No, they couldn't be sure. And besides, the Waterbenders of the Northern Water Tribe were working for Iroh. Even if this guy didn't have any weird magic water powers, he still might be in the Fire Nation's control or employ or whatever.

So Sokka just waved 'Maybe Water Tribe Guy' off. "Sorry, we're in the middle of something, here."

"Yeah." Katara put her hands on her hips. "Wait your turn."

But Cong was grinning. "Well, now, let's not be hasty. You haven't bought anything yet, and this man sounds like he knows what he wants."

Sokka said, "I'm know I want three coats in total. If I get both of those parkas, I'll buy a third coat from you, and if not, I'll go somewhere else for everything."

'Maybe Water Tribe Guy' turned to Sokka. "What makes you think you're worthy of those parkas? Those were obviously made for warriors."

Katara stepped forward and put her fists on her hips. "Good thing we're all fighters, then."
'Maybe Water Tribe Guy' blinked at her. Then he turned to look at Mai. Then he turned back and gave Ty Lee a few ups-and-downs. Finally he looked back at Katara. "Don't disgrace the Water Tribes with your ridiculousness, girl. Get something else to make yourself look pretty."

Sokka decided that now was a good time to back away from his little sister. He looked around and confirmed that there was no obvious water, but that didn't mean it was safe to be near Katara.

"You," she said. She made it sound like a statement unto itself. "You have- No. Idea. No idea what you're talking about. The only disgrace around here-" She stepped forward and pointed right at 'Probably Water Tribe Guy' between his eyes. ":is you thinking you have any idea about the Water Tribes or me or- or anything!"

The guy slapped her finger away. "Me?! I fought to defend the Water Tribe! I risked my life and my spear and nearly drowned out there! You're the one who knows nothing! Just like a woman!"

"Ha! No wonder the Fire Nation won, then, if they had stupid men like you and Master Pakku and Kinto fighting." Katara smirked and crossed her arms. "Good thing a real Waterbender is coming to fight to show you that-" Katara blinked. "That-" She looked around.

"So," Mai said into the silence, "we're running?"

Sokka waved her off. "I got this." He looked up again and turned to Cong. "How much for the coats and your silence?"

Katara knew it wasn't good that her outburst had turned out to be expensive, but she wasn't going to let anyone call her a disgrace to her tribe after living a decade of her life in a cage for being a Waterbender. And besides, once the bribes were paid out, it turned out that revealing themselves might have been a good thing.

They had all gone to one of the little restaurants scattered in the marketplace, a collection of blankets on the ground beneath tall umbrellas stuck in stands. An old woman was serving bowls of stew out of a large pot at the center of the space. The umbrella was probably meant to bock the sun, but the sky had gotten even darker and thicker with clouds, so it might soon protect against the rain. For now, it established a little space where they could talk amidst the clamor of the crowds.

Katara hated the way she had reacted to all the people. She'd been fine around crowds before, but everyone here was so pressed together, and she'd never been in the center of so many bodies before. It was stupid, like the hat she'd finally been able to stop wearing.

But instead of that, Katara decided to focus on the sexist jerk they'd brought with them from the coat merchant. He tipped some of his stew into his mouth, and said as he chewed, "I guess I'll start. My name is Hahn, and I'm the greatest warrior of the Northern Water Tribe."

Katara snorted. "Well, I'm Katara, the greatest Waterbender of both tribes."

Hahn didn't even look at her. He looked at Sokka, and said, "You let your woman talk like that?"

Sokka shrugged and ate more of his stew. "She's my sister, not my woman. And I thought that after Iroh conquered the Water Tribe, everyone was working for him."
Hahn rolled his eyes. "You probably heard wrong."

Katara frowned at that, but it wasn't over the disrespect. "Probably? You mean you haven't been back? I mean, if you had, you'd know either way, right?"

Hahn finally looked at her. "I- got separated from my team. The Fire Nation sank our ship, and I was the only one who survived. It was tough, but I stayed alive, met up with- with some friends, and then we got word that the central city fell to Admiral Iroh. I had an important position there, and a beautiful girl I was betrothed to - a princess, and yes, I was that important- but I couldn't get through the Fire Navy's patrols. So we've- I've been making my way here on the northern seas for the past few years."

Katara noticed a few very big missing pieces of that story, and when she looked around at the rest of the group, she could see the same suspicion in their eyes.

Hahn swallowed the last of his stew and put the bowl down on the ground. "So, Takara, how do you know about Master Pakku and Kinto? I've actually met them. They were pretty big deals in the tribe."

It took Katara a moment to realize that he was talking to her. "My name is Katara, and I met Master Pakku near Ba Sing Se. He taught me, but we had a falling out. Kinto was a jerk who I gave what he had coming."

Hahn laughed. "Sure, Master Pakku taught a woman. Tell me another one."

Aang adjusted the weird rag he had covering one of his eyes and leaned forward. He hadn't touched any of his stew, but Momo was happily lapping from the bowl. "The thing is that Iroh is Fire Lord, now. The news probably hasn't gotten this far yet, and the leadership of the Fire Nation is on their way right now to crown him. We're trying to figure out what's really going on up there and do something about it all, but the problem is that we don't know exactly where we're going."

Sokka nodded. "We need charts, at least. A guide who knows the area would be better."

Hahn looked around at everyone, and Katara noticed that his gaze seemed to linger on her. "And what are you people supposed to be? Even if you really can get to the city, what are you going to see? The Fire Nation in control with their soldiers all around? What are a bunch of women going to do about that? If you're even really a Waterbender."

Katara motioned at Aang's stew, and then waved towards Hahn.

The stew jumped up and splashed him right in the face. Momo screeched and moved to hide behind Mai.

Hahn blinked. "Huh. Okay. Waterbender." He blinked again, and then his eyes went wide. "Oh. I get it. You're from the Southern Tribe." He looked at Sokka and smiled, but then looked at Ty Lee and Mai and frowned again. "Some of you, at least?"

Sokka sighed and held out his hand. "Sokka, of the Southern Water Tribe. These are our friends, but they're shy about things like names and backstories."

Hahn reached out and clasped Sokka's hand at the wrist, and Sokka returned it. Katara hadn't seen such a greeting since before she was taken away to Crescent Island. None of the Waterbenders there had been allowed near each other, so they couldn't have shared a sign like that.

When they let go, Hahn leaned back and sighed. "My associates could probably help you, but they're
pretty shy, too. Sorry, Sokka, but I think you're on your own. I'd guide you myself, but- well, I really owe these guys, you see, and—"

Hm. Too bad the first Water Tribe handshake she'd seen in a decade had to involve such a jerk. But Katara knew how to deal with jerks. Especially this kind. She leaned towards Ty Lee and whispered, "Give him a helpless damsel. Like with the coat guy."

Ty Lee smirked for a moment before pulling her expression into one of pathetic sadness. She looked to Hahn and said, "Please, honorable Hahn, sir. We really need your help. I know we'll get captured if we don't know where we're going and I'm so scared of the Fire Nation!" She sniffled. "And it'll be worse if we get lost, and just freeze to death, feeling our bodies go cold and icky, and I'll probably get sick, and- and-" She covered her face and said, "Boo, hoo, hoo!"

Katara had to cover her own mouth to stifle a giggle. Ty Lee had actually said the 'boo, hoo, hoo' part.

Hahn's cheeks went red. "You- uh, maybe it would be better if you don't go. If Iroh is the Fire Lord now, it's probably really dangerous anyway, right?"

Sokka put a hand on Aang's shoulder. "It's our responsibility as men to try to do something about Iroh. And these girls are part of our Tribe, now. We don't have a choice."

Hahn blew out a heavy breath. "Okay, I get it. Look, I was never in charge of a real voyage, so I can't tell you too much about sailing the Northern Seas. Or even the waters around the tribe's central city, not anymore. But- but maybe I can at least put my hands on some charts for you. And at least I know how to get into the city without anyone seeing."

Aang and Sokka shared a nod, and Aang said, "That would be a big help!"

"But I can't just walk away from my allies." Hahn glanced around at the crowd beyond the little eatery. It was thinning now, and the skies had gotten pretty dark. Katara expected that it would be raining, soon. "Let me talk to them and see if they're okay with me going with you. And if not, I'll at least write down what I can, and see if I can get you some accurate charts. Okay?"

Ty Lee lowered her hands and gave a big sniffle. "Oh, thank you! That would be wonderful!"

Katara raised her fists, and all the leftover stew trembled with her excitement. "You do that, and we'll find a way to save your Tribe."

Sokka watched Hahn run off into the first scattered drops of rain, and then he turned to Ty Lee. "I'm taking you with me on every shopping trip I go on. The whole trembling-lip thing is really effective."

She winked at him. "What can I say? People like me. Do you like me?"

"Ah-" Sokka felt his face heat up. He wasn't so far above Hahn, in certain ways. "As you said, people like you."

Thankfully, Mai chose that moment to turn the subject to more practical matters. "So, is it just me, or is news of a Water Tribe city a big deal? I was expecting a Fire Nation installation of some kind. But Stupid Boy there was talking about a city he grew up in."

Sokka leaned back and considered that. "Yeah, the city talk surprised me, too. I mean, they say that before the Fire Nation started attacking us, the Southern Water Tribes each had their own permanent settlements. Well, more or less permanent. We started moving around more to avoid the Fire Navy,
and then they eventually pressed us together in that mining colony. Hahn's talking as if the Fire Nation invaded something like Ba Sing Se and hung up red flags."

Aang looked up as a couple of fat raindrops hit their umbrella, and then back down. "Well, wherever Iroh is, I like the sound of Hahn getting us in without a fight. I don't know how many more people there are like that Weapon of the Fire Nation who exploded us out of the sky above the Capital Caldera, but I don't want to risk Appa like that again."

Ty Lee raised a hand. "As long as we're asking questions, how come there are two Water Tribes, anyway? And on opposite sides of the world! I've never really thought about it before, but." She shrugged.

Sokka wasn't even sure that the question was serious, at first. But then he remembered all of the stuff he'd learned about the Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation since leaving home, and realized that even though he'd been traveling with these people for so long, he'd never shared much about his own culture's history. The North and South Poles must seem so far away from everything else going on that no one had bothered to ask. But to Sokka, the South Pole was the center of the universe. Everything else was revolving around the cold snows where the Avatar had first appeared, and Sokka's actions had started off this whole adventure (or series of adventures, depending on how people wanted to tally it).

He looked at Katara, and found her expression to be just as surprised as he felt. He took a breath and began, "We weren't always two tribes. According to the histories, there was first just one Water Tribe at the top of the world. A group of warriors, Waterbenders, and hunters decided to seek their own destiny, though, and went out into the world to find a new place. Eventually, they hit more snow country, which was the South Pole, and settled down as a new Southern Water Tribe."

Aang pulled his headband up to show both of his eyes. "Yeah, now that you mention it, I've heard something about Water Tribe explorers. Monk Gyatso told me once that there are probably a few little Water Tribes scattered around the world, people who were done exploring and settled down. There was even a Waterbender pirate clan that the Earth Kingdom fought off."

Katara made a sound like a happy hum. "Gran-Gran used to tell stories about the First Journeys. She said that in some of the legends, the travelers got lost and cut off by wars in the Earth Kingdoms, and they considered going back to the north. But then they encountered some Spirits who guided them past the dangers and looping lands to new seas, and then they sailed on to the South Pole."

Sokka chuckled as the rain started falling in earnest. "Yeah, that was in the nice stories they told the girls."

Ty Lee frowned. "I like nice stories."

Sokka sat up straighter and tapped his chest. "Well, the men would tell spooky stories. About the spirits who weren't so nice to the travelers and didn't like them leaving the North Pole. Bato used tell one about Pana's Errants, and Dad once gave me nightm- I mean, told me a story about tundra monsters that could actually sense a hunter from a thousand paces by their breathing, and then could suck out their life through their face."

He was almost ashamed at how he looked to see if Ty Lee shuddered or hunched or sought out comforting cuddles, but she didn't seem at all bothered by his description.

It was Mai who actually moved to hug herself. "Probably more than a story. That sounds something like what we fought in the Southern Air Temple."
More than a story?

Huh.

Now Sokka was the one who wanted a comforting cuddle.

Katara was grinning at him. "Well, we can ask your new friend Hahn about face-sucking monsters when we meet up with him later."

Something about her evil delight- "You heard that story from Dad, too, didn't you?"

She gave a shrug that didn't at all dent her smile. "Not directly. But he wouldn't chase me away if he caught me sneaking in to listen to the men's stories. I love spooky stories."

Aang and Ty Lee laughed, and Mai's slight lip-twitch could have been just as loud, considering her usual reserve.

Sokka sighed, and looked around. The rain had chased away a lot of the shoppers from the market, as well as all of the sellers who didn't have a roof of some kind over their heads. He spotted the woman who ran this little eatery standing under one of the umbrellas with her pot.

When she noticed Sokka she crossed her arms and looked at him. "I'm not running an inn, here. Pay for seconds of the stew or shove off."

He looked at the rain, and then at the aghast expressions of his friends. "Well, as long as we're going to get wet, we might as well try to find someplace that will sell us enough jerky and rice to get us to the North Pole. And everything else that I can remember on my poor, lost shopping list."

Their meeting with Hahn wasn't scheduled until after dark, but it was still raining when the time came to check in with their new possible ally.

"So aside from the fact that he's a sexist jerk," Katara brought up as they hurried through puddles that reflected the dull green light of the crystal street lamps, "we should probably also worry that he might sell us out to the Fire Nation."

The sound of the downpour drowned out her friends' responses, but none of them sounded argumentative. After the limited success of their earlier shopping, they were all wet and cold and not in a good mood. Of course, they had three waterproof coats that they paid way too much for, but it wasn't anywhere cold enough for that kind of covering, so everyone had been forced to suffer the rain.

Katara was sure she could have used her Waterbending to keep herself dry, at least, but that hardly would have been a good idea in a Fire Nation colony.

Still, even soaked to the bone, she felt better than she had in that crowd earlier. Maybe that was why she was the only one thinking about more than just getting out of the rain at the sailor's tavern where Hahn was supposed to meet them.

Still, at least Sokka really considered it as the rain ran down his face. "And here I'm supposed to the suspicious one, but you're absolutely right. After all, everyone else from the north is working for Iroh. Hahn seems like an idiot, but that could just be an elaborate act."

Ty Lee's giggle rose above the patter of the drops on the street, and she splashed past Katara and Sokka and turned around to face them. "Nope! Hahn is an idiot and he's completely honest! I would
Katara nodded, satisfied. She had no idea what Ty Lee's aura-reading was all about, but it had proven too reliable on their adventures together to be doubted. Still, Sokka was looking skeptical, so she said, "Well, if he's an idiot, then he might have drawn the attention of the Fire Nation and is being watched. We should still be cautious."

"Meh." Mai didn't sound the least bit excited about being ambushed, for a change. "If it gets me out of the rain, I'll walk into a Fire Nation trap. But if everyone else insists, I suppose I can hang back across the street or something. I don't think that moron even noticed me, before."

"Really?" Aang sound completely perplexed at that. "Well, if it makes you feel better, I don't mind the rain so much. I can keep you company."

"That's a good idea, you two," Katara said. "Thanks!"

Sokka stepped in a particularly deep puddle and stumbled at the splash. "Ugh. Well, anyway, as long as we have one Weapon of the Fire Nation as backup, we should take the other with us inside. Ty Lee's punchy style is good for close-up, anyway."

Ty Lee clapped her hands at that, and paused her walking just long enough to let Sokka come up beside her. "Don't worry." She looped an arm around his shoulders. "I'll keep you safe."

Katara snorted at that, because it was probably amusing, but she wished Ty Lee would treat this a bit more seriously. Sure, Ty Lee was usually amusing and delightful when they needed some levity, but—well, Katara wished she wouldn't encourage Sokka so much, that was all. He sometimes got weird ideas in his head.

They at last came to the meeting place, just where Hahn had described. It was in a section of the city near the biggest docks, and quite a few of the buildings rang with music and voices as off-duty sailors hid from the rain. The place they were looking for didn't even have a name; it was just an unmarked second floor above a smoke-den, its paper-covered windows glowing no brighter than the crystal lamps in the streets.

Aang and Mai moved to the other side of the street and slipped into the shadows of an alley. The rest of the group didn't pause until they were at the foot of the narrow staircase leading to their meeting. Katara took the initiative and went first, Sokka and Ty Lee making little noises as they bumped into each other trying to follow her.

She pushed open the door at the top, and emerged into a gloomy common room.

An empty room. There wasn't even a tender at the bar. Tables and chairs sat waiting for use in the light of a few low candles.

Sokka cleared his throat and said, "Hello? Hahn, are you here?"

There was no answer.

Ty Lee snorted. "We've been stood up! I've never been stood up before."

And then the figures in black burst in through the windows.

Katara immediately jumped into a Waterbending stance, pulling the rain from her clothes with a wave of her hands to form a defensive shield in front of her and her friends, but—
-but the attackers - half-a-dozen already and more climbing in through windows on dark cords - moved, their own motions echoing the style Master Pakku had shown her, and her water-shield was pulled away-

Oh.

Waterbenders.

And she was very outnumbered.

TO BE CONTINUED
Chapter Summary

Waterbenders clash in the rain.

The Faceless Tribe

Huy, largely considered to be the most reliable lookout working the Northern Seas, didn't notice that it was raining until he was halfway back to his docked ship.

To be fair, the Jinchu City streets kept tilting beneath him just like when he was out to sea, where it was always very wet like a rainstorm, the only difference being that the water went up, not down. And the crystal street lamps weren't shedding much light against the downpour, so it wasn't immediately obvious if the water was going up or down. He didn't know why the ground was swaying so much, but maybe if he stopped for another drink before heading back to the ship, the situation would become clearer.

He blinked through the water running down his face and tried to look around. After a moment, his eyes focused, and he saw that he was outside a smoke-den. That wouldn't do. He didn't go much for that stuff. All he needed was a good mug of-

And then a bunch of guys in black dropped down from the building's roof on dark cords and swung through the paper coverings of the second-floor windows.

Hm.

Maybe he didn't need another drink, after all. Once you were seeing darkly-dressed infiltrators, it was time to call it a night.

Another wave of guys in black climbed down the hanging cords and in through the windows. So this wasn't just your average snatch-and-grab, then.

And then another wave of weird people climbed down the cords. A fourth wave started making their way down.

On the other hand, it was entirely possible that Huy needed three more drinks to make this make sense. Or to forget it ever happened.

And then the air buzzed, and suddenly the cords weren't attached to the roof anymore. The latest wave of people in black clothes dropped down to the street right beside Huy with their ropes still in their hands, splashing heavily into the rainwater puddles. There were grunts and groans of pain, but they got back on their feet a lot quicker than Huy had managed at that last tavern.

"Hey," he said, leaning towards the one of the guys. "Can ya spare s' coins fer a thirrrrsty s-sailor?"

Before he got an answer, a bloody shadow zipped out of the alley across the street and threw itself at one of the guys in black.

And the rain wasn't just falling down anymore. It took Huy a moment to figure out what it was
doing, because the ground was still tilting to an unreasonable degree, but it seemed like the rain was following the motions of the guys in black as they reacted to the shadow.

Well, that was odd.

But the shadow-thing wasn't bothered by it. It flitted amidst the fallen rain-movers, twirling and snapping and rolling. Whenever it reached a piece of itself out like an arm, there was a flash of reflected light, and then one of the rain-movers would fly back as though the night itself had gotten offended at all the swirly rain and given a shove. Those rain-movers would fall against the facade of the smoke-den and slump upright as though pinned. But soon another rain-mover would gesture, and the pinned one would be moving again.

As this all played out, the air grew colder, and the shadow began to slow. The rain seemed to grow denser around the shadow, and it disappeared with a cry that could have come from a young lady. That was weird.

Lightning flashed, and Huy looked up as the thunder rolled over the city.

Something flew across the dark sky, a figure that seemed to hold onto the flash of the lightning a little longer than anything around it. As Huy watched, the figure flitted from rooftop to rooftop, passing across the street and back again with little effort. It might have been a goblin of some kind, dancing with glee as it watched the fight in the streets below, but as Huy's vision adjusted, he realized that there were more people up on the rooftops, and they were chasing the thing.

They moved the rain, too, turning the drops into waves that could have come from the ocean- had they not being flying through the air, of course. Bad enough that the rain was going up and now down-

But the figure pushed back against the waves, and they obeyed him, too. So did the storm-winds, which Huy realized were what moved the figure around with speed and ease. And when the rain-movers tried to surround the figure, light itself would burst from the thing's hands to clear a new way.

One rain-mover took a light-flash a little harder than his compatriots, and tumbled down off the roof. The rain seemed to reach for the guy, but its grip was too slippery - it was rain, after all - and he crashed down on the street within reach of Huy.

Okay, he could see that he'd kind of wound up in the middle of something, here. Best to just leave it be. And find another drink, because getting away from this was worth a celebration.

He was stumbling his way down the street - slower than he'd like, because the ground wouldn't stop moving - when the entire floor above the smoke-den exploded.

Yep, Huy wanted no part of this. And he was about three- no, four, definitely four more drinks away from being able to safely call it all a hallucination.

Katara had only ever fought other Waterbenders one-on-one. She was starting to feel like this was an oversight in her training.

Another wave of black-clad attackers swung in threw the windows, landing in a stance that she recognized. Everyone single one of them used flowing motions of their hands to pull the moisture from their tunics and raise it into floating promises of pain for her, Sokka, and Ty Lee.

She couldn't bring herself to move as another half a dozen warriors in black climbed in through the windows to join the ones who had already blunted her first attack. The cords behind them jiggled
with the promise of more on the way. Their faces were all covered with rags the same color as their tunic, blue eyes visible through twin holes in the fabric.

How were this many enemy Waterbenders in Jinchu City?

Yes, she knew that Pakku and his students were working for Iroh, but here? Now? Even if Hahn had betrayed them and was in Jinchu as Iroh's agent, what were the odds that a fighting force of Waterbenders had come along? Hahn hadn't been hunting for Katara and her friends, not if Ty Lee's read of his aura had been correct. Wasn't it more likely for Hahn to have brought the Fire Army for this ambush?

She realized that figuring this out might not be her highest priority right now.

Before she could take action, Ty Lee flipped towards one of the ambushers, hands already clenching into fists-

-the Waterbender dipped back into a flat stance, hands circling and pulling at the air-

-and the rainwater that was soaked into Ty Lee's clothes rose out of the fabric and snaked around her limbs and twisted-

-Ty Lee crashed the ground with a cry of pain.

Katara's heart began pounding, and she yanked with both hands and all her strength. In response, the rain outside surged in through the windows with the force of the ocean surf. The Waterbenders - maybe a dozen in total, now - were knocked to their knees as the liquid exploded against their backs and filled the air with glistening droplets.

And then Sokka smashed a chair over the head of one of the Waterbenders and Ty Lee somersaulted back to her feet to give a paralyzing punch to another one's shoulder and Katara pulled the rain out of Sokka's shirt and whipped it into the face of an attacker trying to get to his feet and everything became one big ugly brawl.

Katara didn't even need to summon her own water. There was so much flying around that it was easy enough to pull some droplets out of the air to cover her knuckles for an ice-punch, or catch someone's waterwhip and send it snapping right back, or seize control of some ice shards flying towards Ty Lee and melt them into a defensive of wall that she let drift in front of Sokka as someone tried to kick at him, or just twist her feet to form an iceboard as all the puddles on the floor came together to rise in an indoor tide so that she could surf around the tumbling furniture.

Everything was in constant motion.

And too few of the enemy was getting taken out of the fight.

Katara was good, but her best trick needed a full moon to work, and there were just too many foes to fight effectively. No more came in through the windows, at least, but getting any of the people already here to stay down was proving hard. The ones with numb, dangling arms fought with their legs, and even armed with the solid remnants of a table, Sokka was no match for a trained, experienced warrior, never mind- one, two, three- waterwhip- eight, nine- oops, dodge around Ty Lee's stumble- sixteen, sev- well, a lot of trained and experienced warriors.

But Weapons of the Fire Nation were supposed to be as good as an army. Katara's best strategy was not to try to fight back against this many foes, but to protect Ty Lee!

(Just like Ty Lee had protected Katara earlier today, when the push of the crowd at the marketplace
had once again stolen Katara's bravery.)

She hurried towards a glimpse of pink motion at the other side of the room, circling her arms as she ran to form a vertical ring of water. A trio of Waterbenders were moving in on Ty Lee from behind, and Katara rushed at them and leapt. As she came down on them, she chopped with her right hand so that her water-ring tilted at the same angle to deliver a wet downward smack on the Waterbender's head.

As soon as her feet were on the ground again, she spun and brought her arms in close to her body, shrinking the water-ring and angling it to catch the next attacker's water-whip. She swirled her hands to pull the tip of the whip into her own control and add it to the swirling ring, and then she leaned forward in an arrow-stance as she pushed her it at the last attacker. It struck him hard enough to send him flying off his feet, and for a moment the little space was clear.

Katara came to a stop back-to-back with Ty Lee. "So. How are you?"

Ty Lee made a sound that was half-giggle and half-whimper. "Been better. Can you dry my dress?"

In response, Katara reached back over her own shoulders to tap Ty Lee's back, and when she brought her arms forward again, all the water in her friend's pink and gray clothes followed along. Katara formed it into a wall, and exhaled a frigid gale that froze it solid.

Then she shoved it to slide into a group of approaching enemies.

Bodies went flying, and Sokka ran across the newly emptied space to grab a chair leg to use as a weapon, only to skid and turn and run away screaming from a pair of enemies wearing what looked like ice-armor.

But Ty Lee was already back in motion. At the edge of her vision, Katara caught a glimpse of the lightning-fast movement of her friend ducking under a waterwhip to tap a series of blows on a pair of Waterbenders, and then running up and jumping off their falling bodies to land with snapping fists amidst the ones chasing Sokka, her blows shattering the armor with ease. The whole time, she was somehow managing to twist and twirl and dodge around the ice and water that flew in at her from the rest of the Waterbender armor.

Four more of the enemy fell, either paralyzed or unable to use their element long enough to defend themselves from one of Katara's blows.

But even as Katara was punching a fifth in the stomach with a 'Marlin Form' spike of water over her knuckles to channel the force, there came crunching and crinkling sound from above.

And then Katara realized that, in all this fighting, quite a bit of water was being splashed all over the ceiling.

And now it was being frozen into a massive slab of ice and dropping down on everyone's heads!

She raised her hands and splayed her fingers just fast enough to soften the ice right above her. The slushy impact merely made her flinch, and she caught most of the other Waterbenders around her doing the same.

But Ty Lee was couldn't.

She spun and curled in on herself, just getting her head out of the way as the ice smashed down on her and pressed her straight into the ground. Katara looked around for Sokka-
And then all the ice melted again, manipulated by someone lost in the crowd of attackers, splashing everyone. Katara shivered at having her clothes completely soaked in ice-water.

Wait.

Soaked clothes?

Katara turned back and reached out to try to dry Ty Lee again, but a pair of waterwhips snapped out to seize and hold her wrists, keeping her from Bending. At the same time, the liquid rose out of Ty Lee's clothes to entangle her like a particularly nasty tumble-seaweed. Ty Lee inhaled, and then blew out a gale-force wind that had to come from her Airbending, sending herself skidding across the floor.

It was Katara's last sight her friend, as the enemy closed in again, and how long had it been since she saw Sokka? Was he hurt? Was Ty Lee being hurt? Where-

Katara screamed and pushed, splattering the waterwhips that held her, but even as she took a new stance, the enemy Waterbenders surrounded her. There was nothing but a sea of blue eyes staring at her through black masks, and the reflection of her own eyes in the weapons of ice they raised. They were so close, like the crowd today, and she needed air, needed space!

If only there was a full moon and she could use Bloodbending! Even Pakku had gone down to it. It let her be more than herself, gave her the strength to stand up to crowds, to look up at the big empty sky-

Wait.

The sky.

It was *raining* outside!

She twirled on the tip of a boots, hands outstretched, whipping all of the water around her feet into a razor-tipped splash that drove the enemy back for a moment. When she was pointed at the tavern's windows, she threw her hands backwards to propel herself across the wet floor-

-towards a table lying on its side in a tilt.

Katara skated right up the table and out a window.

The rain that battered her as soon as she passed outside felt warm after all the ice in the tavern, and it answered her call when she asked it to flip her around in the air. Her hair must have escaped from its braid during the fight, as she felt it flap free in the wind as she spun to see the Waterbenders in the tavern gathering at the windows to follow her.

She bared her teeth and used all four of her limbs to seize control of the storm.

Then she threw it at the upstairs tavern.

The whole front wall of the second story collapsed under the assault, and then the roof in turn collapsed on top of the new nothingness. The rain wasn't so loud that she didn't hear the cries of pain and fear from the Waterbenders who were being buried in the collapse.

She had a moment of satisfaction before she remembered she was falling backwards to the street.

She had to-
Solid arms caught her and a light body carried her up to the rooftops.

Aang!

He deposited her atop the building across the street, where Mai waited with a razor disk in each hand.

Oh. There was a fight out here, too.

Lightning flashed, revealing figures that moved in familiar ways across the rooftops. As the light faded and the thunder came in, their dark clothes made them nearly invisible in the downpour.

This wasn't going to be any better than inside, was it? Katara couldn't win without Bloodbending, and she just didn't have enough Moon for it tonight.

Mai said, "Where's Ty Lee?"

Katara shook her head. "Hopefully on her way to help us."

"Great," Aang groaned. "So, uh, do we just keep fighting?"

But Katara was already moving to attack.

---

Sokka ventured to raise his head over his little fort of broken furniture and check out the remnants of the tavern. He didn't know what Katara had done, but she had made a very nice mess.

A bunch of the Enemy Waterbenders were piled up where the windows used to be, and now the remnants of the wall and a good portion of the ceiling were piled up on top of them. Some were moving, all of them were groaning, and none seemed inclined to get up right away. That completely worked for Sokka.

He looked around for something pink, and found Ty Lee lying on the far side of the room amidst the broken remnants of the furniture. He hurried over and lifted half a table off of her-

She smiled up at him. "I'm an icicle!" Then she shivered. "It's not as much fun as I imagined."

'Icicle' was a good word for it. She was wrapped in ice that pinned her arms to her body and kept her from so much as wiggling. Even the loose ponytail she was wearing her hair in had gotten frozen to her back. Sokka grabbed a chair leg (his favorite weapon of the night, so far) and hammered at the ice, but even his hardest hits just chipped away at it. This was quality ice, the kind you only got at the South Pole. Okay, and probably the North Pole, too.

He needed something harder, sharper. He knew better than to try using the thin knife he carried around, unless he wanted a quick way to snap the blade, but this was a tavern. There had to be something around he could use.

But when he looked around again, what caught his eye were a pair of Enemy Waterbenders who were not trapped under the collapsed wall with the others. These guys must have been at the back of the crowd and knocked clear of Katara's big explosion, and now they were shaking off a few planks of wood in a decidedly grouchy manner.

Sokka didn't rate his odds alone against two Waterbenders any higher than his knife's blade against Ty Lee's icicle jacket. So he picked her up (with only a single strained grunt, as even iced, Ty Lee was a lot lighter than a baby walrus) and dashed for a door that he hoped was a convenient
But instead of a storeroom, he found himself carrying his frosted Ty Lee into a kitchen. An *occupied* kitchen.

There were five people staring back at him from the center of the room—young and old, men and women, but not a one looked like a cook.

Sokka did recognize someone, though.

Hahn.

"You," Sokka said.

Hahn blinked at him. "You're okay! Thank-"

Then Sokka threw Ty Lee at the jerk.

Katara was learning a lot of new Waterbending tricks! Too bad she was seeing them used against her friends.

She was having a waterwhip duel with one of the enemy Waterbenders, both of her arms covered with and directing massive tentacles that drew in the rain as it fell on them. Their every clash and whip and tangle sent waves the size of Katara's whole body splashing around, and she couldn't imagine what the people in the Jinchu buildings below were thinking. It must feel like they'd been hit with a monsoon. Katara felt like she was struggling against one, unable to break through her opponent's defenses. Did this guy wrestle octopuses as a hobby?

On the neighboring roof, Katara glimpsed Mai sliding past her own Waterbender attackers on the slick surface, extending her arms as if to active the bolt-launchers on her wrist, but yet another enemy came up behind her and pushed out a chill that froze her heavy robes into solid ice. She skidded, unable to otherwise move, to the edge of the roof and almost fell over-

Katara's opponent twisted his tentacles around hers and tried to break them, but she slid out a foot to raise herself on a wave that let her keep her leverage-

Aang bounced over and used a waterwhip of his own to snag Mai and bring her to a safe halt. He landed in a crouch and came up with raised arms that reversed the direction of the rain for a moment, creating a wave of his own that slapped both of the Waterbenders off their feet-

But more Waterbenders had gone unnoticed nearby, three of them. While they were no match for the Avatar's raw power, they knew their craft well enough to seize control of the wave at its crest and give it a little nudge to fall back down in Aang's direction.

Katara heard him give a yelp that became a gurgle, but her own opponent needed her full attention again, and she would have to be content with the sounds of Firebending and the sizzle of newborn steam to let her know that Aang was still in the fight and protecting Mai. She needed to be their powerhouse, here. Aang was the Avatar, but he hadn't studied under Hama for very long, and never under Pakku. He had no idea how to make the best use of the storm, but their enemy did.

Katara was learning quickly, but she was something flawed. She thought she'd conquered the sky only to nearly be sent into a panic by a bunch of people bumping into her in a marketplace. Could she ever make herself right again? Had she ever been strong enough, or had a decade in a Fire Nation prison just revealed the weakness that was always there?
Katara needed to change the game. She inhaled, reduced the strength of her giant waterwhip-arms, and let herself lose her duel. The liquid arches collapsed back down on her, driven by her opponent's.

But reducing the strength of her arms didn't reduce her control.

They didn't so much strike her as flow around her, and for a moment all the water of those giant tentacles became a swimming pool balancing without walls or support on a rooftop. She kicked her legs and pushed back with her arms, shooting herself through the water like a dolphine and popping out at the top to fly through the air.

And flying was exactly what she was going to do.

The rain was thick enough to flatten and bunch together at her sweeping gestures, becoming like a river beneath her feet as she twisted her ankles and froze herself a little surfboard around her boots. She directed and propelled herself with hip motion while the slow, broad swaying of her arms kept the rain-river solid enough beneath her.

She surfed across the sky, rising and dipping in defiance of gravity.

Her opponents must have been taken by surprise, because she was able to surf far enough for her next trick without any kind of opposition. She saw Aang freeing Mai from her ice shell, and as she passed overhead, she motioned at them and pointed down. She could only hope they understood the message to get off the rooftops.

Then she headed into the sky.

When the rooftops were distant beneath her, she let her little river and surfboard fade away in the warm rain, and surrendered her body to gravity. Her momentum carried her upward until she hung in the air for a moment, and at that instant, she brought her hands to her mouth and blew a kiss down on the city.

It was a very cold kiss, and her hands spread the chill across her entire view.

With the dark of the night and thickness of the storm, she didn't even need to think of Bloodbending and the strength it gave her to distract herself from the sky's fearsome vastness.

The rain continued to fall, but every drop that Katara could see had frozen solid.

A storm of hail and icicles fell on all her enemies.

The iced Ty Lee did a great job of taking Hahn straight the floor and pinning him there, but that left Sokka with nothing that could prevent everyone else in the kitchen from pulling out machetes and boomerangs and pointing the pointier parts at him.

Then the doors behind him burst open, and those two remaining Waterbenders came in finish surrounding him.

Sokka decided that maybe now was a good time to negotiate. "Okay, okay, I can admit that throwing Ty Lee at Hahn may not have been the most mature thing I could have done, just then. I am completely opening myself up for constructive criticism, here."

The people pointing sharp things at him just stared.
That was when Sokka noticed that they all had blue eyes.

Sure, with some of them, he would have expected it. The man in blue with the braided steel-colored hair who could have been Bato's age? Obviously Water Tribe. The young woman with the triple-hair-loopies on each side of her face and the water-skin strapped over her shoulder? Again, very Watery in looks. But the young man with the shorter hair wearing a red shirt? The older woman with the green smock over her gray dress? Their eyes were blue, too, and their machetes were the white of whale-bone.

The older man with the braided gray hair took a step forward, and angled his boomerang so that he could slit Sokka's throat with an easy motion. "Give the order for your friends to surrender!"

Sokka blinked. "Assuming we can find them, what makes you think they'll listen to me?"

The threatening people all exchanged glances, and then Boomerang Slashy Man turned back to Sokka. "Hahn said you're the leader."

Sokka gave as much of a nod as he could without cutting himself. "Hahn was correct, despite being a no-good Fire-loving traitor like the rest of you, but I've learned over the last year that being the leader doesn't mean people necessarily listen to me."

From the floor where she was involuntarily pinning Hahn, Ty Lee said, "Wait, you're the leader? I thought Mai was the leader."

"Mai?" Sokka turned away from Boomerang Slashy Man to look down at her. "How could Mai be the leader? She has no leadership presence. I'm the one who makes the plans!"

Ty Lee shrugged as much as she could, being a giant icicle. "Yeah, but leaders don't always make the plans. Aang does everything she says."

"Well, that's because he wants to s-"

"Excuse me," Boomerang Slashy Man said. "I've never been particularly patient with the ramblings of stupid youngsters, and I want to get back to you calling Hahn a 'no-good Fire-loving traitor.' Are you saying Hahn is working for the Fire Nation?"

From beneath the Ty-cicle, Hahn gave a breathless, "I'm not!"

Sokka looked back to the guy threatening to slit his throat. "Aren't all of you guys working for the Fire Nation?"

Boomerang Slashy Man blinked. "Aren't you? You're from the Southern Tribe - that your Waterbender woman can fight proves it - and we've heard of how you've fallen under the Fire Nation's control! You're a spy and a traitor!"

"Excuse you." Sokka folded his arms of his chest as indignantly as he could with people pointing knives at him. "The only spying and betraying I've done has been against the Fire Nation. That's why I'm working with the Avatar."

The title had its intended affect. All of the people with the machetes and boomerangs took a step back and exchanged confused looks. They said things like, "The Avatar who destroyed the South Pole?" and, "The Airbender boy who wiped out a Fire Nation island?" and, "The child who threw a whole Fire Nation fortress so hard that the ground collapsed into a sinkhole and buried it?" and, "The Purifier who fought the Mountain Monster on the remnants of Ba Sing Se?"
Ty Lee added, "And he just destroyed the Fire Nation Capital a few days ago, too!"

Boomerang Slashy Man grinned and didn't move his boomerang at all. "Well, that should settle things nicely. The Avatar child who did all that should be able to handle a couple dozen Waterbenders. If he survives, he's clearly the Avatar. If not-" He nudged Sokka's neck with the edge of the boomerang. "Then you're a lying traitor and we'll send you to Sedna to feed the sharks with your body." He looked to the young woman with the waterskin. "Amka, go tend to your injured brothers."

Sokka resisted the urge to slump, as the woman trotted past him and the Waterbenders at his back, because doing so would cut his own throat. "Well, uh, in the meantime, perhaps you can introduce yourselves? I mean, if you're going to kill me anyway..."

Boomerang Slash Man gave a one-shoulder shrug. "I suppose a man of a sister-tribe deserves that much. We are the Faceless Tribe."

Sokka didn't like the sound of that. Things without faces were never good. "I'm not familiar with the name."

"That's the idea, kid."

Katara panted for breath in the Jinchu street, but couldn't stop and rest, yet. She was fairly confident that she and her friends might be about to win this fight.

Her earlier ice-storm had turned the tide, scattering and injuring the Waterbenders, forcing them to raise their heaviest defenses. And in the immediate aftermath, Aang and Mai had struck, hitting the enemy hard and taking the fight back down off the rooftops, where Aang could use his Earthbending to immobilize and imprison.

As they fought the last of the Waterbenders, Katara saw Aang’s clothes icing up on him, but a quick motion of her hand thawed him out before it could even start to inconvenience him. He kicked a fireball at a Waterbender who raised a wall from a puddle to protect himself, but even as it turned to steam from the swallowed flame, Mai slid spinning into the street and kicked out a series of bolts from her ankle launchers. The Waterbender was pinned to the outside of a tavern, and Aang reinforced the situation by raising little walls of stone from the street to cover the guy completely and cut him off from the rain.

By then the puddle beneath Mai was surging and starting to carry her further than she wanted to go, but Katara spotted the Waterbender responsible and beckoned at him, pulling the rain in his own clothes while he was distracted and turning it to ice. Before he could think about freeing himself, Aang was there again, pulling spikes of earth through the ice to pinch limbs in place so that they could make no more Waterbending moves.

And then, somehow, it seemed to be finished. There were no further attacks. The only motion was the continued fall of the rain.

Katara looked at Aang. He smiled back at her. They both looked to Mai, and gave her time to take on an expression of distaste before they both rushed to trap her in a group hug.

"Yay," Mai drawled in the rain, "we won."

Aang laughed. "I'm just glad we're okay. Where's Sokka and Ty Lee?"

Katara let herself lean on her friends. "Up where we were supposed to meet Hahn. I'll check on them"
in a moment. I just- that was a lot of work. I don't know why we were attacked, but they really wanted us gone."

Aang patted her back. "Well, we're still here. Thanks to you."

Katara smiled, and was about to tell him what a good friend he was-

-and then a huge team of Waterbenders dropped down to surround them.

Katara blinked, and looked up to where they came from. It was the tavern, the second-story one where she had first been ambushed, the one she had collapsed on-

-on-

-on these very Waterbenders. Their black clothes were torn, and even in the rain seemed filthy with dust. And they were glaring at her specifically. How were they all be back in the fight?

Well, it didn't matter.

Katara wasn't going to be able to fight them.

There were over a dozen, and they all seemed ready for battle. They had her and Aang and Mai surrounded, and she was tired.

But wait, if these guys were here, then what had happened to Sokka and Ty Lee?

Katara's heart hammered. She loved all her friends, the people who had become like family to her, but Sokka was real family, was part of her Tribe; he had come to save her when she thought that freedom was beyond hope. And Ty Lee- Ty Lee had traveled with Katara during the trip with Master Pakku, had supported Katara when there was no one else but a ship full of arrogant woman-haters. They'd fought together when Pakku turned against them, and relied on each other during the journey to find and warn their friends about Iroh. Ty Lee was probably the person Katara had spent the most time with since she was freed from Crescent Island, and- and- and life was so much brighter with Ty Lee in it.

Katara looked around at the Waterbenders, as the rain continued to fall. They took attack stances, closing in-

-she let go of Aang and Mai and stood tall, arms stretched to her sides. She took her fear for Sokka and Ty Lee, and her anger at these Waterbenders, and all the frustration at her own weakness- and mixed it together. She took that mix, a jumble of feelings that rubbed and clashed against each other to form a miniature lightning storm, and put it all into her next motion:

She snapped her hands straight up, as if calling everyone around her to a halt.

The Waterbenders didn't listen to her. They started to move-

-But the rain did.

The drops all stopped where they were, hovering in the air. The impacts in the puddles on the ground lost their motion, the beautiful circular splashes covering the street like flowers on a field.

The Waterbenders looked around confused.

Then the rain started to reverse.
The drops flew upward, traveling back along the path of their angled descent to return to the sky. The puddles on the ground joined them, the filthy liquid rising it into the clouds that had forsaken it. Even the moisture in everyone's clothes - Katara and Aang and Mai and the enemies around them - seeped out into the air to leave behind dry fabric.

Katara felt her loose hair floating around her head as the water in it left to join the rest of the rain collective. Her loopies floated in front of her eyes as they dried.

She was distantly aware of one of the Waterbenders shaking free from his shock to move at her, stealing some of the rising water into a whip that he aimed at her, but Aang moved like a flash, catching it with his own Waterbending motion and shifting it around his body to stream up into the sky. Mai made a gesture, and the Waterbender gave a sound of pain and dropped to his knees.

Katara wasn't paying enough attention to tell exactly what Mai had hit. She was too busy concentrating on the lake she had hovering above the rooftops.

All of the rain, all of the spare moisture, had floated up at her command to join the precipitation that was still trying to fall from the heavens. She had stopped it all, at least as far as this street and the surrounding buildings, and kept it gathering just above where she and her friends had been fighting earlier. It required all of her mental and physical fortitude to hold it there.

She was vaguely aware of Aang and Mai continuing to defend her, but they couldn't press the attack, couldn't leave her behind.

But that was okay. Katara had a plan.

And the water above desperately wanted to return to the earth.

It was like the sky was pushing back at her, disdainful of all the fear she had given it. The sky hadn't been the source of her fear, but the recipient. The fear came from within her, and if it wasn't intertwined with the sky, it would touch something else. Like the crowd, earlier today. Or danger for her friends. Or any number of things. Katara might always have this fear.

She would find a way to live with that.

The rain she had gathered yearned to fall. The water wanted to join the earth, and the air was helping to push. The elements shouldn't be separated. They naturally wanted to come together to make new and complicated and amazing things.

So Katara let it.

She let it all go.

She didn't just drop the water she'd gathered; she pushed it and guided and swirled it.

Basically, she threw an entire lake of her own making at all the enemies around her.

It worked really well.

*Then* she let herself collapse.

---

It was awkward for Sokka, having a sharpened boomerang held to his throat, but fortunately that came to an end when something exploded outside.

At least, the crash was loud enough for something to have exploded.
And then the young woman - Amka, right, that was what the jerk threatening to cut Sokka's throat had called her - came running back into the little kitchen, shouting, "She stopped the rain and they're coming and we need to- AHHHHHHH!!"

Whatever she had been about to say was cut off when Ty Lee blew her into a wall with a burst of Airbending, and before anyone could react, Aang burst into the room. The two Waterbenders standing guard jumped to face him, but a pair of knives flew in through the swinging door to pierce their sleeves and pin their hands together. The two might have overcome that, but Aang didn't even give them a moment to think before he was doing his Airbender dancing-twisty thing and somehow had them crashing into each other hard enough to tumble into a shelving unit.

Boomerang Slashy Man moved to take in the new threat-

-and Sokka decided to show the guy a little of how they fought on Kyoshi Island. A step backwards, a slap to the elbow, and a shove got the boomerang away from Sokka's throat and sent the guy straight to the floor. The others in the kitchen - the young man in red and the older woman in green - shifted their machetes back to Sokka.

Fortunately, by that time, Aang had freed Ty Lee from her ice. The whole fight was over a second after that.

Sokka picked up the boomerang that had been used to threaten him as Mai and Katara crammed into the now very crowded kitchen. He didn't like the way Katara had to lean on Mai, but she didn't seem injured, just tired, so he decided to hold off getting mad about it.

So he didn't put his full weight down as he stepped on Boomerang Slashy Man's chest and held out the weapon. "This is mine, now."

Boomerang Slashy Man - who was now probably just Jerky Old Guy - grimaced up at Sokka. "Do you even know how to throw that?"

"No," Sokka shrugged, and held the boomerang out so that the sharp edge was now pointed at Jerky Old Guy's throat. "But you showed me how this part works. So!" Sokka stood up again, tucked the boomerang into his belt, and turned to where Hahn was sitting against a cold oven and trying to catch his breath now the he didn't have an Iced Ty Lee on top of him. "Here we have the Avatar you all doubted. Does anyone want to tell me what's going on?"

He wasn't too smug about it. He could magnanimous in his victory.

"The story starts with Avatar Kuruk," Hahn began a little while later.

They had moved back a storeroom in the back of the tavern, once both Hahn and the older man who seemed to be the group's leader had given their pledge of peace. Katara had only vague memories of such a vow, but she knew she had seen it at least once before she was taken away by the Fire Nation. When her family had first been forced into the mining colony at the South Pole, one of the men from another tribe had continuously gotten into arguments with Dad. Katara couldn't remember what it was about, if she had ever been aware, but she did know that after a while both men had agreed to the pledge so that they wouldn't have to fight anymore. Sokka explained further that it was to keep rivalries within a tribe from getting out of control, and was supposed to be the last word of any kind of conflict between two warriors who made it.

So Katara had allowed the Waterbender girl, Amka, to heal her injuries. But she also made sure that Mai and Ty Lee were keeping any eye out for any trouble.
"Legend has it that Kuruk's wife was taken from him on their wedding day," Hahn continued. He was leaning against a stack of shelves, the clay jars shoved aside to make room for some lamps. "From what I was always told back at the North Pole, the culprit was an evil spirit named Koh who hated life and love and all that stuff. But, uh, my friends here tell the story differently. Right, Toklo?"

The man who Sokka had stolen the boomerang from nodded. Everyone was sitting on the floor, but Toklo and Amka had put some space between themselves and Katara and her friends. "Our histories say that Avatar Kuruk was being punished, but there are a few different versions. Some say he was too aggressive a person, creating conflict and war wherever he went just for the fun of it. Others that he just didn't do enough to prevent the fighting that naturally popped up across the world. Either way, his corruption led him to fail in his Avatar duties, and Koh retaliated."

Katara looked around at her friends. Aang had an expression on his face like he had swallowed some bad seal jerky, and Mai's brow was creased, and she was leaning forward with her chin on her hand. That was strange; Mai usually didn't like to reveal when she took an interest in things.

"The difference between the stories is the point," Hahn said. "I don't know or care which is right, but back in Kuruk's time, those of the Tribe who thought he had it coming formed their own group and left the North Pole. That's all the history we have about it, until I got swept overboard fighting the Fire Nation— and was found by the new tribe descended from those exiles."

Toklo tapped his fist on his chest, over his heart. "My ancestors felt that the Northern Water Tribe had drifted away from the path of balance. Its great city had become a source of pride, and that pride was keeping its people from seeing the truth. So my forefathers went out into the Northern Seas to found a new tribe. We remember Koh as a warning against failing in duty and letting the world become unbalanced. Thus we are the Toqukiinaq: the Faceless Tribe. We keep our home a secret, but reach out to the world around us, both the natural world and the cities of man. We learn, and keep watch for Koh."

Katara couldn't hold back a grunt. "So you attacked us to keep your tribe secret? Maybe you should just keep Hahn from blabbing about you to people."

Hahn's face went red, and he turned away from her.

But Toklo smiled. "Southern women can't hold their tongues, eh?" His gaze flickered to Amka, but she lowered her eyes and said nothing.

Katara was getting fed up with sexist attitudes and was going to say something about it, but then Toklo continued with, "But you're right. You have wisdom for your age, Katara of the South. We had compassion for Hahn of the North, and gave him a home when he lost his to the Fire Nation, but he does not find our ways of secrecy natural. We let him contribute as a warrior, including going along on excursions to Jinchu City to trade and get news. This is his first failure to uphold our security."

Hahn snorted and spun to face Toklo. "They were of a Water Tribe! I knew they were okay, and look, it turned out that they're not working for the Fire Nation! I was right about them."

Toklo stood up and pointed to where Mai and Ty Lee were sitting together. "Those girls are not from any Tribe. They may serve the Avatar, but you didn't know that. Next time, be more careful, and we won't have to attack anyone. And if we do have to fight, learn the difference between a 'little watermaid' and a real warrior like Katara there, eh?"

Katara had to admit that Toklo had a point (especially that last part), but she wanted to make one thing clear. "Mai and Ty Lee have given up everything to help us. I consider them a part of my
Aang gave a clap. His shirt began shifting weirdly, and then Momo popped out and hissed with what sounded like annoyance. "Sorry, Momo, I didn't mean to startle you. But yeah, we vouch for the girls."

Mai rolled her eyes while Ty Lee gave a dazzling smile and said, "Thank you!"

Sokka, though, was rubbing his chin. "But you aren't all Water Tribe, either. The lady in the green smock, and the guy in red- they were with you."

That's right! Katara had seen them, during the little fight in the kitchen. They weren't here, now; once the paralysis Ty Lee gave had worn off, they had gone out to help Amka bring in the injured Waterbenders, and then set about cleaning up all the damage in the common room. They seemed to be the owners or part of the staff of the little tavern, and if it hadn't been for their earlier presence in the kitchen with Toklo, and their blue eyes, Katara would have-

Wait.

Blue eyes?

Katara inhaled. "They are part of the Tribe! You've been marrying here in Jinchu!"

Toklo nodded at her. "In the time of Avatar Kyoshi, our leaders became disquieted when trips to the mainland resulted in- let's call it an 'extended tribe.' But we have long since come to value our sisters and brothers who live and work outside our homelands. Our excursions are partly to keep in contact with them, and sometimes they'll come back to live with us. Quingnu owns this tavern, and she is gracious enough to let us use it as our gathering place whenever we come to port. Arac works in the tavern on nights, and helps his parents in their spice shop during the day."

Sokka chuckled. "So the relatives come over and wreck the place? Not very nice of you."

Toklo scowled and folded his arms over his chest. "I'm sorry, did I misunderstand and you're not looking for our help getting into the city at the North Pole? We had a misunderstanding, we fought, and now we're all caught up. What part of that means you get to insult us? Or steal my boomerang?"

Katara covered her mouth to hide her smile.

Sokka folded his own arms in an imitation of Toklo. "I won that boomerang in fair combat. And isn't it in your best interest to stop the Fire Nation from sandwiching you between colonies here and at the North Pole?"

"That's right!" Aang hopped to his feet, sending Momo skittering away to find a quieter place to rest. "And I'm trying to find a way to restore balance after everything the Fire Nation ruined fighting the war! And you guys-"

Katara cleared her throat. "It's okay, Aang. You don't actually have to convince him. He's just messing with Sokka. Right, Toklo?"

The edge of the old man's lip quirked. "Maybe. But yes, we will help the Avatar. Or, at least, I will take you to our lands and High Chiefs, so that they can commit our tribe to action. Will that satisfy you, Avatar?"

"Oh, yeah. That's great! And you can call me Aang."
"Very well, Avatar Aang." Toklo held out a hand to help Amka to her feet. "The rain will be finished by tomorrow. Then we will take you to our lands."

Hahn straightened. "Don't we have more to do here in Jinchu? We've barely arrived-

Toklo cut him off with a chop of his hand. "And our warriors had a brawl in the streets in the busiest sector of the city. The storm kept most from noticing so far, but there are always eyes watching, and word will get to the Fire Nation. Better that there are no Waterbenders for them to find, when they come looking."

That made sense to Katara. She looked to Sokka, and got his nod of agreement as well. Then she turned to Ty Lee, and whispered, "How do their auras look?"

Ty Lee winked. "Hahn has a mix of happiness and frustration, and Amka is scared of you, but Toklo is earnest. We can trust him."

Amka was scared of Katara? Why? Katara didn't think of herself as scary in any way.

But then, she had kind of wrecked a little army of Waterbenders. That might look scary to someone who didn't really know her. And Amka was a Waterbender, a healer, but she hadn't been part of the attack force. With the way these people were all reacting to Katara being a warrior-

Amka had never learned to fight, had she?

Yes, Katara could understand how she could seem scary to someone like that. "All right. Then I think-"

"That's great," Aang said, never having even looked at the rest of them. "I can't wait for tomorrow!"

Katara glanced at Sokka, but he just shrugged and shook his head.

"So," Aang continued, "Do you guys have enough room on your ship for my sky bison, or should we meet you somewhere?"

Toklo glanced at Amka. "What's a sky bison?"

Sokka decided that maybe this was a victory.

The sky was still gray the next morning, but at least it wasn't dumping water on everyone. The group had set out early in the morning to get back to Appa, and found him happy at the center of a defoliated cluster of bushes with soggy fur. Now, they were all loading the big guy up (and ignoring the smell as best they could) so that they could fly out to meet their new allies out beyond the harbor.

They hadn't made much of a dent in Sokka's shopping list, sad lost list that it was, but they'd gotten some nice coats. And, presumably, even a 'Faceless' secret tribe would know how to make jerky and be willing to share. They hadn't found charts, but a secret Tribe and a defector from the Northern Water Tribe were better.

He stowed the coats they bought, and would soon need, at the back of the saddle and looked around to see what else was left. He found Mai standing down on the ground, looking at his new (not stolen) boomerang. "I'm not giving that to you."

She turned it over and ran a finger lightly over the sharp edge. "Maybe I'll be able to get one of my own, where we're going."
Sokka leaned over the saddle held out his hand for it. "Just one?"

"At least one. Fifty would be my ideal number." Mai didn't hand it up to him. She worked her wrist back and forth, as if judging the weight. "So, do you know how to throw it?"

"I'll figure it out. How hard can it be?"

Mai looked up at him.

Then she threw the boomerang. It twirled out through the forest, around a copse of trees, and arced back. It passed over Ty Lee's head, making her squeak, and angled up towards Sokka-

He clapped his hands together by reflex and just barely caught it. Then stumbled back to fall on his butt.

Momo came over and sniffed at the boomerang, then scampered away.

Sokka shook his head and crawled over to the edge of the saddle. "You could have killed me! This is sharp!"

Mai actually looked abashed. "I- uh- I wasn't aiming for you. You can keep that one. I'll get my own." She hurried over to Ty Lee.

Sokka shook his head and stuck his boomerang into his belt.

Soon they had everything ready to go, and they all took their places. Aang sat up on Appa's head with the reins, and everyone else gathered in the saddle. Sokka looked out at the landscape as the rose, spiraling up near the clouds so that they would disappear against the gray sky. When Aang judged them high enough, he steered Appa out over Jinchu, and Sokka took a last look.

He thought he maybe spotted a ship docked at one of the piers, a ship similar in shape to the kind he had seen before his tribe was forced into a mining colony, crawling with a crew who moved in time with the lapping of the waves (those who weren't still sore from the walloping Katara had given them, anyway).

The city gave away to open ocean, and Sokka leaned back so that he was sitting safely in the saddle, next to Katara. "So, uh, I hear you did pretty well in the fight. I mean, I saw you inside, and that great move where you collapsed the wall on those punks, but outside you stopped the rain and then nearly drowned the bad guys? That's neat."

Katara tilted her head. "Yeah, that was fun. Not at the time, but I think I had fun."

Sokka reached up and put an arm around her. "Yeah, that's how it goes. You know, with all this 'secret Water Tribe' and other weirdness, I- uh, well, I'm glad you're a Waterbender."

Katara looked at him. "Okay?"

He wasn't saying what he wanted. "I mean- I'm glad you're our Waterbender. The Southern Water Tribe's. If it had to be just one person- well, I'm not happy it meant we lost you for a while, but you survived it, and you're grown up strong enough to keep us in the fight."

Katara just stared at him for a moment. Then she leaned against him and sighed. "You're a good brother. And I- I don't think I would have believed you yesterday. I hate that I get scared of silly things. But- but I know I can do this. I can help you. So, thanks. Thanks for believing in me. I believe in me, too."
From across the saddle, Ty Lee crawled over and sprawled herself across both Sokka and Katara's laps. "I believe in you, too! I believe in everyone!"

Oh, wow, okay. This was a new experience for Sokka.

Aang waved from Appa's head, and Momo copied the motion. "We have the best team in the world! I believe in us!"

"I agree," Mai put in. "I think we all exist, too."

Ty Lee lifted her head off Sokka to glare at Mai. "That wasn't what I meant by believing!"

"I know. Teasing you is how I pass the time on these boring flights."

Ty Lee humphed and laid her head back on Sokka's lap. Katara laughed.

Well, their plans had changed a bit, but they were still headed for the North Pole. Now they would just have the help of a secret Water Tribe that worshipped something called 'Koh.' That was probably an improvement, right?

Sure.

It wasn't long before Ty Lee was asleep, and her head was cutting off the flow of blood to Sokka's legs.

TO BE CONTINUED
Chapter Summary

Toph tries to do her job, and Zuko is increasingly confused.

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Black’ Victor Cachat of FanFiction.net for inspiring (or outright giving me) a bunch of the ideas in this segment.

Chapter 31: The Rule of the Earth King

The covered wagon shuddered as it rolled over the rocky ground, and Zuko struggled to keep from spilling any stew from either the bowl or the spoon in his hands. He was sure that Azula would call it a metaphor for the balancing act his life had become, if she were still capable of speaking. Or annoying him.

The cart rolled to a stop for a moment, and Zuko seized the opportunity to bring the spoon to Azula's mouth and press it against her lips.

She didn't look at him. She just sat against the back wall of the wagon staring into space, alone in a world only she could perceive. Not that there was much to see in the little compartment, but she hadn't shown any awareness or reaction to their escape from the Capital, the journey across the ocean, or the trip across the Colonial Continent.

But she did part her lips and eat from the spoon.

Zuko scraped up the last of the stew for one more spoonful, and Azula took that as well. And so another meal came to an end, at least keeping his sister in the realm of the living. That was enough for now, he supposed.

Time to find out what was going on in the real world.

Zuko laid the bowl and spoon down and put his eyepatch back on over his empty socket. He turned and crawled past where Tom-Tom was sleeping on a bag of rice, and swung out the back of the wagon into the sunlight. "Why are we stopped? I thought you said we're almost there."

None of the Earthbender guards responded. They were ignoring both Zuko and the rocky, muddy landscape around them, in favor of something in front of the wagon. Zuko followed their gazes past the ostrich-horse, to where King Toph was talking with someone.

Oh, it was Jojo, the Earthbender rebel who seemed to be Toph's preferred spy. The king had sent her ahead to their supposed 'secret base' several hours ago. And now she was back- with a bundle of chains hanging over her shoulder?
Zuko tensed. "What's going on?"

King Toph swung to face him with a big grin. "Good news! We are almost there, and some important people have come to visit. That will make it easier to scrape together enough fighters to stand up to whatever your uncle is doing."

Zuko still hadn't formed a full opinion on that, so he let it pass. "Then shouldn't we be moving? Why stop if we're almost there?"

Toph nodded and ambled over to him. She made no attempt to avoid splashing through the mud puddles that littered the road, and given the strength of her Earthbending-sense, he could only assume it was because she didn't care. "Well, Prince Patience, we have a little bit of what we call a 'concern.' See, I'm obviously the incarnate goddess of the earth itself, ruling from a divine mandate expressed through the power of my Earthbending. You know, typical royal stuff."

Zuko nodded. "If you're about to tell me that you've been faking this king-thing all this time, I'm going to be very disappointed."

"Ha!" Toph swung a fist into his shoulder. "That's why I love you. But no, I'm really the king. Everyone says so, and everyone can't be wrong, right? Especially after I beat up the ones who said I'm not king. But beating people up takes a lot of time, and I found out there's this stuff called 'politics' that can sometimes be used to avoid a fight."

"The sarcasm is wearing a little thin." Zuko rubbed at his shoulder. It was really sore after that hit. "What are you saying?"

Toph looked up in what was almost the direction of his face. "I'm going to honor my offer of sanctuary to you. But it will be easier for now if you look more like my prisoner when we arrive at the camp. You get it? No one makes a fuss, and I can do politics with the right people later, one at a time."

Zuko looked over to the chains looped over Jojo's arm. "You want to tie me up?"

"And Azula. But I have a feeling she won't give us any trouble about it."

Zuko's chest burned at the thought of submitting to such treatment, but only for a moment. At this point, he didn't have much of a choice, and he was fairly certain that King Toph was being honest about everything. He wouldn't put lying past her, but she really didn't need to bother. She could have taken him from the Capital without his cooperation, and at this point hardly needed to ask him to put the chains on, not with a team of Earthbenders and nothing but rock and mud around them.

And maybe he could use his time as a prisoner to figure out what he was even doing here. He chose going with Toph over a quiet retirement in the care of the White Lotus, but he hadn't really thought about what was going to happen after that. Toph hadn't given any explanations, or promises beyond his safety.

He sighed and nodded. "Fine. But the less time I'm in chains, the better."

"I agree. I want your sunny disposition back in my life as soon as possible." Toph grinned and nudged him with an elbow. "Go ahead and get back in the wagon, and then Jojo will help you and Azula into your new duds."

It turned out that the worst part wasn't being handled like cargo, but rather seeing Azula simply allow herself to be locked in chains.
Zuko averted his eyes to stare out the back of the wagon as they got moving again. It might have been his imagination, but he thought he could feel the ground give a shake every now and then, too quick and sequential to be natural. Earthbender signals of some kind? Eventually, the bumps of the uneven road gave way to the slow squelching of mud. And then the sun yielded to the shade of a cave.

Zuko allowed himself to be carried as a prisoner into the dark.

After a moment, he heard Tom-Tom stir from his little rice-sack bed and say, "It night time?"

Toph stopped where the tunnel opened into a larger cavern, the dark blur in her vision having given away to a light blur that was probably a sunlight (the taste of fresh air spiced up the dank flavor of the typical cavern atmosphere) mixed with fires (she could smell that someone was smoking mudskippers) and crystal lanterns (the way they rang almost beyond the height of sound was unmistakable). The typical noises of community life echoed, giving her a sense of how big the space was.

She summoned her Earthbending and stomped a foot hard enough to make the whole vast place shake. Then she threw out her hands and boomed, "Your king has returned! Go, me!"

The whole cavern went quiet, allowing her voice to reverberate through the whole space, fading slowly into nothingness.

And then a cheer rose up loud enough to make her wince.

It was good to be home. Even if Toph had never actually been in this home, before.

Still, she could feel the Life here. It was just like their old hideout across the lake from Ba Sing Se, a collection of refuges and supplies and people and even some badgermoles. (There should always be badgermoles around.) It wasn't quite as refined and defensible as Full Moon Bay, but some of the rebels who had pledged themselves to her had told about this area and its muddy caves, and it didn't take a genius to realize that it would be a good backup camp. She could feel some of those mud ponds even here, but most of the ground had been smoothed and solidified by Earthbenders, allowing a little city of clay and canvas to be built in the space. As her Earth-sense brought back more detail, she could feel that a whole lot of air shafts in the walls substituted for the big gap in the ceiling that Full Moon Bay had boasted, keeping things from getting too muggy.

Toph wondered how long she'd get to stay here before running off on the next adventure.

She strode into the little kingdom, her spies and Zuko's wagon trailing behind her, and let all of the activity form a picture through her Earth-sense. People came crowding around, some reaching their hands out to her and others falling to the floor to bow at her feet. She moved her focus from person to person, making sure that none of them were preparing weapons or Earthbending stances; it had been a while since someone had tried to assassinate her, but it was always good to check.

Toph slowed to let Jojo and Lee pass and start pushing back at the bit of crowd right in front of her. She had learned that a King didn't do her own shoving unless she really wanted to. Once there was enough of a path, she continued her march, waving to her subjects, slapping a few hands, nodding or pointing at the ones whose shouted welcomes she heard, and generally playing to the audience like this was an Earth Rumble.

It was amazing how similar being a king was to being a Rumble champion. Someday, Toph was going to write a book about it for people to read, which meant she was going to talk about it until she
got tired and somebody else would put it on paper all pretty-like.

Her path took her beyond the mass of rebels, and now she felt some familiar figures approaching. They were her direct subordinates, as well as the community leaders of the refugees under her care. She found the Water Tribe granny, Kanna, and pointed for the old woman to approach ahead of everyone else.

Toph whispered some instructions to Jojo, finishing just as Kanna had shuffled over. The Water Tribes didn't have kings, which was probably why Kanna didn't wait for Toph to speak before going. "Your majesty?"

Toph gave a little wave to let everyone know it was okay, and spoke loud enough that the rest of the group would be able to hear. "Your grandkids are doing great. Katara came back with some news, and she and the Avatar's team are off again on business. Everyone else is okay, too. But it turns out that Mai's family - you remember Mai, she's still cranky - are typical Fire Nation jerks and we had to rescue her little brother from them. Do me a favor and take care of the kid?"

Kanna was still reacting to the news, her heart speeding up at news of Sokka and Katara, a little tension easing from her body at confirmation that everyone had survived the trip through the Fire Nation, when Jojo brought Tom-Tom over by the hand. The kid's walk still had enough of a toddle in it to be completely without grace, and Toph enjoyed the feel of it on the rocky ground. Children were screechy, but their way of walking helped her understand what people meant when they said kids were cute.

Toph took Tom-Tom's hand from Jojo. "Hey, Tom-Tom. This is Gran-Gran. We told you about her, right? She's going to give you something to eat and a place to sleep. You get to go camping in a cave!"

Tom-Tom gasped. "Mommy says camping is bad! I wanna camp!"

Kanna gave a low chuckle. "Just like his sister, I see. Very well, Tom-Tom. Let's go meet the other kids and figure out which tent you'll be in."

"Okay, Gran-Gran." He let Toph transfer his hand to the old woman's, and then they were moving away, with Tom-Tom babbling some excitement about tents.

With that promise kept, Toph motioned for the next act in her performance for her Royal Court. "That's not the only prize I've taken from the Fire Nation. Check it out: Prince Zuko and Princess Azula, nephew and niece to the Fire Lord, are my prisoners!"

Toph enjoyed the sounds of surprise that greeted Lee as he guided Zuko and Azula over. She could feel Zuko slumping and bristling in his chains, but Azula just stood where Lee was holding her, her heart not reacting in the slightest to being surrounded by people who would gladly start throwing rocks at a moment's notice.

Toph took a casual little walk that just so happened to put her between the Fire Royalty and everyone else. "I haven't decided what to do with them, yet. Zuko here personally executed a traitor Lavabender who was serving the Fire Lord, and both of them recognize my superiority over their-" She sniffed and held her head high. "-debased royal blood. For now, put them somewhere secure with space and clean water. I'll attend to them later."

As Jojo and Lee moved to comply, one of the figures in front of her dropped to kneel on the ground and made a bow of the head that signified a request to speak.
Toph recognized him, and supposed it was just as well that he was making himself known upfront. "General Fong. The earth sang of your return to us. Welcome. You have something to ask me?" It wasn't even lie, since Jojo was an Earthbender and talked in a kind of sing-songy voice.

Fong looked up at her. "Your majesty, is it wise to keep Firebenders where they could hurt the refugees? This is not a real military base, and not secured for prisoners."

Toph stepped forward so that she was standing right in front of Fong. He was weighed down by the robes and armor of his rank, one of the few military commanders to still wear all that so long after Ba Sing Se's fall, but she was still barely tall enough to lean over him. "Zuko surrendered himself and his sister to me, and I tasted truth on his words."

Everyone else bowed at the waist and gave a little chant in celebration of her ability to sense lies. They loved that.

Fong inclined his head. "As you say, your majesty. And I'm sure having the children of Fire Lord Iroh’s brother will benefit us."

Hm. Fong's pulse was steady. Toph had only referenced Zuko as the Fire Lord's nephew a moment ago, and now Fong was connecting that directly to Iroh without a single bit of surprise. "Good, you've heard that Azulon is dead. I guess that's why you're here."

"Your majesty is wise. Yes, I have come to serve you at the hour when our people can finally rise up and take back our country!"

Oh.

Huh.

Well, this was going to be a problem.

Toph gave a regal wave of her hands. "Yeah, yeah. Everyone, I have great tales of my adventures in the Fire Nation, but we'll do storytime a little later. Fong and I need to have a conference, first."

Zuko kept his eyes on Azula as they were led to the far side of the cavern by the Earthbenders Jojo and Lee. Their pace was slow enough that Azula could shuffle along without stumbling.

Zuko wished he understood this kind of sickness of the mind. It was less worrying when she simply acted as though asleep, even with her eyes open, because at least it looked like a coma or other unconsciousness. That went with bad injuries. But to have her taking food and drink, going where she was led, and not being Azula -

Even a trained animal would act according to its own mind.

Was there any coming back from this? And if so, what exactly would come back?

"Here we go," Jojo said.

Zuko turned his attention back to the matter at hand. They were near what must be the west wall of the cavern, judging from the sun that speared down through the regular air shafts in the rock. They were headed for something like a doorway, and Zuko could see that the room beyond was lit dully with the reflected glow of sunlight. Now where could that be coming from?

Then he passed into the space, and realized it wasn't a room at all. It was the bottom of a very thin
ravine, as deep as a well, with the sky visible all the way at the top. Water flowed down into the space through a crack in the far wall, feeding a pool of mud that covered half of the room. But the half by the door was solid rock, so there was no need to get messy.

Zuko supposed it was the best possible jail to be stuck in, under the circumstances. "Thanks. I don't suppose we can get the chains off?"

Lee turned away, while Jojo smirked and produced a key in her hand as if by magic. "The Earth King is generous, isn't she? And if your sister needs any care, just knock on the rock-door I'm going to raise. Someone will be listening."

As Jojo moved to unchain him, Zuko considered all that. "I just hope King Toph can afford her generosity."

On the other side of the space, the mud bubbled.

Once they were free of the chains and the Earthbenders had left, Zuko guided his sister to one of the walls and sat her down so that she could lean against it. Then he kneeled across from her, so that her unfocused eyes were at least pointed at him. "Azula, do you know who I am?"

She didn't say anything. Of course.

Zuko nodded. "It's okay. I know that you know. I just wanted to tell you that you don't have to be scared. We're safe here, and soon King Toph will let us out."

Once, Azula would have broken out into violence at the suggestion that she might be scared. Now, she did nothing.

Zuko reached out and put his hands on her shoulders. "I need you to come back. Please. Mother said I should take care of you, but- but I don't know how. I don't think this is what she meant, feeding you and stuff like that. I'm relying on Toph, but even she needs to make compromises. You've always been more observant than me. That would help right now."

Azula said nothing.

Zuko let go of her and leaned back. "I'm not lying. I- I never liked you. I admit that. But I respect what you can do. And it's just the two of us, now. But maybe you don't want it to be?" He looked into her eyes, but found nothing but a dull reflection of himself. "If you want to leave me and make your own life, that's fine. I'd rather that than- well, this."

Azula said nothing.

Well, so much for that. Zuko stood up and walked into the center of the room, where he could practice his Firebending without putting Azula in any danger.

But his mind was on what was supposed to come next.

"...so the thing we have to do," Toph finished, "is find out what Iroh wants in the south and get some defenses down there."

Fong was quiet. Toph could feel him stroking his beard, a sign that he was deep in thought.

They were alone, isolated from the main camp by stacks of supply crates. In the distance, Toph could feel some of her rebels putting together a 'court' where she would soon sit on a 'throne' and dish out
her propaganda, but right here in the shadows was where the real kingship was being done.

Well, Toph was assuming there were shadows. People got really excited about the symbolism of shadows.

Then Fong said, "I don't agree."

Great.

This was the problem with Fong. Before the war ended, he had been the highest-ranking general outside of Ba Sing Se, and when the Fire Nation came along and burned the place down, that left him in charge of the remnants of the Earth Kingdom's military. But things had been confusing, and not everyone thought that the old command structure was still in place in a world with no Earth King, so Fong hadn't been able to unite the scattered remnants of the kingdom.

At least, not before Toph had come along claiming to be a distant relation to the line of the Earth Kings, and systematically jumping through every hoop necessary to get people to believe it.

Unlike most rebel leaders, Fong hadn't condemned Toph's claims. But he hadn't supported her, either, not until the Earth Sages decided to confirm her kingship. And while he'd accepted her orders, he'd been happy to operate at a distance.

In other words, he was smart. He'd waited, listened, and picked the best options available.

The smart types worried Toph. (Unless they were Sokka. He was okay, and smelled like love and hotness.)

And so she knew better than to mess with them too much. "Oh? You still want to rise up against Iroh?"

"I do." Fong began to pace. "From what you've told me, the leadership of the Fire Nation is probably in complete disarray. Iroh is removed from those troubles at the North Pole, so even though he's in command, he can't have settled the confusion yet. News of Azulon's death is still spreading, and some colonies won't know where to look for instructions." He came to a stop and turned to Toph. "We've been recruiting and hoarding supplies for the right time, and I don't think we'll ever have a better opportunity to push back against the invaders."

He was sincere. Toph could feel his pulse quicken as he spoke, could sense his gestures growing more dramatic. In most other circumstances, she'd be happy to take his advice, but the problem was that the world had become weird. "I get what you're saying. And, you know, maybe we can send word for some of the groups to start hitting back. I like that. But there's more going on than just rebels and invaders. The Avatar says the Fire Nation is making the world sick, and Iroh's stuff is part of that."

Fong was nodding. "I respect the Avatar's power, and we can only assume that he's correct. But you don't know Iroh like I do."

"You've met him?"

She could feel Fong's grin. "Never. But I received reports of the war in the north, including what our observers could gather about the Water Tribe. Iroh's tactics always stood out from those of the other admirals. He doesn't just understand navies, he understands people, and he knows how to use it to great effect. Frankly, it's possible that giving our attention to that swamp is exactly what he wants right now. Our best strategy might be to secure as much of the continent as we can, and react when we know more clearly what he wants."
Toph shook her head. "It's not a scam. Iroh really is planning something for the south."

"Maybe he was," Fong said in the same tone that Dad had used whenever telling her that she was too weak to go beyond the estate's walls. "But you said he knows you discovered his plans. He's definitely formulating strategy to take advantage of that."

Toph knew Fong wasn't wrong. Iroh had already tried to strike back by grabbing Tom-Tom, and he wouldn't just take their counter-move on the chin. "Okay, get it. This is why I'm glad you're here."

Fong squared his shoulders and stood taller. "Thank you, your majesty. My service is my life."

"Good." Toph turned away from him. "Because the Avatar said it's important that we check out what Iroh wants. I promised him that I would use all my resources to do that. You know Iroh and you bring up some good points, so I need your smarts to help make this happen."

She could feel his stomach roil. "Your majesty."

"I know we'd be missing an opportunity, here, but it might not be our last one." Toph didn't like the way Fong's pulse was increasing, so she shifted a bit to lower her center of gravity without actually taking a fighting stance. Just in case. "The Avatar is going up to confront Iroh, and for all we know a new war might be breaking out there soon. It's important that we solve an important mystery when we can, while watching and waiting for a better opportunity to get rid of our invaders. Hey, Aang might even be able to end the occupation without us having to fight, so why jump into things right away?"

Fong didn't speak right away, but he betrayed his unhappiness with every breath and heartbeat. "Well, I'm not going to pretend that I'm comfortable with this decision."

Toph nodded. "I don't expect you to. I just want your help making it work."

Fong sighed. It was much louder than it needed to be. "Then I will do what I must. You are the Earth King, and I am loyal to your Kingdom."

Toph frowned. "That's great for you to say, but change the wording a little: you're going to support my orders when I announce them to the others."

She could feel Fong nodding. "When we are before your court, you will have my support."

He was stressed and maybe angry, judging from what she could feel, but she detected no lie in him. "Okay. Thanks."

It was good to be king.

Right?

The Mud Man was hearing lots of interesting new things.

That wasn't his original name, of course. It would be pretty strange for a parent to look at a baby and say, "He doesn't look very much like a Wei or a Lee. Why don't we call him The Mud Man?" But the Mud Man's old names - all fifteen and a half of them - weren't appropriate anymore. They hadn't been for the last few weeks or months or years- whenever it was that he'd let himself sink into the mud and began listening. Maybe it had been a full century. Those passed quicker than most people realized.
Even Earthbenders didn't usually associate mud with listening, but that just went to show that people just didn't look at things right. They saw what others told them they were seeing, not what they were actually seeing. Someone would say, "So if you want to hear things from all the way across the world, you need a telegraph system. If you want watery dirt, then mud's the thing." And others would actually believe that! They wouldn't realize that they couldn't actually hear telegraphs, that machines were needed to turn the sounds into something understandable, and you had to have someone on the other end of the line to put the Truth into it before it would work.

Mud, on the other hand, was already all over the place, and it naturally absorbed Truth. And also moisture. And to listen to it, all you needed to do was sink into and let it teach you its very squishy language.

The Mud Man was good at listening.

He had heard about the snowstorms at the bottom of the world, as well as the Big Light that had popped up briefly. He'd heard about the ashlands. Oh, and the volcano! Actually, now there were two volcanos involved, which could be confusing if you weren't paying attention because mud considered all volcanos to be one. He'd heard about the new wars, and the new kings.

There was a lot to listen to right now concerning the littlest of the new kings. That was fine, because the little one was the most interesting, anyway. And now she was the Mud Man's neighbor! How nice. He would come over with a cake, if he knew how to bake a cake. It occurred to him that he could bring a mud pie, being submerged in mud all the time, and he laughed but had no intention actually trying it. He knew that mud pies weren't real desserts. The Mud Man wasn't crazy.

Besides, that would involve leaving the mud, and if he left, he might miss some of the news about the storms in the north, and The Thing that was causing so much trouble up there, and how all that related to The Tree.

The Tree was important. The Mud Man was sure of that.

After all, it had said so itself.

And so the Mud Man stayed in the mud, waiting and listening.

The little king would probably be coming over soon, anyway.

Toph kept her feet pressed to the ground as the dinner hour fell on her kingdom.

Her stories to her court had gone well enough. Everyone had been happy to hear that Azulon was dead and the Fire Nation capital was now a lava flow, and so sneaking in that Iroh was a traitor who needed to be dealt with was pretty easy. She had made sure she emphasized that the Avatar's spies had uncovered Iroh's treachery before he'd been able to spring it on them (never mind that Katara would probably object to being called a spy) and they had enough information to head off his plans. People liked to know that everything was going according to plan, even if the plan was being made up as it went along.

But it wasn't the immediate reaction to the tale that Toph was really interested in. She remained on her 'throne,' a couch of molded clay made from the mud and dust of this cavern, as some of the listeners moved back into the city-camp. She kept her feet pressed to the ground as everyone gathered in their groups of friends and family to eat and talk.

Toph let the orchestra of heartbeats wash over her.
There was Tom-Tom, practically bouncing in place as Gran-Gran, and the Water Tribe kids she took care of, showed him how to eat a smoked kipper. (Toph resolved to get herself a kipper. She deserved something tasty after all the work she’d done today.)

There was Jojo, trading a kiss for a bowl of rice and asking the soldier who gave it to her what General Fong thought of all this. (Good girl.)

There was Zuko and Azula, off in the little open-sky room that was keeping them safe by its existence, if not the walls that most people around here could just open up at will. (Zuko was Firebending, and Toph took a moment to admire his ‘form.’)

There was Fong, letting his kipper-wrap cool as he wrote something on a note and passed it to one of his subordinates, setting off a flurry of activity amongst his guard. (He might not agree with Toph, but he was a productive little minion.)

One of the food distributors was moving through the residential area pushing a small cart ahead of him, calling out that there was cabbage available today and how important it was for a healthy diet. (He added that good children might find that some fresh cabbage cookies were available after dinner if they asked nicely, and Toph grimaced and shifted her attention elsewhere.)

A family Toph knew as having come from Omashu was sitting with Bato and some of the Water Tribe hunters, sharing a story about an old Earth Queen who once tricked the Fire Nation into giving her an especially profitable trade deal using nothing but three carrots, an old sheet, and a herd of puma-goats. (Toph had already heard that one.)

There was excitement through the pulse of people, louder voices and more enthusiastic conversations than usual. Toph couldn't parse all the words that were spoken by everyone out there, but she didn't need to. A sample was good enough, combined with the feel of the activity.

Her people were still on her side.

Satisfied, she relaxed her body and let her attention return to her immediate surroundings. Some of her ‘court’ was lounging in the space around her, enjoying their own dinners and conversations and basking in her presence.

Well, they would have to do without her for now.

Toph snapped her fingers. "I have decided, in my infinite wisdom, that I shall have a conference over dinner with my captured Fire Royalty. Put some of the good stuff on a few plates and come with me. And make sure there's plenty of kippers."

As she stood up, she felt several of her self-appointed attendants jump to their feet to follow her orders. Toph left them to it and made her way over to the edge of the cavern where Zuko and Azula were being kept.

As she walked, Toph noticed that a circle of people were gathering not far from the makeshift prison. They were all men, all of them wearing the heavy armor of the military. She recognized several of them as being under Fong's command. Most of them were wearing boots and none of them had weapons. A few seemed to be weighed down at their belts, and a moment's focus revealed a non-earth container (glass, probably) containing some kind of liquid. And all of guys seemed a little jumpy, their muscles tense and their pulses quick.

Hm.

Seems like General Fong had set some guards, despite Toph assuring him that the 'prisoners' were
safe.

But they weren't blocking the way to the prison, and the presence of the liquid probably meant that this was an unofficial posting. It was probably just Fong being cautious.

Toph supposed that she could talk to her general about this kind of thing. But it really wasn't a big deal, and he'd already conceded one argument to her today. He probably needed something like this to feel like the wise adult looking out for a little girl-king.

Well, whatever kept him on her side, right?

Toph reached the slab that blocked the prison room off from the rest of the cavern. It was a good, solid bit of rock, but it only took her a solid stance and a swing of her fists to push it aside. She felt Zuko freeze, but then he relaxed again in what must have been recognition of her. She waited outside as her attendants brought in the plates of food, and then when they looked at her for their next orders, she nodded back towards the main camp. "Go on, get out of here. No one likes to be watched while they eat."

With the audience gone, Toph went inside and flopped herself down on the ground next to the food. "Well, they found a nice place for you. That's some good mud over there, and I can smell the outside air."

Zuko shifted so that he was in reach of one of the plates and took something. His chewing colored his words as he said, "I don't understand why mud would be a good thing, but there's water and a view of the sky, so it's better than some prisons I've been in."

"I'll have them bring something comfy for you to sleep on tonight, but I think I can let you out tomorrow." Toph scooped up some noodles in her hand and stuffed them into her mouth. "I'll put you on 'parole' and have someone watch over you, and soon everyone will be used to you hanging around. Just don't start any fights or anything."

Zuko snorted. "What if someone starts a fight with me?"

Toph snorted right back. "I can sense truth and lies, remember? I'll know who started what."

Zuko chewed his food for a while. "And then?"

"Then?" Toph wrinkled her nose as she tried to figure out what he was asking. "Well, I figure I'll punch whoever is causing the trouble, but I like to keep my options open. Maybe I'll throw a rock at the troublemaker's head? Or kick them in the-"

"I mean," Zuko interjected, "what's next for me? Once everyone is used to me."

"Oh!" Toph nodded. "That question makes a lot more sense. Well, then you do whatever. Become one of my advisors, or go live with Old Lady Kanna and take care of brats all day, or something. I'm the Earth King, but I don't tell people how to live their lives. Just how to serve me, if that's their thing. And how to bow down to my crushing fist, if their thing is trying to go against me. But that's pretty much it. Anything else is too much work."

She could feel Zuko looking at her. Finally, he said, "Is that going to work when you have your kingdom back?"

"What?"

She felt him motion at the cave around them. "If everything works out how you want - if Aang
defeats my uncle and the Earth Kingdom is freed - then you'll be in charge of the whole continent. The Earth King of Ba Sing Se used to rule over a vast, sophisticated land, with Underkings and city-states and formal provinces. You're going to be at the top of all that. And you'll have to pick a new capital to rule from."

Toph frowned.

This wasn't news to her. She hadn't just decided to become Earth King on a whim, and in the months since she had met Aang, the goal of freeing the Earth Kingdom from Fire Nation rule had been something she'd thought about a lot. And that included the aftermath. She knew she'd be ruling most of the world. She was fine with that.

But she had thought that she could rule in a new way.

Well, maybe she still could.

She was about to say so, to test the waters with a real prince who might have actually experienced some Royal Stuff in between being a kid and getting exiled and helping his uncle enact a coup-

When she felt the slapping of boots on the ground. *Lots* of boots.

People were running towards this room.

She immediately dropped the bread she'd been picking at and slammed her hands on the ground, reaching out with her Earth-sense and demanding details.

The echoes were confused, thanks to the battering of feet, but she knew these bodies. These were Fong's soldiers, the ones 'standing guard' over Zuko and Azula. Why were they running here? Zuko hadn't attacked her. He hadn't even made a pass at her or anything!

Toph stood up and turned to face the doorway.

She could feel Zuko tense. "What is it?" He shuffled over to crouch in front of Azula.

The soldiers arrived, skidding to a stop just outside the room.

Toph called out, "What are you-"

One of the soldiers cried, "The Firebender is attacking!"

Toph took an Earthbending stance, not because she was afraid of Zuko, who was firmly in her Earth-sense, but because anyone trying to trick her had to be an enemy.

The soldiers moved-

Toph punched her fists above her head-

-they were *throwing* things-

-a wall rose to stand protectively in front of her-

-the projectiles crashed into the ground far short of her and shattered and they were glass and there was a hiss and-

The world lit up around Toph like a hot summer day.
And then her feet screamed.

No, it was Toph who was screaming. Her feet were in agony and she couldn't see and her feet her feet HER FEET-

Zuko had no idea what kind of liquid was in the bottles that had been thrown into his little jail, and that was surprising. He was from the Fire Nation, after all.

He'd expect to know about such a thing as a liquid that bursts into flame when exposed to air.

That's what it had to be, anyway. No sooner had those bottles smashed open and their contents splashed out over the floor than the liquid began smoking, and then-

And then there was light, and Toph was screaming.

Zuko extended his hand in the direction of noise, breathed in and out, and swiped through the air. The flames flattened for a moment and bent away from the petite figure rolling on the ground. Zuko hurried over to her, ducking behind the wall she'd raised as he scooped her up into his arms. He heard the sound of grinding rock that always came with Earthbending-

But no attacks came.

Zuko peeked over the wall just in time to see the doorway become swallowed up by the wall around it. They were being sealed in! His heart hammered, but then he remembered that he wasn't buried alive, that this was really just a deep ravine, and all he had to do was look up above the mud pit-

He still heard the grinding of stone above Toph's screeching.

Zuko turned and looked up in time to see the darkening sky and the first of the stars become cut off by an extension of stone.

He was trapped.

With all this fire.

The air!

He hefted Toph and dashed over to where Azula was still sitting, staring at nothing, not reacting at all to the flaming liquid seeping towards her. He dumped Toph into her lap with a, "Watch out for her," not sure which 'her' he was talking to, and stood up into his most rooted Firebending stance.

He held out his arms in front of them, and moved them back to his sides as he clenched his fists and lowered into a reverse arrow-stance. He demanded control of the flames and let the pulse of their dance synchronize with his breathing. He opened his fists, and curled his arms to push down in front of his chest, settling the energy in the flames to put them out-

The cave went dark for just a moment, and then the liquid hissed and the flames burst back into being. Zuko squinted against he renewed glare, and to him it looked like the flames might not be as high or as strong.

But he wasn't responsible.

Soon, they'd be out of air.

Flames demanded the breath of life just like any person, but they were far more greedy. He didn't
have long before there was nothing left in this cave to breathe.

Zuko couldn't get himself out. An Earthbender would have an easy time of it, but Toph was still screaming in a bone-chilling mix of pain and panic. Azula's lightning would be able to punch through the thinner walls, but she didn't seem to care that she was about to die. It was up to Zuko, somehow. But he wasn't strong enough, wasn't powerful enough.

But if he only had a few more minutes to live, there was no point in giving up. He looked around, at the stone walls and the trickle of water at the far wall and the mud beneath it-

Wait.

Even after hanging around all day, the mud hadn't gained any ground on the solid portion of the room.

Zuko was moving even as the rest of his very bad plan began coming together in his head. He went back to Toph and Azula, wrapping an arm around each one. Azula stood in compliance with his tug, but he just went ahead and lifted Toph's weight completely. He brought them both over to the edge of the mud pool and took a moment to look around, but he couldn't see any sign that he might be right.

Oh well.

He clamped a hand over the nose and mouth of each girl, and dived into the mud with them.

It parted slimily around his body as he slid into the pool, but it was noticeably thicker than water, and Zuko soon found himself suspended in the slop. He didn't bother trying to swim; he just bent his legs up close to his body, fed on his Inner Fire, and kicked out with his Firebending. The force struck the mud, exploded, and propelled him downward like a fireworks rocket. He did it again and slid through the mud to hit against a harder surface. He couldn't let go of the girls, couldn't let them drown in this sludge, so he did his best to wiggle around to get his legs were beneath them. He started crawl himself along what had to be rock-

-Toph began jerking around in his arms, trying to pull her face out of his grip. She must be panicking, not realizing that she wouldn't be able to breathe here-

-the ground disappeared in front of him, and he tumbled into a universe of mud. Had he found the outlet? Could there be an air pocket close by? He gave another Firebending kick and flew deeper.

And again.

And again.

Toph hammered her head against his. It was slowed enough by the mud that it didn't really hurt, but it was distracting, and Zuko was trying to keep track of which direction was down. His lungs were screaming and he needed to breath and was this far enough?

He tried to shift and then fire-kicked again. He made a padded crash against stone. He angled himself into a different direction, and tried again-

Stone.

Another direction.

Stone.
Need air.
Stone.
Air.
Kick-
No more fire.
Air.
Swim.
Toph not moving.
Air.
Azula-
Toph-
-air-

And then the mud moved and cradled Zuko and carried him along.

He thought he might be dreaming - or dying - until his head burst up into dark, empty space and he gasped reflexively to fill his lungs with air.

Yes!
Alive!

He let go of the girls' faces, and both immediately gulped for breath.

Zuko let himself float in the mud, luxuriating in the sensation of being alive. It was pitch black, wherever he was, so there was nothing to look at. The air tasted fresh, at least, so there was probably no danger of running out. He decided to risk a light, and unwound his arm from around Azula. He held up the palm of his hand and called for a little flame, casting a warm orange glow.

And Zuko found a mud-smeared face staring into his own with crooked green eyes.

He splashed back as fast as he could and swung his free hand to point at the thing. He hoped it didn't eat people, but if it did, some fire would-

Wait.

The thing remained where it was, staring at him. Mud dropped from its features, from a nose and ears and a beard and-

It was human.

And then it grinned in a very human way, revealing an irregular collection of teeth. "Hello, Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation. This is my mud. Pretty nice, isn't it? Now, calm yourself down. You can call me the Mud Man."

TO BE CONTINUED
Chapter Summary

Toph and Zuko make a new friend.

The Mud Man

General Fong couldn't help but wonder at the strange destiny guiding his life.

He had begun his adulthood by joining the Earth Kingdom's army as a grunt, fighting for to save his homeland, and rose up over the years to become one of its most prominent military leaders. And now the war that had defined his entire adult life was lost, and he was assassinating the Earth King to steal control of the remaining resistance. And she was truly the Earth King. Whether the Bei Fong clan (no relation to Fong himself) was truly kin to the Royal Line was immaterial; she'd been awarded the title by the people with the authority to give it. And so the orders that Fong had given out this evening were treason.

But if there was one constant to his life, it was that he did what was necessary for his country and the soldiers under his command.

He paced in his command tent. The troops were ready to move, or as ready as they could be without tipping off the rest of the settlement that he was expecting news of an assassination-

"Sir," a captain said as he pushed into the tent. "It's done!"

Fong took a breath. "Okay. Get the lockdown started. I'm going ahead."

Despite the need for urgency, his legs felt heavy as he ran out of the tent and called for every available soldier to follow him. His shouts were loud enough to reverberate off the distant ceiling of the massive cavern that enclosed the whole makeshift base and refugee village. What kind of a world was he living in, that arranging for a teenage girl to either suffocate or burn to death was the best choice he could make for all the people gathered here? Especially knowing how horrible it could be to die like that.

At least he'd also killed those Fire Royal teens. He could take a little comfort in their suffering.

There was already a crowd by the time Fong arrived at the little side-cave where Prince Zuko and Princess Azula had been stashed. A team of his special operatives were standing in front of the Earthbending-sealed entrance, keeping the civilians back. It was all according to the orders Fong had written out earlier, and he nodded at the squad's commander as he made his way over. "What do we have, Colonel Trung?"

"The Firebenders attacked the Earth King, sir!" Trung made no sign that this was the answer he had been ordered to give. "We were on station nearby and heard the fighting, and arrived to find everything on fire! We were about to intervene, but King Toph ordered us back and sealed off the room."

It wasn't a great excuse, but it was the best Fong had been able to come up with on such short notice.
He was a man of tactics, and had been sitting on a method to defeat Toph Bei Fong since he first met her and evaluated her abilities, but he wasn't as comfortable with politics and lies like this. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to actively maintain the deception. "For her own safety, I'm overriding the King's orders. Crack this room open for me and keep the civilians back. I'm going in myself."

His operatives immediately shifted into Earthbending positions and punched a break into the wall that used to be the prison's entrance. There was a pop as the air equalized, and the wall crumbled from the force of the brief wind.

Fong hesitated only a moment.

He wasn't looking forward to what he would find inside.

For all the burned bodies he had seen in his career, he hadn't been able to get used to the sight. Some had been allies, while others the victims of the special weapons he had just used against the Earth King.

But when he stepped into prison cave, there were no bodies. The walls were blackened from the fire, there was the residue all over the floor from the burning liquid mixture his command had invented during the war, and the shattered remains of clay plates were mixed with the charred leftovers of a dinner. The surface of the mud pit on the far side of the room was caked and solid beneath a pool of water fed from a spring in the wall.

Where had the Earth King gone? Where were the Firebenders?

There was no sign on the floor or any of the walls of an Earthbending-made escape route. Then where-

No.

It didn't matter now. Something had gone wrong, and it was time to deal with it. As some of his operatives moved into the cave behind him, Fong motioned for Colonel Trung. "We have a problem, Colonel."

The man wasn't an idiot. His eyes moved around- "No bodies."

"Right," Fong whispered. "Spread word that the Earth King is missing, perhaps injured or dead. I'm taking control to maintain the stability of the camp here and the resistance as a whole. We still think the Firebenders tried to kill her, and my best operatives have been tasked with finding her. Is that all clear? And when Bei Fong is found- we handle it quietly, and then we return the body to the people so that they can mourn."

Trung glanced back at the cave opening. "What if the king is already with her own loyalists?"

Fong shook his head. "We have to remove her from power. She and the Avatar are children trying to fight a war against the most dangerous man alive. Taking control and striking back against the Fire Nation is the only chance our Kingdom has of survival. If we fail, being executed for treason and not having to experience what comes next will be a mercy."

It was a risk even speaking this out loud. Earlier, Fong had given his orders in writing, and then had his subordinates burn the paper once they'd memorized the words. The king could be behind one of the walls, listening now to his confession of betrayal, but it was a risk they would have to take.

Besides, Fong had fought clever enemies before. He was fairly sure that the king would be looking to put distance between herself and treachery at this point, not immediately counter-attacking. She
was a fighter who knew the value of waiting to strike the most efficient blow.

She'd never been in the military. Otherwise, she would have learned that all the efficiency in the world is nothing compared to speed and force.

Fong nodded to Colonel Trung. "Go."

Toph hadn't been so blind in years.

(...her feet...)

She had vague memories, in the time before the badgermoles, of not having a constant awareness of the world around her. She'd responded to sounds, smells, and shifts in light and darkness. That was all she had to reveal the world beyond her hands and feet.

(...her feet hurt...)

Then she'd run away from home. She couldn't remember what exactly had made her leave the Bei Fong estate, or even how she'd found the cave; she had just thought of it as a soothing place she liked. She hadn't known about the badgermoles who passed through those caves until they'd crashed across her path and licked her. She'd instantly started copying them (including the lick), and learned how to move the earth, how to feel the earth, how to 'see' what was around her without the need for eyes. The world came alive to her, but she also became more aware of how far Dad and Mom were pushing that world away from her.

(...her feet were hot, roaring...)

She'd relied on her feet to sense the earth beneath her and the vibrations that passed through it - the vibrations created by life and movement. She'd gotten so good at it that it had become reflex, a constant stream of information. Her feet were her life.

And now they couldn't feel anything.

Now she couldn't feel anything.

Her feet were burned.

She couldn't stop herself from whimpering.

She was floating chin-deep in mud, which was already bad for conveying vibrations. There were voices around her, voices echoing against a low ceiling, but she couldn't make herself concentrate on them. It was all she could do to hold back sobs. Her feet were screaming with pain and wouldn't stop. She couldn't focus on using her hands to try to sense who else might be here with her. She didn't even really remember how she'd come to be in mud in the first place. It was something involving Zuko, she knew, but he'd let go of her and she was blind in the sludge.

Or had she always been blind, and she'd just fooled herself otherwise?

Stupid.

Stupid, but not helpless.

She'd held back on showing her true strength for too long, and the Fire Nation had come along and taken her home away from her. Thanks to their flames, there wasn't even a home for her to take back, not anymore. No parents to lock her away, but no parents to finally see and love her for who
she really was. She wasn't going to let fire take away anything else, not so long as she was breathing.

It didn't matter that this latest fire had come from her own people. That just made it all the more important.

Toph let herself sink into the muck and curled her body up like a baby in the womb. Her feet screamed at the feel of the mud sliding over her burns, but she fought back against it, managing to keep her mouth shut even if she couldn't stop tears from leaking out her eyes to join the muck. She reached out with her Earthbending, imagining herself as one with the mud, and extended her legs to move them through the sludge. It leached the heat out, but that wasn't the relief she was looking for.

She drew upon both the power that existed in all earth as well as the secret energy that sprung up whenever water and dirt mixed to become one.

Waterbending could restore damaged flesh. Firebending could restore a body's flow of energy. Mud had its own way of working.

Toph kept moving her legs up and down as though swimming, using the motion to take control of the mud and shift it according to her will. In response, the sludge grasped her feet and massaged them, caressed and soothed them. She let the pain and the heat leak away into the muck, where they were absorbed as a weight without physical form. She raised her hands to take control of that heavier mud and squeezed her fingers into fists. The healing coating pressed against her feet with real power now, seeking to become one with her flesh. It found a ready home on her sole, where the fire had ravaged the skin and muscle.

The mud filled in and firmed up to form a coating over her injuries. She had never liked shoes, but this was something altogether different. The protective mud - almost more like clay, now - would shield her even as it moved as one with her. Her feet were still damaged, and she'd be blind to the world when next she tried to walk on them, but now they would have a chance to heal. It was up to her body, now, and she knew it was capable of great things.

Toph took a moment to savor the relief and satisfaction of a job well done-
-and she was yanked out of the mud so suddenly that she let out a shriek.

Above the pounding of her heart, she heard someone laughing, a cackle that wasn't familiar. It cut off with a snort, and then the same voice said, "So Earth-healing is real! Hooray!"

Toph swung a fist as hard as she could towards the source of insult.

At sound of a meaty impact, Zuko ripped a hand free of the mud and summoned a flame in his fist. The light reflected off of the surface of the glistening mud that filled the room up to his shoulder and covered the low ceiling and curved walls. He might have felt Azula, propped over his shoulder so that she wouldn't drown in this disaster area, twitch as the fire and flash came to life. But it was probably his imagination. Ever since the crazy old man had popped up, Zuko had been jumpy.

Speaking of whom-

At the edge of the firelight, the weird 'Mud Man' was holding his hands over his nose. Toph floated next him, up to her chin in muck.

The Mud Man said, "What was that for?"
"Touching my royal person, jerkface." Toph scowled at him in the completely wrong direction.

Zuko let some of his worry leak out with a sigh. Toph was awake and acting belligerent, so she was all right. He hadn't failed to save her. That was one person, at least.

He did his best to wade over to her without dropping Azula, but the mud was thick enough to make it a struggle. "Are you okay?"

The Mud Man took his hands away from his nose and looked at them. "I don't think it's bleeding. Oh, do you mean the king? She's doing quite well. Right, your majesty?"

"Go suck on a mudkipper!"

"I like you. And I'm very impressed, too. Healing your feet with Earthbending! I hadn't fully believed in that kind of thing until I saw it just now. Not that I saw it, really, because there's a reason they say, 'As clear as mud,' and it's not to try to get an Opposite Day started up again. But I-

"Shut up!" Toph lifted her arms free of the mud and pushed in the filthy old man's direction. She didn't touch him, but the motion sent her sailing through the mud to bump into Zuko. "What's going on, Zooks? Where are we? Who's the creepy guy? Why did my soldiers light my feet on fire and dump me in mud?!

'Zooks'? If there was one benefit to Azula being catatonic, it was that she hadn't just heard this newest nickname. Zuko elected to ignore and hope it went away. "I don't know. After you went down, they sealed us in the cavern. We were either going to burn to death or suffocate, so I grabbed you and Azula, and dived into the mud pit." He frowned, trying to clarify events in his head. "I figured it had to run deeper and maybe into another cave. But I-"

"The Mud Man!" The stranger let himself fall backwards into the mud, floating on the surface. Only his face was recognizable as human through the filth that covered his whole body. (Zuko couldn't even be sure if the guy was wearing clothes.) "It's one of those names that sounds just the like the person it belongs to. Pleased to meet you, King Toph!"

"Um, yeah, sure." She leaned over to Zuko and whispered, "He sounds like he's either super-old or he's been swallowing weird things."

"Um." Zuko looked over at the Mud Man, who was ignoring them and floating happily. "Probably both."

"Yeah. So, uh, where are we?"

The Mud Man sank into the goop like an anchor, and then a second later popped up somewhere behind Zuko. "My home! You better appreciate this mud bath. This is old mud, ancient mud, very good for the skin. And also burned feet, apparently. But thank you for visiting! I don't get much company these days, aside from slimy creatures and the occasional badgermole. It's nice to have someone to talk to. So, why did you come?"

Zuko turned to keep the guy in his sight, being careful to not drop Azula or push Toph under. "Didn't you bring us here?"

"Bring you? Me? I wasn't planning on any guests today, or I would have gotten out the good plates. And something to put on them. Besides mud." Some sludge dripped down from the ceiling to splatter on the Mud Man's head, but he didn't seem to notice. He just paddled around like a turtle-duck in a pond. "I'm not sure how I even got myself here."
Toph grabbed Zuko's arm and pulled herself so that she was floating in front of him again. "Then how did we get here?"

"Oh, well, obviously the mud wanted you here. It's pretty smart, and it listens to everything. Maybe it will bring more visitors soon, like all those people busy being worried up in your camp, or those nasty soldiers who attacked you."

"The mud?" Toph slapped the surface to make a little splash. "This mud? Mud doesn't move by itself. People need to move it. Like with Earthbending."

"Earthbending?" The Mud Man looked over with what was probably an expression of confusion under all the goop. "No, that's something completely different. The mud doesn't get a say if someone is Earthbending it. But the mud definitely wanted you here. It told me all about you. Want to be friends?"

Toph sighed. "Earthbender or not, you're kind of crazy, aren't you?"

Zuko braced for a bad reaction, readying his fire.

But the Mud Man only made a thoughtful sound. "Am I? Well, that would certainly explain a lot of things. The hallucinations, for one. And most people don't live in mud, now that I think about it. And I did spend a lot of time in that ashland. People don't come out of those things right in the head, you know. On the other hand, this is very nice mud, so maybe all the other people are the crazy ones, and the ashland just made me sane. Oooooooooh, I bet that's it! Welcome to sanity, fellow mud-dwellers!"

Ashland? Zuko had to suppress a shudder. That would explain a lot about this guy. He had passed through two ashlands in the last year, and both of the experiences had changed him-in good ways and bad. "Right. So, um, if we wanted to leave, how would we get out of here?" He hadn't taken a good look around yet, but now that Toph was safe and the Mud Man was proving to be relatively benign, he raised his burning hand to shed more light.

It was hard to tell where the immediate chamber began and where it ended. The dome of the low ceiling was pockmarked with tunnels of mysterious length, and the walls gave way in random spots to new paths that curved and twisted out of sight. There were too many to easily count, and mud flowed through all of them, obscuring whatever truth might have been invisible in the darkness.

Zuko didn't have the first idea how to begin finding his way back to the rebel camp. Had he come in through one of the holes in the ceiling, a passage in the wall, or an access point somewhere below the surface of the mud? "This place is a maze."

Toph waded over to a wall, pressed her left ear against its slimy surface, and then slammed both of her fists against the stone. "I can't- It's all- It's not responding to my Earth-sense clearly. The earth is full of tunnels filled with mud, and all that junk is hard to 'see' through. I can sense what's there for a little ways, but that's not going to get us back to the surface."

"Yeppers." The Mud Man sank into the mud with a splash again, and a few seconds later his head lowered down through one of the holes in the ceiling. "The mud moves all around through here. We can just drift on it like time itself. Like a boat on a river. Like a feather on the wind. Like my poor paper boat in the rain-gutter. Why?! Why did no one tell me my boat wouldn't come back?! I spent an hour folding it just right!!" The echoes of his shouts faded, and his voice came back warmly, "Although time and rivers never flow backwards, and I'm pretty sure the mud does that sometimes. So, probably more like the feather thing. Either that or I'm very turned around in here."

"That," Toph bit out, "is probably the truest thing you've said so far. But do you think you can show
us the way back to our home? I have some people to destroy."

"Oh." The Mud Man dropped out of the ceiling and slid into the sludge without so much as a splash. His head rose back out slowly until his mouth was clear enough to talk with only a little bubbling. "You want to leave?"

Zuko tensed. "Is that a problem?"

The Mud Man didn't immediately reply.

Then he popped up to his full height and giggled. "Nnnnnnope, no problem at all. I shall be your guide through the darkness and the mud! A loyal subject to the Earth King herself, as well as the dangerous fallen prince and the not-so-dangerous fallen princess. We can make it an adventure!"

"Or not," Toph said.

"Oh, all right. Maybe next time." The Mud Man spun in place a few times and then suddenly stopped, pointing with both arms down one of the passages. "Come, this way. We'll be back to the surface in either no time or a century. Come!"

Zuko looked at Toph, and she seemed to be as unsure of this as he felt, but what choice did they really have? At least the Mud Man was sane enough to know he was crazy. That was probably a good sign. Right?

Zuko took a deep breath and started wading through the muck. He purposefully bumped into Toph, and she wrapped her arms around his chest so that she was floating off his back beside Azula. Toph gave him a pat over his heart and said, "You steer with your hands. I'll keep us going."

Zuko didn't get it. "What do you-"

And then she kicked out behind her like a frog-squirrel, and Zuko was sailing through the mud like a speedboat. "Whoa! Uh, keep going this direction. The Mud Man is right in front of us." A thought occurred to Zuko. "And, uh- Mister Mud Man, sir?"

"Hnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn?" The Mud Man looked back.

"You wouldn't happen to be one of those old men like out of the stories? You know, the ones who pretend to be crazy to teach wisdom or something?"

Toph snorted. "That wouldn't be so bad. I could put up with an annoying crazypants routine if that got us some new information or fighting style or something."

"Eh." The Mud Man shrugged. "I'm probably just cracked in the head. Stories like that were old and predictable even when I was young and not living in mud. Really, when the last time a crazy person actually taught you something useful?"

Zuko could only nod. He hadn't really expected anything else, and he'd settle for not being lost in muddy caverns for the rest of his life.

Kanna sat in front of her tent, mending a jacket with a whale-bone sewing needle she'd had since before she left the North Pole over half a century ago. She looked up as another set of Earth Army soldiers ran through the refugee camp on some errand or another, and then went back to her sewing. The word was that King Toph had been attacked by the Fire Nation prince and was now missing.
But Kanna hadn't traveled and lived long enough to be called 'Gran-Gran' by believing every word that made its way to her ears.

As she worked her needle and thread, a heavy breeze passed over her that had no business in an underground cavern. A moment later, an old woman in pious gold and white robes alighted in front of the tent and bowed her head in greeting.

Mother Malu. One of the few people in the hidden rebel city who was older than Kanna, as well - possibly more unbelievably - an Airbender. The Avatar had found her and rescued her abbey - all Airbenders - from the Fire Nation. It was one of several signs of the strange nature of the world today, along with a refugee nation of the Southern Water Tribe living under the protection of a child Earth King.

If that wasn't a reason for Kanna and Malu to be friends, then fish didn't like water.

Kanna continued her sewing but dipped her head low in greeting. "You honor me."

Malu came over and sat down beside her. "The children are all right?"

"They are." Kanna jerked her head back towards the tent. "Shila is keeping them inside with the new Fire Nation child. They've learned that times like this aren't made for running around. Finally."

And she was proud of that. It was a dangerous world, especially for children who weren't fully of her Tribe's blood, but she'd managed to teach them when it was time to be cautious and how to survive when even caution wasn't enough. Those same lessons had brought Sokka to the Avatar's side, and returned Katara from the clutches of the Fire Nation.

Those lessons had also failed her son and his wife.

Malu leaned closer to Kanna and whispered, "I spoke with one of King Toph's personal Earthbenders, a woman named Jojo. She says that the prince is the king's friend and would not do this."

Kanna didn't visibly react. She kept sewing, eyes on her work, and when she spoke again, it was in a low voice neither loud enough to carry or whispery enough to attract attention. "The Fire Nation child in my care, Tom-Tom, is a chatty one. He's already told me all about his sister, the Lady Mai. According to him, she entrusted him to Zuko's care as well as the Earth King's. This Zuko bowed to the Avatar at their lasting parting, and received a bow in return."

Malu said, "Indeed?"

Kanna gave a single nod. "My grandchildren were also at that parting. Zuko might not be their companion, but he is at least trusted as an ally."

Malu made a sound of interest. "Of course, I have great respect for the Avatar and his companions."

Kanna knew that. They had talked about their respective adventures. She liked hearing stories about her grandchildren.

Malu stood up and straightened her robes. "Well, I would love to stay and rest some more, but my nuns and I are helping to keep the village calm in the face of this loss and betrayal. Most of the leaders here are assembling where the Earth King held court, so that they can help with the search and act on any new information. Maybe a representative delegation from the Water Tribe would be welcome."
"Maybe." So Malu was bringing together people who were responsive to an alternate explanation for the Earth King's disappearance. Kanna pulled her needle through the fabric one more time, and then tied the thread off and cut it with a small knife. "Have you seen Bato around?"

"He's talking with some of the men at the campfire down the lane."

"Good. Let him know that I'm on my way, please?"

Malu nodded, and then another breeze rose up and carried the old Airbender away.

Kanna stood up and turned to poke her head into her tent. Shila sat with Tom-Tom in her lap, and Naklin, Quinyaya, Tliyel, and Shlim all lounged in a circle around her, enjoying their new little friend. They all looked up at her, their faces glowing with the mix of eagerness and wariness unique to children in the middle of a stressful situation.

Kanna smiled at them. "I'm going with Bato to talk to some people. Stay in the tent, and behave."

Shila said, "Is everything okay?"

"It will be. We'll make sure of it." That was the role of the elders in any community.

And if they couldn't, then it would be time to fighters to step forward.

Toph had no sense whatsoever for how long she'd been wallowing in mud. Not that she had any problem with mudbathes (they were her favorite kind), but she had more important things to take care of.

Like those soldiers who burned her feet and left her for dead.

And Fong.

She wasn't an idiot. (Not completely.) She hadn't detected a lie in Fong, but she'd felt his disquiet after their debate. He never agreed with her about trying to counter Iroh instead of rising up against the Fire Nation colonizers. She'd had enough questions about his resolve to send Jojo to flirt some information out of his troops, and there was no way a whole squad of his soldiers would commit an act of treason without his command. Military guys were big on discipline.

But despite all Toph's caution, all her power, all her well-honed charisma, she'd nearly gone down like a chump. Without Zuko, she wouldn't have made it. Probably. She still wasn't clear on how they survived, unless the Mud Man was an Earthbender and didn't know it.

At least she could take credit for investing in Zuko. Sure, he was missing an eye, had fought to destroy her nation and people, and had one of the biggest attitude problems on the planet.

But Toph liked him.

She kicked through the mud, propelling him and his brain-dead sister in the wake of the Mud Man. "So, are we almost there yet?"

Zuko gave a grunt. "How many times are you going to ask that?" He shifted his weight, getting Azula's limp body higher up on his shoulder but making her leg bump up against Toph. "And how many times have you gotten a useful answer to it?"

Toph stuck her tongue out at Zuko, even though she was still floating behind him and he wouldn't be able to see it.
Further up in the cavern, the Mud Man's voice echoed back to them. "Oh, we have a ways to go here. Then we go left at the fork, up when we reach the spoon, right at the chopsticks, and then at the big serving platter we let ourselves sink into the mud and think happy thoughts. Easy, right?"

Toph tried to feel if there even was a fork in the path ahead of them, but there was too much water in this mud for her to get a good picture. Zuko's body was clear in her Earth-sense, but the Mud Man was vaguer, and past him she couldn't even confirm that the tunnel they were in didn't just drop off into the void.

And, unfortunately, being able to sense when people were lying was nothing like trying to tell when they were sane. "Yeah, easy."

"So," the Mud Man continued, "let's make the most of the time! Most of the news I get is so unhappy, even with the Avatar running around trying to fix things. But we should have some fun together before you go! Tell me, what are you going to do when you get back up to your General Fong guy?"

Toph grinned. This was a happy thought. "I'm thinking broken bones, to start with. Maybe his arms." To punctuate the thought, she kicked again, driving her and the fire-siblings further along the path.

Zuko snorted. "If it was your general, then he committed treason against his monarch. Execution is the only proper response."

The Mud Man cackled. "Ooh, that's a good one. Break his bones, eat his scones, then cut off his head for the watching crones!" He snorted. "I bet all his soldier people will like that, too! They'll go, 'Oops, that was our beloved leader! And that was his head rolling in the other direction! Stinks to be him!' And if they don't like, we'll cut off all their heads, too."

Hm. Toph hadn't thought about that. She was the king, and was practically worshipped by most of her rebellion, but Fong had been a general for longer than she had been alive, and his soldiers still looked to him for orders. Maybe immediately breaking his arms wasn't the smartest move.

"Well," she said, "we need to make sure everything is okay so that we can help Aang and protect the Earth Kingdom from Fire Lord Iroh."

"Oooooooooh." The Mud Man's voice echoed from somewhere above her. Was he hanging from the ceiling again? "That sounds like fun. Well, fun to listen to. I'm not going to leave my mud just for a war. But I'm sure the mud will tell me all about it. The epic battles, the comedic bumbling of the sidekicks like Prince Zuko, the fires and ash and all that awfulness." He was silent for a merciful moment, and then added, "Eh, I've seen that kind of thing already. What else you got?"

Zuko muttered something about a 'bumbling sidekick.'

Toph kicked the mud again, leaving the source of the Mud Man's voice behind. "Got? I got burned feet and a need to hurt people, but you know that."

Something popped ahead and the Mud Man's body once came into the range of Toph's Earth-sense. "Oh, I know that, you silly turkey-goose. I mean after the war. If there's nothing to entertain me through the mud's rumor-mill, I might just have to go ahead and die after all this time. And what would the world - or kids lost in underground muddy caverns - do without me?"

Toph gave a laugh. "Well, sorry to disappoint you, but that's the boring part. The Avatar helps me beat the Fire Nation, and then I rule as the supreme power of an entire continent. I'm the Earth King,
Zuko made a sound of some kind as he angled his arms to steer them down the curving tunnel. "You're really going to rule the restored Earth Kingdom?"

Toph wrinkled her nose. "Sure. Why not?"

"Well, I-" He went quiet for a second. "Never mind."

"No. Tell me what." Toph slapped the back of his head to convey the importance of her curiosity. Zuko sighed. "I just have a hard time seeing it. You seem too-" He didn't immediately continue. Toph decided to go ahead and be offended. "What? Too young? Too blind? Too unrefined? Too heart-meltingly sexy? Too small? Too stupid?"

"What if I said too muddy?"

"...okay, I would give you that one."

Zuko shook his head. "I was really going to say that you seem too smart."

Toph frowned. "That's the opposite of where I thought you were going."

"Well, think about what we've seen. The Fire Nation has control of entire world and burned everything that wouldn't submit. They had won. The Fire Lord, and my- my parents, and- and Azula, and- they had everything. But we saw how that turned out. It all fell apart. My Uncle is in charge now, but he's turned the Avatar against him. What's the point of ruling? Even you have to deal with Fong now, and the Earth Kingdom hasn't even been restored yet. Maybe we're just seeing the end of nations. Maybe the end of the world."

It might have been the single longest statement Toph had ever heard Zuko make. And she hadn't missed how the Fire Nation was 'they.' It was a strange thought, coming from him. He was all about growling and trying to make people think he was strong.

Toph rested her head against his back, near where one of Azula's legs was dangling. "I think it's more about the people who ruined things than the end of civilization. It takes strength to be a leader, but-" She thought back to how her parents kept her locked up, to the point where no one outside their estate even knew she existed. "You have to know when to let things go. Especially people."

She wondered how that was supposed to work with Fong. She still wanted to destroy him. Metaphorically and literally.

His back moved against her face as he gave a shrug. Or maybe he was just shifting Azula's weight again. "Well, maybe you'll find a way to make it work. I just don't know what a good life looks like anymore."

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm not the only one who's blind, One-Eye."

"I can barely see where I'm going right now. So, yes, you're right."

Heh. Zuko didn't have a good sense of humor, but at least he had something.

"Okaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay," came the Mud Man's sing-song call. "Who's ready to dive and find a long secret passage that will maybe drown us all before we get to the end?"
Toph dipped her head in the mud and let her sigh blow some bubbles.

Fong leaned on his desk, a slab of stone raised from the ground to support a map of the Earth Kingdom, and cradled his head. "How can you not find the Earth King after this many hours? She couldn't have gotten far with injuries, and the Prince couldn't drag two people with any speed. Unless your men didn't actually accomplish what was reported."

Colonel Trung bowed low. "Apologies, general, but I saw her get hit and go down myself. Although, she is a powerful Earthbender."

Fong didn't need to be told that. He pushed himself up from the desk and began pacing across his command tent. "It's possible some of the refugees in the camps are hiding her, but we can hardly order that kind of search. We'll just have to accomplish what we can while we have the time. Is the leadership still assembled?"

"Yes, general. They're waiting for news and talking. The guards we assigned for their 'safety' report that no one has said anything against you."

Well, that was something. Although Fong doubted that any of these people were stupid enough to air such thoughts in the presence of his soldiers. They were survivors, and enemies of the Fire Nation. They were all worthy of respect. He hoped he wouldn't have to order their deaths. "Good. I'm going to address them. Notify me immediately if there's news."

Fong didn't even wait to return Trung's bow before hurrying out of the tent and towards the 'court' of King Toph. It was just a perimeter of empty supply-crates with crystal lanterns on top of them, with one box alone at the head of the space to make a kind of throne. It was cheap theater, but effective enough that the 'throne' had been left empty since Toph's disappearance.

The rest of the court was full and bustling. Someone had made a campfire at the center, and gathered around it were the people who Toph had recognized as leaders among her group of rebels. They were all civilians from Fong's perspective, a mix of family heads, clan elders, criminal bosses, charismatic influencers, Earth Sages, and self-styled commanders of irregular rebel groups. Some had military experience, but none now wore a uniform. All these people had drifted into Toph's influence, bringing their groups under the supposed dominion of the Earth King and pooling their resources for her use.

They weren't even all from the Earth Kingdom. Two of the Southern Water Tribe refugees were here, a tall man and an old woman, as well as a handful of Airbender nuns (of all things) rescued from both the Fire Nation and Long Feng.

They all turned to him as he entered the court and stood in front of the throne. "I'm sorry to tell you all that we still haven't found the Earth King. Considering how many hours it's been, we have to consider the possibility that the Fire Royals might have gotten away with her- or her body. They might have even had help waiting for them in the area."

One bearded man with a sigil of the Omashu city guard on his hat stepped forward. "How could such a thing happen? The Earth King herself brought the prince and princess in, and her Earthbenders accompanied them. How could they have all missed Fire Nation spies in the area?"

Fong held up his hands to show his helplessness. "I'm as mystified as you are. I believed in the Earth King enough to pledge my armies to her. But no matter how we look at this, Toph Bei Fong somehow missed treachery coming from right beside her, and now my king is gone."
The court began murmuring at that. Some of them outright worshipped her as divine, and they didn't like the idea of her making a mistake.

All the more reason to bring about the end of such a reign. Fong knew all too well that Earth Kings were not dependable, even if they really had royal blood.

He stepped up on the makeshift throne. "You all heard her tale of the Avatar's need and Fire Lord Iroh's betrayal. I was prepared to follow her call to prepare for a new invasion, but now I worry that even then she was being manipulated by our enemies. The Fire Lord's own nephew was brought into our camp and tried to kill the Earth King! Maybe he succeeded! We obviously cannot trust the people of the Fire Nation. We cannot tolerate them in our lands any longer."

Fong looked out at the assembled court and raised a fist. "In the name of King Toph, I will send out orders to our allies across the continent, telling them that it is time to rise up and strike at the Fire Nation forces! If they have tried to take our king away from us, we will find her and take her back. And if they have killed her, we will have our vengeance!"

Cries of support rose up from some of the assembly, but also worried chatter. One young woman - Jojo, that former bandit trash who Toph had made into a spy - shouted that this wasn't what the Earth King wanted.

That was fine. Fong didn't need full agreement. He just needed everyone's awareness. As long as no one rose to take Toph Bei Fong's place, who could stop a General of the Earth Army from fighting a war with his own soldiers? Secret movements invited suspicion, and so Fong was declaring his intentions.

All he had to do was keep the Earth King from returning, and no one could question him. Some would refuse to fight in his name, but Fong didn't need all of them. It was more important to strike before Iroh could full stabilize his reign.

Fong stepped down from the throne, ready to be hoarded by people wanting to talk to him-

And the ground shook.

The whole massive cavern shook, sending dust floating and falling. Fong looked around, trying to find the cause. That was too large for even a group of Earthbenders, and this area was seismically stable. What could have caused that?

Someone in the court said, "The Earth mourns for the Earth King!"

Even Fong believed it for a moment.

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Zuko nearly slipped and sank into the goop when the Mud Man suddenly popped up in front of him and crooned, "We're Heeeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrre!"

Zuko had been maintaining a small fireball in his right hand, and raised it as he put more energy into the flame. The glow extended to reveal some more of the same old cave scenery, more of the ocean of mud extending from dripping wall to dripping wall beneath a low oozing ceiling.

What he couldn't see was any kind of path in front of them. "A dead end?"

The Mud Man raised his hands out of the mud and covered his own eyes, chuckling. "Nope! The problem with you, Prince Zuko - aside from all that evil you rolled in for so long - is that you see what they want you to see."
Toph finally unwrapped her arms from around Zuko's chest and paddled her way around him. "Who's they?"

The Mud Man lifted his hands and blinked repeatedly. "Them. Surely you know them?"

Zuko shook his head. "You mean the spirits?"

"Nope!"

Toph said, "A secret order of old guys with masked operatives all over the world?"

"Well, sure, that's always a thing." The Mud Man smirked at her. "But isn't it a little paranoid to think they're down here making sure all this mud is in place?"

Zuko had to admit that it was a fairly sane notion, for the Mud Man. "Then who?"

"The magic people sitting in your eyes - or eye, in Prince Zuko's case - who whisper what the world looks like into your brain." The Mud Man raised a fist and knocked on the top of his own head. "They lie to us. We have to open our brains to the possibilities directly, or else we'll always be stuck seeing what they want us to!" Then he laughed, loud and long.

So much for sanity. But Zuko told himself that giving up at this point wasn't an option. "So, uh, what is it we *should* be seeing?"

The Mud Man actually leaped up out of the mud like a dolphin-stag and came down near the wall opposite them. He popped back up and gave a light push with both hands against the slimy stone.

And a piece like a circle slid easily to fall inward, revealing a new, pitch-black chamber on the other side of the wall.

Toph's head snapped up. "Was that Earthbending?"

The Mud Man blinked at her. "Was it? I thought this room was always here. Well, if there are any invisible Earthbenders around helping us out, let's say thank you and get on with our busy, busy lives." He climbed in through the hole.

Zuko looked at Toph.

She didn't look back at him (of course), but she shrugged and paddled over to the hole to climb in.

Zuko heaved a sigh and followed. He passed Azula's limp form in first, letting go only when he felt Toph's arms around his sister, and then pulled himself through.

He landed on the stone plug. It was floating on top of more mud, somehow, even with everyone's weight on it. He summoned a flame again to reveal that they were in a more-or-less circular little room with no ceiling. It extended upward like a tube, eventually fading into the darkness.

And down the walls flowed a steady supply of mud.

So steady that it was filling the chamber, oozing out the hole in the wall to actually raise the level of the muck back the way they came.

Zuko looked up again. "So we just sit here and float ourselves back to the surface?"

The Mud Man lounged on the other side of the platform as though ready for a nap. "Something like that. You're almost not as dumb as you look. Or you would be if I could trust the evil men in my
Toph reached out to pat the wall, mud instantly flowing down over her hand. "I could maybe climb up with my Earthbending. But I couldn't carry anyone. Too slippery."

The Mud Man closed his eyes and grinned. "Don't worry about it. This way is *much* faster. And lots more fun!"

Faster? *Fun?* Zuko checked to make sure Azula was in a stable position. "I'm not sure I want to know what's about to happen."

"Too bad, Firebender! I burden you with knowledge!" Despite the enthusiasm in his voice, the Mud Man was loafing and bobbing his head as though listening to music in a park. "What we have to do is think really hard about mud. Just sit there, thinking about mud, about how it's as old as the earth itself, about how it oozes and dries and gets wet again and can sweep things away better than an army. Think about how it feels when it gets between your- toes. Become one with it in your mind."

The last thing Zuko needed was to think more about mud. He was covered in it from head to toe, had his boots filled in it, and it was the only thing he could see. "And then what, you crazy old man?! You've led us through this maze and it looks like we're further from the surface than ever and now you want us to meditate on mud?! This is ridiculous!" The fire in his hand flared, shedding more light but revealing nothing new-

-except for Toph laying her head on the stone platform as though listening. "Hey, wait. I-"

"Hold on," the Mud Man hissed.

The entire cave around them shook.

And then everything exploded.

One moment, Toph had been aware of a trembling in the earth, a build-up of pressure from what seemed like no real source. It made the stone quake and the mud jiggle.

The next moment, all the pressure released.

Right beneath her.

It came up from below the stone platform, below the muck. Whatever it was, it came so fast that even the mud couldn't get out of the way. It was all carried upward, the walls of this shaft of the room channeling the pressure and stifling its release. The stone platform flew up with it, starting with all the speed and power of Toph's worst fart and getting faster with every moment.

She and Zuko screamed as flattened against the stone beneath them and shot into the darkness. She could feel him crawling to his sister and wrapping her in his arms.

Toph clutched the stone platform with her hands, digging her fingers in with her Earthbending, and braced her injured, clay-covered feet.

She was distantly aware of the Mud Man laughing, but each chortle was carried away by the wind of their passage. The air rushed past them like an angry Airbender. Mud fell down on them in a spray. And the mix of the two was favoring the mud more and more.

Toph wished she could sense what was coming.
Of course, it turned out to be more mud.

They slammed a positive deluge of mud with a splat that Toph felt instead of heard, but that didn't stop them. They kept flying upwards, and then all of a sudden they ripped free of the goop and light blazed in Toph's non-vision and they were being battered by nothing but air and the stone platform beneath them tilted.

And Toph knew they were flying. Real flying, like Aang did.

She heard Zuko give a cry, and then the sound of Firebending drifted away from her.

The Mud Man sang, "Ooooooooooopsie," and his voice was carried away by the wind.

Toph tightened her grip on the stone platform. It spun in the air and maybe it was rising and maybe it was falling and her stomach lurched and this was even worse than Appa and she focused on the stone beneath her and extended her Earth-sense through it until she was aware of every facet and nook and cranny and lost pebble and-

-and the instant one little point on the edge of the circular stone platform first touched solid ground, she felt it. Felt the ground, and the people who stood on it.

She knew those people.

She jumped just a moment before her ride shattered from the impact of its landing.

She landed shoulder-first hard enough to dent the rock, and her momentum carried her on into a tumble that she felt in bones. She came to a stop by slamming face-first to the ground with enough force to nearly drive the breath from her lungs.

She just stayed still for a little bit.

But she knew how to take a hit. She sucked in a breath of air that was flavored with campfire smoke and stressed human musk, scrambling to her feet. She gave an Earthbending swipe that ripped all the mud free of her body to fling it to the ground beside her, and said, "Your Earth King has returned!"

For a moment, there was just silence.

And then all the people she had sensed in that instant between the stone platform touching the ground and the crash that nearly killed her - her Royal Court - cheered.

She knew them only by their voices, the sound of their adulation. She couldn't know if they were bowing or jumping up and down in joy. With her injured feet covered in their protective, hardened mud-shoes, she couldn't sense anything while she was standing. But being blind was better than crawling in front of her subjects.

And her ears still worked.

She distinctly heard General Fong say, "Your majesty-"

Toph motioned at the mud she'd cleaned off herself, and then again in Fong's direction. The sound of the mud splattering against him was pure bliss. She pointed in that same direction and stepped forward. "You had your moron troop-boys try to kill me!"

"No, your majesty, the prince-"

"Zuko saved my life and has earned a possible position as one of my royal consorts." Toph raised her
hands to summon twin boulders (while Zuko gave a, "Wait, what?" from somewhere behind her) and strode towards Fong. "But I felt your soldiers throw weapons at me that burst into flame! You wanted to attack the Fire Nation occupiers instead of defending the southern territory like I ordered. You betrayed me!" She threw the boulders at him.

But her aim was off. She couldn't sense Fong's precise position, and one of the boulders flew through the air without impacting anything. The other crumbled somewhere ahead of her as Fong blocked it, and then she heard a grunt, followed by the sound of scraping stone that came with all Earthbending.

Fong was attacking her. And Toph couldn't see it.

So she just stood there.

She stood there as Zuko cried out. She stood there as the roar of flames echoed and heat washed over her something in front of her exploded.

Then she reached out with both hands and pulled.

She had no idea where Fong was, but he was still covered in the mud she'd thrown at him. And her motion seized the mud and gave it a pull, not just pulling it off of him but also yanking it from beneath his feet, causing him to slip and grunt and jump to dry ground.

Those sounds were enough.

She walked forward and swung her left fist through the mud that came flying to meet her, then hardened it with a twitch of her fingers. Another step brought her to Fong's landing sight, and using her memory of all the times he had been in her Earth-sense, she slammed that fist into his jaw. Her clean right fist pounded him in the stomach. She lifted her right foot and hooked his left leg, then jerked it out from under him. He lost his balance and went down, but his was good enough to land in a clumsy kneel in front of her.

Then she lifted her left foot, still covered in its semi-hard mud protection, and kicked it sideways into Fong’s right knee, the one bent into a stiff position and held in place by the weight of his body.

*Hard.*

Fong's cry of pain rose up above the wet tearing sound, but Toph could hear the permanent damage being done. It was a cheap move, but this wasn't an Earth Rumble ring.

Champions were held to higher standards, but no one was bothered by royalty pulling cheap moves.

"You all saw it." Toph stepped up on top of Fong's prone form. "He attacked me and Zuko saved my royal person."

Fong groaned.

He had been stupid to attack her in front of everyone, but she'd sensed the tension and turmoil in him before. She hadn't felt any sign of lying when he promised to support her decision to guard the south from Iroh, but that had been a mix of his tricky wording and roiling of his insides. He'd been under stress, betraying her, a tension that no doubt would have been pulled even tighter by her sudden reappearance and accusations.

It was no different than goading a challenger in the ring.
And Zuko had already proven that she could depend on him.

A perfect little demonstration of the truth of her words and the power of her rule.

The members of her court surged towards her. She couldn't tell who was among them, or what was going on with any of Fong's soldiers who might be present, so she held up her hands. "Stop!"

The footsteps tapered off, and one voice that she recognized as belonging to an Earth Sage said, "Your majesty, shall we execute him for his treason?"

Toph blew out a breath, and shook her head. The worst part of being king was being responsible. "No. We're doing things a little differently, today. Fong pulled a real stupid move, but I'm not a Fire Lord. I'm not going to kill anyone and anything I don't like. Fong didn't want to go to the south, so he can go fight his war. Anyone else who wants to join him can do it. And when we send out word to all our allies, we say that everyone has the same choice. They can either come and help, or they can start the fight against the Fire Nation. They can let Fong lead them, if they want. He's awful at treason, but he was a pretty good general back in the day."

Another voice, this one belonging to a woman who had been leading a tribe of raiders in the west for a while, said, "Um, but what about the south? Don't we need everyone?"

Toph shrugged. "Maybe. But we don't have time to fight our own people. We can worry about sorting things out after the Fire Nation has been tossed from our country." She smiled the way her parents had taught her, an expression of grace and gentility.

Then she turned it into a grin that was all teeth and stomped on Fong's head. "Hey, buddy. I suggest you die heroically leading a resistance against the Fire Nation, or find a very out-of-the-way place to retire to when the fighting's done. Someplace I can't find you, because you have no place in my kingdom. And I'm sure that knee's going to make running really, really hard."

She stepped down from him (carefully, because she couldn't feel the ground with anything but the touch of her feet) and turned back to her subjects. "Now, my feet are injured, so someone carry me to my throne. In fact, make a nice stone palanquin for me. Decorate it so that everyone knows I'm a king. I'm holding court starting now, and all soldiers must either pledge themselves to me or go into exile with Fong. Start preparing messages for all our allies, and get the runners going. And be quick. We have lots of work to do."

The sounds of voices and footsteps echoed as everyone started acting on her orders.

It was disorienting, without her Earth-sense to shape the picture for her. (She hoped her feet would heal quickly.) For the first time in a long time, she was surprised when someone suddenly spoke next to her.

But it was just Zuko, saying, "Are you sure it's wise to let your enemies go free?"

She shrugged. "Like you said before, your stupid relatives made a mess out ruling a nation. We'll have to wait and listen to find out if this works better. But thanks for having my back."

"Of course. But the Mud Man is gone. I don't know where he landed. And I have no idea what was going on with him."

Toph wasn't surprised at the disappearance. She was sure the Mud Man had landed fine from his crazy entrance. He might deny being an Earthbender, but it would explain a lot about what had happened back in the mud pits. And as he'd said, he would be listening. Through the mud. Or whatever. If she needed him again-
"Well," she said, "he's part of my kingdom, and he got me back to my throne. That's good enough for now. Speaking of mud, you still sound squishy. Want me to clean you off?"

"Thanks." Zuko sounded kind of relieved. He probably hadn't been looking forward to trying to find a bath. "And if you could get Azula, too, that would be-"

His voice cut out with a sharp sucking of breath.

Toph tensed. "What is it? Are you hurt?"

"-no. But Azula- she was just- I don't know-" His voice kept moving, as if he was whipping his head back and forth. "She's gone! She was right here next to me and now she's gone!"

Oh.

That probably wasn't good.

Azula was good at escaping.

She'd escaped from Mom and Dad. She'd escaped Grandfather and the Fire Nation. She'd escaped from all the confusing thoughts and feelings that hurt so much. She'd even escaped from herself, for a long time. She'd escaped into the dark, going where she could disappear and no longer be a person.

And now she'd escaped from Zuzu.

She crawled into the prison where she and her brother had been kept, earlier today or last year or whenever. She'd snuck away when no one was looking, when everyone was busy making noise, but there was no one here in this little side-cave. She remembered that the blind Earthbender had come to eat with them, before, and then they'd escaped enemies and swam in mud. Those were experiences that had happened while she wasn't a person. They didn't matter to her; they were just information.

She remembered that the strange man said he'd gone sane in an ashland.

Azula wanted to go sane, too.

Then maybe she could understand how Mom could be Dad and Father could Mother.

She needed help to go sane. And Zuzu was bad at giving help.

Dad and Mom were better, but-

Azula shut those thoughts away in the darkness.

She went over to the mud pit at the far side, where the water trickled. Zuzu had thrown her in this mud, before. Then they'd met the strange man. He said he listened with mud.

Azula leaned over the mud and said, "Please take me to your ashland."

The mud bubbled, and a head rose out of it. "My ashland, you say?"

Azula nodded. "I need to go sane. I need to go to the ashland."

The mud-covered face blinked. "Do you know what an ashland is?"

"I do. I was in one before." The strange man didn't react, so Azula added, "I think it almost killed
The muddy face broke into a grin that revealed a random splay of stubby teeth. "Well, Princess Azula, far be it from me to deny a Princess of the Fire Nation a look at the work of her people." He raised a hand out of the sludge and held it towards her. "I will take you to where Omashu used to stand."

Azula took his hand, and let him pull her into the mud. She was looking forward to being sane again.

Zuko still hadn't found his sister when Toph came to him.

He'd had complete freedom to move through the whole underground base, and even the lands around it, but his searching had been futile. Even the Airbender nuns hadn't found any trace of her, not so much as a trail of muddy footprints, somehow. Now he stood outside, in front of the tunnel entrance that he'd been carried through in chains the day before. The sun had risen hours ago, but all it revealed were empty plains of stone and dirt pocked by puddles of mud.

Had Azula run off towards the rising sun? He scarcely believe that she'd mustered the will to move on her own, but he'd been standing between her and the rest of the crowd. No one could have moved her without making a sound, not even an Earthbender.

As he stood going over it in his mind yet again, King Toph came out of the tunnel, holding the hand of the Water Tribe elder, Kanna. Jojo walked behind them, acting as a guard to her monarch, and whispered, "The prince is in front of you."

Toph waved in his general direction. "Gran-Gran here said she'll keep looking for Azula, and take care of her if they find her. She's already taking care of Tom-Tom, so Fire Nation babies aren't a problem for her."

The old woman nodded. "You are an ally of the Earth King, the Avatar, and my grandchildren. If caring for your sister will ease your mind, I will do it."

Zuko spun to face them. "You think I'm leaving without Azula?"

Toph let go of Kanna's hand and stepped towards him. "I'm leaving with the fighters who are coming to fight with me in the south. We're going to meet up with all the other rebels who answer my summons. If you want to fight your uncle, I guess you can always meet us later, but traveling by yourself won't be much fun."

Fight against Uncle? Did she think that saving her life meant he wanted to be her assassin? "Is that why you took me in? To fight under your command?"

Toph didn't meet his glare, of course. "Nope. You can go join Fong, if he isn't holding a grudge. Or stay here, if you want. Be safe and hang out with the refugees. I'll make sure they won't bother you. I don't know that they'll like you, even though you saved me. You are a Fire Nation prince, after all. But you're probably used to people not liking you."

He couldn't help but snort a laugh at her bluntness. "Yeah. I am."

Mother had told him to take care of his sister. He'd tried, first agreeing to enter Uncle's care, but then choosing Toph's alternate hospitality. He hadn't been able to see a future beyond caring for his catatonic sister, relying on the Earth King's generosity.
Meanwhile, everyone else was preparing to defend the good of the world from his Uncle.

The Fire Lord.

And Azula had run away from him. The last of his family that he still had. So was his future to fight against his own nation? Uncle Iroh claimed he was acting on behalf of Lu Ten, but-

-was he really doing this for the greater good, as he claimed?

Could Uncle Iroh or Lu Ten maybe become his family again?

"I don't know that I can fight with you," Zuko finally said. "But I will accompany you on your journey, and witness for the Fire Nation. And- and if my sister is found-"

Toph grinned and swung a fist that slammed into his shoulder. "I'm glad you're sticking with me, Hot Stuff. You've been a good royal bodyguard so far, and who knows how many other people are going to try to kill me this week?"

Kanna bowed her head. "You have my word of honor, Prince Zuko. I will care for Mai's brother, and your sister if she is found."

Honor.

Zuko was glad to know some people who still understood that.

He turned his eye to the path ahead, a rugged path marred by puddles of mud.

In the dark, the Mud Man laughed.

It had been a good day. Very productive. And fun!

And there was still more work to do, before it all came to an end.

TO BE CONTINUED
The gaang find that their trip to the North Pole will be more dangerous than they hoped.

Sundering Dusk

The seas were cast red by the setting sun as it fell behind a range of snow-covered mountains on an island ahead. High above, the first smear of cloudy purple night was making itself visible as an icy wind blew down from the north.

"I hate the cold," Mai grumped as she pulled her new (new to her, at least) coat tighter around her neck. She didn't know what filthy animal it used to be, but the fur was a glistening gray she could tolerate. She’d spent most of her life wearing Fire Nation red, switched to Earth Kingdom green for a while to try to make herself into a new (better) person, switched back to red so that she could be Fire Nation enough to get Aang in and out of the Homeland alive, and now she was wearing gray.

So what did that make her, now? Did she belong anywhere? What kind of person was she?

"Of course you hate cold." Sokka said, "Don't you also hate sweating?"

Oh, right. She was a grump. Question asked and answered.

On the other side of the saddle, Sokka stopped fondling his new boomerang for the first time all day to look at her and add, "I think I remember you talking about it when we got to Ember Island. You said it was stupidly humid and you hated it because you're above getting damp under your arms."

The others weren't paying them any attention. Appa was flying through the sky, following the ship of the weird 'Faceless' Water Tribe, and Aang was holding the reins atop the sky bison's head. Katara was right behind him in the saddle, practicing her Waterbending by moving a little ball of liquid for Momo to chase. Ty Lee was slumped next to Mai, dozing and providing a little helpful body-heat that she didn't need to know about.

Everyone who had them was wearing their winter coats, leaving Mai and Aang as the only ones not in blue. Aang didn't seem to have noticed the colder weather as they left the Earth Kingdom behind for the islands of the Northern Seas.

Mai decided that she was bored enough to engage in some banter, as gross as this conversation was. "Thanks for the warning that you've been obsessing about my underarms. But yes, I do hate sweating. What's your point?"

"So is there a climate you actually enjoy, or is this why your face always looks like you're sucking on a raw sea slug?" Sokka snorted at his attempt at cleverness and looked back down at his boomerang.

Yes, he was in a gross mood today. That deserved full retaliation. She leaned over and poked Ty Lee's face, waking the other girl up. "Hey, Ty Lee, please help. Sokka is being mean to me and I'm
Ty Lee blinked exactly twice and then snapped up to glare at Sokka. "Don't be mean to Mai! She's gloomy but she's a wonderful human being and you're corrupting your spirit every time you give in to bitterness!"

Sokka's jaw dropped. "I- uh- I wasn't- and she, um- but- oh, never mind. Does cynicism count as bitterness? And what kind of corruption are we talking about, here?"

Mai managed to keep a straight face as she said, "Not the kind you want from Ty Lee, I bet."

Ty Lee burst into giggles at Sokka's reddening face and was soon rolling across the saddle. Sokka gave Mai a look that was all sarcastic gratitude for embarrassing him in front of the aura-worshipping girl he'd been trying to flirt with since they left the Fire Nation.

Mai's own moment of corrupt amusement was brought to a end when, upon Appa's head, Aang turned back to smile at her and say, "If you're too cold, maybe I can teach you the breathing technique that keeps me warm."

Katara actually looked up at that, of all things. "Isn't it an Airbender technique?"

Aang shrugged. "Well, do we know that Mai isn't an Airbender? Ty Lee didn't become one until recently. Maybe Mai just needs to try."

Perhaps it was a little awful, but Mai's first thought was that it might be nice to make a little hurricane she could fill with razor blades. (Her second thought was that she wasn't quite sure she had the emotional strength to shave her head.) But soon reality came crashing down, and she found herself considering the damage an Airbender could do without a vow of pacifism to hold her back. Mai had killed Lady Gerel and Kei Lo, both deliberate acts. And then there were the lives she had undoubtedly taken defending her friends and running around in Fire Nation fortresses making things explode-

No, she knew there was no chance she could be an Airbender. She felt far too heavy, even without all the blades she wore against her skin.

Maybe that's why she said, "What, you won't like me anymore unless I can Airbend? Knives too creepy for you?"

She immediately regretted it.

Aang's expression fell, but he looked her straight in the eyes. "I'll always like you. Didn't you know that?"

Hn.

Since when were Airbenders supposed to be so direct?

But that was Aang, unpredictable and unstoppable.

Mai realized she was the center of attention, now. Ty Lee had stopped her laughing, and was joining the Water Tribe siblings in waiting for her response. Even Momo had come over to try to nibble at the tip of her hair-tails again.

So, naturally, Mai looked anywhere else, and found that the universe or Destiny or just plain luck had decided to take pity on her. As her gaze swept out over the edge of the saddle, her sharp eyes
taking in the ocean and ship below, she noticed a signal flag was being waved. "Oh. Look. I think Toklo is trying to get our attention. Better descend and see what he wants."

Sokka had the gall to laugh at her. Jerk.

But Aang smiled again and turned to face front again. "Okay! We're heading down, Appa. Everyone hold tight! Yip-yip!"

She elected to ignore his advice, and instead crawled her way to the front of the saddle as Appa began descending. She hated to be in motion during changes in altitude (her stomach flipped and she kept her eyes firmly on the stationary saddle), but she didn't yet fully trust their new Water Tribe friends.

Silly her, maintaining suspicions about people who only wanted to be friends after they lost a fight.

And it hadn't even been a fun fight. Aang had brought them to Jinchu City on the northern coast of the Earth Kingdom to get some supplies and map a path to Fire Lord Iroh's stronghold at the North Pole, but instead they had found a secret (heretical) Water Tribe. Mai had been hanging out with Aang long enough to not be surprised by any of it, which was either a very good sign or a very bad sign. After Katara had proved herself to be the most dangerous Waterbender around, the 'Faceless' Water Tribe was willing to help out, to take the Avatar and his friends back to their secret home and then on to the main settlement of the Northern Water Tribe.

Mai would go along with all that, but as she had just said, she was the creepy girl with the knives. She'd keep a creepy, cynical eye out for trouble, and use her knives as necessary.

When Appa touched down on the wooden deck of Toklo's ship, she was crouched just behind Aang and fingering some needles. She'd already worked out how to hide quite the nice arsenal of sharp metal in the sleeves of her new fur coat-

"Tell the Fire Nation killer to stop grinding her teeth like that." The gravelly voice belonged to Toklo himself, and sure enough, the Faceless Tribe's gray-haired excursion leader was approaching across the deck. "If you want to mangle something, use the jerky I gave you people."

Aang started to say, "She's-"

But Mai cut him off even as she kept her eyes solidly on Toklo, "I only mangle things when I have to. But thanks for your condescending concern. Want to try addressing me as 'woman' next?"

Toklo shrugged as they all hopped down to the deck, and came over to rub Appa's nose. "My apologies. I didn't invite you down to insult you. We're approaching our destination. We didn't have room in the ship for a long journey with this magnificent creature, but the desk is large enough to let him have a bit of a rest. And this way, everyone back home will know that we're allies."

Appa gave a low rumble of contentment and shifted all six of his legs until he was sitting down. Despite being a Water Tribe, the Faceless Tribe was sailing a cargo junk of typical Earth Kingdom design. But then, their whole deal was not being noticed, and their supply runs to the northern Earth Kingdom coast would be pretty noticeable if they were sailing distinctive Water Tribe ships. The Northern Water Tribe was not big on trade, by all accounts.

Was that because it was just too far to the North Pole for the trip to be worth it? Or did Iroh's secrecy extend to keeping the entire Northern Water Tribe in his sight?

Well, they'd find out soon enough.
Katara let Sokka help her down from the saddle (Ty Lee had just jumped, or else Sokka would no doubt be asking if he could carry her) and said, "I don't see Amka around."

Mai looked, sure enough, the Waterbender healer wasn't among the crew on duty. But that was hardly a surprise, if Ty Lee was right and this Amka was scared stiff of Katara. Maybe she was hiding.

Toklo motioned vaguely behind him. "My daughter is packing up below decks."

So 'hiding' was still on the table. With that as settled as it was going to get without additional effort, Mai turned towards the front of the ship to watch as they came up on one of the large islands that dotted the Northern Seas.

And she actually gasped at the sight of the mountain ahead of her.

The ship was sailing into a bay that surrounded a solitary mountain right there on the coast. A full range of mountains stood in the distance, but this one was left alone as a sentinel standing right on the border of the sea and the flat icy landscape. From above it hadn't caught her eye, but from here, the mountain was perfectly shaped, a symmetrical snowy peak that reached for the dusk sky and reflected the purplish glow even as it was in turn reflected by the mirror-like surface of the bay. Mai had only ever seen mountains like that in paintings; the real things tended to be as lumpy and irregular as most other rocks.

Toklo came up to the railing beside her. "It's not really that perfect."

"What?" Mai tore her gaze away to face him.

Toklo nodded. "You were looking at the mountain. It only appears triangular from the back and the front. It's long on the other sides. Still looks nice, though. My people say Spirits live on it, so we call it the Sacred Mountain."

"Not one of your Tribe's more imaginative moments." Mai turned back to it. "I'd call it something like Stab Mountain if I was in charge. It looks like it's stabbing the sky. So I guess I'm not very imaginative, either."

Toklo gave a grunt that could have been a laugh.

Aang came over, and Mai saw that his own gaze was locked on the peak. "Do spirits really live there?"

Toklo nodded. "There are voices, at least. When our boys reach the age of manhood, we send them to camp on the slope. They go alone, working their way upward for as many days and nights as it takes for them to hear the spirits. It is a journey that starts them on their life's true path. I heard the voices myself, when I was fourteen. They speak different things to everyone."

Mai wondered what the girls got to do when they came of age. Probably just got taught when to wear extra-thick underwraps at certain times of each month.

But Aang's eyes and smile were wide at Toklo's explanation, and he leaned forward. "Ooh, what they'd say to you?"

Toklo rubbed at his eyes. "I was trying to imply that it's a personal thing. When you meet the rest of the tribe, don't go around asking people what the spirits said to them, okay? You'll just embarrass yourself." He turned and headed for the rear of the ship, where a couple of the crew were working the rudder.
The conversation must be over, then. Mai reached over to pat Aang's back.

He might be enthusiastic about it, but she wasn't sure she liked the idea of visiting more spirits. The last one she met had spit up on her, although it had been eating enough coins beforehand to make it a profitable experience, at least. And if this was anything like the ashland Aang had brought them to back in the Earth Kingdom-

She'd make sure to bring her platinum blades ashore.

Aang stayed on the deck of the ship and didn't fly ahead to meet all the prospective new friends waiting on the other side of the mountain, but he enjoyed the fact that he wanted to.

Things had been really tough and dark and— and terrible lately, with war and death and betrayal. But he was making new discoveries, meeting new people who wanted to help him set things right, and he thought that Gyatso would approve of his excitement. Gyatso had always found a reason to smile and have fun.

Momo curled around Aang's neck as the ship pulled in towards the hidden camp.

They had sailed around the mountain-island, finding that it was indeed longer than it had first looked. The base was connected to the rest of the rocky, snow-covered coast only by a thin bridge of land, and right across that bridge was a settlement, sprawling between dramatic cliffs and icy waterfalls. It was surrounded by a circular wall of packed and shaped snow, but a wide opening had been left through which Aang could see huts and larger buildings.

"It looks just like home," Sokka breathed.

Katara hummed. "Does it?"

Aang stroked Momo's fur. "It makes sense. The two Water Tribes shared a strong culture, and the Faceless Tribe is an offshoot of the North."

"But this looks nothing like the South Pole," Mai said. "Trust me, I lived there for about a day."

"It doesn't look like the South Pole now." Sokka rolled his eyes. "It looks like home."

"Ohhhhh," Katara gasped. "You mean where we lived before the Fire Nation found us. I barely remember that. I can't even picture it."

Sokka inclined his head towards their destination. "Well, it looked like that. Right down to the way the snow glows the same color as the sky."

Ty Lee squinted at the village. "You probably had more people, though, right? If it weren't for the smoking chimneys, I wouldn't think anyone's home. It looks lonely."

Aang looked back at the village, and found that she was right. There were no people visible at all. Were they all indoors? He used his Airbending to hop over to the rear of the ship, where Toklo was staring ahead at their destination as his crew worked the rudder. "Is everything okay?"

Toklo must have been worried, too, because all he said was, "We'll see." Then he held out his hand, and one of the crew handed him a white horn. Toklo put it to his lips and let out a sound that reminded Aang of the whalesongs he sometimes heard while flying with Appa over the ocean, except with a clear human pattern to it.
At first, nothing seemed to happen.

Then Aang spotted movement in the village ahead. A heavyset man in fur robes came running out of one of the longer buildings, waving at the ship with both arms. His movements were hurried, more than what could be explained by friendly excitement.

"Something's wrong," Aang said.

"Did your Avatar Spirit tell you that?" Toklo tossed the horn to one of his crew. "What are you nitwits waiting for? Let's get everyone on alert. I want two Waterbenders heading for the shore now! The rest are getting us docked as fast as we can. Bring Amka up here and tell her we might have injured. Go!"

As two of the Waterbenders jumped over the side of the ship and began skating across the water, Aang snapped his staff open. "I'll go with them!"

He waited just long enough for Toklo's nod, and then he was in flight. He beat the Waterbenders to the village, passing right over the wall and dropping to the ground beside the waving man. "What's wrong?"

The man's eyes were wide. "An Airbender? But- no, is Amka aboard? Kirima is dying, and we need more healers!"

Aang had to smile. "Wait here." Then a snap of his glider and a gust of wind carried him back into the sky. He zipped straight to the ship, where a whole pier made of ice was in the process of rising from the bay to meet it.

He came in for a running landing on the deck, scooping Katara up in one arm as he went, and finding Amka climbing up to the main deck on the central ladder. Aang steered for her as Katara wrapped her arms around his chest for a firm grip, and he managed to shout, "Hold-on-I'm-going-fly-you-to-shore-really-fast!" and let go of Katara just before grabbing Amka. Then he jumped up into the winds with both girls hanging on to him.

Amka shrieked, which Aang had been trying to avoid, but all he could do now was steer back towards the shore before anyone lost their grip or the weight dragged him into the icy waters.

They landed heavily, but the waving man was there to steady Amka when Aang let go of her. Toklo's two Waterbenders had arrived as well and had taken combat stances as they looked around.

"It's Kirima," the heavyset man repeated, "and she needs help now. In the longhouse!"

"Kirima?" Amka inhaled and squared her shoulders. "Take me."

"I'm a healer, too," Katara added, slipping her waterskin off her shoulder. "I'm coming."

The man nodded, and led the way back to the lodge he'd come out of. The two Waterbenders remained behind, maybe to tell Toklo what was going on when he arrived.

Entering the longhouse, Aang was surprised at how bright it was inside, lit not just by a large firepit in the center but also crystal lamps from the Earth Kingdom and large white candles beneath protective globes of glass. The space was roomy even with the crowd gathered inside, as tall as a barn and wide enough for Appa to walk through without brushing the walls.

But for now everyone seemed to be clustered near the fire.
The heavyset man pushed through to get Amka, Katara, and Aang to the center of all the activity. A Water Tribe woman about Amka's age was lying with closed eyes on a blanket on the ground, tossing and turning and even moaning out loud. About five women were all working together to guide a glowing stream of water back and forth over the sick one, their movements just like what Katara used for healing, but it didn't look to Aang like they were having any effect.

Next to them, a group of Sages - all old men in fur headdresses and unmistakable long robes embroidered with symbols of the Water element - were helping in ways even more familiar to Aang. They were chanting as they shook bone rattles, and two of them tossed a handful each of fragrant dust into the firepit that filled the air with a calming scent of spring flowers.

Aang's guide called out, "Amka is here! And another healer!"

The healers shifted so that Amka and Katara could join the group effort.

Amka turned to the eldest as she began her Waterbending motions. "Ticasuk, what happened?"

"Her life is being drained." Ticasuk tilted her head from side to side, obviously considering her words. "We need to keep her energies up and give her the strength to outlast the attack."

"Attack?" Aang's question wasn't acknowledged. Everyone was either working to help Kirima, or watching everything with a tension that seemed to dim the lights around them.

Katara moved her arms in time with the other healers, helping to guide the glowing stream of water over their patient. "I can feel the draining. It's- it's strong. I don't think we're going to be able to slow it enough."

Ticasuk whipped her head to look at Katara. "And who are you?"

But it was Amka who said, "Katara is from the Southern Water Tribe, and a powerful Bender."

Katara frowned. "Not powerful enough. Aang, we need your help." She looked to him, and it seemed to take everyone a couple of seconds to follow her gaze.

Ticasuk frowned. "The boy? What can he do?"

"Aang is the Avatar," Katara bit out. "So he can do a lot."

Aang figured it was okay to step forward. "What do you need? I'm still not very good with healing. But if you guide me-

Katara grabbed and pulled him so that he was standing right next to her. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders and shut her eyes. "Just join in. Can you feel the attack?"

Aang shut his eyes, too, and steadied his breathing in time with the Sages' rattles. They weren't toys, he knew; just as the Air Nomads would use cymbals and gongs and flutes to create Sounds of Harmony, these rattles created a spiritual atmosphere that could guide him into an ascended state.

He reached out with both of his hands, feeling the water that the Healers were moving, and joined his Waterbending with theirs. His body swayed with Katara's, and he began moving his arms through the Waterbending motions that Sifu Hama had taught him. He helped steer the stream of glowing water in a circle above the sick woman, and as he became more and more aware of its movements - of the infinite interaction of every drop of water within the whole - he could feel the energies at work.
The water was offering sustenance to the body beneath it and the lifeforce within, but that sustenance was being absorbed the way a desert would consume and quickly forget a single raindrop.

That must be Kirima. She felt like—like emptiness.

Or maybe not.

There was something there, something that was almost slipping away—

And then Aang found the problem.

Guru Pathik had taught him about línghún, the spirit energy in all living things, and how it could mix and form connections with others. It formed around love, around family, around friendship. It was the very substance through which a person could feel a tug on their heart.

And it was the medium through which such a bitter, chilling cold was now burning Kirima.

Aang gasped at the icy bite.

It wasn't real cold, but it was the closest way he could think of it. Just as cold sapped the heat right out of a body, this—this attack was drawing the Qi right out of Kirima's physical substance. The healing water was helping, was strengthening Kirima's Qi, but not fast enough. Not warm enough. Not enough.

So Aang reached out across the línghún connection to see if he could find the source of this awfulness.

He found a man.

And something more.

As he touched the man's own línghún, Aang felt something from Kirima. It was warmth, and power. It was loyalty.

It was love.

And the same feelings flowed back from the man to Kirima. They were in love. They had formed a connection, and nothing could break that.

Except the man was dying.

It was unmistakable. Aang could feel the man's own energy draining away just as Kirima's was, only faster. Colder. And there was something else here; it was feeding on the man's Qi, draining it away. Slowing the man's body, freezing the breath in his lungs.

Aang sucked in his own breath of air. It was just like what Mai and Sokka had described of the Di Fu Ling undead monsters in the Southern Air Temple. The reanimated forms of the murdered Air Nomads had risen and tried to draw the very breath from the bodies of his friends.

And now it was happening to Kirima's lover.

And there was nothing Aang could do about it. It was all beyond his reach.

The man's lifeforce faded under Aang's observation, and like the way Air rushed in to fill a Void, Kirima's own energies were flowing back through their connection to be absorbed by the killer,
dragging her into death as well. He felt the last of the man's Qi flicker - *flicker* - and then it just disappeared like a candle in a storm. He heard Kirima's cry, a sob buried amidst her moans of pain, and a wave of coldness reached across the universe to grasp for her.

But Aang could feel the connection between Kirima and her dead lover, and although he could not break it - did not *want* to break it - he could protect it.

"Roku," he whispered, "help me."

And it was like a bonfire began blazing in his heart.

It warmed his body and spirit. His blood sang. He reached out with the strength of a thousand lifetimes and *shoved* back against the deadly force.

There was a snarl, and then the presence was gone.

Aang opened his eyes.

Everyone was looking at him. The Waterbender Healers had stopped their ministrations, while the Sages were holding rattles loosely in slack hands. The rest of the Tribe was still clustered behind them, and Aang could hear their anxious murmurs.

On the ground at his feet, Kirima was asleep, and no longer restless.

"Um," Aang ventured, "everything okay?"

Beside him, Katara unwrapped her arm from around his shoulders. "You should be the one telling us. You were glowing."

"Oh," Aang smiled and offered a wave to the crowd. "That's nothing to worry about. Just Avatar stuff. And, uh, I think I protected Kirima from something really bad. But, well, there was a man who I think she really likes, but he wasn't here, and there was a- a *something* and I think the man kind of died? Sorry about that. I couldn't- couldn't-"

And then the door to the longhouse burst open, and Toklo led in a group of Waterbender warriors, followed by Mai, Sokka, and Ty Lee.

Toklo looked around. "What the *slush* is going on?"

Aang thought that was a really *good* question to start with.

Sokka should have known something like this would happen.

It never failed. They were just supposed to be making a quick stopover: meet a new Water Tribe, enjoy the culture, get some supplies (some better jerky than they sold in the Earth Kingdom would be good, maybe even seal-meat), plan out how to go show Iroh 'what for,' and then set off again. Easy-peasy. They'd have the world all fixed up by the end of the week. Probably.

But of course it never worked out that way.

Sokka sat beside the firepit in the longhouse, sharpening the boomerang he'd taken (or rather, won by right of victory in combat, more or less) from Toklo at their first meeting, and listened as someone said, "We think we have a monster problem, good Avatar."

Yup. Monster problem. Distractions didn't come bigger than that. It never failed.
Most of the rest of the Faceless Tribe village had dispersed for now. Night was falling. Waterbenders were sealing up the protective snow-wall around the village, and patrols of warriors were being set up. Everyone else was seeing to their families, and there had been talk of moving the whole village into the longhouse together.

But for now, Team Avatar was being given a not-quite-private audience. Amka and the other Healer women were seeing to their sick friend, who was still sleeping, while Toklo and his crew were seated near Sokka, also waiting for explanations.

Aang bowed his head to the speaker, the round man who had waved to them from the shore when they first arrived. "You can call me Aang. So, uh, what kind of monster problem?"

The man bowed his head in return. "I am Chief Kumaglak. Thank you for your help, and my apologies for my hastiness. As for the monster, have you heard of the Unhcegila?"

Sokka glanced around. Toklo and his warriors stiffened at the word. Mai and Ty Lee exchanged questioning glances. Katara looked over at the sick girl. Aang shook his head.

Sokka held up his boomerang so that he could inspect the cutting edge. "The fact that it has a name means it's a pretty bad one. No one ever bothers naming monsters that only caused a little trouble before getting chased off by a few guys."

Kumaglak's eyebrows rose. "You speak wisdom, of a sort. You are of the Southern Water Tribe, as well?"

"I'm Sokka. Nice to meet you. This is my boomerang."

"Likewise, Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe. And Katara is your wife?"

Sokka couldn't stop himself from making a face. "Ew, no, she's my sister!"

Katara gave a sardonic wave. "I'm on my own. No husband, no father, no man watching over me. And the same for the rest of the girls, thanks."

Toklo added, "The Southern Tribe has modernized, Chief. Get back to the Unhcegila. How long has this been going on?"

Kumaglak sighed. "Which part? You know of the strange weather. Of the boulders that tumble down the mountain and seem to come from nowhere. And the sounds like thunder in the night." He looked back to Aang and Sokka. "We have lived next to the Sacred Mountain since our ancestors split from the Northern Water Tribe, and we have honored and lived in harmony with the spirits. These changes started about a year ago, and now-" He swallowed. "Several days ago, a fishing boat right here on the bay disappeared."

Toklo sat up straight. "Who?"

Kumaglak turned to him. "Ikiaq and Aput."

Toklo scowled, and the Waterbenders behind him traded whispers.

Kumaglak turned back to Aang. "Of course, we sent out our Tribe to search for them. That's when we caught our first glimpses of the creature. No one could discern a definite shape, but it seemed long like a snake, and we found footprints that indicated four clawed legs. That matched the legends of the Unhcegila, according to our Sages. Hunters tried to track it, but-" He frowned, obviously unsure how to continue.
Sokka had to wince. "How many more were taken?"

Kumaglak gave five more names. Toklo swore and hopped up start pacing around the fire.

Aang looked over at the sick girl. "And- one of them- She knew him. Loved him."

Kumaglak's eyebrows rose. "The Avatar, too, is wise. Yes, Aang, Pana was betrothed to Kirima."
He also looked over to her. "The others all just disappeared, out of sight for a moment and then never seen again, but Pana stayed close to his friends and managed to cry out. It was night, but the others said they saw him using his club to try to fight off something like a dragon. Again, it matches the legends."

Sokka didn't miss the way Mai and Ty Lee shuddered at the word 'dragon.'

Kumaglak continued, "Then- the accounts are colored by fear, but the creature did something to Pana that paralyzed him, and wrapped its tail around him and carried him off. The hunters chased, but they lost it in the darkness. When they came back, I went with some of the women to tell Kirima. Pana had no other family, and had already taken her into his home. We found her collapsed. And Old Ticasuk said she felt an evil presence around the girl. We brought Kirima here to try to save her, and- and we thank you for your help, Avatar. I mean, Aang."

There was silence for a moment.

Sokka went ahead and ended it. "So does anyone else find it fishy that the girlfriend of the guy who managed to fight the monster is the only one to get sick?"

Aang pointed at him. "That's how I knew! I felt the connection when I was trying to help heal her. The man faded-" Aang hugged himself, and Momo cooed and curled up in Aang's lap. "-lost to the cold. It tried to get Kirima, too, but I pushed back against it. The Avatars of the past helped me."

Toklo brought his pacing to a stop. "So everyone in the Tribe is in danger. If we send out warriors, their families could be killed from afar by the Unhcegila. A close hunting party can be brought down if just one member is taken."

Sokka could do the math. But that wasn't what intrigued him. "But six other people were taken, and their families are fine. Right?"

Ty Lee hummed. "Maybe something protected them. Or the monster only goes after the others if it gets mad? Do monsters get mad like that? Azula kicked a camel-pup once and it hung around outside the palace growling for a week. They had to send guards to remove it."

"All I know," Katara said, "is that we were going to lose Kirima until Aang fought back against the Unhcegila. I'm not sure there is any protection from it."

Oh, that was so reassuring. Sokka shrugged and leaned back. "Well, I'm out of data to work with. I can't make igloos without snow. Hey, Aang, any mysterious Avatar Wisdom you want to add before we run away screaming?"

Aang shook his head. Of course. It would have been too easy, otherwise.

The new quiet was broken by the unmistakable sound of a metal blade sliding against its sheath, and Mai held up her platinum knife to shine in the light of the fire. "So, I take it we're staying and going monster-hunting?"

Katara stood up. "Of course! We have to help these people, right, Aang?"
The kid nodded, to Sokka's complete lack of surprise. "Iroh needs to be dealt with, but it's my duty as the Avatar to take care of stuff like this." He looked to Sokka. "Right?"

Sokka sighed. Logically speaking, it was more important to see about Fire Lord Iroh and save the whole world. Getting involved in a local monster problem was an unnecessary risk. What if Aang got hurt or killed? What, would Sokka go to the north In The Name Of The Avatar, and then pass on notes about how it went with Iroh to the next weird kid in the cycle? No, the smart thing was to ignore this and go after the more relevant threat, then swing around and take care of this once they were done (if they survived and wanted to). There was no question about it.

But Iroh had done something to the Northern Water Tribe. Sokka knew firsthand that the Southern Water Tribe was broken, and maybe couldn't be fixed. This might be a weird, hidden, spirit-obsessed splinter-tribe, but it was a Water Tribe all the same. It might be the last one living like a Water Tribe was supposed to.

There was a part of him that didn't really want to leave it be eaten by a monster. Even if another (very big) part of Sokka didn't want to be eaten by a monster, either.

He didn't say any of this. "We're all going to die horribly here, aren't we?"

Ty Lee leaned over and batted at his Warrior's Wolf-Tail. "If we do, at least we'll all die together."

Somehow, it didn't help.

Mai had seen some weird ways of preparing for a fight: meditation, speeches, and symbolic group-kata with way too much shouting, to name just a few examples. She had grown up in the Fire Nation, after all, the world-capital of People Making A Big Deal Out Of Fights. She herself had participated in a few ritual combats, back in her young and wild days, including one a few weeks ago.

But she'd never before seen anyone get ready for a battle with a party.

The various members of the Faceless Tribe had returned to the lodge after the sky fully darkened. They came with food and supplies and kids as old as Tom-Tom. (Any scared sniffles had stopped when they saw the sky bison curled up at the far side of the lodge.) They also came with musical instruments. And they barely had enough for a band when the dancing started.

"This," Katara said, "is how warriors of the Water Tribe prepare for battle."

Mai snorted. "Classy."

They were sitting off to the side, because apparently women didn't dance around here. (Mai wasn't sure whether she should be offended or relieved.) The men were all gathered around the firepit, organized into lines and moving to the music. It wasn't a particularly fast or shaky kind of jig, so Mai didn't feel especially scandalized. The lines of dancers would take a step, wave their arms and bob a little, take another step in a different direction, wave their arms in a way that was somehow different from the first time, and so on and so on. Sokka was up there, trying not to look like he was really into it, and Aang was grinning up a storm despite what awaited them tomorrow.

Katara turned her gaze away from the dancing to raise her eyebrows at Mai. "What? You don't like dancing?"

Ty Lee giggled.
Mai decided to keep things polite. (Just this once.) "There isn't much dancing in the Fire Nation, unless it also involves trying to kill someone. Dancing without combat is lewd."

"Lewd?" Katara blinked, and then motioned to the party. "That's lewd?"

Mai gave a dismissive little flick of her fingers. "Dancing without combat is movement without restriction. In other words, freedom. People who embrace freedom have no honor, because there is nothing keeping them from disobeying the Fire Lord, or forsaking their companions, or running away with a cutie half their age and leaving their honorable spouse behind with the kids and a mountain of debt."

Ty Lee giggled again. "But leave your grandpop out of this."

Oh, sure, she had to just bring that up. "Whatever my grandfather might have done before I was born, I have thankfully not inherited the inclination."

Katara smirked. "I don't know; you've been disobeying the Fire Lord all over the place for as long as I've known you. I didn't realize you were being lewd in public."

Mai had to stop and think on that for a moment. "On the other hand, maybe I did inherit something from my mother's father, and it's my poor cursed blood that I can blame for all my life's troubles. It's not lewd if I can't help it, right?"

Ty Lee smiled and stuck her chin out. "I can help it, and I danced all the time back in the colonies. I even made it part of my circus act, dancing across the tight-rope."

Mai held up a hand. "Not picturing it, thank you. Keep that kind of thing to yourself."

"Mai, you've seen me dance. Sometimes in the bath-"

Mai placed her hand over Ty Lee's face. "Not picturing it, thank you."

Ty Lee leaned away, freeing her face and landing in Katara's lap. "Hey, Katara, want to dance with me?"

Katara froze. "Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh-"

She was saved when Amka came over, carrying a bowl filled with some kind of liquid. The bowl itself was bone-white (and probably made from bone, to Mai's wariness) and its surface was carved to form images of people and animals. It was probably Culture.

Amka knelt in front of them, and held up the bowl. "Women would not be welcome with the warriors, but you will nevertheless be fighting with them tomorrow, yes?"

"Yes," Mai, Ty Lee, and Katara all said at once and with certainty.

Amka nodded slowly. "I do not understand it, but I have seen your skills, and I- I am glad you will be protecting my tribe. I have brought you this drink, so that you can prepare yourselves in spirit and body."

Ty Lee sat up and sniffed at the bowl. "What is it?"

Amka frowned. "It is what the boys drink before going to the mountain to listen to the Spirits. It strengthens them in spirit and body."

Mai started to say, "Yeah, we got that part, but what exactly is-"
But then Ty Lee picked up the bowl and took a gulp.

Mai rolled her eyes and gave up.

Ty Lee lowered the bowl and licked her lips. "I was expecting baijiu, but this tastes like weirdly spicy cream."

Amka blinked. "If it was baijiu I would have said it was baijiu. The Sages prepare it before matters that pertain to the Spirits."

Ty Lee handed the bowl to Katara, who took it with reverence. Katara bowed her head to the bowl - several times - and then at last took a sip. When she finished, she lowered the bowl and whispered something.

Then she handed it to Mai.

Really? Drink some weird Water Tribe cream for superstitious reasons? Mai was going to tell Ty Lee to go ahead and finish it, but then stopped. As Katara had pointed out, Mai had been engaging in a lot of lewd behavior this last year, and she'd already gotten used to living outdoors and making do without a real bathroom. What was weird Water Tribe spirit-cream compared to that?

After all, she hung out with a boy who glowed. This stuff might even work.

She accepted the bowl and took a slow sip.

Ty Lee was right. It was creamy, but there was something in it that added a sharp flavor. There was no taste of wine to it, but somehow Mai felt warmer as it settled in her stomach.

As she puzzled over that, Katara said, "So how is Kirima doing? I heard she woke up?"

Amka nodded. "She did. She asked after Pana, and - thankfully, she is sleeping again. I will stay with her tomorrow. As a friend and as a healer. She was so happy when she moved into Pana's hut. I don't know if she will stay there, or go back to her parents."

Mai shrugged. "She might as well make sure we're not all going to die, before she decides. Why agonize for no reason?"

Amka stared at her, and then shook her head. "I am not used to your Fire Nation humor."

"Hey," Ty Lee said with a snort, "don't blame us for Mai's sense of humor. The Fire Nation has enough things to answer for."

Katara chuckled, but there was no real mirth in it. "That's part of why I'm not going to let anyone stop me from going to help fight, tomorrow. If the Unhcegila can hurt people through their love, then everyone is at risk. I'd rather be out there protecting the people I love than waiting for that love to be turned against me."

"Oh." Amka's voice was soft. "You're right. I hadn't thought of it like that. Now I'm even gladder you will be fighting. If the Avatar is our best hope, then it is good that his love will be there beside him." Then she looked at Mai. "Are you and he betrothed, yet? If it is okay to ask."

It took a moment for Mai to find her voice, and when she did, it just came out as, "Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."

"They're not betrothed," Katara said.
"What age do Air Nomads get betrothed, anyway?" Ty Lee tapped her chin. "I'm not quite an adult in the Fire Nation, but maybe now that I'm an Airbender I'm of marrying age? Aang is younger than me, and he and Mai-"

"Why," Mai hissed, "is everyone talking like this? Aang and I aren't- we aren't-" She couldn't find the words, so she waved her hands to indicate the obvious meaning.

Ty Lee frowned. "Aren't what?"

Amka's eyebrows drew together. "He looks at you like Pana and Kirima looked at each other. I thought you were-"

"He's ten years old." Mai nodded, satisfied that she'd shut this whole thing down.

Ty Lee shoved her. "He is so not. He's thirteen, at least. His voice is changing. And I was conscripted as a Weapon of the Fire Nation at thirteen after our Agni Budokai."

Mai shook her head. "Well, I'm seventeen. I'm an adult. In the Fire Nation, he's a kid. End of story."

Katara leaned forward and grinned. "Then maybe I'll go ahead and get betrothed to him. Aunt Wu said that if you don't want Aang, I'd get to marry him. Are you stepping aside?"

Mai snorted. "I don't believe in fortunetellers. Do what you want."


Amka shook her head. "I am sorry I brought it up? I wish you good fortune, tomorrow. For all of our sakes." She took the empty spirit-cream bowl, and left with one last bow.

That left the girls in an uneasy silence. At least, it was uneasy for Mai. She liked to get the last word in.

She looked over at the dancers, where Aang was hop-stepping in a circle with Sokka, while all the warriors did the same around them.

"I'm not evil," she said. "I'll be there with Aang tomorrow, and wherever else he goes. Because I- I believe in him."

The silence in the little group wasn't any less uneasy for having said those words. But then, Mai had never been comfortable saying things like that.

Katara reached over and patted her shoulder. "I know."

And Ty Lee grabbed them both into a hug. "Your aura says it all, Mai. Don't worry about it."

So she didn't.

She worried about the monster they'd be fighting tomorrow, instead.

As soon as the hug was over, Mai sat back in a shadow, took out her platinum sword, and began checking the edge. It was ready for cutting, if that even mattered when dealing with spirits, but as she went to put it back in its scabbard, she caught a glimpse of something both shocking and familiar in the reflection in the blade.
It was a face painted like a Noh-mask, emerging from the body of a giant insect.

Just like her dream, back in the Fire Nation.

Mai froze in her surprise. Then she moved to take a closer look, and just saw her own face in the mirror-like blade, distorted but still fully human.

Weird.

She didn't usually react that badly to stress.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
The True Face of Death

Chapter Summary

Aang and company go monster-hunting, and it turns out to be quite a chore.

The True Face of Death

Sokka had never been on an actual hunt before.

He'd heard stories of them, and fantasized about them throughout his life (usually with plenty of meat for everyone at the end and maybe a gorgeous girl or two for himself). He'd done metaphorical hunts, too, depending on how much he wanted to stretch the definition; he'd hunted for where he'd lost a boot many times, and this whole 'world-spanning adventure with Aang to save everything' gig was probably a kind of hunt. But this was the first time he was setting out with a bunch of real hunters, across a snowy landscape, to kill a beast. And it was with a Water Tribe, albeit one which was kind of isolated and cult-ish about some face-stealing spirit that fought Avatar Kuruk a kazillion years ago, but no one was perfect. Right?

He resolved to represent the Southern Water Tribe well, bringing bravery and strength to this hunt, and also to not die horribly in the coils of a horrible death-monster.

The day began before dawn, when the whole Faceless Tribe woke up together to the sounds of a summoning drum in the longhouse. Chatter and tuneless music brought Sokka out of dreams about watchful eyes, and he found himself curled up on Appa's tail. Aang was waking up on the other side of the field of fuzz, and up the saddle, he heard some grumbling that sounded like Mai and some testy responses from Katara and Ty Lee. Sokka found Momo sprawled in what looked like it had been one of bowls of that Qi-strengthening drink they had all drank last night, but the bowl was bone-dry now; Momo really knew how to pack it away, apparently.

It turned out that preparing for a hunt was a lot like getting ready for a day of work or travel or infiltrating a Fire Nation fortress. You got dressed, hit the bathroom, checked your supplies, ate something hearty that wouldn't make your tummy rumbly, traded quips with people to hide how worried you were, settled some last-minute plans, hit the bathroom again, made sure Aang hit the bathroom again because seriously we are not turning this whole hunt around in an hour and you don't want to have to go when you're being stalked by a supernatural terror- and then set out to risk your life for the good of the Tribe.

Sokka noticed that the sick woman from yesterday - the one whose husband or something had been killed by the monster, the 'Unhcegila,' and who Aang said had nearly been killed through her magic connection with the guy or something - was packing supplies for the hunters with the other women. There was no time to mourn, it seemed.

It was the old warrior Toklo, apparently acting as Hunt Leader, who came over while Sokka was having breakfast by the central fire and said to him, "So how do we best use your crew?"

Sokka wasn't surprised that he was the one being asked- just relieved. "Well, I was thinking that it would be a shame to waste a flying sky-bison. Appa can pace the hunting party, keep an eye out where we can't, and warn us of any trouble."
Toklo sat down beside him and nodded. "On the other hand, I would feel better having the Avatar on the ground with us."

"No problem." Sokka tilted his head towards where Ty Lee was petting Appa's nose and feeding him some of their dried fruit supplies mixed with what looked like a seaweed harvest. "Appa's smart, and we can all steer him when the weather is okay. I figure Ty Lee can stay with the big guy, since she's an Airbender and can almost fly. Aang's on the ground with us, along with Katara and Mai."

Toklo grimaced. "You're still bringing the women along, huh? They're not of our Tribe, so I won't give them orders, but it could be bad luck."

"Bad luck?" Sokka snorted. "I consider Waterhealing and platinum weapons to be the opposite of bad luck when weird stuff is happening. And Katara is a better Waterbender than your guys. Uh, no offense? We could bring some of your healers along in Appa to keep them out of the fight. Your daughter Amka might."

Toklo cut him off with, "I will accept their presence of your women. Those of my Tribe will remain behind as is our way."

"I am so glad I have your acceptance," came Mai's voice. Sokka looked up to find her towering over him, already wearing her gray fur coat. "I'd hate to get eaten by a monster because you were distracting me with disapproval."

Toklo looked up at her, looked at Sokka with a clear 'your life choices mystify me' expression on his face, and got to his feet. "The sun will be up, soon, and that's when we'll leave." He gave one last nod, and moved away.

Mai immediately sat down in his place. "I heard you making plans."

"Yeah. You okay being on the ground for this?"

Her eyebrow did that really sharp arching thing she enjoyed so much. "The less flying I do, the better. Especially if Aang is going to be on the ground, too. But that's what I wanted to talk to you about. It's fine that we're helping these people, I guess, but Aang is still the most important person in the world. Right?"

This had been what was bothering Sokka last night. He wanted to help a Water Tribe, but also knew this was a big risk. "Right. Your point?"

Mai leaned close. "I'm going to stay by Aang with my platinum sword. I'll protect him, no matter what."

Yeah, that was Mai's practical cynicism at work. Sokka was glad it was still working. "Okay. I don't think the Tribe is expecting you to take point, anyway."

"That's not where I'm going with this." She glanced around, and then pulled a small blade from her belt. It glinted brightly in the light of the fire, and Sokka recognized it as the platinum knife she'd been carrying since the South Pole, when she helped Aang and Sokka escape. "Take this. I know you'll protect Aang if there's an overly dramatic hard choice, but you also want to help kill this monster. So you need some platinum, too."

Sokka reached for the weapon, but stopped himself. "Are you sure?"

She gave him a Look. "Do I give away weapons when I'm not sure?"
He knew she didn't, but that wasn't what he was getting at. "I mean, the knife versus the sword. You're magic with knives, but you're keeping the sword and giving the knife away."

"Oh." She blinked. "I was thinking that I've shown you how to fight with knives, but the only sword training you've had is with Suki's katana. This isn't the same kind of sword. I want you to be effective, not a danger to yourself and others. More than usual, I mean."

"Wow. Thanks." Sokka took the knife, and slipped it into his own belt. "Someday, I'm going to teach you about the concept of team morale."

"Eh, don't bother." Mai stood up and smoothed her coat. "I never had any to begin with."

The entire snowy landscape glowed with the light of the rising sun. It reminded Aang of how the white towers of the Southern Air Temple would reflect the colors of the sky. Except here, the closest mountain wasn't below them, but standing tall and casting a spear of a shadow across the snow. The Sacred Mountain, isolated on its own little peninsula in the bay, reached for the sky like an arrow.

And was it Aang's imagination, or did the wind that passed the mountain carry whispers?

He was straining to hear when Sokka came over to throw an arm around his shoulders and say, "So, you ready for a manly trip to hunt down and kill something?"

Aang tried to smile. "You know, we might not have to kill the Unhcegila. Maybe it can be reasoned with. Or healed of dark, corrupting energies and turned into a kind and loving fluffy peace-monster!"

Sokka patted his shoulder. "Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you're maintaining a positive outlook. You've had trouble with being manly, sometimes."

That's when Ty Lee, nearly camouflaged in her Water Tribe parka, crashed into them both from behind and wrapped her arms around their waists. "Positive energy is how success happens! Our minds are more powerful than our bodies or our world, and we can will victory and fortune into existence if we just believe in it hard enough!"

Aang thought about that. "Um, I have no problem with staying positive, but if that's how it works, then why is the world damaged and at war?"

Ty Lee pressed her head against Aang's so that their cheeks were mushed together. "We need more positive energy! I'm going to sing a happy song really loudly so that everyone stays positive!" She suddenly let go of them, and ran off. "Hey, Katara, I need you sing harmony for me!"

"Whaat," came Katara's voice from somewhere.

Aang looked over to see Sokka lost in thought. "What are you thinking?"

Sokka's eyes continued to stare into the distance. "Have you ever been attracted to someone who you're sure is wrong for you in every possible way and some you probably haven't even imagined yet?"

Aang thought about Mai. "No. Maybe you can work through it?"

Sokka just sighed.

The hunting party soon moved out.

Most of the men of the Faceless Tribe were part of the hunting party. Hahn, the survivor from the
Northern Water Tribe, was staying behind, and he didn't look as excited as Sokka or Ty Lee. Remaining with Hahn and a few guardian warriors were the elders, including the Water Sages, and Chief Kumaglak. The women all stayed, and Aang saw them already working to set up a simple hospital area in case any injuries came back. Even Momo was clinging to Aang as they set out across the icy landscape.

As Ty Lee took Appa up into the sky, Aang trotted over to walk beside Toklo at the head of the group. "How come your chief isn't coming? I thought Water Tribe chiefs were also hunt leaders?"

Toklo raised his eyebrows. "In the main Southern Tribe, perhaps. Northern Chiefs are all descendants of Torngasak; they consider it a sacred bloodline destined to lead. That's one of the things my Toqukiinaq Tribe - the Faceless Tribe - chose to change when we split from them. Kumaglak was named chief based on what the Spirit Voices said to him, when he came of age camped on Sacred Mountain. The old chief took him as an apprentice, and Kumaglak has proven himself to be a wise leader. Our hunt leaders are chosen by the hunters alone."

"And you're leading this hunt?"

Toklo nodded, setting his braided gray hair swaying. "Yes. You have a problem with that?"

Aang shook his head. "I'm just curious. I love learning about new places and people."

"Well, then to satisfy your curiosity, I was asked to lead this hunt because I do not feel fear when my Tribe is danger. I just feel anger." He finally turned to reveal his full face, and the glint in his eyes was so sharp that Aang found himself stumbling in his march.

Toklo continued on, his steps steady.

As Aang got moving again, Mai wound up marching beside him, and she said, "Any problems yet?"

Aang shook his head. "No. Just satisfying my curiosity."

Mai glanced at him, and the look in her eyes wasn't dissimilar to Toklo's. "Curiosity might not be the best thing when we're hunting a monster."

It was a point to keep in mind.

The hunting party continued on, away from the mountain and the bay where the tribe's ships rested. They moved fairly quickly, everyone apparently used to long tracks with backpacks full of supplies. Aang had no problem keeping up, but he noticed that his friends - Mai, Sokka, and Katara - were getting a little winded by the pace set by the rest of the group. He looked to Mai with a questioning expression, but she shook her head. As they walked, heavy clouds began streaming in from the north. They grew more numerous as the morning wore on, blunting the light of the sun.

The hunting party took a short break when they reached a river, but not just to rest. Toklo gave a hand signal that brought the whole group to a halt, but then he looked to Aang and twitched his head in a summons.

Aang came over, being careful not to say anything.

Mai followed him, her hands on the handle of her platinum sword. A normal steel sword hung from the back of her waist, ignored for now.

Toklo nodded towards the river, and moved forward with his club and machete held out in front of him defensively.
Aang similarly readied the Monk's Spade he'd brought out of the Fire Nation, the end with the crescent-blade held forward, and tensed himself for an attack. He tried to shoo Momo off of his back, but the lemur clung to him and wouldn't let go, so he had to trust that Momo would flee if any danger appeared. Mai followed him as he in turn followed Toklo.

The hunt leader investigated the area around the river. It was wide, but not so wide that Aang couldn't have jumped across it to the other side. A few rocky hazards rose from the streaming waters, and some spots were covered in sheets of ice. Toklo examined quite a bit of the riverbank on this side, and then finally picked up a fist-sized rock and tossed it into the center of the river.

It disappeared with a plop.

The river continued to run on.

Momo let go of Aang, skittered over to the river, and leaned over to lap the icy waters.

After a long moment, Toklo nodded. "It's not here. We can relax." He raised his hand in another signal, and the hunting party shuffled over to rest at the river bank. Ty Lee brought Appa down near the group and hopped down to the snow, where she immediately launched into some stretches. Katara walked over to talk to her.

Sokka, meanwhile, came over to stand with Aang, Mai, and Toklo. "So what's our path? Up river or down to the bay?"

Toklo looked out over the landscape. "I think to the bay. The disappearances happened near water. If we find tracks, we'll follow them, but otherwise we'll just try to flush out along the water. Did your woman Airbender see anything from the sky?"

Mai snorted. "Trust me, we would have heard the screeching."

Sokka looked up. "Does it look like snow to anyone else?"

Aang turned his attention to the sky, and sure enough, the last of it seemed to have been covered by ugly clouds. "That's going to make this harder, isn't it?"

"Ha," Toklo said completely devoid of any humor. "Only if you value visibility."

Mai raised a hand. "I'll take some visibility, please."

Aang reached over and patted her back consolingly.

Soon the group got moving again, and Ty Lee once again took to the skies. Aang tried to get Momo to go with her, but the lemur seemed to be really attached to him today. He had no idea why, as this area was similar to the type of lands that surrounded the Southern Air Temple. But maybe Momo could sense something else that no human could.

Soon, it started to snow.

It wasn't very heavy, but with it came some fairly strong winds. They kept the snowflakes dancing through the sky, as well as some of the snow and ice crystals on the ground. With the lack of sunlight, it created a very gloomy atmosphere, and as Toklo had warned, visibility suffered. It wasn't too bad yet, as Aang could still see the full hunting party and the area around it, but things could get dangerous if it got worse.

And then, as they followed the river's languorous twisting towards the bay, there were the shapes in
The sky and the reflective ground had taken on a gray-beige color, and the swirling snow's slightly lighter coloration made it seem like shadows were dancing across Aang's vision. It made shapes appear ahead of him that he would try to focus on, but they all disappeared under his attention. He would get an impression of a form that was almost familiar, like something from a dream he hadn't quite forgotten, but it would slip from his gaze as soon as he focused on it.

The worst were the shapes that were almost like faces. Twin dark splotches within a circular swirl of not-quite-invisible snow and a smear of shadows that were almost the eyes, nose, and mouth of people he might know. But after a blink, they would be gone.

Except for one.

Aang was surprised when he blinked and it didn't disappear, so that he was left staring dumbly until he thought to really see what he was looking at. It was strange, a face-like impression that lacked the kind of details that differentiated a real live human from mimicry like puppets or drawings, and as his eyes met the twin balls of shadows that were the eyes, he felt a shiver build up from his darkest depths to rattle his body.

Momo gave a hiss that draw Aang's attention for a moment, and when he looked again, the face was gone.

Thankfully, he'd heard enough ghost stories to know what to do next. "Hey, I saw something! And I don't think it was my imagination!"

Toklo raised his hand again for a halt. Mai drew her platinum sword.

Aang breathed in and out, steadying himself, and looked again. There were the usual swirls of snow and shade, but not the face he thought he had seen.

Yet Momo's hair was standing on end.

Aang said, "I think there's something out there."

Toklo looked at him.

Aang looked back.

Toklo nodded, and turned to address the hunting party. "Be ready. Waterbenders, build us some defensive walls. You, you, and you, watch the river. Everyone else, circle. You see anything, you cry out. You feel anything weird, you do whatever will let everyone know."

Aang looked up and saw that Ty Lee had Appa circling above them. Good.

When he looked out again, the wind picked up, scattering more snow across his vision. The howl echoed across the landscape, a howl that Aang recognized as mere weather but was still super creepy.

It was Mai who said, "There!" She flipped her sword out to point ahead, and Aang caught a swirl of snow mixed with a shadow moving at the speed of the wind-

-someone screamed-

-Aang jumped forward-
-Momo squeaked and climbed into Aang's shirt-

-Aang landed in a tuft of snow where the shadow had been, finding nothing-

-there was a splash in the river-

-and when Aang turned around, twin lines of animal tracks in the snow led straight through the center of the hunting party, where the imprints of a pair of heavy boots were the only thing left of the Water Tribe warrior who had just been there. The three-toed tracks led straight to the river, which ran on without concern for the life it had just swallowed.

"Go," Toklo roared.

A pair of hunters, Waterbenders, leaped out over the river. The water beneath them turned to ice just before their boots touched down. Standing there solidly, the pair raised their arms high over their head, moving in tandem, and the water of the river responded. Between them, the river itself bent and tore in half straight down to the rocky surface at the bottom, forming a dry valley.

Then Katara leaped out to join them, followed immediately by several other Waterbenders, forming discs of ice that they surfed across the surface of the river. Aang saw that they were converging on something, moving to surround a point within the valley. Some reached to form waterwhips while others pushed to steadily freeze the rest of the river into solid ice-

-and Aang saw something blur across them, something long that had reached up from down within the artificial valley. One of the Waterbenders managed a brief cry before falling off his ice patch-

-Aang summoned a wind that aided his jump to carry him over the scene. He looked down as the warriors struck with their waterwhips, catching a glimpse of something long and serpentine as it twitched and curled around the attacks, too quick for his eyes to make out any real features, invincible in its speed-

-Aang straightened his legs and swung his monk's spade above his head to create a counterforce wind, launching himself downward like an arrow from a bow-

-he slammed into something solid and meaty and hard enough that the impact jolted his legs painfully, and there was a sound like wind howling through tunnel while a Yangchen Festival Chorus screamed in unison-

-and he bounced off to crash on the chilled rocky ground of the forcibly-dried riverbed. Rushing walls of water sprayed frigid mist on him while he tumbled, but he managed to hold on to his Monk's Spade and used it anchor himself into a stop. He stood up and raised his eyes to the shadow-

-and found himself looking into a face the size of his whole body. It had smooth pale flesh somehow reminiscent of both a fresh field of snow and a fattened maggot, deathly white and absolutely frigid, carved with the care of a master sculptor to evoke a beauty that transcended gender or even humanity. Curved horns rose to frame the head like a halo but failed to meet at the center, a broken bridge that fell into the face and the dark eyes that stared out from the center-

-dark eyes that glistened like blood in the moonlight, as deep as the cracked heart of a mountain.

Aang found himself falling into those eyes even as his boots stayed heavy on the ground and his fingers froze in a desperate grip around his Monk's Spade. He fell, a drop so profound it felt like flying, the darkness coating him and sticking to him and sapping every last bit of heat from his body. The darkness seeped into the pours of his skin and melted his bones into icy slush and Roku was screaming and Kyoshi was screaming and Kuruk cried out, "Not again-"
That's when Momo climbed up onto Aang's face, blocking his vision. The darkness and the falling and the inky cold didn't go away, but Aang found that he could move again, just enough, and he heard the sounds of waterwhips and battle cries and his name and the roar of a sky-bison-Aang realized what was going on and jumped.

His Airbending was slow to answer his call, but it was enough to keep him aloft as Appa slammed down right on top of the creature. Strong hands grabbed at Aang's clothes and swung him into the familiar solidness of Appa's saddle. Momo let go of his face, but Aang was trapped in a cage of dizziness that blocked his senses, as if he wasn't used to twisting and rolling through the open air and needed a moment to recover. But that was ridiculous; he was an Airbending Master. The disorientation didn't go away until Ty Lee's panicked face and reassuring gray eyes filled his vision. She said, "Breathe!"

He was confused for a moment until he realized that he wasn't breathing. He started again, and immediately felt better.

How close had he just come to dying?

Sokka wasn't sure what to do with himself. The fight was happening out on top of the river, where only the Waterbenders were any use. He and the other regular warriors were left out here in the snow to just stand around. At least Toklo was nominally supervising things, but guys like Sokka had nothing to do but observe and maybe offer some kind of near-useless moral support.

He turned to make a comment to Mai, but she wasn't where he expected. He looked right and then left. With those options exhausted, he tried looking down.

She was on the ground, sprawled in the snow, eyes wide and mouth gasping as her hands clutched at her heart. Her sword lay useless beside her.

"Mai!" He immediately dropped to his knees and grabbed her. "What's wrong?"

Her face was pale, even for her, and her eyes weren't focusing on him. They seemed to be staring at nothing at all. Mai's gasping was like a fish on land, almost like she had forgotten how to breathe.

And Sokka had no idea how to remind her.

He'd seen this before. Back in the Southern Air Temple, when Aang's people came back as nightmares in the dark. When he risked his life to save her, even though he had barely known her, and seemed to earn a little bit of respect as a result—respect that all his previous posturing had failed to find. He couldn't fix this then, either. She had just come out of it on her own. All he could do was hold her and vow that if she died, he'd make sure her sword was used against her killer.

Then she cried out, something between a screech and sob, and sucked in a lungful of air with the suddenness of a newborn sealpup. Sokka continued to hold her as she got used to respiration again, and then let go and pretended that she had never needed help and he certainly hadn't seen her so vulnerable.

She was still breathing hard when she picked up her sword again and sat up. "What the slush?"

"I don't know." He gave a smile that he hoped was reassuring. "But between the hunting and the swearing, I think you're ready to be officially adopted into the Water Tribes."

She groaned, but didn't say anything more.
Sokka noticed that the din of the battle had died down, and looked over to see the Waterbenders skating back to dry land — and one swimming back, but as soon as the guy got out of the river he dried himself with a flick of his hands — and Appa landed next to the defensive walls of snow that hadn't done any good. The river was whole again, and everyone looked glum.

He saw that Katara was okay, and then went over to help Ty Lee carry Aang down out of the saddle. "So, we lost?"

"Yeah." Aang let himself be held up. "If it helps, I hung on to my Monk's Staff."

Sokka thought of his new boomerang, and what it meant to him. "Hey, that's, like, the third most important thing about being a hunter, right there."

"What are the first two?"

"Getting the meat for your tribe, and surviving. In that order. So, we didn't do great, but we weren't completely terrible!"

Ty Lee shook her head. "Being a hunter isn't any fun."

"Well-" Sokka tried to shrug, but he was still holding Aang up. "Well, not when there are spirit monsters, no."

---

Mai was still feeling shaky, but she clutched her sword harder to make up for it.

She went over to join the rest of the group where they were gathered near Toklo, cutting through the clusters of Waterbenders and spear-throwers checking each other for injuries and/or chanting some kind of prayer.

She announced herself with a preemptive, "I'm fine. So, what happened?"

Aang's eyes met hers, and her gut clenched at how watery they were. His body lacked the strength and confidence it usually had, just like she how she felt right now. But he had no parka to hide his vulnerability, unlike her. "The Unhcegila got away. After Ty Lee got me away from it, it slipped into the part of the river that was still liquid and went downstream."

Mai's stomach clenched even tighter, but she kept the pain from showing on her face. "Back up to the part where Ty Lee got you away. I saw you jump into the fight, but you were out of sight after you dropped into the gap in the river. What did Ty Lee get you away from?"

Aang shuddered. "The Unhcegila had a weird face. When I looked at it—"

"Let me guess," Sokka interrupted, "Cold, can't breathe, spooky, dying, blargh?"

"Yeah, pretty close to that!"

"Yup, just like the Southern Air Temple." Sokka crossed his arms nodded. "Mai can confirm it. She got hit there, and just now I think she got it again when you were being ghosted or whatever."

Aang blinked. Then he turned to Mai. "You, too?"

She sighed as Ty Lee grabbed her in one of those rib-cracking hugs. She wished Sokka hadn't mentioned it.

But he was still enjoying his moment of blabbing everyone's secrets. "Just like the girl Katara and
Aang helped save, yesterday. Her husband or whatever was dying, affecting her. So Aang got hit, and he's practically Mai's husband at this point—"

She tried to smack him, but he was too far away, and Ty Lee's hug was keeping her from properly lunging.

"-thus Mai was nearly killed along with him." Sokka crossed his arms and nodded. "I bet that's the difference. People who see that thing's face or eyes or nose - whichever part is cursed, and don't count out its chin just yet - get hit with the weird spirit-sucking thing. But others just get dragged into the water or hit, and die without taking their friends and family down with them. It got one hunter before we mustered a defense, and nearly got a Waterbender during the fight."

Mai took a moment to parse that. "So we can't even look at it when we're trying to kill it?"

Sokka shrugged. "Try looking at its knees. Its eyes are up here." He motioned as if drawing an invisible observer's gaze to his face.

Katara tilted her head back and forth. "It makes sense. I don't know if looking at its knees is the answer, exactly, but the Waterbenders and I weren't affected looking down on it. But we saw Aang meet it face to face, and-" She shrugged.

Ty Lee finally let go of Mai. "It didn't have an aura."

"Of course," Mai said, putting as much confidence into her voice as she could. "Auras aren't real."

No one took the bait. She worried that they'd keep figuring things out and realize what she had realized-"

"Time to move," Toklo called out. "We know Unhcegila's path now. We chase it until it stops and fights."

Before Mai could ask if it might be possible to stop and come up with a plan before continuing, the Water Tribe hunters all immediately dropped whatever they were doing and launched into a jog along the river. Mai hissed, "Slush," again (because 'ash' just didn't seem appropriate in these circumstances), and then Aang and Sokka and Katara were running along, too, while Ty Lee was making air-assisted leaps back to Appa.

Momo was the only one with Mai, and the lemur looked at her with a trill. She let him scamper up her coat as she sheathed her sword, and once he was settled in her hood, she ran after the rest of the group.

It wasn't long before she was breathing harder than she would have liked. She was still in Weapon-class shape, but she wasn't used to this level of activity in weather this cold. A burst of fighting was fine, but they'd been out in this cold for hours now.

She caught up to her friends and settled into the same jogging pace as the Tribe members.

Sokka glanced at her, and gave her what she took as an apologetic grin. "This is how the Water Tribes hunt. We run down our prey until it exhausts itself, and then we fight."

Mai didn't bother asking if spirits could get exhausted. She just raised her eyebrows, and Sokka had the grace to look abashed.

They ran through the gloom and the snow, following the river.
At least this kept everyone from figuring out what she had noticed. If Aang getting caught in the monster's power could hurt her, then it must also work the other way. If she got hit, he would die along with her. It wasn't any great revelation, not after what they saw of Amka's friend yesterday, but it made Mai realize that she was a weakness for Aang. No matter his power or Avatar abilities, he was exactly as vulnerable as she was.

She was putting Aang in danger.

She just didn't know what to do about it. She couldn't talk about it until she had some idea of how she fe- how to address it.

She kept her hand on her platinum sword.

They followed the curve of the river, and slowly the shard-like peak of the Sacred Mountain began fading in and out of the snowy view. Funny how the mountain was sometimes visible, while landmarks far closer were hidden in the gloom.

Sokka was pleased that the hunting party's commitment to the chase didn't extend to eating while they ran. Toklo called a break after a while, and everyone immediately sat down on the snow and broke out some food.

Sokka himself made sure he had downed a full seaweed cake with a strip of moistened jerky on top – the work of a whole five seconds - before crawling over to Toklo. "So we haven't seen any sign of the monster. Have we lost it?"

Toklo took a sip from his waterskin. "Not necessarily. We follow the river to the bay. That's where it took Ikiaq and Aput, the fishermen. It hunts there, but we'll make it into the prey."

Sokka didn't like the idea of having to flush the monster out of the huge bay that encircled the Sacred Mountain. Was an 'Unhcegila' like a flint-whale in that it had to surface for air every so often? Could it be driven into nets? Sure, Waterbenders would make it a little easier, but they hadn't helped so much on the river.

He chewed his way through another seaweed cake and swallowed quickly. "How far to the bay?"

"An hour's jog. Why?"

Sokka pictured it. The river curved around so that it met the bay where the land faced the long side of the Sacred Mountain, ninety degrees and maybe an hour or two from the Tribe's village. Theoretically, the monster could cut across to the village while the hunting party kept moving towards the bay. And even if it didn't- "And how fast was the Unhcegila moving? How long until it gets there?"

Toklo shook his head. "It moved fast, but some creatures move better in bursts than over long distances. But it is a spirit."

Sokka crammed one last seaweed cake into his mouth and chewed just enough to speak around it. "Then we need more information, and we need a way to move faster. I think I should take Aang and the rest of my friends up on Appa to rush ahead and cut it off, if we can."

Toklo blinked. "Is that how the Southern Tribe hunts? From the sky?"

Sokka had to laugh. "Considering how the Fire Nation outlawed the use of our own hunting grounds, and how much time I've spent trying to save the world from Appa's back, I guess the
answer is now yes."

"Very well. Good luck, brother." Toklo held out a hand.

Sokka put his own out, and they clasped each other at the wrist for a shake. "Come running if you hear us screaming."

And then he was standing up and waving to his friends. "Time to hit the skies! We're doing something that's hopefully not stupid! Feel free to eat some more in the saddle. I will!"

Ty Lee was glad to have her friends up in the sky with her, after being alone with Appa all day so far. She just wished their auras weren't all tainted with the muddy gray color of fear. Mai's coat even matched her aura color, which had to be some kind of bad omen. Usually, her black and grey outfits were a surprisingly stylish contrast to her dingy aura.

They flew along the course of the river, hovering low because of all the snow. It had grown thicker, making it harder to see, so everyone was straining to watch for some sign of the monster. The 'Unhcegila.'

"This reminds me," Aang said slowly, "of the storm that Appa and I flew into when I ran away from home." He was sitting at the front of the saddle, just behind Ty Lee, allowing her to keep steering.

She'd heard of the story of that storm. Katara had told her, having heard it from Sokka, who got it from Mai, who was told from Aang himself. His aura was getting darker.

"But this time you have lots of friends with you." Ty Lee leaned back to plant a kiss on his cheek. "So it's nothing like that, right?"

Aang managed to put on a smile for her, but his aura only lightened a little bit.

Phooey. But Ty Lee wasn't feeling very positive, herself. She was trying to look that way for everyone else, because they couldn't see auras and so it was a lie she could get away with, but the truth was that her hands hadn't stopped shaking all day. This was a spirit monster. It had a name- the Unhcegila. It was a thing without an aura. It hurt people without harming their body. It attacked the very stuff that auras were made of!

Ty Lee had always believed in something beyond the material world, no matter how illegal that faith was, but she'd stopped believing in monsters under the bed a long time ago.

Now she knew that they were real.

Her own aura was muddy gray, too.

"There's the bay," Aang called out.

Ty Lee startled, having lost track of where they were flying, and quickly added, "Yes, I see it! So pretty!" She turned to Katara. "You'll have so much water to work with down there. You'll be able to protect us all!"

Katara's gave a slow nod. "Maybe."

Phooey. Even Katara was gloomy. But she made it look so cute.

Mai said, "So did we miss the monster? Or did it get away?"
Sokka pointed down to the rocky, snow-covered ground. "I think that's our answer! Anyone else seeing footprints?"

Ty Lee looked and didn't see anything. But Mai squinted and said, "I think you're right."

Ty Lee didn't need to be told to take Appa down for a landing. But she didn't need to like it, either.

The mouth of the river was a little waterfall, not even as tall as Mai, that emptied out into the bay. Chunks of ice made loud splashes as they went over the falls, and Ty Lee wondered if she was fast enough to use them as stairs while they fell through the air.

The footprints started at the riverbank right before the waterfall, as if the monster decided not to take the ride, and once she got a chance to look at them up close, they reminded her of a the shapes left by a turtle-duck in the mud. Ty Lee followed the trail with her eyes, being careful not to move around and leave too many of her own tracks. She couldn't see any pattern to them, but she had never really been good at that type of thing. Azula was the one who figured stuff out, and usually was the only one smart enough to see a pattern.

Ty Lee wished she hadn't thought of Azula. She was scared enough already.

"I don't get it," Sokka said. He was smart, and had traced the path of the footprints. But he must not be as smart as Azula. "It came all the way to the end of the river, here, but didn't swim out to the bay. The footprints start where it emerged from the river, and then it walked around. Maybe shaking off the water? But then the tracks just stop here in the middle of the snow. How could they do that?"

Ty Lee said, "Maybe it can fly!"

No one answered her. She didn't think it was a very likely guess, either, but it felt like a possibility that had to be voiced. She turned back to the waterfall, waiting for Sokka to be clever enough to figure out the real answer-

-when something brushed her leg.

She looked down, expecting to see Momo, but all she saw was the bottom of her parka and her boots. "Um."

She looked back up. Momo was still clinging to Aang.

She said, "Um," again.

The others were gathering around the end of the footprints, while Appa was contentedly chewing one of the seaweed bales they had brought for his meals. Ty Lee turned in a little circle, but all she saw were snowflakes falling to the ground. The sounds of ice chunks splashing down into the bay was the only thing she heard.

She said, "Um."

Something brushed her back.

She clenched her fists and turned around.

There was nothing there. She looked at the waterfall, and at the falling snow. She turned back to her friends-

-there was a splash-
she looked back at the waterfall-

and a massive face, so white it barely stood out from the falling snow, looked at her with eyes the color of spending her whole life in a matched set. It didn't have features so much as the suggestion of features, like an old weathered opera mask, but it was as smooth as the finest cream.

Ty Lee realized she was becoming colder.

She said, "Um."

And then her heart stopped beating.

As she fell to the ground, she heard Katara and Mai cry out in the same tone as the coldness in her blood.

It turned out that hearing his friends die was worse for Aang than experiencing it himself.

He had been standing just behind Sokka, looking at the end of the tracks in the snow, with Mai and Katara on either side of him. Momo was hanging off of Aang's back, tail curled around his waist. He hadn't noticed that Ty Lee wasn't there, but then the sound of a little impact in the snow worked its way across the wind, and he realized that they were in trouble.

He hadn't even been quick enough to turn around when Mai and Katara both wailed and crashed into him with their full dead weight. He tried to catch them, but Momo began trilling and started scrambling around his neck, and he was trying to hold on to his Monk's Spade, and he wound up just falling with the girls and getting pinned beneath them. "Mai! Katara! Are you hurt? Wha-"

And then they both went into fits, violently convulsing as though in a seizure. He let go of his weapon and tried to steady them, but they were moving with a wild strength, and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt them.

Then he heard Sokka say, "What is- oh no it's back Aang take care of the girls I gotta get Ty Lee here we go Appa yip-yip and WATER TRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIBE!!!"

Aang caught a glimpse of Sokka leaping straight over him, pulling a gleaming knife from his belt, and he followed the motion to see-

The Unhcegila!

It was looming over Ty Lee, face pointed down at her, and while its reptilian body quickly faded to shadow in the windswept snow, Aang could make out that shadow curving back to the little waterfall at the mouth of the river. It had come out from under the waterfall!

Aang needed to do something. And he couldn't manage two thrashing girls at once. He focused on Mai, trying to cradle her head and pin her arms, but her strength wasn't at all diminished, and he still needed to figure out what to do about Katara-

-Sokka was making a lot of terrified noise, so Aang assumed the other boy was doing okay. Appa stamped ed over to join in-

-and then the girls both went limp and stopped breathing.

No!

No!
He patted Mai's cheeks, pushed down on her heart, and even threw snow on her face, but she didn't react. And the same thing was happening to Katara, and he didn't know what to do-

-Sokka went something like, "OOMMPH!!" and then the only noise coming from over there was Appa's roar-

-which faded into heavy impact and a splash, followed by a deafening silence-

-Aang heard heavy feet crunching the snow beneath them, growing closer-

-Mai wasn't breathing-

-and the storm burst into being within him.

It was not the storm of snow. That was the external world. His internal world was being overcome by another kind of a storm, a storm of souls. The winds of Aang's pain whipped into motion the shades of Roku and Kyoshi and Kuruk and Yangchen and Zhanshen and Shexian and Yuhwa and Dawa and Shushen and Kimsuro and Ikujuri and Jampa and-

But the storm was too much to be contained within, and leaked out of Aang in the form of light and wind and power.

The winds lifted him from the bodies of Mai and Katara, cradling him in the air. The snow was driven to blinding speed, lightening everything but obscuring no longer. He saw the Unhcegila before him, a pathetic worm that pretended to humanity with a face made of death. Ty Lee was crumpled in front of it, and Sokka was on his back a distance away with his arms crossed over his eyes. A piece of metal - a knife - sat in the snow near him, and it was shining, reflecting the light of Aang's own glow, but it was a harsh light and he hated it and averted his eyes from it.

Instead, he focused on the Unhcegila.

It raised its face to look at him, and as those black eyes met Aang's, as the nothingness of death met the glow of life, he felt a chill sweep through him and start to calm the storm within.

But before it could die, he reached into the storm and out into the elements around him. Air and Water answered his call, combining to form a frozen hammer the size of the universe- or maybe a pair of sky-bison. The Unhcegila shifted its face to look at the new threat, and then Aang brought both of fists down.

In response, the ice hammer was driven into the monster with the full force of the storm.

One hit was enough to sped the winds and scatter the snow and crack rock and send his friends skidding away.

No!

He couldn't hurt them!

He couldn't-

-couldn't-

-the storm-

The Unhcegila roared and scurried away into the obscuring snow. Aang tried to stop it, to follow it, to reach out to it, but the storm within was spiraling beyond his control. He had nearly hurt his
friends, and Mai-
-Mai-
-she was *stirring*.

So was Katara. And Ty Lee. Sokka was up and shouting something. Appa was flying up from the bay, dripping seawater. Momo landed in Appa's saddle.

They were all okay.

And then there was no more storm, and Aang dropped to the ground.

Mai was getting tired of losing a fight before she even got to join in.

It took a while for warmth to return to her body, and even as she found the strength to move and start opening her eyes, there still remained a chill at the center of her bones that seemed untouchable. It slowed her, made her hands shake, and reminded her of just how vulnerable she was to this monster.

After all, she loved pretty much everyone here.

She finally got her eyes open, and found herself in a world of white. But it wasn't the snow that had obscured things all day, it was the bright white of Appa's fur. She was nestled between two of his limbs. So that's what was so warm. She squeezed herself free and nearly fell to the ground when her legs refused to support her.

Sokka caught her before that happened, though.

"Sure, you *would* be the one to try to escape," he said, leaning her back against Appa's side. The sky bison sniffled something like an agreement. "Katara was just fine going back for a nap, and I'll bet Ty Lee will stay put until she's strong enough. But you have to go running around as soon as your eyes are open, don't you?"

"Shut up. Where's Aang?"

"Up in the saddle." Sokka turned away from her and scanned the scenery, which seemed unchanged to her eyes. He must have agreed, because he turned around again. "He went into the Avatar State and chased the monster away, but that tuckered him out. He wasn't turning into corpses like you girls, though, so he and Momo are hanging out up there. Once Appa dried off – his fur is great at repelling water – he was the perfect thing for warming up half-dead people."

"Well, thanks." At his questioning look, she added, "For cleaning up after the rest of us made a mess of things."

He grimaced. "Well, I didn't do much better. Didn't even get a chance to try the knife."

"I didn't get a chance to try my sword, so we're even." Mai tried raising herself again, this time more slowly, and while her legs remained shaky, they agreed that upright was an acceptable state of being for now. She took the opportunity to look around, and sure enough, Ty Lee and Katara were tucked in between Appa's arms and tail just like she had been. Both seemed to be sleeping.

The snow was still falling, but there didn't seem to be any sign of the monster. Or the Faceless Tribe. So she couldn't have been out for very long. They were still at the mouth of the river, the waterfall gurgling away into the bay.
But as Mai looked out over the bay, she spotted something new cutting through the falling snow. "Is that a Faceless Tribe ship?"

Sokka followed her pointing finger with his gaze and frowned. "It couldn't be. They didn't have any ships that size yesterday- or this morning! And why would they- wait, there's a flag- but that's a moon symbol, like Hahn was wearing, and- and another flag, a red one-"

Mai's eyes found what he was talking about, and the chill in her bones deepened. "It's a Fire Nation flag. Trimmed in gold. It's part of the personal fleet of Prince Iroh.

"He's found us."

TO BE CONTINUED
The hunt comes to its icy end.

Icy Paths

Aang awoke to find his friends scrambling into Appa's saddle, which was never a good sign.

Specifically, he startled into wakefulness when Ty Lee's unconscious body crashed beside him, her landing softened only a bit by the thick parka she was wearing. Then Katara crashed on top of Ty Lee, blinking like she had no idea what was going on. (Aang could relate.) A moment later, Sokka and Mai both tumbled on top of her. Those two were fully awake, and more than a little hurried. Sokka managed to squeak, "Appa, yip-yip!" before Momo landed on his face to complete the party.

As Appa rose into the snowy sky, Aang stretched the fatigue from his limbs and shifted into a sitting position. "Um, what's going on? Should I be terrified?"

Mai extricated herself from the pile of people (prompting a grunt of pain from Katara) and pointed over the side of the saddle. "The Northern Water Tribe just arrived. And they're flying Fire Lord Iroh's flag."

The Northern Water Tribe?! Aang crawled up over the pile of his friends and looked to see what they were fleeing. It was hard to see through the snow, but it looked like a ship - a rugged one with large sails, not one of the metal steamers - was cutting its way across the bay beneath the solitary Sacred Mountain. But he didn't remember anything going on with the Northern Tribe. He'd been helping the Faceless Tribe, who lived right here on the coast of the bay, and-

Wait! The monster! The- the Unhcegila! "What happened to-"

Sokka pulled Momo off his face. "It almost got Ty Lee, we tried to fight it - operative word being tried - and then you glowed and gave it a good smash. Not good enough to solve the problem, but you chased it away. We were all recovering when we saw Iroh's friends joining the party. And now you just woke up in the middle of the subsequent skedaddling. Any questions?"

Aang opened his mouth to ask-

And then Ty Lee pushed herself up from beneath Katara (who went tumbling backwards with a squawk, sending Aang crashing back to land in Mai's parka-padded lap) and said, "We're flying? What's going on? What happened to-"

Sokka groaned.

Mai pushed Aang out of her lap and stood up to straighten the sword scabbard hanging from the back of her waist. "This is why you wait for everyone to wake up before explaining things."

"Noted!"

"Um," Aang interrupted, "what about the Unhcegila? Which way did it go?"
Sokka's face tightened. "It went- It went back up river! Towards the hunting party!

Aang nodded, pulled an air current to assist his jump over to Appa's head, and grabbed the reins. "We have to help them. We know what the Unhcegila can do now, so we solve that problem, and then we get away from Iroh's people before they catch us. We can do this!"

He turned and offered a smile to his friends.

Ty Lee blinked sleepily at him, but waved with what seemed like encouragement.

Katara got back up and nodded. "Yeah! We can do this! I'm ready!" Momo scampered up to curl around her neck.

"Whatever." Mai didn't even look up as she checked the blades in her sleeves.

Sokka groaned. "Always so positive. I guess I'll just start thinking about everything that could go wrong? Yeah, that sounds good. Contingencies. Let's see..."

Confident that he had the support of the people he loved, he turned around again and steered Appa down close to the snow-covered landscape. The tracks of the Unhcegila were still visible next to the river that they had followed to the bay and the waterfall where they'd fought the monster, leading off into the yellowish gloom of the snowfall. The day had to be getting late by now, so soon visibility would be even worse.

He wondered how they'd actually deal with the Unhcegila, since they couldn't look at its face without starting to die. But he was sure they'd come up with something.

Yeah.

---

Pakku stood at the ship's prow and stared out across the bay, trying to pierce through the obscuring snowfall with the sheer power of his disapproving gaze. The ship was circling around that striking standalone mountain, revealing more of the coast with each moment. There might have been some movement near a small waterfall where a river emptied into the bay, but staring into a windy snowfall was a good way to see all kinds of things that weren't really there.

But then, his life had been full of seeing things that weren't really there.

Last night, Fire Lord Iroh had visited Pakku's dreams again, complete with the usual tea and related paraphernalia. With something like a jungle around them, the Fire Lord had said, "My guests are departing tomorrow, now that I have been officially crowned. I'll also be sending out my orders to the Earth Kingdom to prepare for the contingency. Is the Avatar still traveling north?"

"If your device is working, then yes." Pakku hadn't bothered drinking the tea. He wasn't sure, due to the nature of dreams, whether it was a figment of his imagination or something of the Spirit World, but either way he wasn't interested in playing Tea Party tonight. "Seems a waste to send us out here to collect him, when he seems to be coming for you anyway."

Iroh had sighed. "I would rather welcome him as a guest than find him attacking me in my bed. I thank you for your efforts in making my first physical encounter with the Avatar peaceful."

"Peaceful. Sure. Because when I show up with my Waterbenders, the Avatar will no doubt just happily surrender himself." Pakku had rolled his eyes. "I don't suppose you can help with that? As I recall, you promised to free the Earth Kingdom from Fire Nation control. If you went ahead and did that, I could tell him-"
"You know," Iroh had interrupted, putting his teacup down with enough force to thump the table, "why that is not possible. If the Avatar cannot help with Lu Ten-"

"No, I don't know why," Pakku interrupted right back. "Not exactly. And I'm sure you're aware of that. Whatever you have going on in your labs - places like Temple Base - is quite the mystery. I wonder why you won't tell me?"

Iroh had sighed, and it was a long moment before he spoke again. "Pakku, I take no pleasure in threatening people. But I need your best efforts. And you know what will happen if you don't give that to me. Your princess-"

"Oh, I know." Pakku didn't need to hear it again. He was well aware of what was at stake. "I have no desire to push you that far. The search will continue, and I will bring the Avatar to you."

And so the dream had faded, leaving Pakku with that strange mix of physical rest and continued weariness. It didn't exactly help his mood now as the snow whipped at his parka. "Are we sure the Avatar is nearby, or are we on history's most pathetic sightseeing tour?"

*Saman* Wei, a cousin who had been called more to spiritual matters than Waterbending forms, walked up to join him at the prow. "As sure as I can be, Master Pakku. This device-" He held up the metal box that Fire Lord Iroh had provided. It was strangely shaped and the prongs on the front looked like an invitation to a fight, but the most prominent feature was the set of jewels in the face. They glowed painfully in the dim light. "It directed us this far, and now see how it glows? These jewels came from our oldest Avatar Sanctuary, from the eyes of the Kuruk statue itself."

Yes, that was the way of things, now. A sacred statue had to give up its eyes to make a new toy. "If the jewels are so special, what's the metal box for?"

Wei shuffled his feet. "You'd have to ask Fire Lord Iroh. Or one of his pet outsiders. My *saman* provided the jewels at his request. This is one of the devices that came from the lab of Maker Lian."

Even Pakku had picked up rumors of what was going on in Lian's lab. The fact that Iroh had provided some 'special tools' for this mission that included her work was part of Pakku's unease with it all. And he noticed that despite Iroh's appreciation for Lian's work, she hadn't yet managed to solve the 'Lu Ten problem,' so she was hardly infallible, right?

"Well," Pakku eventually said, "if the magic metal box can't tell us anything more, then we need to look for the Avatar the traditional way. Kinto! Noa! Kam! Get your pathetic selves over here!"

His least favorite students hurried over. Noa and Kam arrived first, but Kinto's limp didn't slow him down by much. Nor had it affected his taste for fashionable parkas, judging by the fanciful wave motif on his coat. "Yes, Master Pakku?"

"It's time to start the search. Take your full teams and start by that waterfall. I think I saw movement over there."

Kinto's left hand clenched into a fist. His right hand twitched, but the fingers barely moved. "And Katara is still traveling with the Avatar?"

Pakku didn't immediately reply. Iroh's intelligence, probably gleamed from his dream-walking, said that Katara had indeed rejoined the Avatar in the Fire Nation capital. Pakku hadn't requested or received any updates since setting out from the North Pole. He would have felt confident in answering Kinto with a 'yes.'

But Kinto's limp was a legacy of his last duel with Katara, back at Temple Base, and that twitchy
hand had been outstretched to torture her when the rogue Blue Spirit had buried his sword in the arm.

"Stop wasting an old man's remaining time," was all Pakku said. "And don't forget the special equipment."

All three of his students bowed, and then ran off. Soon, they had their teams assembled. Some were armed with platinum weapons, in case the Avatar Spirit needed to be disrupted, and several more esoteric platinum tools were in the hands of the less capable warriors. The Waterbenders jumped over the sides of the ship to surf their way across the bay.

Once they were all gone, Pakku nodded to Saman Wei. "I'm off, cousin. Try to keep the captain from running aground in this wretched weather." Then he swung himself over the ship's prow and called for his element.

As he propelled a strip of ice across the bay, balancing himself on top, Pakku was able to make out further details of the approaching shoreline. He wasn't headed directly for it, but near the bridge of land connecting the mountain to coast, vague shadows and shapes became a circular wall and the tops of smoking chimneys.

Hm.

It seemed that the Avatar had just made Pakku's day much more complicated. Wonderful.

He crouched on his ice-plank and lifted his arms to raise a tidal swell beneath him, and then before the wave could start to break, he pushed backwards to give it an additional snap. The water beneath his plank practically threw him forward to skip across the bay, racing ahead of even Kinto's group of Waterbender warriors. It wasn't eagerness that drove him to beat his students to the shoreline.

He just needed to let them know of a change in plans.

Mai's eyes, Azula used to say, were like those of a raven-eagle: sharp, far-seeing, and best suited for hunting other birds of prey. Mai had always taken that as a compliment, as much as she was tired of being likened to various kinds of raven-creatures so often. But her eyes were indeed a part of why she was such a great knife-thrower.

So it was a big surprise to her when the whipping snow and murk suddenly resolved into a fight between a giant monster and a bunch of Water Tribe hunters happening all around them.

Stupid weather!

Appa roared and Aang pulled on the reins and Mai scrambled to grab something to hold on to. She got a glimpse of Appa's tail rising as she looped her arms through one of the holes in the side of the saddle. Sokka and Katara were grabbing on to the other side, and Ty Lee-

Ty Lee was reaching for Momo and completely unsecured.

Mai kicked off from the saddle's side and slid over to slam bodily into Ty Lee. Their parkas absorbed most of the impact, but they both still went careening (with Momo in Ty Lee's arms) into the Water Tribe siblings on the other side. Katara and Sokka linked arms around Ty Lee, and Mai was debating whether to try to hold on to them or quickly crawl over to another armhole-

And then Appa hammered his tail down and the whole world began looping.
They were somersaulting over the battle and Mai got nauseatingly rapid glimpses of the opaque sky and the ground below and sky and ground and sky and ground and she was falling.

_Falling!_

She barely realized she was airborne before she plopped to a landing in the snow.

Well, at least she hadn't fallen far enough to do any real damage.

Except now she seemed to be in the middle of a war.

She had fallen behind a series of ice walls that seemed to be serving as a makeshift fortress. Behind her, the river was serving as a dead end for anyone who couldn't Waterbend. Ahead, a massive shadow darted from wall to wall, snapping over the top with a sound like something between an animalistic roar and the screeching of a terrified infant. It made her want to shudder, but shuddering always threw off her aim, so she resisted.

With each movement of the shadow, Water Tribe hunters responded. The front lines near the walls were being guarded by spearmen, their bone weapons held at full length, while in the rear the Waterbenders were turning the tufts of snow at their feet into flying spikes of ice that kept the shadow dancing.

Mai flicked her platinum sword free of its sheath and looked around.

She spotted the hunt leader, Toklo, directing things from the center of the action. She hurried to his side, darting between Waterbenders.

His eyes snapped to her immediately. She half-expected some comment giving her grief for chasing the Unhegila back into the hunting party's midst, or maybe some snark about her being a useless girl, but he just said, "The Avatar?"

Mai pointed up. "On his way."

Toklo whipped his glance forward again, sending his braided gray hair swaying in the wind, and angled his spear towards where the sinuous darkness in the driving snow was once again leaning over a wall. A rain of ice shards arced up according to his gesture. "We have it engaged. We just need to deliver a killing blow. If the Avatar-"

Whatever his suggestion was going to be, it was lost as the wind picked up and one of the ice walls exploded inward.

That couldn't have been from the wind.

And then the screams started. Human screams. Toklo let loose with something like a roar and ran forward.

Mai wondered where Aang was. Still trying to get control of Appa?

She chased after Toklo, falling behind him in the awkward drifts of snow but readying her platinum sword for action. People in blue parkas were running all around her, but no longer in the same direction. The massive shadow moved through the falling snow with the swiftness of the wind, a tornado given form. Where the shadow struck, screams sounded. The snow would thicken somewhere and the person standing there a moment ago would be revealed crushed in the snow. Mai saw something like darkness in the shape of a whip move, and then the Waterbender ahead of her grunted and a red stain splashed the snow around him.
Then the shadow loomed in front of her.

She remembered Sokka's suggestion to look at anything but the Unhecgilala's face, and focused her eyes downward to find the lizard-like, three-toed feet slipping in the snow as it moved towards her.

She decided to strike the first blow.

She dashed toward the Unhecgilala, keeping her eyes on its knees. She waited until she passed between two legs like the twin pillars of a sacred paifang gate and swiped her sword upwards. She hit something, but not deeply, so she drew her weapon back and then stabbed the sky while keeping her eyes down. Her sword sank into something hard but yielding.

She'd stabbed a legendary monster.

Okay.

But the air tore with a sound like a flock of dying raven-eagles and Mai's sword was nearly jerked from her hands. Instead, she pulled it free, still keeping her eyes down, and she saw the Unhecgilala's feet scrambling with enough speed to send snow flying. She raised the sword in front of her, trying to figure out the angle to stab out again, but the shadow above her shifted to reveal the yellow gloom of the snowy day-

-now, something dark was flying at her from the side-

-and a tail as hard as rock slammed into her from the left and knocked her sprawling to the snow.

Ow.

Okay.

Good things she was wearing a thick fluffy coat.

Amazingly, she had managed to hold on to her sword. And she absolutely could not look up, because for sure that thing's face would be waiting for her. She could hear it breathing, even above the wind. The sound reminded her a bit of Tom-Tom's moans when he had a stomachache. But she couldn't let that disturb her. She couldn't look at it.

And so the first she knew of the tail wrapping around her ankles was when she was yanked into the air.

Sokka didn't even realize that Mai had fallen out of the saddle, at first. He and Katara were busy holding on to Ty Lee, while also making sure to keep themselves in the saddle, as Appa flipped around and around. Reality finally stopped somersaulting, or maybe just the sky bison, and Sokka was almost about to believe that they were safe, if just for a moment.

Then they crashed.

Appa slammed into the snow-covered ground without warning, the jolt bouncing Sokka up and down hard enough to knock his tailbone against the saddle, and then Katara crashed into his back and he fell forward just in time to eat one of Ty Lee's elbows.

Then they stopped.

Momo chittered at them angrily from somewhere and flapped away.
Sokka sucked his sore teeth. Ty Lee had a surprisingly hard elbow. "What happened? Is everyone-"

"Appa!" Aang called out. He scrambled down to the ground and rubbed the sky bison's nose. "Are you okay?" Appa huffed and shook snow from his face, which Aang was apparently taking as a good sign. "He just lost track of the horizon. This weather-"

And then Ty Lee stood up in the saddle, nearly stepping on Sokka's hands, and wailed, "Where's Mai?"

Now, the set of possible answers to that question was depressingly large. Mai was nowhere to be found in Appa's saddle or the ground immediately around the bison, and that left a whole lot of reality to rule out. She couldn't have gone too far, of course, but in this weather she didn't have to be 'too far' to be effectively invisible.

But Sokka could make an educated guess, based on past experience, and this group's luck so far. "Probably in the middle of the greatest amount of trouble. So the action looks like it's thataway-"

Aang was already running across the snow, his Airbending enhancing his speed to effectively leave the rest of them behind.

Ugh.

Of course.

Sokka turned to Katara. "How fast can you get us over there?"

She started climbing out of the saddle. "Fast. Come on!" Ty Lee beat Sokka to the ground, but Katara waited for him. She turned her back to the conflict happening ahead and looked at each of them with very serious eyes. "Hold on to me."

Sokka grabbed his sister's waist, leaving some room for Ty Lee to do the same. He clenched his jaw just as Katara shoved at the field of snow behind them-

-the field of white exploded-

-and then they were skidding straight into a war with the speed of a diving lemur.

Sokka let go when they started slowing, allowing himself to scrape to a stop in the middle of a bunch of Water Tribe hunters rushing at something with spears ready. He quickly got to his feet, pulled out his platinum knife, and added his roar to the battle cry that was rising around him. This was it, his chance to finally honor his Tribe and his ancestors by completing a real hunt-

And then the Unhcegila was in front of him.

Oh. He wasn't expecting results that quickly.

Nor was he expecting such a good view-

The Unhcegila was rearing up on its hind legs as bone spears bounced off its dark skin, giving Sokka his first real look at it and turning the shadows of the previous encounters into reality. It was a big, long lizard, like the dragons he'd seen all over Fire Nation architecture, and could have been carved from a kind of stone itself. But what those sculptures had never really captured were the powerful muscles that had to be underneath such a creature, stretching the oily skin. It looked like obsidian, but Sokka really knew his rocks, and wouldn't be surprised if better light brought out blue tones in the scales. Spiky fins trailed down its back, but its twisting neck was free of them.
And at the top of that neck, shining like a sick mockery of the moon, was the creature's face.

Sokka averted his eyes.

And so he spotted Mai dangling by her feet from the long, rope-like tail that lashed back and forth.

The monster roared with a sound like the wind itself being torn in half.

And it was roaring at Aang.

The kid was dancing on the creature's back, trying to catch Mai, but it seemed that even a Master Airbender wasn't fast enough to catch that snapping tail. That pale, dangerous face swung towards Aang, but he used the crescent-bladed end of his Monk's Spade to catch one of the curving horns above the face and vaulted over the whole head.

Sokka watched all of this carefully while, around him, warriors and Waterbenders converged on the creature. Spears and waterwhips and ice shards and boomerangs and all kinds of weapons bounced off the rocky scales. Katara was among the attackers. And while the monster was distracted by Aang, Sokka saw Ty Lee used her Airbending to vault up onto the creature's back, dodging all the falling weapons as she moved towards the tail.

Sokka took out the platinum knife that Mai had given him and ran to join the fight, but then the Unhcegila became a cloud of movement that might have been a dance and might have been a spasm and definitely involved the tail shifting to lash Ty Lee. Both Airbenders were batted away to go tumbling through the air.

A red mist followed Ty Lee, and her torn parka fluttered in the wind.

And the monster's neck curved so that the face was following her, poised to do further damage.

Sokka knew he wouldn't be able to get close enough fast enough. He wasn't anywhere as good at throwing knives things as Mai, but he'd been doing extra practice with his new boomerang, and the Unhcegila was a pretty big target.

The platinum blade glistened, despite the dim light, as it flew from his hand.

And, sure enough, he managed to hit the thing right in its underbelly, between its front limbs. He'd done it! He'd landed a blow on the prey! The knife landed a little off-center, but it was still a pretty good throw if he could say so himse-

What happened next was beyond Sokka's ability to break down. The Unhcegila roared- or screeched, or screamed, or- the sound pierced Sokka's ears to strike right in the center of his head. It made his skin crawl. And the monster was moving, so fast it had become a shadowy blur once again. Cries of pain rose up from the warriors - his friends weren't among them, thankfully - and it became impossible to tell the difference between the Unhcegila's movements and the driving snow. Something as hard as rock hit Sokka, knocking him on his back once again, but the snow was softer than Appa's saddle, so that probably evened out.

And then things quieted, leaving only human groans of pain.

Sokka blinked, and got to his feet. Other people were doing the same, but he noticed that some were remaining still in quickly-reddening snow. He spotted Ty Lee crawling around, one leg of her pants stained dark red, her head whipping from side to side as if looking for something. Katara went over to join her, and they seemed like they were having an urgent conversation, and Aang joined them, and the urgency went up, and Toklo staggered over to them, face crusted with snow, and-
Sokka realized that he didn't see Mai anywhere.

It was just his luck that nailing the monster with the weapon made of magic metal at a critical and dramatic moment would make things worse.

He jogged over to the group. "Do we have a plan yet?"

Aang turned to him with tears already freezing at the corners of his eyes. "It took Mai! We couldn't get her-"

"Ty Lee, stay still, you're bleeding," Katara said. "I need a moment to fix that-"

"Mai will be okay," Ty Lee murmured, still not getting up. "She'll be okay. She knows not to look at the face. She's smart. She's-"

"The Unhcegila left the river," Toklo declared. "We'll have to use its tracks to find it, but the weather is getting worse. It will be slow going-"

"Okay, no plan." Sokka ran a hand over his head and tugged his warrior's wolf-tail. "I'll get Appa. Katara's going to heal Ty Lee. Aang- um, do that thing where you find people half a world away by meditating."

They all stared at him for a moment. Then they got to work, and Sokka felt safe in leaving to go get the sky bison. He made one quick stop on the way, to pick up a certain item from where it sitting in what seemed to be a patch of snow stained by shining green monster blood.

When he returned with Appa, Katara was throwing away some used healing-water and helping Ty Lee to fix up the tear in her parka. Aang was sitting in the snow, arrows glowing and eyes closed, while Toklo stood over him protectively.

Sokka brought Appa in for a landing. "Where to?"

Aang breathed in and out, and then his glowing faded. "Mai's heading towards the mountain. She's cold and afraid, and- and the mountain is calling the Unhcegila."

"The mountain?" Sokka tried looking for it, but the snow was too thick, and it was too far away. "The lone mountain with the ghosts on it? That mountain? The one right next to the village full of women, kids, and old people?" All of the Faceless Tribe's women had stayed behind, both young and old, Healers and the regular folk, including Toklo's daughter Amka. The old men were there, as well as Chief Kumaglak and some guards- too few guards.

Sokka's knife had driven the monster towards what might be the last real Water Tribe left.

So much for his hunt.

Aang was already hopping over to land on Appa's head. "Yeah. We need to go."

But Toklo said, "My hunters are hurt, and the girl Katara is the only healer."

Aang and Katara both immediately clenched their fists. It was Aang who spoke first with, "But Mai-"

Toklo interrupted, "My daughter is in danger! But I cannot condemn my warriors, too!"

Sokka stepped between them. "So Katara stays here, and Appa takes a group to the village, and if it's not in danger, pick up another healer like Amka and head to the mountain. Katara and Ty Lee both"
started to say something, but Sokka continued with, "And I'll stay with her." Everyone froze at that, so Sokka took the opportunity to take out Mai's platinum knife out and hand it over to Toklo. "Make sure Mai gets that back. She'll take it out on me if she doesn't."

Toklo accepted the knife. "This is the weapon that hurt the creature? I'll take good care of it, Sokka of the South."

Katara put her hand on Sokka's shoulder. "And we'll take care of your hunters. Now go!"

Everyone got moving, Katara heading for the injured hunters and the rest of the group running for Appa. Only Sokka stayed still, watching his friends and allies go off to continue the adventure. He hated staying behind, but he knew there was little more he could add to this fight.

At least he'd gotten a good hit in. Even if it might have ruined everything.

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Pakku waited in the falling snow until someone came out of the village to meet him.

Despite the wind and gloom, he thought this was the least he could do for this village he'd just 'discovered.' He wouldn't appreciate it very much if some stranger barged into his home and demanded a place by the fire; a respectable man waited to be invited in. When he could, he tried to cling to some measure of respectability, at least when he wasn't dealing with students.

Too bad the small army of Waterbenders standing behind Pakku couldn't help but look like a threat. But he could hardly tell them to go stand somewhere over there and stop glowering.

It was a young woman who saw Pakku and his Waterbenders first. The walls around the village opened to create a path to a central longhouse, and as Pakku had approached, her head stuck out of the door for a moment before disappearing with haste. A group of old men had looked out next; Pakku waved at them and stopped several paces from the opening in the village's walls. The old men had disappeared, to be replaced by a pair of young men with weighted clubs who stuck around and stared at the assembly of Waterbenders. One of them almost looked familiar-

Now, a younger, heavyset man in fur robes of obvious rank stepped out into the snow and approached. The two young warriors flanked him. "I am Chief Kumaglak. I take it you are brothers from the North?"

Pakku nodded. "I am Master Pakku, Counselor and High Sifu." He noticed one of the young bodyguards flinch, the one who seemed familiar for some reason. But that couldn't be, as this offshoot Tribe had to be too old for any familiar relations to still be visible on their faces. "I just need to find the Avatar, and then we'll be on our way."

Kumaglak stared back without expression. "The Avatar is assisting my people on a matter of great importance. May I ask your business with him?"

Ah, they were going to be like this, were they? Pakku really didn't want to make any trouble for these people, but Iroh would know if he didn't give this mission his best effort. "The Avatar made a promise to assist an acquaintance. Let's say it's another 'matter of great importance,' yes? My students and I have come to escort the Avatar and see that he fulfills his obligation."

Chief Kumaglak leaned to look behind Pakku at all the Waterbenders gathered. Kinto took a step forward, menace evident in his limp, and Pakku quickly waved the moron to stay put.

Kumaglak looked back to Pakku. "Quite an escort."
"Yes." Pakku let his shoulders slump. He was a teacher and Waterbender, not a politician. And killing a Blue Spirit for Iroh's cause was bad enough, never mind a fellow Water Tribe (no matter how rustic). "Are you getting tired of this diplomacy garbage, or is it just me? You don't want to tell me where the Avatar is, and I don't want to break anything I don't have to, so how do we resolve this?"

If Kumaglak had any suggestions, he didn't get a chance to share them. Kinto hobbled forward again and pointed-

-Pakku was about to tell the thug to keep his threats to himself-

-right at the familiar-looking bodyguard. "I know that guy! You're Hahn, son of Kalicho, aren't you?"

Hahn, son of Kalicho? Hahn. Hahn? Pakku maybe recalled a Hahn. Kalicho was another Councilor, and he had a son, and the son's name could possibly be Hahn. But Kalicho's son was lost during the war with-

Ah.

Hahn, for his part, had turned to Chief Kumaglak. "I do know them, sir, and they're powerful Waterbenders. And- ah, they are very serious about their duties."

Well, however this Hahn (son of Kalicho) came to be here, he at least arrived with a part of a brain in his head. "Good assessment. Now, perhaps if you could just-"

And then someone screamed, "Monster approaching!"

Oh, for- what now?

Chief Kumaglak hissed, "The Unhecigila? Here?"

Unhecigila. Unhecigila? Wasn't that some kind of serpent? Water Tribe lore was full of serpents, but that was only because the ocean was, too. There was a reason Water Tribe ships didn't leave on long voyages without offerings to as many spirits as the crew could name.

Chief Kumaglak was already running back in through the wall around the village, which made him a chief with a good head on his shoulders. Hahn and the other bodyguard were staying behind, raising their clubs, which made them dutiful warriors who were probably about to die pointlessly.

Pakku sighed and motioned to his Waterbenders. "Defend the village! Use those platinum weapons if you have to!"

Kinto blinked. "But the Avatar-"

"This is a Water Tribe village." Pakku whirled on his student. "I won't."

Then the monster arrived.

The first Pakku knew about it was a strike against the village's circular snow-wall. The sound carried through both the air and the ground, a solid impact followed shortly by the sound of groaning ice. No shattering sound followed, so the wall must have been very solid. But there was an echo of crunching snow growling louder-

Pakku saw the beginnings of a rather large shadow coalescing in the gloom, and immediately pointed
and shouted, "There!"

And a swarm of platinum boomerangs flew towards the shadow.

Pakku never got a good look at this Unhecigila. He saw the beginnings of a long shape, making out four legs, a lashing tale, and a curving neck that seemed to end in a pale visage of some kind-

The creature let out a horrible shriek that nearly froze the water in Pakku's veins as the boomerangs cut into its flesh. Pure green light erupted from the points of impact, becoming like liquid in the snowfall.

"Yes," Pakku called out to his students, "more!" He himself focused on boxing the creature in, reaching out and spinning in place to turn the snow in the distance to a curving wall not unlike the one surrounding the village. He was no hunter, but he knew that only a particularly stupid creature would stand its ground in face of an unbeatable weapon, and did not want to let this one escape to strike again.

He heard chanting and drumming coming from the villages. So they had their own sages, and were helping in what way they could? Good.

A handful of platinum spears flew up as the boomerangs returned to their throwers, but the shadow that was the Unhecigila didn't give up quite yet. It dodged most of them, although one landed and stuck in its back, making it thrash as it chose to charge Pakku and his students.

And in that thrashing, Pakku thought he heard something like a human voice crying out. A woman's voice-

He stared, and although the snowy gloom did his old eyes no favors, he thought he saw a gray parka - or a person wearing a gray parka - being whipped back and force at the end of the tail-

And then the moon rose right in front of him. But no, not the moon- it pulled light out of the air instead of giving it. It was a face, a face like what children shaped in their snow-guardians, and the eyes were pure emptiness.

Pakku suddenly couldn't breathe, and felt a cold like he had never felt in all his long life.

It was the last cold he ever felt.

Half a world away, in the underground refugee camp created by Earth King Toph, Kanna supervised the children in her care as they ate their dinner. Most of them were old enough that they didn't need her assistance, but the Fire Nation child Tom-Tom still hadn't quite learned what to do with a hunk of meat. Shila was cutting it for him, and Kanna watched to make sure the child behaved himself and thanked Shila for the help.

Then, after dinner, she would give them all a lesson. Today it would be numbers. Sokka had always enjoyed the number lessons, but most of these children didn't-

Kanna grabbed for her heart as a chill exploded within her.

"Gran-Gran," Quinyaya said, "are you okay?"

Kanna didn't answer right away. The cold feeling was fading, and her heart seemed to be returning to its normal rhythm. "I think so. I just- I had an odd feeling there, for a bit. But I'm okay now." She shook herself, and the chill left her. "Don't think this is going to get you out of your number lessons."
A few of the children groaned, including Tom-Tom, but he seemed to be doing it just for the fun.

The last thing Pakku heard was Kinto, calling over the wind, "Stay back! Keep focusing on the monster! Master Pakku can take care of himself."

That callous brat.

Oh, well. Maybe he'd get himself killed by a monster, too.

Cold filled his body, a cold that he knew would never go away. He tried and failed to breathe, but it still wasn't working, and a calm settled on him. Breathing wasn't so great, after all.

Well, at least this way, he wouldn't have to help Iroh, anymore.

Good luck, Avatar.

And then Pakku was just a body in the snow.

Aang arrived at the village just in time to see the monster escape again from what seemed to be an army of Waterbenders.

He looked down from Appa's head as they skated on ramps of ice around the Unhcsegila. The village was barricaded nearby, safe for the moment. But where had this army come from? Had Sokka found a way to get the hunters here before Appa could-

And then Aang saw a trio of Waterbenders skate past the Unhcsegila's left side and throw spears the color of the wind itself—platinum! But only the Fire Nation had access to that, and-

Iroh's Northern Water Tribe soldiers!

But the spears found no home in the Unhcsegila. It shifted out of the way, leaving behind a blue-clad body lying still in the snow. It moved towards another Waterbender a short distance away, one that wasn't skating all around. The figure started to move, but it seemed to be limping-

-Aang said, "Yip-yip!" and yanked the reins for a dive that would hopefully bring him down in time to save the Waterbender-

-and the Unhcsegila's head whipped out and rammed the limping figure. Aang couldn't see what had happened to him for a moment, looking around to see where the Waterbender might have landed, but then he caught a glimpse of blue parka on top of the Unhcsegila's head-

-where the horns were-

-Appa was close now, and Aang prepared to jump back into battle. He called out, "Get ready," to the others back in the saddle-

-and then the Unhcsegila whipped around so that it was facing right at Aang-

-that dark-eyed death mask that the monster was using to steal the life right out of its victims-

-but even as Aang's breath was slowing in his lungs, something like an expression of pain spasmed across the inhuman face. Its neck snapped around and Aang immediately pulled Appa to turn and get away from the monster again.
He looked as he passed to the monster's right and found it staring at its tail, where the gray figure wrapped in its tail was hacking away with an rod of pure light-

-no, not light, a platinum sword-

-Mai-

-and then the Unhecigila darted into the storm and disappeared.

"No, wait, come back!" But Aang's call died in the falling snow, unanswered.

Behind him in the saddle, Toklo reached up to pat Aang's shoulder. "It's okay, Avatar. We know where it's going." He pointed ahead, and Aang looked.

The dark silhouette of the Sacred Mountain loomed before them.

Mai awoke to find herself alone somewhere dark and cold, which was never a good sign.

She had blacked out at some point after the Unhecigila fled the Faceless Tribe's village. She'd been trying to cut herself free of the tail wrapped around her body with her sword, been trying to return to Aang. But she'd been squeezed and shook and rattled and eventually her body just gave up.

As light and awareness returned, she found that she had managed to hold on to her sword, at least. When her vision had started going dark, she'd cut a length of her hair and tied it around her fist just in case things got- well, hairy. Assured that she was armed and at least semi-dangerous, she looked around.

She was in a dark, frozen cavern.

And her entire body hurt.

She started to try to lift herself off the ice-covered floor, but something in her stomach twinged and the strength in her arms fled. She took the hint and just breathed for a few moments, taking in her current situation.

She wasn't sure how large this cave was, or how deep it went. Her view from the floor was obscured by stalagmites and stalactites so iced over that there might not be any rock under there at all, and what path that was visible curved and twisted. One end of the cavern narrowed and trailed into darkness, while the other led to a kind of light. But the sky wasn't visible over there; the light seemed to be taking advantage of all the ice, reflecting down through the caves until the darkness overwhelmed it.

The ice also reflected sound.

She couldn't be sure, but she might have heard whispers. Not human voices, and not any words she recognized. They might have just been the remnants of her dreams, or- Wait. Hadn't Toklo talked about spirit voices on the big mountain? Hopefully the voices wouldn't be as sexist as the Water Tribe that worshipped them.

Mai could also hear the noise of movement, the shifting of something large. Echoes that could have been growls and grunts and snorts and whines bounced around the cave with no sign of their original source, and something soft scraped against the ice. When those sounds quieted, the whispers returned.
There was also the sound of breathing, and not Mai's. Not the Unhcegila's either, because surely a creature that size would be louder. No, this breathing was coming from someone Mai's size. It was human, and-

"Nnnhhhhhh," came a voice.

-and it was in pain.

Mai took another look around.

She'd missed it in her first pass because it was lying next to the chunky remains of a shattered column of ice. She looked closer now, noting the blue Water Tribe parka. It wasn't like those worn by the Faceless Tribe; this one made an attempt at fashion, like Hahn's had. It was decorated with symbols and panels and even an impression of ocean waves, and at the center of the chest-

That was not a decoration.

Mai quickly looked away, nauseated.

The wound was about the size of one of the Unhcegila's horns. The pained breathing continued to echo.

Mai wasn't doing so well herself. She was sore from her shoulders to her knees, her stomach worst of all. Something felt disconnected in there. She was hurt and alone and trapped with a monster. But she had her sword. She looked at the blade-

-and a face not her own, a face emerging from the body of a giant insect and painted like a Noh-mask, looked back.

"Hello again," it said.

This should be startling, but she'd seen this face twice before – a few weeks ago in her dreams and last night in the reflection of the sword like this - and she was hurting too much to get excited. "Go away."

The creature smiled within the sword. "Just when we have this delightful opportunity to get to know each other better? Trust me, this is a conversation you'll want to have."

Mai wanted to unleash one of her sighs, but her chest hurt too much. "But we've met before, haven't we? We discussed traitors. And Aang. And not in a good way." Something about this creature's sophisticated way of talking brought out Mother's lessons, of keeping her face politely blank and not telling people to go lick ash. "I've also heard of you from the Faceless Tribe, now. I trust I'm speaking to Koh, the killer of Avatar Kuruk's wife?"

The Noh-painted face disappeared, replaced by a stern old woman whose scowl remained even as it laughed. "Ah, it's nice to be working with an informed partner! So few these days seem to recall the old stories. But I like to think of myself as quite the memorable encounter. Most never get over it."

"Do you have a point, or are you just here to torture me before a monster sucks my lifeforce out through my eyes?"

The old woman face sighed. "I suppose we don't have much time, do we?" A blink, and then the face of a little boy with a scar on his forehead stared back at her. "And we've come to the point, anyway. Given your situation, I am here to make you an offer. When the Unhcegila returns, it will feast on your spirit, and in doing so, feast on all those you love."
Mai glanced around the cave. The Water Tribe man was still maybe dying, and the monster hadn’t come back. "I give you permission to rescue me, if that's what you're proposing."

"Yes, well, in a manner of speaking." The face switched again, now to a thin man with sunken cheeks and eyes that bugged out of his head. "Instead of letting your demise also destroy those connected to your carefully shielded heart, I can make sure they remain safe. All you have to do is put an expression on that handsome face of yours."

It didn't take a genius to read between the lines here. "Is that what you did to Avatar Kuruk's wife? It sounds like you're not so much offering to help me as trying to kill me yourself. No thanks."

"That is precisely what I'm offering. But don't think I was trying to trick or trap you. If I do the deed - if I use the expression on your face to steal it away, ending both your existence and participation in the reincarnation cycle - then your loved ones will remain safe." The skull-like face licked its lips. "Your brother won't be destroyed by your hidden fondness. The friends you've made into a new family won't be dragged down into an abyss along with you. And your grand love with the Avatar won't-"

"I don't love Aang," Mai spat out, a bit louder than she'd intended. She took a moment to master herself again before continuing in whispers. "Not the way he loves me. I'm old, an adult, and he's- he's still a child-"

"Yes." The face shifted once again, back to the painted Noh-face. "You don't need to explain it to me. I do try to stay informed, you know. Perhaps more than any other spirit. It's important to keep up on current events." The gaze of the face drifted, and it almost took on an expression like Ty Lee at her most daydreamy. "I've observed the flourishing of your love, and it's been quite the tale. Your love still journeys but the destination is clear. As you and the Avatar both grow, you will become more and more intertwined, until the two become one, and the one live for the two. You know this. That's why you're considering my offer."

Mai opened her mouth to voice a denial-

And then closed it again.

The fear was too sharp in her chest to deny.

Koh nodded. "All you have to do is let the emotion you're feeling show on your face, and I can save the ones you love."

Mai closed her eye. It was so tempting to save Aang by destroying herself, not just because of the Unhcegila, but because of everything. She did feel her heart pulling her towards this boy who was becoming a man, but there was nothing about her that would be good for him. She had betrayed him once already. She'd killed and enjoyed it. To free him from her-

But when it came down to it, she just refused to go down without trying to get in one last stab. "If you're so informed and observant, you know why I won't."

The sound of Koh's chuckle echoed through the cave. "True. But I thought I owed you the chance. If you ever change your mind, you just have to ask. We'll see each other again, I'm sure."

"I'm sure," Mai repeated. And when she opened her eyes, the only thing staring back at her out of her platinum blade was her own expressionless face.

And beyond her reflection, the Unhcegila was slithering out of the distant shadows at the other end of the cave, scraping against the ice and knocking over a few stalagmites. It had to pull itself along,
the cave was such a tight fit, but the twisting path was no problem for it.

Mai quickly averted her eyes before the impression of the monster's face could become real. It would really undermine her grand choice there if she immediately got herself killed in the most damaging way possible.

Thankfully, the Unhcegila didn't seem to be immediately interested in her. It undulated its way over to the injured Water Tribe man and snaked its head around to hang over his body. The man's pained breathing became more frantic, tinged with moans.

"Keep your eyes closed," Mai whispered. Maybe it would help him.

Empty whispers answered her with incomprehensible words.

The Unhcegila coiled its neck, bringing the face down to the Water Tribe man. It dipped suddenly, and the man grunted, but Mai could still hear his breathing. Maybe he had heard Mai's advice. The Unhcegila's head dipped further, and bobbed as it did something.

The man's whimpers became screams. Long, throat-ravaging screams.

Mai tried to get up again, but something in her body was just broken, and pain shuddered up and down her entire trunk. She'd never joke about Ty Lee's crushing hugs again, not so long as she could remember the Unhcegila's tail wrapped around her.

She reached out with her left arm, the one that didn't have a sword tied to the hand, and pressed her palm against the painfully freezing ice of the cave floor to pull herself forward a little. She slid, not painlessly, but not with an intolerable amount of hurt, either. She used her other arm to pull herself a little farther, using the butt of the sword's handle to anchor against the ice, and then the first arm again, and on, and on, escaping a handspan at a time.

The whole time, the Water Tribe man screamed. There were wet sounds. Was he really keeping his eyes closed this whole time? Or did the Unhcegila not care anymore? Surely, a Waterbender who had stood right beside Master Pakku would have many connections, right?

One thing was clear, though: the Unhcegila wasn't feeding. Mai had heard animals eat, and this wasn't that. This was just-just systematic destruction.

She kept pulling herself along the cave, trying to find the source of the light.

She didn't.

Instead, she found her friends.

Well, allies and friends. Toklo came first, leading Aang, Ty Lee, and Amka through the cave. (Where were the others? Alive?) Their eyes went wide when they saw her, but then they spotted the Unhcegila as well, and they quite reasonably kept their mouths shut. Mai made an effort to pull herself closer to them, but they save her the trouble, sneaking their way over to her. Aang actually cupped her face in his hands as he fell to his knees in front of her, and Ty Lee dropped down to try to give Mai a hug.

That was their undoing.

Mai couldn't stop herself from crying out in pain, and the sound echoed in the tunnel.

Over by the darkness, the Unhcegila froze. The Water Tribe man had already gone quiet, but that
hadn't deterred the monster from its games. Now, though-

Toklo and Amka exchanged a glance, and then Toklo moved to stand between Mai in the monster. Amka pulled her waterskin off her shoulder and leaned down over Mai. Aang and Ty Lee immediately scooted to give her room.

Amka whispered, "When I tell you to drink, do it. Your injuries are inside. I need to heal them from inside." She flipped the cork on the waterskin, and then motioned the liquid within to fly out and into the air. It started glowing, and Amka set the waterskin aside.

Then she began streaming the glowing water through the air towards Mai's mouth.

Drink?!

Well, okay-

Mai swallowed the freaky glowing healing water. It was like trying to chug a whole bowl of lily wine, and not in a pleasant way. She'd joked before about 'wild' water that didn't come out of wells or aqueducts, but this- the water was like something alive as it flowed down Mai's throat and began swirling in her stomach under Amka's directions. It brought with it a coldness, but also a warmth. It was both painful and soothing, and unpleasantly invasive. It was like having a living thing thrashing inside, trying to break free.

Looking for something else to focus on, Mai looked down at the sword still tied to her hand, at the reflective blade, and saw the Unhcegila's face looming behind her.

She saw its face-

-and nothing happened to her.

The reflection!

She wanted to warn the others, because the reflection also showed Toklo waving a spear in one hand and her platinum knife in the other, putting himself between her and the monster. Aang and Ty Lee moved to join the defense, and they were in danger, and they needed to know-

But it was hard enough to breathe as the lining of her stomach convulsed, as the muscles throughout her chest tightened and loosened and tightened again. She couldn't even remember how to speak.

She tried pointing to her sword, to the reflective blade, but Amka wasn't paying attention to that. Her eyes were closed as she moved her hands back and forth over Mai's body, face tight, mumbling, "I can do this, I can be strong, I am a healer, I will fix this..."

"We'll protect you," Toklo called out, his words echoing like a roar. "Keep working!"

Mai only got glimpses of the battle. The Unhcegila was impaired in its movements, in a cave this tight. He slammed the walls and cracked the ice and knocked over every obstruction in its way. As it moved in and out of the range of Mai's observation, she spotted a large glowing wound in its underbelly, just above its front legs. Had that been where Sokka hit it with the knife?

Aang and Ty Lee were more evident in the sudden winds that bounced around the cave than in the quick glimpses Mai got of them in her mirror-like sword. It was impossible to piece it all together, but trying was a good distraction from the glowing water working on her insides. At one point, Ty Lee called out. "Is this Kinto? I think- Amka, we need you here next!" And throughout the fight, Aang was pleading, "Let us help! I can heal you! Or figure out what's upsetting you! Please!"
That contrasted sharply with Toklo's occassionnal, "Die, monster!" and, "For my Tribe!"

Every time the Unhcegila reappeared in Mai's blade, it had new lines of dripping green light sparkling on its dark body. Toklo was putting that knife to good use.

Until, that is, the Unhcegila got him.

It was inevitable, really. They couldn't look the Unhcegila in its face, and the cave offered limited space. They were going to slip up, one way or another, either being caught by its gaze or missing something critical while their eyes were averted.

Toklo was ruined by the latter. He might have even chosen it, if failure was inevitable.

All Mai saw of it was the Unhcegila following him around a wall-like series of stalactites. There was an impact that shook the cave, a crunch, and Toklo's last choking cry.

Tears filled Amka's eyes, but she kept working on Mai.

"The knife," came Ty Lee's voice, "get the knife!"

It had to be bad if Ty Lee, of all people, was asking for a weapon.

But there was a metallic clatter that couldn't be good news, and a grunt of pain from Aang. Ty Lee gasped, a noise that turned into a startled squeal, and then there was a cacophony of shattering ice.

After that was silence.

No, not quite silence. Whispers. The scraping of tough skin against ice. Heavy, labored breathing.

A shadow covered both Mai and Amka.

She angled the sword to look behind her, and the Unhcegila stared right back at her. It was panting, a horn was broken, and its whole neck was creased with glowing, leaking wounds. It leaned over them-

"Done!" Amka let her arms fall back, and the strange resistance of the liquid running through Mai's body suddenly became a mere drink of water. She swallowed, cleared her throat, and then rose and spun and slashed with her sword.

She put all her strength into but kept her eyes closed. She already knew what she was aiming for, and didn't need to look.

And then there was a heavy thud right in front of her, and she opened her eyes to find the Unhcegila's head on the floor at her feet. It was leaking luminescent green liquid all over her boots. The body thrashed for a moment, shaking the whole cave, and then collapsed. She looked the head straight in the dark, starless eyes, but other than a brief shiver that ran up her spine, it had no effect on her.

It was dead.

Mai flicked the strange glowing liquid off her blade. "Who's still alive?"

Aang pulled himself to his feet from behind the lifeless body with his Monk's Spade, and Mai's heart grew a little lighter. Ty Lee crawled out from a pile of shattered ice-stalactites and waved.

A quick investigation showed that the Water Tribe man - Kinto, Ty Lee had called him - was beyond
help.

So was Toklo.

As Amka's sobs started to echo, they made plans to take care of their dead and reunite with their friends. How Mai would deal with what she had learned about herself - or, really, what she had finally admitted to herself - was a problem for tomorrow. And all the days after that.

Aang would have liked to leave it all behind as fast as possible, but finding their way back out of the cave had taken longer, without Toklo's help. It didn't help that they had to carry Toklo's body, as well. Again, Aang was executing the old Air Nomad duty of taking the dead to their final resting place. Appa was still waiting at the cave's entrance, and then it was a short flight down from the mountain.

By the time they got back to the gates of the village of the Faceless Tribe, the Northern Waterbenders were gone.

Sokka and Katara had returned with the hunters. They waited while Aang and Mai passed Toklo's body over to Chief Kumaglak and the sages, and Ty Lee guided a sobbing Amka over to her friends. Then the siblings dashed over, and Aang found himself at the center of a group hug. Mai joined in without prompting. Even Sokka didn't hesitate.

But he did pull away in a few moments and point over to the bay. "The jerks from the North left as soon as they gathered up their dead. They let the Faceless Tribe's healers fix up the wounded, but I think that's just because they didn't bring any of their own and would have run out of bandages. We made them wait until after the Faceless hunters got helped, though."

Katara stepped back and bowed her head. "It was already too late to help Master Pakku. Maybe he and Jet will meet again in another life."

Ty Lee poked her head up. "So they just waited for the healers? That was polite!"

Katara gave a low chuckle. "They weren't happy, but they didn't want another fight. Especially when they saw me. I trained with some of those guys, remember? I'm surprised Kinto wasn't here, though."

"Yeah." Ty Lee chuckled back, and there was definitely no humor in it. "I'll talk to you later about that."

Aang let the hug come apart around him. "We need to do something about Iroh as soon as possible. I don't know how they found us, but they won't stop. Not once they recover from- from all this."

Mai put an arm around his shoulders, and pulled him close so that they were leaning against each other. "We'll do it. With the Faceless Tribe's help, we'll do it. And we'll do it the right way."

It was what he needed to hear. And it came from the person he needed the most.

Momo scampered over to join the group, and together they went back into the village, to mourn the dead and prepare for the coming struggles.

Night had fallen when Saman Wei and a few of the uninjured Waterbenders found the cave where the Unhecigila died. They had used several of the special devices that Maker Lian had developed for their mission, and brought along a few others that might come in handy.
What they found was Kinto's body, and a monstrous head that was all too close to human. All other remnants of that monster were gone.

The Waterbender Noa said, "Kinto's in no condition to be moved. I guess we could freeze the bits-"

"Never mind," Wei interrupted. "This ground is sacred enough for him to rest. There's no need to waste time with that. We need to find a way to transport this creature's head before the Avatar or his new allies discover us."

The Waterbender Kam shuddered. "The head? We're taking it with us? Why? Master Pakku never liked bothering with this kind of thing!"

"My cousin Pakku is dead." Wei dipped his head in a brief moment of mourning and respect. "Now we need to find a way to protect our lives from Iroh, once he learns that we won't be able to complete our mission. And this- this is just the kind of thing he's interested in."

Wei motioned, and the Waterbenders brought the platinum tools.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
Suki was arrested as soon as she stepped off the boat. She had shuffled down the gangplank with the other passengers in the morning light and presented her papers to the guard. She expected them to get a quick look and approval like at all the other stops she’d made since leaving the Fire Nation; her black mourning clothes had gotten more comment than her travel documentation, so far. But the guard had raised his hand to make a motion, and Suki found her arms being grabbed by a pair of soldiers in the local armor style.

"Let's do this quietly," one of them said as he relieved her of the sack that held all her worldly possessions.

Suki had shrugged as best as she could with her arms restrained and let herself be led away. She didn't drag her feet or try to pull free. Partially, that was because there was no point; whoever was behind this, they obviously knew who she was. And this was an island, so it wasn't like she could run very far.

Besides, Suki hadn't returned to Kyoshi Island just to have to flee it again.

She was taken to one of the guard outposts in the dock sector. It looked and smelled old, perhaps even dating back to when the Kyoshi Warriors had patrolled the port city, arresting troublemakers and smugglers in the days before the war. Perhaps this particular outpost had even been used to imprison a Fire Nation spy or two, once upon a time.

Now the Fire Nation just paid the locals to do their spying for them.

Suki had been good at spying on her friends.

But as far as the Fire Nation knew, she'd been a fairly ineffective spy, hardly worth the effort. And that wasn't even counting the lies she'd worked into her tips, misinformation she'd cultivated like a farmer working tired soil.

She spent the first five hours back home languishing behind a wall of iron bars.

Suki was wondering if she could ask for lunch - without the guards trying to beat her up - when her visitor arrived.

He wore full armor and a neatly folded sash. "Welcome back, Agent Suki. I am Corporal Akechi. Should I be worried that you're here?"

"Former Agent. Prince Zuko himself approved my retirement. You can see for yourself in my paperwork." Suki rose from the bench she'd been perched on and looked the man in the eye.
'Akechi' was a native Kyoshi name; the Corporal was another traitor. "So no, you don't have a reason to worry. I just wanted to come home and move on with my life."

Corporal Akechi stared at her. "Kyoshi Island isn't the same place, anymore. You've been away for a long time. We're at peace, now, and the new Commander won't tolerate any trouble."

"Good. I came home to get away from trouble."

Akechi kept staring. Then he turned to one of the guards. "Did you find any weapons?"

The guard motioned at his desk, where the contents of Suki's sack had been dumped. There were clothes, coins, and trinkets, but no weapons. She didn't need any to defend herself from anything she'd find on the more civilized travel routes.

But defense wasn't the only reason to carry weapons.

She was glad that she had kept her war fan tucked in her left boot. The guards had merely patted her down before throwing her in the cell, and missed it—fortunately for them. The fan was a gift from Zuko, and a returned piece of the legacy of the Kyoshi Warriors. She would be obligated to cripple anyone who tried to take it from her.

Akechi turned back to Suki. "I expect you to behave. No trouble. No rebel activity. Report any information you acquire about subversive behavior. And if I so much as hear a nasty rumor about you, your head will be on a pike so fast it will spin. Literally."

Suki crossed her arms, unimpressed. "Of course. Am I free to go?"

"We have to finish the paperwork, first." Akechi nodded at the other two guards. "Lunch time, boys. Let me buy you some stickies before we get back to work."

They left Suki alone for a while. She waited very, very patiently for them to come back. Eventually, they signed the paperwork and fined her for half her coins, for the crime of 'distracting a Fire Nation soldier during the execution of duty.'

She told herself that it was good to be home.

Suki wanted to get something to eat, having skipped what passed for breakfast on the overnight ferry from Chin, but business came first. She headed for the old neighborhood, leaving behind the docks and markets for leaning shacks and alleyways that doubled as open-air bathrooms. She passed by widows sweeping the drifting dirt off their doorsteps, dodged around half-naked kids chasing after fat scorpion-gulls, and raised her fists and took a stance at a trio of sullen teenagers who eyed her boots a little too intently. No one here was working; this was a neighborhood needed all the money it could bring in.

She took the long, scenic route. Not to take in any scenery, not in this neighborhood, but rather to be seen.

At one point, she stopped by one of the torch-pillars that hadn't been lit since before her birth. She leaned over to pretend to adjust her boot, and used a finger to smear some of the black dirt of the road on a particular point on the pillar in a particular pattern—the ancient local characters for 'Assembly' and 'Little Sister.'

She continued her walking tour for another two hours.
For all that Akechi had claimed that Kyoshi Island had changed, it didn't look that way to Suki. But then, neighborhoods like this had never seen much Fire Nation presence; the soldiers had gotten out of the habit of coming here, back in the days of the Unagi Gang and the promise of alleyway-warfare for any trespassing. The Unagi members might be long gone (thanks to Kirai), but some things had their own inertia. Aside from the occasional soldier looking to terrorize locals for giggles, the Fire Nation didn't bother with places like this. Nothing to steal, for one thing.

Or maybe it was the nature of the Fire Nation itself that created the squalor of Suki's home neighborhood. What would Kyoshi Island be like, if the Fire Nation had never decided to use it as a portal to the South Pole and its resources?

It was in places like this that the Kyoshi rebellion had started and, largely, remained. Living in the shadows, preparing for uprisings that might never happen- it had been their way of life until Aang and Sokka and Mai had come. Then the rebels had risen up to help save the world.

That was the last Suki knew of it before her triple-agent game collapsed and she was dragged away from her home.

She wondered if her fellow rebels were all dead now.

It had been long enough. She headed for a particular lane on the border of the neighborhood, where homes gave way to workshops and a few food stands steamed. At this time of the day, things were only slightly crowded. Suki picked one particular noodle stand, shouldered herself a place at the counter, and made the casual hand gesture that meant, "One bowl, orange spice, and don't even think about overcharging me because I know your mother and she likes me better than you."

A bowl of noodles was plunked down in front of her with a pair of chopsticks, and she dropped a coin beside it. It disappeared immediately into the hands of the cook, but even before he dropped it into the pocket of his apron, the other customers at the counter wandered away. The cook ducked down below the counter, acting like he was organizing his supplies or feeding the flames. Suki was now effectively alone.

Oh. Good. Someone had seen her message.

She went ahead and began eating, hurrying in case someone was about to stick a piece of sharpened scrap-metal in one of her kidneys.

A familiar shoulder shoved Suki over to make room at the counter despite the ample space, nearly spilling the broth in her bowl all over her mourning clothes.

Suki looked over at the intruder and found herself staring into the green eyes of her oldest friend.

"Sabure," Suki breathed. Her throat became tight, and she tried to swallow past it. She couldn't have picked amongst the friends she'd hoped had survived, but it was a comfort to know that another Kyoshi Warrior bloodline was still around. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Yeah, well, I wish you were dead," Sabure hissed. "You're just like your sister!"

"My-" Suki's words failed her. It was like she had been punched in the gut. "K- Kirai is dead."

"Thank Kyoshi and all the spirits." Sabure turned away and leaned on the counter. A bowl of noodles was plopped in front of her, despite the cook still being under the counter, but she didn't seem interested in eating. She just used the chopsticks to move the noodles around. "Is that why you betrayed us?"
"I-" Suki made herself breathe in and out. She had expected something like this. She just hadn't thought it would come from someone who had actually seen Kirai beat her up. "I didn't betray you. I was picked up by the Fire Nation after the Avatar left, and I tried to feed them bad info. It didn't work out for me."

Sabure glanced over at her, and then looked back down at her noodles. "Fine, you made the marks that you need to talk? Go ahead and give me the story. But no sudden moves. No signals. Keep your hands away from anything more dangerous than those chopsticks. Longshot has an arrow pointed at the back of your head, and he's waiting for an excuse to puncture your skull."

Suki sighed, and turned back to finish her noodles. "Understood."

"Is it? Is it really?" Sabure stabbed her chopsticks into her own bowl. "There is no rebellion anymore, Suki. The day after you disappeared, the ash-lickers came down on us like a hammer. Arrests. Deaths. They found some of our safehouses. Our depots just began disappearing. And now here you are. The only reason I didn't take you out and dump your body for the Unagi is because you're practically family. I want to hear why you betrayed us."

Oh, no.

So that was what had changed. Not the neighborhoods or the habits, but the home Suki thought she was coming back to.

She prepared herself for the very real possibility that she was about to be killed by one of her friends. "Do you promise to let me tell you the whole thing? Before you hurt me?"

Sabure's lower lip trembled. She gave a nod.

Suki took a deep breath and started, "So you remember how we suspected that we had an informant? That was actually me. I realized that Yon Rha was trying to get a spy into our group, so I figured it would be better if I controlled what he learned about us..."

Suki managed to get through the whole story without either Sabure commanding the earth to swallow her up or Longshot letting fly with his arrow.

They had long ago finished their noodles. While Suki had spoken about her adventures with Zuko and Aang and all the rest, Sabure had not-so-subtly led the way back into their old neighborhood, taking a route that doubled back on itself a few times, before they finally cut through a dead-end alley that stank of dog-skunk and slipped through the fence into what turned out to be a shed. Suki paused her story long enough for Sabure to slip a crystal glow-stick out of her belt and open it. Then the girls sat down to lean against the walls and continue speaking of Avatars and Fire Lords and politics and murders and teenage heroes.

Either Sabure trusted Suki enough not to require Longshot's backup anymore, or else her story had already been dismissed and this would be a more convenient place to kill her.

But when the tale was done, minus a few details from the end, the first thing Sabure said to it all was, "You should have just stayed and married the prince."

She felt her face warm at the insinuation and gave a shake of her head. "Zuko had to leave, too, remember? Anyway, it wasn't like that. And I wanted to come back. I've been away so long, and it wasn't by choice."

Sabure sighed. "So I'm supposed to believe that nothing of what happened was your fault? That you
only told them lies, but they still managed to roll us up after you left?"

"Well, no." Suki squeezed her eyes shut against the headache she could feel coming on. It didn't stink in here as badly as the alleyway, but just barely. "I didn't only give them lies. I couldn't. There were some truths in there. Stuff I couldn't hide, or that they would have found out in some other way. It needed to be a balance. I tried to make it a balance. Sometimes they came to me with information, and it seemed like they were already sure of it, so I confirmed it for them. To earn their trust, so that I could lie about more important things. It got- it got complicated."

"Unagi breath," Sabure hissed.

Suki nodded. "Yeah."

They just sat there, for a while. Suki wondered if Longshot was still waiting for them. Maybe he was covering the entrance to the shed.

Eventually, Sabure said, "I believe you."

Suki wasn't even sure she had heard it right, at first. She looked at Sabure, went over the words in her head, waited to see if some twist or qualification was coming, and found herself sitting in silence.

Then a laugh bubbled up through her throat. "Oh, thank Kyoshi."

Sabure snorted. "Well, what am I supposed to do? I remember what you were like after Kirai- by the way, I am so glad that hekoki is dead. I don't care that you loved her."

Suki shrugged. "Yeah, everyone else, too. I- I hate that it happened- how it happened, but- but I'm kind of relieved, too. She can't hurt anyone else now. She can't hurt-" She inhaled. "Anyway, thanks for believing me."

"Don't be. That still means I think you're a liar and a traitor. But you meant well, I guess. And I doubt you were the Fire Nation's only source of info on us." Sabure glanced over at Suki, and must have seen something in her face, because she made a gesture of apology. "Anyway, your story makes sense. I always wondered why, if you sold us out like your garbage sister did to the Unagi gang, the Fire Nation never found the dojo."

Suki's heart fluttered. "It's safe? It's okay?"

Sabure looked down at her bare feet. "At first I thought they might set a trap there. Then I didn't want to risk leading any spies to it. But I check every now and then." She looked up at Suki and frowned. "You want to go there."

Suki nodded. "I do. But we need to be careful. I'm pretty sure the Fire Nation has someone following me."

"Obviously. That's why I got us out of sight. I have a tunnel in here that will take us a few blocks over. I made it with my Earthbending after you left." She leaned over into one of the shadowy corners, and pulled out a pair of hooded cloaks. She tossed one to Suki, and then reached into the shadows again for a patched pair of green pants. "Put these on. You're too obvious in that funeral garb."

Suki smiled. "That's part of why I'm still wearing it. Maybe Longshot will be able to spot whoever they have covering me. Then we can-"

"Oh, that was a lie," Sabure cut in. "No one was covering us. Longshot died five months ago."
It was night by the time they got out of town. Sabure had kept Suki moving, occasionally stopping in another shed or landfill to swap cloaks, clothes, and one time even put on hats. They passed the time by going over the names of the dead. When the sun set and the dinner hour arrived, the fishing vessels came back into port and the streets once again filled up. Sabure shifted their path to go in and out of a few busy taverns.

If anyone was following them, they would have to be doing it by the air. And both Aang and Ty Lee were otherwise occupied.

Suki also took the effort as a sign of Sabure's trust. If she believed that Suki really was a traitor, there wouldn't be any need to go to all this trouble.

(Unless she was trying to isolate Suki.)

The journey ended back in the old neighborhood, in one of those alleyways that served as a communal toilet. Sabure led the way around a few puddles of distressing color, around a corner into what seemed to be a small garbage dump, and then took a rooted stance and pushed with both arms towards a pile of moldy broken logs.

Both the pile of logs and the patch of packed dirt beneath it moved to reveal a square wooden door.

Suki didn't recognize this access. It, like the shed and tunnel from before, was something Sabure had built after-after everything.

This tunnel itself, though, was familiar. Sabure had simply made a new entrance into the old smuggling routes that the Kyoshi Warriors inherited from criminals they'd arrested. It led out of town, underneath the encircling walls that forced travelers to pass through the Fire Nation's checkpoints, and into the forests that colored the island.

After that, Suki didn't need to be led anywhere. She recognized the trees and trails, the slope of the ground and sounds of safely unconcerned birds. She took point, and by the time full dark had arrived, she came to the stone that marked the location of the underground Kyoshi Warrior dojo.

Suki waited as Sabure took a wide horse stance and swung her arms to raise the marker stone. What appeared to be a small rock was revealed to be a massive boulder as it tore free of the earth, moving smoothly on balanced tracks but fully powered by Sabure's Earthbending. Clumps of dirt fell free from the stone onto the ramp that was revealed to extend down below the surface.

Suki had always found it to be an impressive sight and gotten a thrill out of seeing such power in the hands of a descendent of a Kyoshi Warrior. Before the Avatar came to the island, Sabure was the only Bender who Suki had ever known.

But now Suki knew plenty of Benders. She'd seen all the elements in action, wielded by people who had rightfully earned the title of Master. And the spectacle of a floating rock, even one that was fairly big, now didn't make much of an impression compared to a monster the size of a city made out of unholy ash.

"I wonder if Aang is strong enough to lift that rock now," Suki found herself saying.

Sabure frowned as she straightened out of her stance. "The Avatar is already learning Earthbending?"

Suki nodded as they headed down the ramp.
"Unagi breath." Sabure smacked a fist against the wall as they passed underground, shaking things a little. "I knew I should have started teaching him while he was here. Now I missed my chance."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, his teacher is the new Earth King herself."

"Eh, not really."

Rather than darkness, Suki found light at the bottom of the ramp. The crystal lanterns that chased away the gloom had been hung by Sabure's mother, and Sabure herself must have 'fed' the crystals recently. They were shining as brightly as the sun, the green tinge of the light the only clue that they weren't outdoors in daylight.

But it was the little building at the center of the cavern that stole Suki's gaze and put tears in her eyes. It was just as she remembered it, just as she dreamed it.

The very dojo that Kyoshi herself built centuries ago. The place where the Kyoshi Warriors were born. The place where they thrived. The building where Suki's own grandmother had trained and painted her face and earned her katana. The structure that had been threatened by the Fire Nation, then saved and rebuilt piece by piece in this sanctuary by the descendants of its students.

Sabure gave a low chuckle. "Yeah, I guess you didn't mean to sell us out. You wouldn't be crying over this place if you were evil enough to pull a Kirai."

Suki sniffled and wiped her eyes. "Thanks. Hey, want to see something?" She reached down to her left boot and pulled out the hidden war fan. She flicked it open, and it flashed in the light of the lanterns.

Sabure gasped. "No way! Where did you get that?! None of ours have gone missing-"

Suki had been gifted a similar fan by Sabure when they were kids. Back then, Suki had been a clueless Unagi Gang initiate who thought she'd never become a real member. (She never did, but that was only because Kirai had destroyed the gang.) There weren't many fans left, not after the Fire Nation forcibly disbanded the Kyoshi Warriors and tried to disarm them, but all those that remained had been bequeathed to worthy descendants of Warriors. They were kept here in the dojo to keep them safe, but each one had an owner somewhere on Kyoshi Island who could draw strength from her legacy.

And now Suki could return this one. "Z- Prince Zuko gave it to me. He says it was found in a trophy room in the Fire Nation."

Sabure blinked. "Did he know what it really was?"

"Of course. That's why he gave it to me." Suki flicked it closed again.

Sabure's lip twisted. "I couldn't imagine a better engagement present, eh?"

"Shut up. It's not like that." Suki squared her shoulders. "He was thanking me for all my help. And then I left him to come back home."

"So you gave him a lot of 'help', huh?"

"I was helping to save the world!"

"Then why did he give you a present? Maybe you went above the call of duty?" Sabure twisted two
of her fingers together. "Way above?"

"Sabure, I know you're trying to get me flustered to prove that I'm attracted to him so that you can tease me about it. That's immature and illogical, but I appreciate the show of camaraderie. And I swear on Kyoshi's big boots that I will shove this fan up your nose if you don't knock it off." Suki crossed her arms and waited to see if she'd have to make good on her threat. "Now, can I have a moment in the dojo? By myself?"

Sabure sobered and gave a nod. "I'll be right here if you need anything."

"Thanks." Suki took a calming breath and headed into the dojo.

The windows and open doors let in more than enough light. It was a fairly plain dojo, and the big mat on the floor had accumulated a lot of dust, but Suki still felt the warm embrace of legacy and support as she stepped into the space. A single hanging scroll had survived from the original days, and even that was half-burned, but the rest of the artifacts were kept in perfect condition. Several low shelving units lined the floor on one wall, showing off a series of open war fans on stands that glittered in the light. Another wall had racks containing sheathed katana swords ready for use, although not all were filled.

And, on a stand on a wall all by itself, was the charred remains of a statue of Avatar Kyoshi.

All that was left was a large chunk of the face, almost like an opera mask. It was stained by smoke and the edges were blackened, but the painted visage wasn't even smudged. That it had survived was considered to be a sign of the Avatar's lasting power. Before Aang had returned, this was all they had.

Suki snapped the fan open with a clang, calling the spirits' attention to herself, and kowtowed before the wooden face. "Avatar Kyoshi, I am the humble granddaughter of your servant Tomoe." She sat and used both hands to hold the fan up. "I return to you a weapon of your servants, recovered through honest service." She placed the fan on the floor in front of her and kowtowed again.

Silence filled the dojo.

Keeping her forehead pressed to the floor, Suki said, "I thank you for your protection. I acknowledge my failures and offer my life in repayment if the debt calls for blood."

She was prepared for the wooden face to come to life and stab her with a katana or shard of stone right there, but nothing happened.

She remained in her kowtow. "I also ask a boon of you."

She raised her head and looked into the image of the face of Kyoshi. "I seek guidance. I- I tried to do too much, and nearly lost my home because of it. I don't- I'm not sure I could have made any other choice, but I should have. I think. And now I can't just retire here. Iroh promised to release the colonies, but he might be going back on his word, and Aang and the others are out there trying to fix that, and maybe Zuko, too, but-"

Suki inhaled and lowered her head. "I know I am not worthy of their fight. But there's nothing here to rejoin. So many of us-"

Her voice wavered as she fought back a sob.

"If all I can do is avenge them, then that is what I will spend my life on. I ask, Avatar Kyoshi, that you give me the strength to strike a worthy blow- and the wisdom to tell whether Sabure is a traitor."

Silence answered her.

Sabure was Suki's oldest friend, and a fellow descendent of a Kyoshi Warrior.

But Kirai had been Suki's sister, and equally shared in the lineage of Kyoshi.

Not all of the Fire Nation's victories here could be from the information Suki had given to them when acting as a triple-agent. Some of the required knowledge could have come from just watching carefully after Suki's departure and some sloppiness on the part of her rebels. There could have been some informants among the populace passing on little scraps and rumors that could have paid off.

But there might also have been another spy in the Kyoshi Rebellion.

And it might have been Sabure.

Suki didn't want it to be. And the survival of this dojo was a good argument against it.

But what if Sabure had sold out the rest of the rebellion to protect the dojo? What if she wanted to be the sole heir of the Kyoshi Warriors? Or maybe she just hadn't yet worked out a good price-

Suki had no idea if that kind of thinking made sense. She couldn't even being to speculate what had gone through Kirai's mind, at the very end, when death was approaching and all hope was gone. Suki would have tried to spend her own last moments helping her friends, but Kirai had chosen to attempt one last betrayal. Suki knew she could never understand the mindset of a true traitor.

So she needed Kyoshi's wisdom to tell if Sabure was an enemy.

She rose again, fully straightening her back as she continued to kneel, and clapped her hands twice to finish the prayer. She didn't know how her words would reach Kyoshi. Perhaps a wind would carry them to Aang, where they would be heard on an unconscious level. Or perhaps a portion of the spirit of Kyoshi existed separately from him, inhabiting the island home she had created. There might not be a difference. Aang had said that everything was connected. Perhaps even across time, Suki's words could be heard at a moment when Avatar Kyoshi was still alive.

It didn't matter. Suki knew that something of Kyoshi was still in this world, and she had been born to serve it.

She put the fan that Zuko had given her back in one boot, and took from the shelf the one that Sabure had given her all those years ago, hiding it in her other boot. She also took a katana before stepping out of the dojo.

Then she looked Sabure in the eyes and lied, "It's time to rebuild the rebellion. Avatar Aang is returning in two days, and we'll be there to meet him."

Piandao had quite a bit of dust to shake from his boots, when he was finally able to come inside.

It was a fairly busy inn, its common room filled with locals who treated this place as the social center of their Fire Nation town. A small Pai Sho tournament seemed to be taking place in one corner, while the other tables sounded like they were hosting quite a few informal debate clubs. The phrases of 'the Fire Lord' and 'the Avatar' and 'Capital volcano' seemed to be popular, tonight.
Piandao stomped his filthy boots on the mat as the innkeeper bustled over. "Are there rooms open?"

The innkeeper, a classical image of a plump man in an apron, nodded. "What manner of accommodations does sir require?"

Instead of answering right away, Piandao motioned through the door for his companions to enter. They did so with a hesitation that might have been wariness at the noise level, or perhaps lingering shock from their earlier experiences. The children seemed more interested than the parents, but didn't let loose with any requests or questions quite yet.

Only when Piandao was sure that his charges weren't about to bolt did he produce a shining gold coin for the innkeeper and reply, "These poor souls were robbed on the road. Give them two rooms and whatever they can eat. They also need clothes and supplies. If this coin is not enough, give them what they need and see me for the extra cost."

The innkeeper took the coin first and nodded second. "Yes, master. I can also send word to the local guards about the bandits, if you like?"

"Why? To bury the bodies?" Piandao shifted the sword that was hanging from the back of his belt to hang more comfortably. "I'll take a dinner and drink, and check out that Pai Sho game, I think. I'll let you know if I need a room for myself."

He said a quick goodbye to the family he'd rescued (the eyes of the children drifted to his sword, one last time), and then headed for the gaming corner.

The roads had been bad since the death of Azulon. Considering the circumstances, Iroh had been accepted quite readily as Fire Lord, but any change in leadership brought anxiety. And chaos. Then there was the fall of the Capital. Piandao did not know what the Avatar intended with that, but it had created additional troubles. Piandao had been able to find well-paying work as a bodyguard for the nobles fleeing with their wealth, and then accumulated something less tangible but possibly more rewarding by protecting the poorer locals from formerly wealthy fugitives who hadn't quite figured out how to work for a living.

None of it made up for what he'd done on behalf of Ozai- or of Ursa. Piandao couldn't know when that switch might have happened, not exactly, but he didn't want to assume that all evil came from one person. No doubt he had served multiple terrible masters. And that, simply, made him terrible as well. He'd tried to take refuge in service, since freedom had worked out so dreadfully, but that had proven no better.

Perhaps he needed a different kind of service.

As he walked across the common room, passing between tables of drinking and arguing locals, he retrieved a Pai Sho game piece from his belt.

It was a White Lotus tile.

It had been a gift, many years ago. Before Ursa. Before Ozai. Before Azulon. Before the Weapons of the Fire Nation. Before the one hundred men who had died trying to take him, and the one hundred who he chose to save with his surrender.

Before he returned to the Fire Nation.

Perhaps that had been his first mistake.

Piandao reached the Pai Sho board and its surrounding cluster of old men at the same time as a
waitress bearing a tray full of food for him. The innkeeper here was quite an efficient fellow, it seemed. Piandao accepted the dinner and sat down to watch the game currently in progress. It was a very good match, a battle between two experienced players. Piandao enjoyed it.

No one seemed to take notice of him, except maybe an individual in a hooded robe who sat down nearby with a drink and seemed to also be interested in the game. It was a young man, underneath the robe. His walk gave that much away. As well as several other interesting things.

The current game ended, one old man defeating another, and the group gave murmurs of approval. Then the victor turned to Piandao and said, "Would you care to play a game, stranger?"

Piandao finished his meat and sat back. "I wouldn't be opposed. I'm quite a student of the game. But I'm afraid I would have to borrow a set of tiles. This is all I have with me." He raised his White Lotus piece to so that it would be visible in the light. "I was told that it will always find me a friend here. But the man who did so was a mad king all the way across the world, so I hope I'm getting this right."

There was a little stillness that settled over the group, and the hooded young man tensed in his seat.

Piandao decided to do something about that. He turned to the figure and said, "Please don't, Bangfei. This seems like a nice establishment, and I would not want to ruin the atmosphere by shedding your blood here."

Bangfei, one of two Qi-blocking ex-Weapons of the Fire Nation, pulled the hood back and dipped his head. "Apologies, sir. They asked me to be here in case - to ensure peace."

"So you've found them, too. And they knew I was coming." Piandao turned back to the old Pai Sho players. "Perhaps the position I thought to seek has already been filled?"

The victor of the previous match finally relaxed and shook his head. "There is always a place for those who value philosophy, beauty, and truth, Piandao Clanless. Bangfei here was recently initiated. He has a need we think we can fill. But what of your needs?"

Piandao shook his head. "If I could put a name to them, I would not have waited so long to seek you out. But my sword seems to keep finding itself covered in blood, and I am growing tired of cleaning it."

"Then perhaps it is time for you to take up less violent games." The old man reached out to put a hand on Piandao's shoulder. "Come, Piandao Clanless. Share a game with me. We will talk. And then, we will find a purpose for you. One I think you'll like better than being a Weapon."

"Well, I'd almost have to." Piandao shifted to sit at the Pai Sho table, and put his lone tile on the board. "I seem to have nowhere to go but up."

Suki didn't spend much time with Sabure while they waited for the 'Avatar Rendezvous.' She wanted to give the other girl a proper chance to betray her.

And, if she was going to die avenging her fallen rebels, she wanted a chance to enjoy her last two days on Kyoshi Island.

She'd used most of her money traveling back from the Fire Nation, and then the local guards had taken their 'cut.' Pickpocketing down in the business sector, where most people wore red, produced enough to pay for food for a few days, but that still put most of the nicer inns out of her price range. (Besides, those were for tourists.) Until she could find something more permanent - until she could
tell if permanence was even a thing that would be happening to her - she made use of one of the
copper-a-day hammock houses that serviced the sailors passing through. It lacked privacy, but so had
lodging in the Unagi Gang's old headquarters. Privacy, for Suki, was an acquired taste.

Besides, the low cost meant she didn't have to find a job, so she was free to properly reacquaint
herself with her home.

It was strange, how familiar everything was. She'd grown up here, barely even leaving the port
settlement, learning every street and alley and building and plaza. She knew all the fishing boats in
the harbor and who captained them. Which food stalls had fresh ingredients and which ones could
work miracles with stale bread and which ones sold overpriced junk to Firebenders. The best taverns
to beg some dinner. Where to scrounge up a piece of scrap-iron that could serve as a weapon in a
pinch. She even had a favorite alleyway to take a piss in, when no more civilized options were
available.

It was also strange how little she liked it all. She loved her home, loved Kyoshi Island. She just didn't
like it.

It was the same relationship she had with Kirai.

The rest of the world, in contrast, had been so startlingly new. She'd started in a variety of Fire
Nation prisons, which admittedly was a poor way of broadening her horizons, but then she'd thrown
in with Zuko and got to travel the Earth Kingdom on Princess Azula's coin. She'd seen the haunted
remnants of Ba Sing Se and been bowed to by ghosts made of ash. She'd slept in rebel refugee
villages and been hosted in the sprawling mansions of Fire Nation nobles, once within a few days of
each other.

And it wasn't just the places, either! She'd never before encountered the likes of Aang, or Sokka, or
Mai. Azula was a thoroughly unpleasant meeting, but quite an education. Katara was a heartening
discovery. Ty Lee was barely believable. And Zuko-

Zuko had taught her just how complicated other people could be, while still being so familiar that
they didn't even need words to communicate on some topics. The most important topics.

And now Suki was back home, with the people she'd known all her life. It was all familiar. It was
exactly what she'd wanted to come back to. And she was seeing it all again with new eyes, new
context.

Before, Kyoshi Island had been her world.

Now, she saw how Kyoshi Island fit into the rest of a world too big to ever fully know.

It made her home smaller, yes. But 'smaller' wasn't bad.

It was just a choice.

Like so many other things.

The place Suki chose for the fake meetup had to be outside of town. No one would ever believe that
the Avatar intended to just land in the middle of a Fire Nation colony.

Well, Sabure wouldn't, anyway.

It couldn't be the hidden dojo, because if Sabure was indeed a traitor, then she had nevertheless
preserved the dojo up to this point and might still want to do so (and Suki wanted to, as well). The
place needed to allow a small army to sneak up unnoticed, because even an Avatar wasn't sufficient
bait if he'd be able to see you coming. And, of course, it couldn't be on the shoreline, because
nobody, regardless of their expectations or loyalties, wanted the Unagi to crash the party.

But Suki was sentimental enough to want something that had more than random significance, so she
picked the clearing that had once been Longshot's archery range.

She and Sabure, katana at their sides and faces painted like the Kyoshi Warriors of old, arrived three
hours before the dawn meeting that wouldn't be taking place. A half-moon was shining down
through the break in the leaves. Suki took a moment to look up at it.

Sabure glanced back at her. "Danger?"

Suki shook her head. "Nothing. I was just looking. In some of the old dialects, my name sounds like
a word for the moon."

"Huh. I never knew that. Did you parents do it on purpose?"

Suki shrugged. "Everyone who could answer that is dead now. I never asked before my parents
died. And if Kirai knew-" She shrugged again, and then started doing some reconnaissance of the
area. The clearing was in the middle of the forest outside of the port settlement, far enough away that
no one could stumble on it randomly. The trees were thick and tall; the upslope logging industry
hadn't extended this far- yet.

And from what Suki could see, there was no Fire Nation army waiting.

Yet.

The stuffed dummy that Longshot used to shoot was missing. Suki recalled that he had brought it
here himself when he wanted to practice, and now that he was gone it was probably lost. A bad
mockup of a Fire Army soldier might molder away in some hidden basement and no one would ever
know.

Suki saw Sabure start to do her own reconnaissance, checking the foliage around the edge of the
clearing, and for a while the night was quiet.

The girls orbited each other as they patrolled.

The question was how long it would be before they collided.

Suki could smell the dawn approaching.

She was making another circuit of the clearing's perimeter, Sabure once again moving as her shadow
on the opposite side. The clearing was longer than it was wide, and when the girls circled to the point
where they were closest, Sabure said, "So what are we going to do when the Avatar gets here?
You've been kind of vague about that."

Suki slowed her walk. "He can show people that there's hope. A reason to fight the Fire Nation. We
can build something up that will eventually push the Fire Nation right out of here."

"Oh." Sabure came to a stop. "Kind of pointless, though, isn't it?"

Suki stopped as well. "What do you mean?"
Sabure turned to face her directly, and her visage was streaked with shadows that hid her more colorful facepaints. "Well, we only have one Avatar. So he's going to risk himself, showing himself here where it's so dangerous, just to save our island?" She rubbed a foot against the ground. "Why?"

"This is the land that Avatar Kyoshi herself created." Suki couldn't hear any movement out in the forest. Which didn't necessarily mean anything. She casually rested her right hand on the sheathed katana hanging from her waist. "Why not start here to free the Earth Kingdom?"

"I guess. I'm not a strategist or politician or anything, so maybe it makes sense to free us first."

Sabure's posture stiffened and she stopped kicking at the grass. "But it's definitely stupid to start from scratch here. Especially when there's a magic truth-tasting Earth King with her own big rebellion up on the mainland. Don't you think?"

"Did all of these thoughts just occur to you, or were you maybe talking them over with friends when I wasn't looking?" Suki tightened her grip so that now she was holding the handle of the katana at an angle that would let her draw it and slice in a single motion. Too bad the traitor was so far away.

Sabure stomped a foot, and the grass tore as a rough-edged rock popped up to float in the air. "It's better if you don't fight."

"Yeah, you'd say that." Suki took a moment to put some spring in her legs, and then she dashed towards her oldest friend.

Sabure punched, and the rock flew straight at Suki. She twirled around it without stopping her run, not yet drawing her sword. She'd unsheathe it and strike down her oldest friend in a single motion—

No.

She didn't know for sure yet. She wouldn't draw the sword until she had proof—

And then footsteps were tromping in the grass from Suki's left and she dived out of the way of a log swinging at her head—

A line of metal glinted in the waning moonlight and Suki snagged her fans from her boots as she came up from her dive and flicked them open to strike. One slap of the fan changed the motion of the incoming weapon so that it would miss her completely, and the other smacked below the base of the metal where it encountered a fragile human hand and elicited a grunt of pain—

But then the air flashed like lightning and, the thunder followed with enough force to knock her off her feet.

How she held on to her fans, she had no idea. Nor could she say where in the name of Kyoshi's big boots lightning could come from in a cloudless sky. Ears ringing, and she started to get up—

An arrow struck the grass right in front her, quivering for a moment in implied threat. She looked up from it to see a figure with a longbow at the far end of the clearing. It wore a rice hat tied atop its head.

As her vision cleared from the lightning, she realized she was looking at Longshot. There was no mistaking that stance or the watchful silence.

He was alive.

Other figures stepped into her vision: a hulking body of rectangular shape with what seemed like a whole tree trunk in its hands, a little form that could have been a child with clay globes strapped to
sashes crossed over its chest, and a hunched shape with a short sword in each hand.

And Sabure, more rocks hovering at her sides.

No soldiers?

And Longshot-

Suki blinked back tears. "So you both betrayed us to the Fire Nation, huh? Well, you're not getting the Avatar tonight. And I'm not going to make the mistake of being taken alive again."

The figures traded glances.

Suki took the opportunity to lower her arms and tighten her legs in preparation for another dash. If the little guy's globes were explosives as she suspected, she was better off going for him first, and then using him as cover against Longshot, so that she could-

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," Longshot said as he lowered his bow.

Suki blinked. "What?"

Sabure stepped forward. "Weren't you selling us out to the Fire Nation? A trap for the last rebels?"

Suki blinked again. "No, you sold out everyone else and now you're setting a trap for Aang."

"I didn't sell anyone out! You admitted you were a triple-agent!"

"I was! But don't be an idiot!" Suki snapped her fans shut. "There's no way the little bit I told them was used to get everyone!"

"Well I didn't betray anyone!" Sabure stomped a foot, and the rocks floating around her all crumbled to dirt and fell to the ground. "So either you gave them more than you're saying now, or they just figured the rest out themselves!"

"Exactly!" Suki realized what she had just said. "So, wait, no one told the Fire Nation about tonight? We're just fighting each other over a lie?"

Sabure groaned. "And I set up this great ambush! Me! I even brought Longshot out of hiding!"

"Yeah, about that: you told me he died!" Suki took the risk of walking closer to her ambushers. "I cried over it!"

No one attacked her, but Sabure's hands formed into fists. "Well, I cried over you when you disappeared and again when I thought maybe they tortured you to death for information and again two days ago when you showed up alive and I didn't know if I could trust you!" Sabure stopped and rubbed at her eyes. "Yes, I lied to keep one of my rebels safe."

"Oh." Suki stepped over to her friend and put her arms around her. How could she have misjudged things this badly? "Well, that was a good idea. And this is a great ambush."

Sabure took a deep breath and nodded. "Thanks."

The big figure with the log in its hands finally spoke, raising a voice so deep and resonant that the forest seemed to vibrate with it, "So we're not fighting anymore?"

Sabure shook her head. "No. Turns out we're all friends. (Thank Kyoshi.) In that spirit, let me
introduce everyone: this is Suki, former leader of the Kyoshi rebellion and ally to the Avatar. Suki, you know Longshot, the big guy is code-named Pipsqueak, the little guy says to call him The Duke, and the cutie whose fingers you almost broke is Sneers.

"These are my Freedom Fighters."

The forest changed as the daylight brought it to life. What was once cold and covered in shadow was revealed as lush green life.

Suki sat on the grass with the others and listened with rapt attention.

"They came down last season." Sabure motioned at her little rebel group, but her eyes never left Suki. "I'd heard about the Avatar meeting the Earth King girl even before you told me. I just didn't know you were there. The King put out word that there was a rebellion down here that needed help--"

"The actual words," The Duke interrupted, "were, 'I want them to swear life and allegiance to me as their King, and in exchange I will lift them from their sad little Toph-less existence.' She talks like that."

"Thanks, The Duke. Anyway, these guys were kind of kicking around as their own sabotage and acquisitions unit, and decided that they could help us here."

Pipsqueak grinned, an expression that took over his whole massive face. "And we were right!"

Sabure's lip quirked. "You were. Eventually." She turned back to Suki. "You can imagine how much they stood out, but they immediately went to work against the Fire Nation as best they could, and when I decided that they were the real thing, I made contact."

Suki nodded. Sabure had made an act of trust and been rewarded. "And with your knowledge, they became much more effective."

"And I'm an Earthbender. Don't forget how useful and amazing that is."

Suki turned to Longshot. "Of course you're still the best shot on the entire island."

He shrugged. "But not a leader. Sabure has the blood of Kyoshi Warriors in her."

So did Suki, but it didn't need to be spoken. She was wearing the facepaint, and she didn't miss how everyone's eyes went to it after Longshot's statement. Instead, she said, "And my arrival looked just like the Fire Nation trying to find and draw you out."

Sabure snorted. "Especially with this obvious ambush. I bet the Avatar isn't anywhere close to Kyoshi Island right now."

"No, he isn't." Suki frowned. She wondered if Aang and the others had reached the North Pole already, or if they were still trying to find a good approach. Zuko, though, must be in the Earth Kingdom with Toph by now. "We're on our own."

Pipsqueak laughed. "That's more than enough! We've already got something in the works. Right, The Duke?"

The kid pulled the Fire Army helmet he wore down to cover his blush. "It's just a new way to hide small explosives. No big deal."
Sabure leaned over and rubbed his helmet. "But not one we would have thought of. It's pretty smart."

Suki leaned forward. "Tell me more."

They did.

And then she got an intriguing idea.

A day later, Suki was knocking on the door of the guard station where she'd been jailed immediately after her arrival on the island, this time wearing dusty green.

The fishing ships had already gone out, but the morning was young enough that quite a few people were out and about. Nevertheless, not a single person paid visible attention to Suki or the building. That was how survival worked on Kyoshi Island.

The same Corporal Akechi who had overseen her harassment finally answered the door with a frown. It quickly turned into a full scowl. "What do you want?"

"Gold." Suki gave him her most brilliant smile, and she didn't need to fake even a little of her pleasure. "More than you can authorize to give me. Also, I'll need a fresh set of unrestricted travel permits. Contact your superiors and tell them that I can provide the full details of a rebel plot to destroy the Navy base."

Akechi blinked, and then grabbed her left arm to drag her into the station. Seconds later, the jail cell bars were once again locking shut in front of her.

Suki rolled her eyes. They hadn't even bothered to search her, this time. "I would have waited for the gold. You don't need to keep me in here."

"I'm not giving you anything!" Akechi grabbed the bars of her cell and rattled them in what was probably supposed to be a show of intimidation. None of the other guards behind him seemed to be impressed. "There's no rebellion here anymore, and no one trusts you."

Suki sat down on the cell's bench. "Wrong for both. I lived here most of my life. I've made contacts with old friends who are still rebels. They've been hiding from you, but they love me, and they also seem to love stockpiling improvised explosives."

Akechi actually stepped back. "Explosives?"

Suki grinned. "You've been having problems with mysterious explosives, haven't you? Well, that's just been playtime, from what I've been told."

Akechi was silent for a long moment. "I can beat the information out of you."

Suki raised her eyebrows. "Because beaten prisoners are such reliable sources of information? Ask your superiors what you should do- but for gold and travel permits, I'll tell you everything. I'll even wait in this cell until you recover and confirm the explosives. Fair?"

"I-" Akechi frowned. "Why travel permits?"

Suki snorted. "Like I'm going to survive three hours on this island after turning on all my old friends. And they've had help from off the island, so the permits need to be general-use, not anything that specifies my name. My sister taught me how this goes: get a good price, get a way out, and burn it all
Suki forgot to arrange for lunch. The Fire soldiers didn't offer one. But, really, it was for the better. She doubted she'd be able to keep anything down.

She made a show of trying to sleep on the cell's bench, but it was all she could do not to jump up and wear her boots out with pacing. Her body was in combat-mode, primed for action and hyper-aware, despite the lack of obvious threat. She was in no more danger than she was during her first stay here, but back then her biggest concern was the Kyoshi Warrior fan she'd been smuggling; her own safety had been secondary.

It was almost time for dinner when Corporal Akechi returned with a pair of his regular guards and a new man, posture stooped, in scratched armor of the Fire Navy.

The stooped man was holding two halves of something like a brick of candied strawberry jelly with a kind of white clay in the center-

Suki recognized its exact nature just before he tossed it to land on the floor right in front of the cell's bars. She jumped to her feet and half-climbed up on the bench before she realized that nothing was exploding. "What was that?!"

The man smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. It won't go off just by being thrown."

"But it's illustrative that you reacted as you did," Corporal Akechi said.

Suki stepped down from the bench. "I'm glad I could be of service, even unconsciously." She bowed, just to make sure no sarcasm had leaked its way into her words.

Corporal Akechi snorted and moved to unlock the jail. "The explosives were found at the sites you mentioned. We detonated the contents of one of these bricks to confirm their nature. And the result matched your own expectations. It seems you gave us nothing but the truth." He swung the barred door open and stepped aside.

Suki emerged from her captivity. "Thank you. And the deal I offered?"

Akechi motioned, and one of his guards brought a small box forward. He took it, and then handed it to Suki.

It was pleasantly heavy, but when she opened it and slid the travel permits out, she found that it was filled with silverish coins. Not even pure silver, never mind the gold she had specified. "What is this?"

"A fair price." Akechi looked over at the stooped man. "Yong, the demonstration is over. Take the last explosive and sink it with the others."

"Sink it?" Suki probably shouldn't have let herself be distracted, but she had to know.

The stooped man - Yong, apparently - nodded as he picked up the halves of the brick he had thrown. "It's the safest method of storage. Underwater, nothing will ignite the material."

"And your friends won't be able to get to it, not before we decide how to turn it against them," Akechi sneered as Yong left. "Not unless they can swim into the bay enclosed by the Navy base and swim back out with all the weight."
Suki had to suppress a smile. "They're not my friends. And neither are you, if you're trying to short me. Where's my gold?"

"You didn't earn it."

"You said the explosives are real!"

Akechi waved a dismissive hand. "And you did your duty as an agent of the Fire Nation and protected denizen of its colonies. Considering how few names you could give us, you're lucky we're paying you anything besides the permits. I should arrest you for contact with murderous rebels, but I'll be content if you leave and never come back."

"Arrest me?!" That might have been too much. Suki took a moment to put on a calm face and inclined her head. "My apologies. What I mean to say is that while I am disappointed, I am of course grateful for the chance to serve the Fire Nation."

Akechi didn't believe it, she could see. But he didn't want to, so nodded his acceptance. "Good. Now get out. If I see you on this island again starting tomorrow, I'll throw you in that cell one last time. Do you understand?"

Suki slid the lid of her reward box closed. "Perfectly."

And so she left her home behind.

After she grabbed one last bowl of noodles to sustain her, the permits did their first job by getting her out of town. She passed through the checkpoint at one of the main gates and onto road that would take her either up the mountains or to one of the smaller coastal settlements. She headed to one particular little beachside town, hurrying as fast as she could manage over the distance, and she still arrived well after dark.

Fortunately, there was stew, a bed, and friends waiting for her.

She spent the night on an old futon in a boat house, and woke up before dawn to say her goodbyes.

Sabure and Longshot walked out on the dock with her, while Sabure's father prepared his small fishing boat. Longshot was quiet, of course, but Sabure groaned and said, "I can't believe we finally trust each other and now you're leaving!"

Suki hugged her. "It's not forever. I have faith that the Avatar will someday save us from the Fire Nation and free our home. Then I'll be able to come back."

Sabure returned the hug but also gave a snort. "Sure, if that Fire Prince doesn't whisk you away to some island retreat to spend the rest of your life lounging on a beach."

"Well you can come visit me on my Royal Fire Private Island anytime you want." Suki stuck out her tongue at her friend, and then put on a more polite expression as she turned to Longshot. "Keep her in line, will you? The blood of the Kyoshi Warriors may carry bravery and honor, but it hasn't stopped her from being silly."

Longshot smiled and nodded. They clasped hands.

And then it was time to leave.

She was halfway to the boat when Sabure called out, "Wait!"
Suki turned around. "What?"

Sabure trotted up, and took two gold objects out of her belt. "Here. You'll need these more than we will. Show the world what the bravery and honor of Kyoshi Island looks like." She pressed the objects into Suki's hands—

Her war fans.

Suki couldn't refuse such a gift, even if she wanted to. She took the fans, snapped them open to cross them over her heart, and bowed. "Thank you."

They had to swing around the island back towards the main port settlement in order to get to the Earth Kingdom mainland. Suki kept out of sight, down in the foul-smelling hold where the day's haul of fish would normally go, but they were still in Kyoshi Island waters when Sabure's father called her out on deck.

Suki emerged and shielded her eyes from the sunlight. "What is it? Trouble?"

"Not for us." Sabure's father pointed from his position at the ship's rudder.

Suki followed his finger back towards the island—

—where the Unagi was attacking the Fire Navy base with a mix of its massive jaws and the high-pressure steams of water it could spit.

Suki laughed. She hadn't expected it to happen this early, but—

She could picture how, last evening, the soldiers of the Fire Nation would have brought all the explosives into the walls of their base. The bricks would be glistening in the light of the setting sun, the looking less like strawberry jelly and more like blood. But the soldiers wouldn't realize how telltale that color was, wouldn't realize that the coating around the explosive center was really a mixture of animal blood from the slaughterhouse district. They'd bring the bricks over to the bay where their ships were docked, to an empty pier, and have a crane lower the explosives down in the water, just as Yong and Akechi had said. And as night fell, none of those soldiers would have noticed the blood-coating starting to dissolve in the water.

—apparently the Unagi was quick to detect the signs of a good meal.

Once again, the Kyoshi Rebellion had managed to draw out the ancient monster that Avatar Kyoshi herself had possibly put in the island's waters, and inflict it on their Fire Nation oppressors. This time, they had done it without an Avatar's help.

Suki watched and enjoyed the sight as Sabure's father steered the ship out into the open seas and the sail flapped in the wind.

Towards the Earth Kingdom, and the bigger war that would soon be fought there. To the Earth King.

And to Zuko.

Suki raised her golden fans, catching the light of the sun, and signaled her goodbye to her home. This time, on her own terms.

And with trust.
The Laboratory

Chapter Summary

Sokka discovers that there's some science he just can't get into.

Chapter Notes

I feel like I should check in at this point. This chapter marks the beginning of the Act 4 finale. I figure it will take another 3 or 4 chapters, followed by an interlude chapter. Act 5 will essentially be its own finale, covering just the last confrontation. And then we're done. I am very excited by this.

On that note, I'm calling attention to the fact that I added a 'Major Character Death' warning to this story a while back. It's always been part of the plan, but when I first published this story I wanted it to be a surprise, so I chose not to use archive warnings at all. Since then, I've decided that I like the ominous nature of an unspecified MCD tag. If that bothers you, then feel free to stop reading, but at this point I think everyone is okay with a little death.

However, I also should note that I don't think anyone is going to like how this story ultimately ends. But I planned this all out before I began writing, and I'm sticking to it. I believe in the ending. So you're getting it, whether you like it or not...

Thanks, and I hope you all enjoy!

The Laboratory

The snowstorm's winds howled like the cries of the hungry dead. The tundra was devoid of mortal life, at least as far as Sokka could see, which left him and his friends as the only things a horrible monster might be interested in eating.

"I," Sokka spat past the driving snowflakes, "have a bad feeling about this."

Aang jumped up from somewhere near the back of the group, looking so odd in his regular monk-wear while everyone else was in parkas. "If the wind is a problem, I can use my Airbending to calm it down a little!"

"Better not." Hahn looked back at them from the front of the line, pulling his scarf down to uncover his mouth. "If anyone's watching, we don't want to clue them in to our position with snowflakes that aren't going the right way. Besides, our Great Hunter of the South isn't scared of a little wind, right?"

Sokka rolled his eyes. "Obviously not. But I've had multiple supernatural traumatic experiences with snowstorms at this point. A cautious attitude is probably pretty smart, don't you think?" No one said anything more, but Appa grunted, so Sokka took that as a sign of general agreement and appreciation for his hard-earned wisdom.
They had been walking for a while now, Hahn leading Sokka, Aang, Mai, Katara, and Ty Lee across the snow, with Appa bring up the rear. (And Momo hiding from the weather in Appa's saddle beneath a blanket and the last of the dried fruit, the ungrateful moocher.) This was their grand plan for sneaking up on Fire Lord Iroh. According to Hahn, the Northern Water Tribe's main city was situated where the ocean met the ice, and it was possible to come in the back way by crossing the stormy tundra between the city and the North Pole itself, and then climbing down into some spiritual 'garden' (the word no doubt being a metaphor) with a literal backdoor.

But flying was out of the question, according to Aang. Appa didn't do so well in bad visibility and high winds, and they had no idea who might be listening for a crash. And why was this route stormy? Well, according to their expert, that's the way it had always been. The North Pole itself was smack dab in the middle of an actual climate-inappropriate 'Spirit Forest' (that is to say a forest of spiritual origin, not a forest of spirits, and Sokka had gotten confirmation that point twice) and covered by constant snowstorms. Sokka had noted the similarities to the South Pole's Everstorm, while also remembering how Aang's Avatar State had almost caused it to bury everyone back at the start of their epic life-endangering adventure.

Hopefully, they'd find the Northern Water Tribe before they got buried. And it would have to go a lot better than their snowy adventure at the village of the Faceless Tribe, right?

Sure.

He was, to say the least, a bit pessimistic about this plan.

At least the journey through the Northern Seas hadn't been bad. Once the Faceless Tribe had more or less recovered from the damage done by the Unhecigila, they put together a crew to sail up to the North Pole. It turned out to be a bit more complicated a path than just 'north a bit,' having to look for specific landmarks that Hahn remembered to guide them, and also dodging around the areas that were supposedly watched by Waterbender patrols. Then there were the new Fire Navy patrols that Hahn hadn't known about; that had made for a few interesting moments.

It had reminded Sokka a bit of the sneaky way they'd had to sail to Crescent Island to rescue Katara. Except this time Jet wasn't around to mess with anyone. Hahn was a bit of jerk, but Katara said he wasn't even the worse pig-headed warrior from the North Pole she'd met, so that was probably okay.

Hopefully Mai wouldn't be betraying them at their destination this time.

(Sokka had managed to refrain from making that joke out loud. He did have some tact.)

The regular sounds of the group trudging through the snow was suddenly being broken up by a pair of boots taking on a faster pace. Sokka turned around to find Ty Lee trotting up to the front of the line.

Her muffled voice forced its way through her scarf with an, "Um, are we there yet?"

Sokka frowned. "We took a bathroom break barely an hour ago!"

"No, it's not that." Ty Lee had always seemed a bit stifled by the heavy Water Tribe parka she'd been wearing since they all came north, but she was practically wilting now. "It's- I- uh, you know how I can see auras?"

Hahn said, "You do what now?"

Sokka wasn't sure he believed this aura business; he thought it more likely that Ty Lee combined a high sensitivity to human mannerisms with some form of synesthesia. But Ty Lee was gorgeous, so
he put aside his profound distaste for anything unscientific in nature just barely long enough to say, "What about our auras?"

"No, it's not us." Ty Lee pulled her scarf down and looked past him, to the mess of moving white that was the snowstorm around them. "I never encountered anything like this, but- but I think this whole place has an aura."

"Wow," Aang breathed.

"Oh here we go," Mai mumbled. Katara bumped an elbow into her side.

Hahn snorted. "Is that good or bad?"

"I don't know." Ty Lee hugged herself. "What's worrying me is that all I'm seeing is gray. An ugly filthy gray sheen like I'm wearing filthy goggles."

Sokka looked around at the gray snowstorm beneath the gray sky. "You don't say."

Ty Lee stepped towards him. "I do! And you know what that means."

Katara pulled her hood back a little despite the flying snow. "I think I remember. You said- that's right, a dirty gray is blocked energy."

Ty Lee broke out into a huge grin. "That's right! You've really been listening."

Katara's cheeks went rosy. "I try."

A thought occurred to Sokka: his sister's blush might not have anything to do with the frigid winds. She had been talking to Ty Lee about auras, huh? She did seem to be spending a lot of time with Ty Lee, lately. Even more than Mai did. And even worse, it looked like Katara even believed it.

Sokka suddenly realized that it didn't matter how cute he thought Ty Lee was. In a way, it was kind of a relief. "So how does an area have blocked energy? Aang, are you getting any kind of bad Avatar tingling or something?"

Aang shrugged. "I'm cold, but I don't think that counts. I've never really seen energy coming from places like Ty Lee is saying. Usually the spiritual energy of a place is visible in its natural appearance, or you can feel peace or pressure. The closest thing to blocked energy I've encountered was the Capital Caldera; there was a Spirit Gate that kept the volcano dormant."

Until Aang had undone it under Roku's guidance. Then the volcano had exploded and taken the entire Fire Nation Capital with it.

Great.

Ty Lee shivered. "I just know that it's really freaking me out, so I thought everyone should know. And are we almost there yet?"

Hahn turned pointed ahead on their path. "Actually, I think so. I see the start of the Valley of the Spirit Forest, so we can swing south just a little further up and head straight for the back of the city. But something looks weird."

Oh, great. Weirdness. This in top of whatever Ty Lee's problem was, and the concept of a 'Spirit Forest' of green healthy trees that surrounded the actual North Pole despite this being an inhospitable storm-ridden tundra.
Sokka sighed. "What do you see?"

"A line of lights. It's leading-you see where the valley starts? The dip between those two mountains that kind of forms a path?"

"Nope, I don't see any paths." Sokka shielded his eyes with his gloved hands and squinted through the whipping windy snow. It did indeed look like a series of little glowing things was stretching across the horizon. A telegraph line, lit up with crystal lanterns like the ones at the South Pole. "The two closest mountains seem to start to have a dip, but the lights lead to another big outcropping that seems to be- kind of squarish?"

Aang said, "Earthbending?"

Ty Lee said, "Tanks?"

Katara said, "An ancient Lionturtle from ages beyond memory?"

"Oh, for First Flame's sake, it's another Fire Nation base," Mai groaned. "Seriously, people. What else would a telegraph wire lead to?"

"Ohhhhh." Aang nodded. "That would make a lot more sense. Good job, Mai!"

Ty Lee ran over to hug her friend. "Yeah, you're really smart! And now we're going to run away because everything is gray and people get hurt in high-security complexes of doom, right?"

Katara's face twitched beneath her hood. "Ugh, I can't believe I used to look forward to infiltrating a Fire Nation base. After nearly dying in that stupid sinkhole, I've learned my lesson." She blinked. "Oh, no, I'm old and jaded like Sokka now!"

For his own part, Sokka could only nod his approval. "Well, my very intelligent sister is right. But if we keep following Hahn's route, we'll be on the shortest path between that base and the Northern Water Tribe. Any traffic between them will trip right over us, probably literally with the way this snow is coming down. So-we should- ugh-we should- I don't even want to say it."

"Wait," Hahn interrupted, "you want to check out the base? Why?"

Mai pulled her hood down tighter around her head. "To find out if it's any danger to us. To see if there are roads for tanks or trucks that we should avoid. Maybe even check out if there's a cargo transport we can hide on and get past whatever security you don't know about at the city's rear. And for all we know Iroh is hiding in this installation instead of doing the regular Conquering Invader Thing and taking over the local throne room."

Sokka waved at her, which she probably missed with her hood covering her eyes. "What the gloomy girl said."

Aang hopped up to try to get a better look. "And I'm worried that there's a Fire Nation installation right on the path that leads to the Spirit Forest. Especially after what Ty lee said. We can't risk another Ba Sing Se."

Sokka nodded; he was glad to have missed that one, and didn't feel the need to make up for lost monsters. Katara, Ty Lee, and Mai - who all had actually fought the city-sized abomination made of the ashes of entire civilization - nodded more vigorously.

Hahn bowed his head in acquiescence. "Then I will guide you, Avatar Oong."
"Um, it's Aang, but thanks."

The group continued on their path, and Sokka was glad now that they had chosen to walk. They might have missed this, otherwise, or more likely been caught by whatever spotters were in the base. The storming didn't abate at all, but eventually they got close enough for Sokka to take a better look with a spyglass.

"Okay," he told the others, "I can make out some more details. It definitely looks a lot like the Navy base we had at the South Pole, complete with telegraph lines and pointlessly patriotic flame sigils. I bet it's using all of the same heating and insulation technology. But-" Something looked off to him, and a second later he realized what it was. "There's no fencing around this place. I see some poles standing in the snow where they'd normally wrap and secure the fences, but there's nothing blocking us from just walking straight up to the buildings."

"Oh," Aang said, "that's a nice change of pace."

Mai snorted. "Yeah, they're making it nice and easy to walk into a trap."

"You think this is a trap?"

"I think everything is a trap."

Sokka had to shake his head, though, as he lowered the spyglass. "If it's a trap, they're not putting much effort into the bait. We just want a good look at this place so we can tell if it's a threat. But that should only take one of us. I'll go."

Aang reached over and put an arm around Sokka's shoulders. "We'll go. I can fly us out if it gets dangerous."

Katara raised a hand. "I vote with Aang to save my brother from himself!"

Ty Lee did the same. "What she said!"

Mai shrugged. "I don't care, but I'll back my friends."

Appa grunted and shook snow off his face.

That was stupid of them. But Sokka was still a little bit grateful. He hated weird stuff, and this was turning out weirder than expected so far. "We're wasting time, so I guess vote with Aang. He wins. We'll take a flare, and the rest of you can watch us with the spyglass. If we light it, come and save us, as heroically as you like."

Aang found it very hard not to fly or air-scooter or wind-dash over to the mysterious base. He wanted to get to the Northern Water Tribe, now that they were so close. It had taken all his willpower - and some glaring from Mai - to not just fly Appa straight to Iroh and save the world and restore balance and defeat all evil forever. Or at least stop one bad man.

But even aside from the practical concerns that Sokka and Mai were so good at thinking about, something about this new discovery gave Aang a bad taste on his tongue. He could feel the flow of energies this close to the North Pole, just like he could feel the winds.

In fact, it was exactly like feeling the winds. The winds and the energies were one. This was no ordinary storm.
So he kept pace with Sokka and approached this oddly-placed Fire Nation facility.

The first detail that Aang noticed, as they got close, was that the buildings all had writing on them.

It wasn't a lot of writing. It was just a single character - 'shield' - carved on each a wall. Most of the buildings just had one, sometimes half-covered by the piled snowdrifts, but some of the larger structures had several marked walls. And in every case the 'shield' character was inscribed with some kind of silvery metal.

Aang didn't know how he knew, but he was pretty sure it was platinum.

He didn't see any guards or patrols. Some of the buildings had window-like patches covered with shutters, but they were all closed. There wasn't even anything like a gatehouse. Not that there was a gate. Just those thick poles outlining some kind of perimeter. He tried to spot some sign of the Spirit Forest, but it must have been on the other side of the complex.

Sokka stopped and whispered, "So, what do you think?"

"I don't remember the buildings at the South Pole having any writing on them. And you guys were mining platinum down there, so it's not like you were short on it."

Sokka frowned. "Why write 'shield' on buildings? If I wrote 'optimist' on my forehead, it wouldn't drain my brains out all of the sudden."

Aang had his own opinions on that matter, but didn't feel the need to get into it here. "Right. It's odd. So since we just have more weird and no answers, we need to keep investigating."

"Unfortunately. I'll go first, okay?" He straightened against the wind and led the way closer to the base.

Aang followed.

They got to the widely-spaced poles that marked the perimeter. Sokka paused just short of the invisible line. He looked to Aang.

Aang readied his glider.

Sokka nodded, faced forward again, took a step, and braced himself.

Aang tensed.

Nothing happened.

Sokka blinked and took another step. Nothing continued to happen.

Aang smiled. "Heh, no reason to be scared." He moved to catch up to Sokka-

-and a sound like a gong the size of a mountain echoed over the howl of the storm, sending tingles through Aang's teeth and bones. Rather than fading, it rose in volume, becoming a ragged noise almost like a human scream, and Aang had to cover his ears against it.

And then, abruptly, it stopped.

Only Aang's lifelong training in Airbending allowed him to hear the subsequent click that was carried along on the wind. He turned in time to see the fence-less poles fall apart-no, panels were dropping and tubes were falling out to hang like spokes around a wheel and they began spinning-
Aang hissed as little blossoms of sharp pain exploded in a line across his chest. They felt like stings of a scorpion-bee, and he looked down to see something like burs, little seed pods covered in flexible hooked feelers, caught in his shirt. He moved and his chest stung again and he realized that they were caught on more than just his clothes.

And burs were from plants, just another way that nature protected itself and spread out. These had been shot from the poles, and something about the color seemed to shift and evade being pinned down as any one shade.

He barely had enough time to wonder what they were when his breath became like a roar and his blood surged through his veins. Everything became more - Sokka’s cries of, "Aang? Aang?!" were cracks of thunder - and even the dim sunlight that managed to fight its way through the storm made his eyes water.

Then Aang realized that some of the light was coming from him.

He was glowing.

A moment later, the world went away.

Sokka forgot all about the evil sharp sticky things poking him through his coat when Aang started glowing and collapsed.

Well, at least if the kid was glowing, he wasn't dead, right?

Right?

Sokka had to light the flare and get the others and-

Wait. Mai had been correct. This was a trap. And he might not be a real Water Tribe hunter, but he knew the basic principles. Traps meant hunters, and before the sharp part started, there had been a loud noise. Too loud to be a design quirk. Which meant the noise was a signal and the hunters were listening.

Which meant Sokka didn't have long to come up with a plan.

He pulled the flare out of his parka’s pocket, twisted the end off with a scrape of the spark-coating, and stuffed it into a snowdrift as lit up with a dancing red glow. Then began digging, ignoring the burs that were still sticking him through his coat; unless they were poison, they weren't important right now, and if they were poison, then it was too late anyway.

He got himself and Aang buried together in the snow just in time.

The first sign of the hunters were their voices, but between the snow covering him and the continued sound of the storm, he couldn’t make out any specifics until they were practically on top of him. They both sounded like men, and despite their proximity, he couldn’t even catch all the words:

"... footprints ... flare."

"Spirits don’t ..."

"Maybe ... spy?"

"... alarm ... wouldn't ... people."
"Whatever they ... must ... here."

Uh oh, that last part sounded distinctly like the kind of thing which preceded figuring out where to find the stupid people who had just tripped an alarm. Sokka tried to reach for his boomerang, but with Aang's body jammed against him and the light layer of snow above them both, it was hard to get it without moving and giving away their position-

And then, through the snow and the storm, he heard the roar of a skybison.

Sokka smiled.

There was a thud of a landing, the surprised cries of the hunter, the liquidy noise of snow turning to water and deciding to throw itself at people, the crunching of boots in the snow, and then a series of impacts that ended with two bodies falling to the snow.

Sokka stood up and shook off his hiding place, dragging Aang's still comatose and glowing body up with him. The snow fell off his hood just in time to see Mai rushing over to grab Aang from him.

She slapped Aang's cheeks, and scowled when there was no response. "What happened? We heard that noise but couldn't make anything out."

Sokka brushed the remaining snow off his parka. "Let's find out." He went over to where Katara and Ty Lee were standing over a pair of armored Firebenders (in capes?), and extricated one of the weird color-changing burs from the front of his jacket. The Firebenders were laying in the snow with the distinct boneless look of people whose limbs were no longer obeying commands. "What's going on? What are these things and what did they do to my friend?"

The one of the left said, "What did the witch do to us?! I can't move my legs! Or my arms! Or my-"

"Nothing that won't wear off in an hour if you answer our questions." Sokka slid the guy's faceplate off, revealing a terrified visage with a very unstylish pointed goatee- and a silvery circlet across his forehead?

Sokka ignored it and dangled the bur over the man's nose. "Tell me about this thing and why my friend won't wake up!"

The man blinked. "You're Water Tribe. You- those don't do anything to people. They're just sharp. It's something the Maker came up with to deal with- we were having a problem with the spirits from the forest-"

Sokka sucked in some unpleasantly frigid air as understanding dawned. "You built a trap for spirits. The sound went off when Aang crossed the poles, and then these things shot out, but they only affected him!"

The other Firebender, still masked, said, "Aang? The Avatar?! We caught the Avatar?!"

Before Sokka could say something sarcastic and more than a little witty, Mai was pushing him aside and ripping away the other Firebender's mask. She brandished one of her blades with the impractical number of points, pointing it right at the man's face. "You didn't catch anything. How do I fix my friend? Tell me!"

"I don't know!" The color was draining from the Firebender's face. "They're supposed to do something to make the spirits disappear! I don't know how they work! Only the Maker does!"

Sokka pushed Mai back out of the way. He didn't know if she was just putting on a Mean Guard act,
and didn't want to risk losing their only source of information. "Maybe you better tell us what's going on here. Quickly."

Aang knew exactly where he was without actually having any idea where he really was.

A minute ago, he had been at the North Pole, but now there wasn't a single snowflake around. Instead, the purple sky was completely clear, except for the trails of light that wheeled through it like playful birds, and twisted trees with spindly little branches reached up into the emptiness as far as the eye could see.

Obviously, he was in the Spirit World. Somehow.

Too bad he didn't have a map of the Spirit World.

Or any idea how to get back to the material world.

But at least he knew where to go for help. "Roku? Roku, can you hear me?"

"Aang?"

The voice seemed to come from nowhere. Aang looked around, but he was alone in this forest.

But all was not still. The trees were gnarled reaching things that might have started as networks of vines that had curled together and solidified. Their twists created plenty of shadows that seemed to move as his gaze passed over them, shadows that had a shape and texture, and his eyes settled on one particular shade that seemed taller and more regal than the rest.

Then the shadow stepped away from its tree, and the shadow was now Roku. He smiled and bowed his crowned head. "Hello, Aang. You've gotten yourself into a bit of trouble."

Aang could only laugh. "Yeah, I do that a lot. Do you know how I get back?"

Roku came forward with regal steps and laid his hands on top of Aang's head. "Something is wrong. The path is closed to you."

"What?" Aang blinked, and looked up at his bearded previous incarnation. "You mean I'm stuck here?"

Roku nodded. "I'm afraid so. You've found something very dangerous, and not just for you, but for the entire world."

Sokka had the distinct impression that the Firebenders weren't telling him everything, or at least not being truthful about it all, but there just wasn't enough time to do a proper interrogation. Besides, they were pretty far from the closest shark-infested waters.

"The main thing I got from them," he told the others, gathered in Appa's saddle, "is that this 'Lian the Maker' is the big brains here, so she's the one we need to fix Aang."

They had left the Firebenders in the snow, under Appa's guard, and assembled here for a quick conversation. They still didn't dare risk flying, especially not this close to a Fire Nation base.

Mai, for her part, said nothing from her position hunched over at the rear of the saddle, and her face wasn't giving anything away, either. But she was twirling a knife as fast as her gloved hands could.
Katara was running some luminescent healing-water over Aang's body. It looked to Sokka like the kid's glowing tattoos seemed to get a little brighter as the water passed over them, but maybe it was just his imagination. Katara sighed, leaned back, and threw the water over the side of the saddle. "He seems healthy, but he won't wake up, and it feels like- like there's something knotted in him. It's almost like-" Her eyes flicked over to Ty Lee. "It's like when you hit someone's pressure points. It feels as if his Qi is blocked, somehow, but not in any specific point- I don't know, that's the best I can put it into words."

Ty Lee reached over and put an arm around Katara's shoulders. "It's okay. You're doing your best."

Good information, if not immediately useful, but Sokka was more concerned about something else. "So maybe I should take Ty Lee with me on my infiltration."

Everyone turned to look at him.

It was Hahn who said, "Wait, did I miss something? Why are you-"

"He's worked in places like this," Mai interrupted, "and someone needs to find this Lian so that we can help Aang." She looked to Sokka, and gave him a nod. "Katara can stay here to keep an eye on him, and I'll protect them. You and Ty Lee can go in and see about this Lian. And Hahn is an idiot who can't keep our names straight but he's still a valuable source on the Northern Water Tribe so he can stay with us."

Hahn frowned at her. "Excuse me, My, but I consider that very hurtful."

"Yeah, whatever."

Sokka turned to Ty Lee. "You good?"

She took a breath, squeezed Katara's shoulders once more, and nodded. "My aura is bright yellow and I'm ready for whatever horrors we are about to face."

"O- kay. Yellow is good, I guess." Sokka checked his weapons. His boomerang was probably small enough to bring along. No need to borrow Mai's platinum knife again, since they were going up against the people forging those things. "But the first thing we need to do is get into costume."

Aang walked through the gnarled forest with Roku at his side. As they passed beneath the branches of one crooked tree, a leaf broke free and wafted on the breeze. Aang waited to watch it fall, but then the breeze died and the leaf began rising straight into the sky.

He watched until it disappeared.

Then he looked to Roku. "What could force me into the Spirit World? Some new weapon?"

"Whatever struck you did not send you here, Aang." Roku stroked his beard. "Your spirit retreated here, to save itself. The attack was against the energies in your body." He shook his head, but then looked down and smiled. "Your spiritual attunement saved your life. You have come quite far, and that let you retreat here until it is safe to return to your body."

Aang was relieved to hear that he was doing so well, but he couldn't shake the thought that if he had been a little less spiritually attuned, he might be dead now. And he hadn't even seen the attack coming!

He continued walking through the forest. "But how did I know how to retreat here? I've learned to
trace connections and see beyond the material world, but I've never just hopped over to the Spirit World."

Roku's long strides quickly brought him even with Aang, and another step took him ahead as he raised his arms to encompass the twisted trees and the shadows in their curves. "You've been to the Spirit World many times- but not as Aang. We all stand with you, and always will."

As they walked, the shadows shifted-

No, the shadows stepped out from the trees.

And the forest around them disappeared, hidden by the countless past Avatars who came forward and bowed their heads to Aang.

He smiled back at them. "Thanks. Because there's something I think I need to figure out."

Sokka knocked on the door.

A panel slid open, and a pair of dull golden eyes looked out at him. "Any trouble?"

Sokka grinned beneath his skull-like face-concealing helmet. The armor that he and Ty Lee had taken from the captured Firebenders was actually a pretty good fit, as beneath the standard plating was heavy padding not unlike a parka. And then there were the thick capes each Firebender had been wearing. It must have been the Super Cold Weather variant of the armor. He was quite comfortable in it, but Ty Lee had needed a few extra layers to get it to sit more consistently on her fairly inconsistent proportions. Then they'd just followed the footprints back to one of the smaller buildings.

The only stuff they hadn't taken from the Firebenders was their underwear and the silvery circlets on their heads. Sokka wasn't really in a royal mood.

He deepened his voice to Evil Firebender Jobber levels and replied, "We didn't find anything. I think it was a false alarm."

The eyes went wide. "We haven't one of those in a while! I'll have to make a full report. Come on in." The panel slid closed again, and Sokka heard a heavy lock squeaking.

He tilted his head towards the door and hurried to take the two paralyzed, gagged prisoners from his partner. Then he watched as Ty Lee, wearing her full Firebender armor (plus padding), cartwheeled through the opening door and began inflicting violence on people.

By the time Sokka dragged the almost naked prisoners into the building, it was all over.

Ty Lee pulled off her helmet and grinned. "It's so warm in here!"

"Yeah, the Fire Nation is good at fire. Who knew?" Sokka spotted a pile of paralyzed bad guys ineffectively calling for help, and dragged his two prisoners over and added them to the collection. Most of them were Firebenders in armor (but not their helmets), but he also recognized the dull golden eyes of the door-opener on a uniformed clerk.

And they were all wearing the same silvery circlets as the first two guards.

Weird.

Sokka looked around and decided that this had to be some kind of guard station; there was a card
game no longer in progress on a low table, and a desk that had a stack of papers on it. He went over to look at the latter, after confirming that the card game hadn't been played for money.

He was distantly aware of Ty Lee saying, "Grumpy," as he scanned the papers.

Ooh, this stuff was good. There was a report on daily security concerns, with a schedule! There were no actual names, just code labels like 'Moon Princess' and 'Item NBE08' and 'Shipment Ri Wu Pig 173,' and the buildings were referenced by numbers that had no meaning to Sokka, but this was a good start. One of the few good things about the Fire Nation was that they wrote everything down. And until someone came up with a way of hiding information itself from people who shouldn't see it, paperwork would continue to be among his favorite things to find in an enemy base.

He especially liked the part on these papers that listed a high-priority security need happening right now for Building 4 with listed assets including 'Maker' and 'Teadrinker.'

Well, okay, he didn't like the security or the fact that 'Teadrinker' was going to be there, but the 'Maker' part was at least encouraging. If there was a cure for Aang's condition, she would have it.

He was already moving as he turned to Ty Lee to explain to her, but then reality went away and he was back in his childhood home, watching his mother and father bleed to death on the floor. Their eyes were glassy as they met his gaze, and the spear-wounds gaped like black shadows-

And then Ty Lee was shaking him and he was back in the guard station. "Sokka? Sokka, wake up!"

He blinked, trying to process what he'd just experience. "I'm awake. I think?" He hadn't pictured about his parents' death since- well, since he decided to get Aang to help him find Katara. But his memories had never been this vivid, or real- he'd just smelled the blood and seen the way it pooled on the chilly floor of the prefabricated house in the Southern Mining Colony. But now he was back in the guard station with its dry heat and lamplight and benches and tables and pile of disabled soldiers. "What happened?"

"You stopped moving and your aura went black." She looked straight into his eyes. "And remember how I said this whole place has an aura and it's gray?"

Sokka nodded.

"Well, the gray has gotten darker."

"That's bad?"

"I think it has to be."

Sokka sighed. "Slush. This is going to be one of those days."

Mai lifted the ice-plug in the roof of the igloo and poked her head out. Between the snowstorm and the hood she was pulling down as far as it could go, it was hard to see anything, but she made herself endure the cold and wind until she was sure that there was nothing out there.

She let the plug fall back into place as she crouched down into the igloo, leaving the space lit only by the sizzling red flare. "Still clear."

Katara and Hahn acknowledged her report with a nod, but both of them were giving their attention to Aang. He was lying on a blanket between them, still unconscious, still glowing.
Mai sighed.

Sokka and Ty Lee needed to find something, because she was completely helpless in this situation. Even Appa or Momo would probably be more help, if the animals weren't hiding in another, bigger igloo that Katara had constructed for them; they could at least keep Aang warm. Mai would probably just sap the heat from him if she touched him.

Katara, of course, was a healer and a Waterbender. She was monitoring Aang and had made the igloos that would hopefully keep them out of sight of the mysterious fenceless base.

Hahn was being pretty useless right now, though. But being on the same level as Hahn didn't comfort Mai in the slightest.

She reached into her pocket and, careful not to puncture her gloves, retrieved one of the weird burs that had struck Aang. Despite the red light of the flare, the thing still didn't want to settle down to any one color. That made no sense. Living in the Fire Nation all her life, Mai had been in plenty of red light, and she knew that blue wasn't so supposed to look so bright in it, nor yellow nor green nor purple nor any of those other shades she had no name for.

On a whim, she pulled out one of her knives and tried to slice the bur open-

-except it was surprisingly strong, resisting the edge of the blade. After fumbling with it in her hands for a few moments, she placed it on the icy ground and tried cutting it there. But it still resisted, rolling out from beneath the blade like a stone.

Hm.

Maybe-

She retrieved her platinum knife, the one Zhao had given her as a welcoming present when she'd arrived at the South Pole so long ago. It was a soft metal, not really made for hard cutting, and in this weather had to be handled with gloves because it sapped heat like nobody's business-

-and it sliced easily through the spiky outer shell of the bur.

As expected, what she found inside was a pair of halved seeds.

But what she hadn't expected was for the material of the seeds to be growing tendrils that wiggled as they reached for the other halves.

Disgusted, Mai smashed them with the butt of her knife, reducing them to unmoving pulp.

At the sound, Katara looked over at her. "What are you doing?"

Mai let her gaze fall on Aang. Still glowing. Still unmoving. "Getting very, very worried."

Sokka had another hallucination just as he was passing through some kind of security checkpoint.

One moment, he was walking through the door into the entry room of what he and Ty Lee had determined (after far too much debating) to be Building 4. The next, he was back at Crescent Island - or a version of Crescent Island lacking all color so that everything was either eye-searing white or hungry shadow - passing through the massive Heat Engine on the way to find his sister. He felt the overbearing heat that tried to reach through his leather disguise to pull the moisture from his skin and eyes, just like the Waterbenders he eventually found with their dead stares and dusty skin and-
And then he was back at the North Pole, stepping into the entry room out of the snow, once again in the padded Firebender armor. The staring faces of the old Waterbenders hung in his vision, their unfocused eyes somehow piercing straight to his very core.

Of course, he promptly tripped and crashed to the ground with a metal clatter.

Ty Lee helped him up, but he was barely on his feet before he was looking at a squad of guards who probably weren't disguised friends. "I'm okay. Just took a bad step."

The lead guard scowled at him and put her hand on the sword hanging from her belt. "Who are you? This building is under high security."

"Uhhh," Ty Lee said behind her helmet.

"Uh," Sokka added, and then the lies came flowing from his brain. "There was a perimeter alarm, but the team we dispatched didn't find anything. My partner and I have been sent here to do an inspection for any special trouble."

At the word 'special,' the lead guard's shoulders slumped, and she motioned for the other guards to return to their stations. "Ah. Right. Let me just make a note of it in the logs. What are your names?"

Sokka bowed. "Lee."

But Ty Lee immediately said, "But my name is-"

"Li Li," Sokka cut her off quickly. "I'm Lee, and she's Li Li. No relation."

Ty Lee hesitated, and then bowed.

"Rrright." The lead guard went to her desk at the far side of the room, grabbed a brush, and wrote something onto the sheet of paper there. "Proceed with your inspection. Guo over there will be your escort. And be aware that we are under high security, with important guests, so the staff would appreciate minimum disruptions."

"Of course!" Sokka decided that it couldn't hurt to bow again. (Ty Lee followed suit.) "I'm sure it's nothing, and we'll be out of your hair in no time."

The lead guard waved them through, and a young swordsman who must be Guo stepped out to lead them into the main facility. Sokka wasn't thrilled with having an escort, but on the other hand, he had no idea where he was going, so having someone who could lead him to the most important room and supplies might be helpful.

If only he could stop seeing ghosts.

As they stepped through the next door into an industrial hallway, Sokka caught Ty Lee's gray-eyed gaze through the screen and eyeholes of her Firebender helmet. She seemed concerned.

Yeah, join the club.

The ice-plug resisted her push, so Mai gave it a couple of knocks with the handle of one of her knives. Her next push got it to scrape open, and she once again raised her head out of the Waterbender-made igloo to gaze into the snowstorm.

It looked like a snowstorm. Snowflakes, wind, poor visibility, and so on. Wee.
She still took the time to peek out from under her hood and do a slow circle. Aside from the lump that was Appa and Momo's igloo and the shadows in the distance that were the mysterious Fire Nation facility, it was all just tundra. If the enemy knew they were here, nothing was being done about it for now.

Or so it looked.

Maybe Aang's condition had her on edge, or she was still grossed out by that weird seed bur, but Mai felt like something was off.

Even so, it was a surprise when the black tentacle wrapped itself around her neck and yanked her out of the igloo.

Sokka was starting to like Guo the Guard, at least as far as he liked any Fire Nation soldiers. Sure, Sokka was hoping for a chance to knock Guo on the head, but for now the guy was actually being both dim and helpful, the best kind of enemy combatant.

"Next is the main lab," Guo said, as they moved down a long hallway. More armed guards were posted at regular lengths along the distance, the lack of Firebenders noticeable. "Have you been in here before?"

Sokka and Ty Lee had been shown a few smaller labs, setups that reminded Sokka of the mining experiments he used to perform for the Fire Nation down at the South Pole. Except instead of rocks and metal, the material under research seemed to be twigs, roots, vines, leaves, and seeds. It seemed like a reasonable start to finding something that would help Aang, but the trick was actually getting the right information.

"No, we were transferred out of the reinforcements that came up with all the gold-lined armor. Haven't had a chance to poke around in here yet." Sokka was taking a chance, hoping that extra soldiers did indeed accompany the Generals and Admirals and Sages who would have recently crowned Iroh as Fire Lord.

Guo grimaced. "Well, word of warning, this one is a little weird. And we have guests, so- uh, don't freak out, okay?"

Ty Lee's voice echoed out of her armor in something like what polar bear-dog pups thought was an intimidating growl. "That other ashing stuff was pretty ashing weird. All those ashing plants? We're in the ashing middle of ashing ice-country! Ash!"

Sokka rolled his eyes behind his masked helmet. Ty Lee's bluffing didn't impress him.

"True," Guo allowed. "But that stuff just looks like plants. I don't pay too much attention to it." He stopped at the double doors at the end of the hallway. The two guards stationed here eyed Sokka and Ty Lee, but didn't make any movements. "It's the big monster face that gives me nightmares." He pushed at the doors-

-Sokka was about to ask about this matter of a 'big monster face' because it sounded far too familiar-

-and the doors opened to reveal a sprawl of an industrial space with the severed head of the Unhcegila standing at the center of it.

It was the inhuman face Sokka remembered, that smooth pale flesh that was almost completely white perched on a black neck like a snake, but now it was so much worse. Beneath the sliced base of the neck was some kind of machinery that pumped and clanked. Gears turned and billows of varying
sizes pulsed like lungs and from somewhere deep in the machinery was the flash of electricity.

A wide, black tube rose out from the machinery and went straight up the Unhcegila's mouth. But no, the tube wasn't black. It was clear. It was the contents that were black, some kind of oily smoke that roiled within the conduit.

Poles also rose up to position metal plates in front of the Unhcegila's eyes, polished to reflective mirrors. Sokka couldn't tell if the eyes were opened or closed, and he wasn't sure which would be worse.

The most disturbing thing, though, were the hundreds (thousands?) of needles that were plunged into the flesh of the face, each one trailing long metal wires, some drooping to the floor and winding all through the lab space, other trailing up to the ceiling. It was like the Unhcegila's face sat at the center of a web of shining threads, and the various machines and manned stations around the space were like dead bugs caught in the web.

Sokka swallowed against the urge to be sick. He couldn't bring himself to look away, but the sight of all those needles in that inhumanly smooth flesh-

"Ash," Ty Lee breathed, and this time it sounded like she meant it.

"Toldja," Guo mumbled.

Sokka was aware that he was almost hyperventilating, but he managed to keep the contents of his stomach where they were supposed to stay. "That is- that is- one of the most horrifying- th- things I've ever seen. And I've seen- seen a lot."

"Have you?"

That wasn't Guo's voice. Sokka had never heard it before, but it was like soothing ice in his ears, stealing away the heat of his illness. It was a woman's, melodious and sad-

Sokka turned to see a Water Tribe lady, elaborate white hair shimmering with what could have been its own soft light, looking at him with blue eyes that twinkled with moisture. The braided tails of her hair rested on a black cloak that hid the rest of her form. She was stepping towards him, and the grace of her movements was a balm on his spirit. It wasn't the grace of a warrior, a grace he had kind of gotten used to with Mai and Ty Lee around. This was the grace of- of peace.

...

...

Oh.

Wow.

Sokka realized the woman was waiting for a response from him, but he was having trouble remembering how words worked. He was vaguely aware of Guo bowing and saying something like, "Princess Yue," and that reminded him of the basics of communication.

"Yes. Seen things. Me. I have. Usually scary. And. Sometimes nice? Like- uh, you?"

The corners of her pink lips twitched upwards, for just a moment. "Thank you."

And then another new voice added, "It's true, Princess. You are indeed the one beautiful thing in this
entire facility. But sadly for this tongue-tied guard, Maker Lian is ready for us. It's time for the experiment to start."

Sokka tore his eyes off the woman - Princess Yue, and he would remember that name as long as he lived - to catch the approach a rotund little man in a red cloak with a golden flame-crown in his gray topknot-

Fire Lord Iroh.

Sokka heard Ty Lee's squeak as he once again tried to keep from throwing up.

TO BE CONTINUED
Sokka continues his infiltration, while Aang and Mai take the first steps on their paths to victory.

Aang found that the strangest part of the gathering was the smell. Or, actually, the lack of it.

He did indeed have a scent in his nose, but it was the comforting sweetness of ripening fruit, the wet lushness of grass and leaves and damp wood, and the crisp little topping of a north breeze. He didn't recognize the fruit, and the smell of the grass and leaves was a bit spicier than he was used to, but it made sense that plants would be a bit different in the Spirit World. He'd only ever left the material world before at Iroh's invitation, and every time came with a new bit of wonder. While this latest visit wasn't exactly voluntary, that didn't mean he couldn't make the best of it and enjoy this unusual forest.

What he didn't smell at all was people, and that was the strange part. It didn't matter how well-bathed the people might be, or the perfumes they were wearing, or even the foods in their diet. There was always a consistent human smell that arose from any large gathering, a concentration of all the little scents that reflected the lives being lived.

Yet Aang was at the center of a gathering of more people than he could count, and all he smelled was the reaching, gnarled forest around them.

Closest were Roku and Kyoshi, both of them kneeling on the ground with straight backs and high heads. Kuruk was also nearby, hunched beneath his polar bear-dog pelt. Yangchen lounged on the ground behind him, not all bothered by the stones and tree roots that poked up through the grass.

And beyond them were even more Avatars, people whose names rose up from the depths of the darkness behind Aang's eyes as his gaze fell upon them- Jafar and Guojiu and Schonchin and Changchub and Jimmu and Tieguai and Ouray and Sempa and on and on and on. There were no limits to the names hiding in Aang's head.

Aang looked at them all, and knew them all, and said, "I'm going to have to do something about Fire Lord Iroh soon. But I don't know what. He's hurt people and kidnapped Mai's brother and is ready to invade or re-invade the Earth Kingdom and that's only the stuff we've been able to discover! From what Jet passed on to us, Iroh's also been up to some really dangerous stuff with the Spirits. But he says he's doing it all to save his son."

The Avatars all looked back at him. There was no answer, no confirmation or denial in their eyes. He might as well have been looking at a thousand mirrors.

Aang continued, "So what is an Avatar supposed to do about this? If I make him step down as Fire Lord, that's not going to stop him, if the rest of the Fire Nation even accepts it. And that will just do more damage to the people there."
The most unexpected thing about Fire Lord Iroh - other than that he was ruining Sokka's mission to find a cure for whatever was keeping Aang in a glowing coma - was his eyes. The guy was soft and short and round, and the shadows of laugh lines colored his face, but his golden eyes were hard as flint and as piercing as that one fishhook Sokka always forgot on the floor when he was walking around with bare feet.

They were the eyes of a man who knew he was the toughest slushmucker in the room. They glistened with complete and utter confidence.

And yet there something else behind them that really chilled Sokka's spine. Something he couldn't name.

Whatever it was, there was no other sign of it as Iroh and this (gorgeous, white-haired, refined) Princess Yue woman turned towards the Unhcegila head that was propped up in the center of the laboratory amidst a jungle of arcane equipment and fine metal wire. Iroh looked at it with cool interest, but Princess Yue grimaced and averted her eyes.

"Hey," whispered Guo the guard, "we should get out of their way and get on with your search."

Sokka tore his own gaze off of Princess Yue and tried to get back into character as a special Firebender trooper. "Right, my search. For the things that set off the perimeter alarm. That search."

His voice echoed through his face-concealing helmet. "On with the search-right, Li Li?"

Ty Lee, in her guise as the hard-cussing special operations Firebender Li Li, gave a short bow of surprisingly smoothness, considering how big her own armor disguise was on her. "Right, Lee. Let's clear this ashing place out so we can get on with our ashing day. Ash."

"Right." It was enough to make Sokka miss Mai's talent for lying. "So, uh, if there are any supply stores in here, we should check those first. In case whatever we're chasing is hungry."

Guo pointed. "We have a bunch of closets over this way."

As they picked their way across the laboratory, moving behind the mounted Unhcegila face, they passed by a woman in a green skullcap and long coat who was scurrying over to Fire Lord Iroh. She seemed to about Bato's age, maybe a little younger, and she had an arcing tattoo beneath her left eye shaped like the teeth of a gear.

She smiled at Iroh and Yue, taking no notice of Sokka, and said, "Thank you both for coming. The NBE08 sample has been a tremendous help in our research, and I think you'll agree that today's demonstration is very promising."

The rest of the staff in the room, their individuality lost behind goggles and hoods, all seemed to be paying attention either to the Gear Woman or some bit of equipment or another. Sokka and Ty Lee were ignored as Guo brought them to a series of doors that Sokka recognized as supply closets of the exact same design as in his workplace at the South Pole. He nodded at Ty Lee. "You open each door and search. I'll stand back and cover you with my fearsome Firebending power."

"Guo, you stand back. We don't know what kind of horrible, life-sucking creature with fangs and sticky tentacles might have passed through the
perimeter."

Guo nodded frantically. "A sound tactical decision, Firebender Lee."

Ty Lee moved towards the first closet, Guo put as much distance between himself and the proceedings as he could without deserting, and Sokka shifted his head so that he could look back towards this 'experiment.'

The Gear Woman was standing right next to Iroh now, putting what seemed to be a tied up bundle of vine cuttings on a wheeled cart- and the vines were writhing.

"...standard sample from the Spirit Forest," she was saying, "no enhancements. The platform is made of platinum - and thank you so much for the latest shipment, Fire Lord; we're putting it to good use - in order to direct the flow."

Iroh inclined his crowned head. "There's no need to thank me, Lian. We're all working together on this, and I appreciate your efforts."

*Lian.* The one who might know how to cure Aang.

Ty Lee opened a second supply closet and stepped inside.

Sokka watched as Lian moved over to the machinery beneath the Unhcegila head. She reached for a lever as she said, "We will now induce the feeding process." She pulled the lever, and the unmistakable thrum of electrified machinery began. A glow emanated from somewhere in the machinery beneath the Unhcegila head, and the billows and gears began moving with greater speed. The various technicians worked at their equipment stations, and the poles on either side of the Unhcegila's face rotated to angle the mirrored panels in front of the eyes.

Sokka also noticed the tube that went into the Unhcegila's mouth now contained not just the black vapor that had been in there before, but also a red mist of some kind. It flowed up the tube, mixing with the black smoke and disappearing into the severed head's mouth.

Then the writhing vines began turning brown.

Ty Lee went into a third closet.

The rot started at the edges of the vines, but Sokka couldn't see much more than that from this distance. He just caught the change of color, and then what seemed like the rise of a little cloud of dust, and then the vines were just *gone.*

But they were replaced by plenty of activity. The wires that fanned out from the Unhcegila, the thin metal web that extended from the needles stuck all along the edge of the face, twitched and glowed. There were no fires or crystals, so what could be producing the light? It was golden in color, and getting brighter by the second. The Firebender helmet that Sokka was wearing had a screen over the eyeholes, but it still made him tear up from its harshness. Was the metal heating to the point of glowing? But then-

And then he was standing in Appa's saddle, the air around him gray and tasting of ash and dust and death, while Mai stood across from him in a battle stance. She had her hand on her sword, and her face was twisted with fury and hatred as she hissed, "The pride of the South versus the Fire Traitor. Just you and me settling things up." She strained against Katara's blocking arm and stepped forward-

No, that wasn't here, that was the ashland they'd explored in the Earth Kingdom. *It wasn't real.*
As Sokka forced the reality of the laboratory back into his mind, the technicians at their stations all seemed to get very excited, and the dials and gauges on their consoles danced. One shouted, "We have four thousand, six hundred and fifty-four point seven lians completing the circuit!"

Lians?

Oh boy, someone had an ego.

Sokka looked over by the human Lian to see Fire Lord Iroh raising his eyebrows at her, too. "Four thousand? Well, that is quite a count! But I wonder, my good Maker, just what that four thousand signifies. Is it enough to solve our problem?"

Lian cleared her throat. "Not qu- Um, no, Fire Lord. The process is still very inefficient. But this proves that it works. And it validates all the equipment we've been designing and building, all the theories about the transference and flesh-fusion! Now we simply have to refine the method."

The Princess Yue lady finally raised her eyes from the floor, but her shoulders remained slumped beneath her purple cloak. "And how long will that take?" Her voice was music, but she sounded so tired to Sokka. Why wouldn't anyone let this perfect human being get some rest? No, they had to drag her here for their horror show. They better at least have a good answer for her.

Lian opened her mouth to reply, but then closed it again.

Sokka knew what that meant. He'd worked in a lab, and although it was in a completely different field, he knew the sight of an engineer who was trying her hardest not to make any type of time commitment for new technology.

Iroh stroked his beard. "Well, that is indeed-"

"So," came another voice right behind Sokka, pulling his attention away from the juicy gossip happening across the room, "are we done here?"

It was all he could do to keep from jumping out of his armor. As it was, he spun just a little too fast to find Guo the Guard standing right behind him, and it was only Ty Lee's steadying hand that kept him upright. "Uh, yes, we're done here. Good job searching, Li Li; you are a credit to Firebenders everywhere. On to the next set of rooms, then!"

Guo quirked an eyebrow, but led the way around the back of the room. Sokka needed to find a way to either ambush Lian and make her help, or else figure out what kind of materials in this house of horrors might work as a cure for whatever was keeping Aang asleep and doing a good impression of the Southern Lights. Maybe Sokka or Ty Lee could knock Guo out and find some kind of inventory list or-

"Oh," came Fire Lord Iroh's voice, "is our friendly security force leaving so soon?"

Sokka just barely managed not to crash into Guo's sudden stop, and Ty Lee did bounce into him with a muffled clang. All three of them looked over to find Iroh approaching their little group.

And Iroh was smiling. "I know Guo quite well, but I have not yet had the opportunity to meet- I believe your names are Lee and Li Li?" His eyes narrowed. "Yes, that's what the ledger at the front desk said. I'm very grateful that Admiral Zhao brought us some Firebender reinforcements, and I feel terrible that I have been too busy to meet every one of you."

"Oh, uh, er-" Admiral Zhao? So the jerk had gotten a promotion, huh? Getting crowned must have put Iroh in a mood for ascensions. Sokka decided that it couldn't hurt to bow to the Fire Lord. "I
wouldn't want to bother you during an important meeting."

"Oh, we were just finishing. Right, Yue?"

Whoever this princess was, she looked as confused as Sokka felt. Her beautiful blue eyes flickered back and forth between Iroh and Sokka, and then they shifted to gaze over Sokka's shoulder-

-where Sokka heard the lab door opening-

-this stupid helmet forced him to turn to see the new threat-

And Admiral Zhao stalked into the room with a shining circlet on his head, tossed his black fur cape back off his shoulders to reveal spotless gold-trimmed armor, and said, "I was told that there is need of my strength and expertise here. How may I serve, Fire Lord?"

Slush.

Slush slush slush slush kelp-sucking salt-sniffing *slush-pups*!

Sokka took a step closer to Ty Lee and tried to keep everyone in sight. Guo the Guard was inching his way clear of the sudden convention.

Iroh's smile had turned into a grin so sharp it could gouge an eye. "Admiral Zhao, I was hoping you could introduce me to your old friends Lee and Li Li.

"Or, more accurately, Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe and Lady Caldera Yu Ty Lee, yes? Please, children, take of your helmets and let us get acquainted."

---

Mai had been flying around the world for so long, she'd almost forgotten how much she hated it. She got a good reminder, though, when she was wrenched out of Katara's little hideout igloo and flung through the air.

The black tentacle wrapped around her head and neck and shoulders didn't loosen at all as she arced through the blizzard, nor when she landed flat on her back on the ground. It was a hard landing, but between the padding of the ancient layers of snow and her fur parka, it merely drove the air from her lungs in a rush instead of breaking every bone in her body. How pleasant.

As she gasped for breath, a monster came in to loom over her.

It was the same dark color as the tentacle that still wouldn't let her go, and bore an unpleasant resemblance to a catfish, if catfish came in sizes even bigger than Appa (no, thank you) and decided to try the whole arms-and-legs thing. Its whiskers floated in the air completely independent of the storm winds, but Mai was more concerned with the wide mouth that hung open to both threaten her with rows of jagged black teeth and reveal a bright blue glow coming from within its body.

Good thing she'd tucked her platinum knife securely in her belt.

As she filled her lungs with air - odd that this creature wasn't taking advantage of the tentacle around its neck to just choke or snap her - she inched her hand towards the special spirit-killer. The monster didn't seem to notice, staring straight into her eyes with its own glowing fish-like peepers. The shining yellow light at the center of its otherwise blue and black eyes reminded her of the kind of sunny days they used to get in the Fire Nation when she was little, when she and Ty Lee and Azula would play in the park and throw grass at each other.
Her fingers reached the handle of the platinum knife.

The monster continued to stare at her.

Why wasn't it hurting her? The tentacle was merely securing her to the ground. She'd let herself get caught in its gaze and yet she wasn't getting her life drained via her eyeballs. It loomed over her with a glowing mouth and wasn't trying to inhale her energies out through her throat. Or even bite her.

Oh, well, if it didn't want to fight, they it would just lose. Fighting was what she did.

She pulled the platinum knife out.

The monster's eyes narrowed and it hissed. The tentacle tightened around her throat-

-fighting was what she did, but she was good at it not just thanks to her speed and skill but also because she took the effort to notice things-

-and the monster had only reacted when she drew her knife.

Mai remembered Aang lying comatose in the igloo. He was who he was because he didn't want to hurt anyone or anything. She was the one who did the hurting, because someone had to-

-but she hated it. It was always necessary, but she never felt good about it.

Aang wasn't here to be the good one.

Mai was running out of breath. One slice with the knife could free her.

But maybe-

-Aang believed in her, he always said-

-she could be good for him, just this once.

She laid the knife down on the snow.

The monster continued to watch her, and its tentacle continued to choke her.

She moved her hand away from the knife and rested.

The monster didn't react.

Aw, ash, she'd just killed herself for sentimentality, hadn't she?

Then the tentacle loosened from her neck and she could breathe again.

She was still panting when the tentacle pulled away completely, and the creature backed up to hunch beside her and hiss. Its eyes had moved away, and as she sat up, she saw that its gaze was locked firmly on the knife sitting on top of the snow.

Huh.

Maybe-

There was a Fire Nation base nearby, one that seemed to be dealing with weird spirit plants and had a perimeter that only went off when Aang crossed it. So maybe this thing was the Fire Nation's enemy, and it knew that the opposing side had platinum weapons.
Mai stood up.

The monster - the spirit creature - continued to stare at the knife.

Mai sidled away, one side-step at a time, until she'd put some distance between herself and the knife.

The creature was still behaving.

Okay.

Fine.

As Mai wondered what to do next, she was nearly tackled off her feet by Katara. "Mai! Are you okay?"

It was like being hugged by Ty Lee- tight and involving far too much forward momentum. Mai barely managed to stay on her feet, and thankfully the stumble added to her distance from the platinum knife. "I'm a little beat up, but none of my life force has been yanked out of my body yet today, so I suppose I'm not bad, as far as these things go."

Hahn came skidding to a stop beside them, and his eyes were wide. "What- what is that?"

Mai shrugged and tried to push Katara off of her. "Whatever it is, I'm thinking that we'll back away slowly to pick up Aang, then get to Appa's igloo and maybe just move away from here. It would be a shame to lose her platinum knife, but she still had the sword, and she really didn't want to fight another giant monster if she-

"There's no need to leave yet," a hard voice cut through the winds of the snow. "Not before we've had a chance to meet."

Mai whipped around, grabbing a pair of razor discs from her sleeves, as Katara took a Waterbending stance and turned some of the surrounding snow into a liquid whip.

But their targets blended into the snow, vague human shapes obscured within the blizzard as though drawing shadows around themselves-

No.

Mai's eyes focused and she realized the newcomers were merely wearing white fur cloaks that blended in with the snow. In fact, all their clothes were white, despite obviously being of the Water Tribe style that usually favored blue. Their faces were obviously Water Tribe as well, and they were just standing there watching.

Well, maybe it could work twice in one day. Mai put her blades back in her sleeves and held up her hands. "We come in peace?"

One of the figures - a tall man - stepped forward and raised a hand in what could have been a greeting or a sign to attack. "You've met Mashenomak and he has given his approval. Who are you, that you carry the weapons of the Fire Nation?"

Mashenomak? Who was-

The giant catfish spirit creature bounded over to crouch beside the white-cloaked figures.

Oh.
Sure.

Why not?

It wasn't much weirder than a pet sky bison, really.

While Mai tried to adjust her view of reality to the idea of people who taught a spirit monster to play fetch, Katara dropped her waterwhip to the snow and gave a formal bow with folded hands. "I am Katara of the Southern Water Tribe. This is Mai, a- a defector from the Fire Nation. We were brought here with the Avatar by Hahn of the Northern Water Tribe." She motioned to Hahn, who hadn't moved all this time, the big useless jerk he-

"Wait," Hahn said, "is that Rafa?"

The leader startled, and moved forward another few steps. "Hahn? You're alive? And here with the Avatar." He looked over at Mai and Katara, and then lowered his hand. "But where is the Avatar?"

Okay, Mai knew how this part was supposed to go. "About that: we could use a little help."

Ty Lee had known that they were in trouble as soon as she saw Fire Lord Iroh.

She'd met him before, of course. She'd seen him around the palace throughout her childhood, when he wasn't away trying to conquer 'the Northern savages.' Azula hadn't really wanted to spend time with her uncle, so Ty Lee's encounters with him were all fairly quick, but she'd liked him. He was friendly and his aura was a beautiful swirl of reds and pinks and yellows. And sometimes when Azula wasn't able to get away he'd do magic tricks to try to make them giggle! Ty Lee had wished, more than once but not as many as a lot, that he could have been her daddy. He obviously wasn't going to die in a war, and she was sure that he wouldn't have called her stupid for not learning how to fight with a deadly weapon.

She was still certain about all that, even trapped in some really scary North Pole laboratory with him and guilty of treason, but now-

"Uh, who's Sokka and Ty Lee?" Sokka's voice echoed within his armor, but Ty Lee could hear the squeak of stress. "If you're worried about intruders, we can-

"The Tribal?" Zhao snapped into a Firebending stance, and Ty Lee tensed to move against him if he attacked. "How do you keeping getting into these places?!!"

"Please," Fire Lord Iroh said, voice quiet and hard, "your helmets. Let us find the truth, hm?"

Now, Fire Lord Iroh's aura was dominated by the yellow of winter lemons. His fear of loss emanated from him like a stink. Ty Lee and Sokka were trapped between him and Zhao. Zhao, who would hurt or betray anyone to win, even if it was really mean. But that was still less scary than a man so scared of losing something. That kind of person would do anything.

So it was time for Ty Lee to be really mean.

She threw her fist out, aiming for the Fire Lord's right elbow in the hope that she could hit the Qi-point before fire exploded from his palm. She was faster than Iroh, she knew; she was faster than any Firebender. But there was more to fighting than speed, and this was the Dragon of the North-

Her fist smacked into a waiting palm and thick fingers closed in around her hand. She brought her other arm out, ready to jam a knuckle into Iroh's armpit to take out his whole arm, but the twist it
required moved her right into an outstretched leg that hadn't been there when she had started to attack and she lost her balance and then there was a blur of red robes-

A hand grabbed the back of her helmet and shoved-

-a knee rose to fill her vision-

The impact smashed the world into pieces.

Sokka couldn't even make out the fight. As far as he managed to catch, it went from Ty Lee launching herself into a storm of robes and limbs and then Ty Lee's head was bouncing off of Iroh's left knee and her helmet went flying and head met knee again with enough force to flip her whole body back upright.

Then she crumpled to the ground bonelessly and stayed there. Her lips parted and she let out a moan as she blinked without focus, but she didn't even make an attempt to get back up. Iroh had taken her down without even using Firebending.

Sokka started to move, eyes locked on Iroh in search of a spot where he could maybe land an attack while the Fire Lord was distracted-

-but instead he stepped into a ruins of flame and smoke, a neighborhood of what had once been ornate mansions of an exotic style before they had been knocked over and collapsed and undermined. The street itself was a mess of rubble and holes, but that didn't seem to give any difficulty to the massive man with the metal arm and leg who was swinging to stare at Sokka like a drifting glacier, inhaling deeply-

The image of the Fire Nation Capital from the night of the civil war faded, and Sokka found himself being forced to his knees while his helmet bounced on the ground in front of him. His arms were twisted behind him, and he realized that Zhao had gotten him in a lock that they must teach at The Evil Fire School of Subjugating People.

"Looks like this Tribal's not feeling well," Zhao chuckled. "Perhaps he's been away from home for so long that the climate no longer agrees with him."

Sokka tried to jerk and twist himself free, but it was no good. The stupid padded Firebender armor already hindered his movements, and Zhao had a good grip on his arms.

So Sokka found himself looking up at Princess Yue, who was watching the whole thing with wide eyes and hands over her mouth in horror. She caught Sokka's gaze and held it for a moment, and she took a deep breath and brought her arms down to her sides with hands clenched into fists.

Then she stepped over Ty Lee and crouched at the acrobat's side.

Iroh said, "That is a dangerous criminal, my dear. You should step away."

Yue carefully caressed Ty Lee's head. "This is an injured young lady who is no longer a threat to you." She straightened her shoulders and looked up at the Fire Lord. "I will take responsibility for her. Give her to me and my security staff. I will oversee her healing and confinement."

Iroh stroked at his beard. "Ty Lee is a Weapon of the Fire Nation. I'm not sure it's a good idea."

Yue's eyes narrowed. "She's not a 'weapon,' she's a person. And you gave her a bad concussion. It's the boy you really want, correct?" She looked over to Sokka, and her expression softened. "He'll
know that his friend is getting proper care while you do what you must with him. That will keep him in line."

Iroh looked at Yue, and then at Sokka. It was no fun being under that regard again. Sokka was starting to understand why any talk of dragons, nicknames or otherwise, gave Mai the heebie-jeebies.

A ghost of a frown flicked across Iroh's face. "And why should he trust you? You are in my power as much as any of my soldiers."

Yue turned her face away from Sokka, so he couldn't tell what might have passed over her beautiful features. "He's perceptive enough to tell the difference between you and me. I can see that much."

Huh. Beautiful and smart.

Sokka tried his best to shrug at Iroh with Zhao holding him in place. "It's true. She doesn't give me the same urge to start kicking people in the head that I do when remember you exist."

The old man had the gall to bark a laugh at that. "Very well. Princess, you may take the Weapon. Zhao, bring our other guest to a secure room in this building and lock him in. And please refrain from using the term 'Tribal.' It is most impolite."

Sokka couldn't see Zhao, but he could hear the confusion in the guy's voice as he said, "This building? Not one of the prisons?"

Iroh took step towards Sokka. "No. As I said, he is a guest. I want to show him something. Perhaps he can help me convince the Avatar of the righteousness of my cause."

Sokka snorted. "Odds are against that, I have to warn you."

"Truly?" Iroh's eyebrows rose. "Well, this would not be the first time I've defied impossible odds. It's just a matter of knowing the right trick. And I have some very good tricks."

Sokka's stomach flipped. He didn't want to see any more tricks.

It was Avatar Kuruk who finally condensed the conversation down to its main point. He sat up so that his back was straight, almost seeming larger in Aang's eyes than the other Avatars gathered with them. "You seek a path to stopping Iroh that serves both justice and life. But none of us know if such a path exists."

The discussion had been going on for a while. Some of the Avatars had advocated focusing on defeating Iroh and either killing him or imprisoning him— they said that only then could the Earth Kingdom and Water Tribes be freed, and balance restored to the world. Others worried, with Aang, about the fate of the people not just in the Fire Nation, but everywhere if the existing world leadership was suddenly removed. Not having a Fire Lord giving orders was no guarantee that the imperial armies would simply abandon their colonies.

And even if a good compromise could be made, some Avatars pointed out that restoring freedom to the world was only the start of the healing.

Kuruk continued, "I speak to you, Aang, as a predecessor who perhaps suffered the most unique failure in all of our history. Some failed to prevent evil, and some were forced to give their lives to defeat it. But what Koh did to me—" His voice faltered, and despite his proud stance, his eyes watered.
Aang frowned. "I'm sorry about that."

Kuruk shook his head, chasing the tears away. "Some, such as the Faceless Tribe you encountered, say that it was justice. But if so, that justice was an evil. It was an evil I was forced to accept because by the time I knew of it, the only other alternative was worse. If I destroyed the Face Stealer, I would have doomed my Ummi to an even worse fate."

He slumped again, but did not shrink in size. Somehow, he still towered over the other Avatars. "Had Ummi requested it, I would have killed Koh for her. But she was beyond the ability to give voice to her wishes. It was left to me. And I could not make the sacrifice."

Aang wanted to go over and comfort Kuruk, but he didn't know if his past life was solid - even here in the Spirit World - and trying to give a hug only to just fall to the ground somehow seemed even worse than doing nothing. "Are you saying I should kill Iroh, no matter what?"

"No, Aang." Kuruk once again sat straight, towering above the strange groping forest around them all. "I warn you not to let yourself come to the point of the choice. Iroh is involved in strange things, but there might be an opportunity in that. A true hunter uses his environment against his enemy, even on the enemy's home ground. Seek the path that goes where none others would walk, if you wish to find an impossible compromise."

Aang frowned. "But what does-"

And then everything twisted, including the light itself, becoming a spiral that wrapped around Aang and squeezed him and pushed him and he was rushing through the everything as the light grew brighter-

And he awoke in a world of white.

No, not white- snow. Solid, pure snow.

He was lying on his back, the snow spread above him, and he realized he was inside a cavern of some kind. But it was so rounded and smooth, and the ground so flat. It was sculpted, the work of human hands.

Hands.

His friends!

He needed to-

Before Aang could move, gloved hands settled on his shoulders, keeping him on his back. "Easy, young Avatar. Your friends are here. You just woke up, and should take a moment before you move."

Aang wanted to protest, but Mai and Katara both leaned into view. Katara was smiling and her eyes were as filled with tears as Kuruk's had been. Mai's face was blank, of course, and her eyes were dry and pale as they reflected the diffused light.

But Aang could see the depth in those eyes. Perhaps he was the only one. And in those depths was more than he could ever want.

That just left the matter of the old woman kneeling next to him and telling him to take it easy.

She was Water Tribe, obviously, but all her clothes were as white as the snow of the igloo around
them. It probably worked as pretty good camouflage. Her hair was darker than her furs, the gray of old steel, but her smile was soft and patient.

Katara reached over and patted the old woman's shoulder. "This is Yugoda. She's a healer. She fixed- well, it's pretty complicated. But you're fine now."

Mai snorted. "As fine as we can be this close to Iroh's forces. But sure, you're hale and healthy again."

Aang couldn't help smiling at Mai's regular sour mood, and turned those good feelings towards Yugoda. "Hi. Thank you for your help."

"Greetings, Avatar Aang." Yugoda bowed her head low. "I am the chief healer of the Dreamcatchers. We are the sworn enemies of Iroh, and the guardians of the liberation of the Northern Water Tribe. I think we have a lot to talk about."

"Oh." Aang thought back to Kuruk's advice- to seek out paths that no others would walk. "Good."

Sokka wasn't sure how he should feel about the fact that the smaller lab where he'd been locked up was such an effective prison. It didn't bode well when a place of science needed a heavy metal door and all its equipment and furniture bolted to the floor. It suggested things.

Fortunately, when the door finally squeaked open, it wasn't a monster that had come to visit him.

Although, that depended on how far he wanted to stretch the definition of 'monster.'

Admiral Zhao and Lian the Maker came in together, one with fists raised and ready for Firebending, the other carrying one of the circlets that seemed to be such a fashion statement around here.

"Hello," Lian said, dipping her head. "You're Sokka, yes? The Fire Lord asked me to speak to you."

Sokka folded his arms over his chest. "Is 'speak' a euphemism for horrific torture? Because I can't think why else Zhao would be here. He's a terrible conversationalist."

Zhao's brow crinkled. "I'm here to make sure you behave, Tribal. The Fire Lord said that your treatment will be nonviolent only as long as you are."

"Oh, good. Then I can be as rude as I want so long as I don't give you the smack you so richly deserve for calling me Tribal."

Zhao's scowl became deeper.

Lian chuckled. "Well, I for one am very glad to meet you. I am Lian, a Privileged Colonial Contractor in service to the Fire Navy's Northern Fleet, specializing in scientific experimentation and engineering. The Fire Lord has told me all about you, how you're an analytical thinker with a good sense of practicality. I'd love to get your insight on what we're doing up here. It's such a new and unexplored field, and I'm sure you've seen many interesting things in your travels with the Avatar."

Sokka decided not to be flattered. What could Iroh really know about him? "Interesting. Sure. You could call it that. But I'm not going to help you."

"Of course not. I haven't convinced you yet." She held up the circlet. "My job here is to break down your sense of self by forcing you to make a series of small compromises. Your resistance will grow more and more exhausted until you are fully under our power."
Sokka blinked. "Um, aren't you kind of undermining that by telling me about it?"

"Oh, not at all." Lian smiled. "That's the beauty of the system. The more clever and knowledgeable you are, the more vulnerable you are to it! And to start, I'm going to convince you to put on this Mind Shield."

Sokka looked over at the circlet Zhao was wearing, and then back to Lian. "Mind Shield?"

"Oh, yes. See, I'm wearing one, too." She lifted her green skullcap to reveal the line of glistening metal glued to the edge of the interior. "It's required safety equipment this close to the Spirit Forest. I assume that when you stole that armor, you either missed the accompanying circlet or didn't realize its significance."

Slush. Was she telling the truth? The Firebenders who Sokka and Ty Lee had stolen their armor from had indeed been wearing the things, but he wasn't in the habit of stealing jewelry. If it really was some kind of shield, then there was no point in resisting. But how could he be sure?

He couldn't, he realized. That was the point of this 'system.' Lian was trying to wear him out.

His vision swam for a moment, the sterile lab around him overlaid by shadows- no, not just shadows, but the darkness of the underground. He was back in the sinkhole of Tiankeng Fortress, after he was captured and separated from Mai and Ty Lee. There had been that explosion. His ribs were hurting and he couldn't see and Zhao's office had collapsed on him and he didn't know if anyone else was even alive and-

Sokka forced himself to breathe in, and breathe out, and concentrate on how much he disliked this 'Lian the Maker.' The lab and the light reemerged; he was once again free of his darker memories.

And, well, if he couldn't win, he could at least get something useful out of this battle of wits. "And what happens if I don't put it on?"

Zhao's scowl turned into a smirk. "It's already happening, Tribal. I saw the way you froze when you tried to help Lady Ty Lee. You're already getting the waking nightmares, aren't you? Either you've been here longer than the Fire Lord thinks, or your mind is especially vulnerable to the nightmares."

Oh, Sokka didn't like the sound of this. And he and the others had only arrived today, so if Zhao was telling the truth, then- especially vulnerable? Why? Ty Lee hadn't been stumbling or showing any signs of getting the hallucinations.

Sokka sighed. "Fine, give it to me."

Lian handed the circlet over. "Well, that was quick. The Fire Lord was right. You are fairly rational."

Sokka turned the thing over in his hands. "Platinum?"

Lian nodded. "Of course. What do you know about it?"

"It's my preferred material for stabbing monsters. A spiritual guru told me it's a material that doesn't contain any of the four elements, and lacks any kind of spiritual energy. So, you know, it's really good for messing with things that have lots of spiritual energy."

"Fascinating." Lian's eyes were gleaming. "We already proved that it's a new element, but the reason it lacks its own energies is because it's a conductor of them."
Sokka blinked. "Wait, a conductor? Like how metal transfers heat and electricity?"

"Yes! It disrupts spirits - beings made entirely of unearthly energies- because it conducts them so well that it ruins their existing organizational structure." Lian raised her arms and gestured around. "We've found that we can use it to direct the energies, hence our work here. The circlet takes the nightmare energies and- well, circles them around rather than letting them affect your mind."

Sokka's jaw dropped. "The needles and wires in the Unheciga's face! They were glowing because they were transferring the energies that- oh, wow. You had it feed on those vines, converting them to pure energy, and moved it elsewhere."

"You get it!" Lian clasped her hands together. "If you want to defect from the Avatar's side, I am ready to offer you a job right here and right now."

Zhao snorted. "Let's stick to the Fire Lord's plan for now, yes? I notice that the Tribal hasn't put the circlet on, yet."

Lian sobered. "True. Sokka, I'd like you to put that on, but you will not be hurt if you don't. It is entirely your choice. But your mind is being affected by the energies of the Spirit Forest and the materials under experimentation here. You will continue to be subjected to traumatic incidents in your past, and they will grow in intensity if you stay here unshielded. Your mood will be affected, and then your sanity, until you-

"Okay, fine, stop talking." Sokka put the circlet on his head. He didn't feel any different. "Happy? Iroh's plan is working. Anyway, how does he know so much about me? Aang hasn't been gossiping at their meetings, has he?"

Zhao shook his head. "No, I was the first source of intelligence on you, thanks to our meeting in Tiankeng Fortress. Since then, we've tried to assemble more information from your time working for us at the South Pole, but Iroh himself has been the most significant source."

Sokka frowned. That didn't make any sense. "But I never met him."

Zhao's eyebrows rose. "Not that you remember. But didn't the Avatar tell you that Fire Lord Iroh is capable of visiting people in dreams?"

"But I never-"

"That you remember." Zhao's smirk returned. "Why do you think we caught you so easily? Why do you think I've been waiting up in here in this flame-forsaken wasteland? We knew that you were coming. Iroh has been monitoring and collecting information on your group for a while now. And we know the others are close by."

Sokka struggled to breathe. They knew?! Then- then this backdoor to the Northern Water Tribe city that Hahn wanted to take them to-

"So," Lian said, practically bouncing on her feet, "are you ready for the tour?"

TO BE CONTINUED
**The Dreamcatchers**

Chapter Summary

Aang remains good at making friends, while Ty Lee shows her own skill in that venue. Sokka learns something about what this is all about, and Katara learns something about what she's all about.

And Zhao continues to be a jerk.

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So many things were buzzing around in Aang's head, every single one demanding his full attention. But before he was the world's savior, the Avatar, or even a brother, he had been an Air Nomad, and there were certain responsibilities that had to take priority. So despite his recent discussion in the Spirit World with his past lives, or the new Water Tribe faction that had appeared to save his life, or even the Fire Nation fortress where his two of his friends had gone missing, right now he had to check on his sky bison. He popped out of the top of the igloo Katara had fashioned for shelter, finding that the arctic tundra was still being whipped by a windy snowfall. As he rode those winds down to a soft landing in front of the second, larger igloo, he spotted the spirit creature that Mai had warned him about. As she had described, it looked like a big walking catfish with skin the color of a moonless night. And for a moment, he thought that was the only other thing out here besides him.

Then he spotted the shapes, only vaguely human but impossible to mistake for an animal or spirit, arranged in a defensive circle that encompassed the two igloos. Their coats and even their spears were as white as their surroundings, making the figures almost invisible in this weather, but he could feel their gazes on him as his boots touched down on the snow.

A quick Waterbending swipe opened the front of the igloo up, and Appa stared out from within the cramped space.

Aang could see a fog of anxiety immediately clear from Appa's eyes as the confinement gave way to a glimpse of the sky. The bison lurched to his feet and pushed the rest of the way out of the igloo, destroying it (and making Momo chatter angrily up in the saddle when the roof splatted on the lemur's head) and bringing himself fully out into the open.

Aang wrapped his arms around Appa's nose and cheeks as the sky bison nuzzled him. "Yeah, sorry you had to hide like that. But I'm better now. Are you cold?"

Appa sniffed a negative and lowered his readiness to face the next adventure.

"Good." Aang gave Appa's nose a pat. "We have to go save Sokka and Ty Lee, now. Katara says they went into that weird base where I got hurt."

Appa lowered again, confirming his dedication. Aang knew that the sky bison really liked Ty Lee, and had an odd but deep friendship with Sokka.

But then a new voice said, "I would recommend against that, Avatar."
Aang let go of Appa and turned. One of the Water Tribe men - the Dreamcatchers, the healer Yugoda had called them - came forward and bowed in greeting. He was long-haired and bearded beneath the hood of his white coat, his just-starting-to-gray hair standing out sharply from his snow-covered clothes. Hahn was standing next to the man as if they were already familiar.

Aang gave a quick bow in return. "Um, thanks, but my friends-

"Are within Fire Lord Iroh's control, now," the man finished for him. "We must leave this place, right away, if you hope to someday help them."

"Rafa's right," Hahn added. "He's been telling me about what's going on up here, or at least what these guys have been able to piece together and-

"And we're not leaving without Sokka and Ty Lee," Katara interrupted. She had emerged from the first igloo, trailed by Mai and the healer woman Yugoda. "We can't abandon them! I won't!"

Aang shrugged at the Water Tribe man- Rafa, Hahn had called him. "I'm with her. It's what we do. Our friends go into an enemy base and get in trouble, and then we rescue them."

Mai snorted, hugging herself and pulling her fur coat tighter around her in defense against the wind. "It usually works out. More or less. Eventually."

"That's right!" Katara put her fists on her hips. "That's what makes us family."

Rafa sighed. "That's what makes you predictable."

"What do you mean?" Aang felt a chill that had nothing to do with the winds.

Rafa motioned with his hands and spear at the rest of the Dreamcatchers; they had formed a defensive circle, with Aang and his friends at the center. "How do you think we knew to look for you? Iroh is a Dream Walker, and spies where no living person can hide secrets. He learned the art from ancient scrolls, and we- well, we learn from watching him."

Yugoda stepped forward. "That's the true danger of Admiral Iroh. Not in the forces he commands, but the mind that directs them. We can protect ourselves from his Dream Walking, but even so, all of us had to cut ourselves off from our families to oppose him. I lost my children and grandchildren. I lost my students."

Rafa's gaze fell to the fallen snow. "I have a sister. She thinks me dead."

Yugoda turned to Katara. "Iroh has set a trap for you, and he won't kill your brother or friend because he knows you will come for them. Or he might find a way to send them after you. If you go for them now, you will fail. And then you will die. We have lost people this way, and cannot lose any more."

Aang looked to Katara. He saw his own sympathetic sorrow reflected in her eyes, but also his reluctance. It felt wrong to abandon Sokka and Ty Lee.

Then Mai said, "Well, it looks we're past the point where we could sneak in, anyway."

Everyone turned as one to find her pointing the spyglass Sokka had given her earlier in the direction of the Fire Nation base.

Mai squinted through the spyglass. "A group of enclosed crawlers just left with a big team of Firebenders escorting on some kind of ski-vehicles. There's also plenty of soldiers moving in and out
of the buildings, now. There's probably a search going on. They know there's a danger and I bet they have surprises planned."

Aang looked to Katara again. She gave him a nod, but her shoulders drooped in disappointment. With the situation, or maybe herself?

Or maybe she was disappointed in Aang. He'd barely even approached that Fire Nation base and had been taken out with one hit from a weapon he still didn't understand at all.

He gave his own nod. "Okay. But we come back for our friends as soon as possible."

Katara put a hand on his shoulder. "Of course."

And then there was a weight on his other shoulder, and he turned to find Mai giving him a smile that was almost lost in the snowfall. "Ty Lee and Sokka are tough. Things worse than Iroh have tried to kill them before, and they were both already kind of brain-damaged so we'll probably barely notice any more."

"And you won't," said Rafa, "be completely abandoning them. We have learned how to avoid Iroh's attention, and still keep an eye on him. I will leave warriors to see what they can find of your friends. In the meantime, come to our village, and learn what is needed to defeat Iroh."

Aang let out a heavy breath, and turned to Appa. "Is it okay if you take some extra people flying?"

Appa roared his agreement.

Barely a minute later they were flying away- Aang on his glider, and his friends with Rafa and Yugoda and some of the other Dreamcatchers in Appa's saddle. The warriors Rafa left behind had already disappeared into the storm with their white coats, and the catfish spirit was loping over the snowdrifts even faster than Appa could fly. All that was left to see was the armored crawlers and the warriors on their motorized ski vehicles, traveling off into the storm. It was so tempting for Aang to reach into himself and trace his spiritual connections to his friends, to follow the trails of light to a daring rescue.

But he'd done that with Mai's brother, before, and now Iroh knew that trick.

He made himself fly away.

This wasn't the first time Ty Lee had woken up with a concussion. It just wasn't possible to spar with six sisters, all of them having mastered the art of hitting people with blunt objects, without some skull-rattling oopsies.

It was part of why she preferred to fight with her fists and aim for Qi clusters. The only damage done was exactly what she wanted to inflict.

She didn't open her eyes right away, and she definitely didn't try to get up. She was laying on something soft, which was good, but her dizziness made it feel like everything around her was vibrating. That was bad. And she still felt so tired, even though she'd been sleeping, and probably didn't have the strength to flip to her feet and cartwheel around a dozen Firebenders while punching their unarmored joints.

Wait.

Dizziness usually didn't make things feel like they were vibrating.
Ty Lee opened her eyes.

She was in a metal carriage.

A bench was beneath her, with a purple stretch of fur - a coat - providing padding. The walls were cold and shining and the only light came from a dull green lamp hanging and swaying on the ceiling. The way the shadows played over the steel threatened to make the world start spinning and Ty Lee closed her eyes against it.

But no. Sokka had been captured, too. And Mai and Katara and Aang and Momo and Appa were still out there waiting for them. (Hahn, too.) She couldn't just be a big dumb sleepy-head.

She opened her eyes again.

This time, a woman was leaning over her. Her aura was such a royal shade of blue that it made Ty Lee want to immediately drop into a kowtow, but there were waves of dark cloudiness that revealed a troubled mind.

It was an aura that Ty Lee had seen before, and she recognized it before the woman's face registered. "You're- you're that Water Tribe noble. With the pretty white hair. The one with Iroh."

"I'm Yue." She offered a smile that struggled to reach her sad eyes. "How are you feeling?"

Ty Lee thought about getting up, but only for just a moment. "Like I got a big ouchie on my head. Did I puke?"

"No." Yue leaned back, and Ty Lee could see that she was crouching on the floor in front of the bench. Her skirt was stained from the slush on the floor. "I think you'll be okay. But you need to rest."

Ty Lee couldn't argue with that, because her body agreed and fighting your body didn't ever lead to good things. "Okay. Thank you for- for taking care of me. I'm laying on your coat, right?"

Yue's smile brightened for just a moment. "Yes, and you are perfectly welcome."

Ty Lee was happy enough with the exchange to hum a few notes of a song that didn't exist, and then closed her eyes again. She was tired. Getting your head slammed repeatedly into a Fire Lord's knee could really take it out of you.

But that reminded her of something. She opened her eyes again to find Yue still beside her, but staring into space as the carriage - or vehicle - rattled on. "Um, are you Fire Lord Iroh's friend?"

Yue blinked and turned back to look at her. "In a way, I suppose I am."

"Oh." Ty Lee tried to work that out. "I always thought that was a yes/no kind of thing."

"I have a duty to his son." Yue frowned, and there was a flash of brownish orange in her aura, right over her head that revealed a retic- retic- hesitation in her emotions. "And- I can admit that there are many things about Iroh to like. But we have our disagreements. It's no secret that some of them are quite profound."

He gaze sharpened, and the brown tried to overtake the orange. "How familiar are you with him?"

"Me? Oh, he's my friend's uncle except she's not my friend anymore because she thinks I'm dead and if she found out that I'm alive she'd kill me so now I hate her. Iroh used to do magic tricks for me when I was a little girl and I loved them. And just now he hit my head with his knee. Twice. It really
Yue blinked.

Yue blinked again.

Yue said, "You're a Weapon of the Fire Nation, right?"

Ty Lee had a give a little giggle at the question. "I don't know that there's such a thing anymore, but I used to be. Why?"

Yue's head tilted to the side. "I must admit that my expectations for the title were perhaps ill-informed. You're just like some of the girls of the Tribe."

Ty Lee smiled at what she was taking as a compliment. She was getting really tired, so she let her eyes drift closed. "Thanks. You're really nice, too." As sleep began to overtake her, a new thought floated up from the depths of her imagination. "I think Sokka likes you. Are you married to Lu Ten?"

The last thing she heard, before she was once again lost to the waking world, was Yue say, "No. I'm afraid it's quite a bit worse than that."

The snowstorm stopped right at the edge of the Spirit Forest.

The forest itself sat in a valley like a round bowl, surrounded by snow-covered mountains, making the circle of green leaves look like a stain on the landscape from above. But Aang knew that the real stain was the Fire Nation base situated in the pass leading to the forest through the ring of mountains, the place that had eaten Sokka and Ty Lee.

Aang on his glider, and Appa with the rest of the rest of the group as his passengers, both passed over the forest and emerged from the windy snowfall. In an instant, the sky had become peaceful. Aang had wondered, earlier, if the snowstorm was natural, but now he had to wonder the same thing about this calm.

Over on Appa's head, seated beside Katara and Mai, Rafa waved to Aang and pointed to a specific spot down in the forest. The center of the forest was the North Pole itself, and so every point in the forest in all directions was technically south of it, but the place Rafa was pointing to was about ninety degrees from the Fire Nation base, roughly in the middle between the forest's edge and its center.

Aang dove with his glider into the forest, Appa following him closely. They passed through the soft green canopy and emerged to find a world of black and white.

The trees were tall and only grew branches at the top; the rest of each tree was simply a dark and twisted trunk, not unlike the gnarled forest he'd just visited in the Spirit World while he was unconscious. The ground was covered in snow, although here it was merely a thin coating. Perhaps the canopy protected the floor from much of the snowfall? But if that was the case, wouldn't the green leaves all be covered?

Aang decided, as he came in for a landing, that he didn't need to worry about it.

The village he'd landed next to was much more interesting.

It was unmistakably a Water Tribe village, not unlike what the Faceless Tribe had built much further south. Animal skins and bones figured more prominently in this construction than wood, despite the
forest around the village, but Aang approved of the choice of materials. He was a vegetarian and respected animal life on the same level as human life, but he knew the Water Tribes gave great honor to the animals they hunted, and if the other option was to cut down a tree from a spirit forest-

Well, he wouldn't have been surprised if the trees would have responded but cutting down people in return.

Of course, the trees probably wouldn't have to bother, what with the giant spirit monsters hanging around the village.

But 'monster' was probably too harsh a word. As Aang watched, the spirits solemnly came forward to greet the new arrivals. They all had the same catfish-like features as the one Mai had encountered, and all of them glowed with a blue light that reminded Aang of dreams he had forgotten years ago. They lifted clawed arms that shifted into smooth tentacles, and wrapped them lightly, for a moment, around the shoulders of each of the various Dreamcatchers who disembarked from Appa. A greeting?

One of the spirits approached Appa himself. The sky bison snorted and then opened his mouth to lick the spirit, but the catfish thing suddenly lost its coherency, becoming nothing more than an amorphous blob of night and glow that stretched and snapped a distance away. Then it became a catfish-creature once more and turned a luminescent glare on Appa.

Aang laughed as Momo scurried over to perch on his shoulders. "I guess Appa's too friendly for them."

Yugoda waved to him. "Come, Avatar. We can talk and eat in the Gathering House."

He joined Katara and Mai, and together they followed the Dreamcatchers into the village. Hahn was already mixing and talking with some of the warriors like they were old friends, and they probably were. A pair of women brought over bales of what looked like dried kelp and laid them in front of Appa, who immediately began eating.

Something Aang immediately noticed was that this village was a lot smaller than the Faceless Tribe's. Also, there were boxes of clearly labeled Fire Navy supplies stacked up in places. "So, you guys are some sort of rebellion? That's neat."

Yugoda came over to a solitary longhouse and pulled aside the flap covering the doorway. "Our existence is an act of rebellion against our conquerors, yes. But we have yet to strike at them in violence." She ducked and passed through the doorway.


He had heard about how she'd laid down her weapon rather than fight the catfish spirit, before, so he could safely take that as a joke. "Good one!" With a chuckle, he led the way into the longhouse.

The Dreamcatchers were all gathering around a fire over which a large pot of bubbling stew was suspended. A smaller pot had been placed next to the fire, and when Rafa caught Aang looking at it, he nodded and said, "This one is for you, Avatar. The scrolls say that the Air Nomads of old forsook flesh as food, so we prepared this for you. I hope you like kelp and Fire Nation spices."

Aang blinked. "You knew I was coming?"

Yugoda sat down next to the fire, and other Dreamcatchers took seats around her. "Iroh knew you were coming, and so did his minions, and thus it was in their dreams that we saw the signs. We have prepared a meat-free broth for you every day for the last week, but none of them have gone to waste.
It is our pleasure to finally share our cooking with you.

Wow. Aang was impressed. "So you can visit people in dreams, too? That's amazing!"

"Not with the same skill and power as the new Fire Lord, I'm afraid. We have to take special steps to enter an elevated state of dreaming, and then the glimpses we manage to get of our prey's dreams can be just as confusing as our own real dreams. Master Adlartok here-" Yugoda motioned to an old man seated near her with the bushiest eyebrows Aang had ever seen. "-was a spiritualist in our tribe, and he has greatly aided us in interpreting what we find."

Rafa handed Aang a bowl of the special soup they'd prepared for him. He sat down across from Yugoda and took a sip, finding that it was indeed an odd mix of flavors, very sharp, but not quite what he would call bad. Mai was given a bowl of the stew after she had sat down, which she tasted with obvious caution, and then put on a neutral expression.

Katara was likewise given a bowl, but she just stared at it as she plopped to the ground beside Aang. "I don't know if I can eat while Sokka and Ty Lee are in trouble. How is talk about dreams going to help us?"

Yugoda blinked at her. "Hmmm. Something about you is familiar. Have we met before?"

Katara shook her head. "This is my first visit to the north. I was born into the Southern Water Tribe."

"Hm. We have heard of the hardships faced by our sister tribe, and the wisdom you have been made to forget. Right now, eating is the best thing you can do, so that you will have the strength later to fight."

Mai put her bowl of stew, barely touched, aside. Momo immediately zipped over and began helping himself to it. "I thought you people were pacifists."

Rafa shook his head. "I'll happily jam a spear into Admiral Iroh's neck the first chance I get. We simply don't fight because we wish to survive. Iroh only knows that some of his supplies sometimes go missing, but nothing of us specifically. Secrecy is our greatest weapon."

A short distance away, Hahn lowered his own bowl of stew to frown. "But he has to know about you! You were one of the greatest fighters in our tribe, Rafa, and Master Yugoda taught all the healers. You two couldn't just- just go missing!"

Rafa nodded. "Now you know why we cut ourselves off from our families. As far as the Fire Nation conquerors know, every single person in this village is dead. We recruit one by one, spirit them away with deception and theater, and let the Tribe think our bodies have been sunk to the bottom of the waters."

Yugoda added, "We hide here where even Iroh's minions can't go. They steal from the forest, both its energies and cuttings from the trees. When they enter the forest, they stay at the edge and must bring substantial defenses. Their theft poisons what they take, making it hostile. The energies themselves have become corrosive to everyone in that base, but they seem to have found a defense against that. We, on the other hand, live in harmony with the forest. The spirits accept us here, as long as we don't approach the very center, and don't carry the white gold metal."

Aang saw the corner of Mai's lips twist at that, but only because he knew what to look for.

Just thinking about her choosing pacifism while he was unconscious made him feel warmer, even if it was probably a one-time thing. And now they were making friends with people who weren't just enemies of the Fire Nation, but people who truly understood about living in harmony with the world.
"And the forest protects you from Iroh's Dream Walking?"

Rafa finished the last of his stew and belched. "In a way. Dreamcatchers are what we call a kind of protective charm made of broken branches from the trees here. We all sleep beneath them. The sages could probably tell us more of their origins, but the Tribe uses them to extend the care of a spider spirit over our babies, with the father coming to gather fallen branches and the mother weaving them together. We happened to discover that they can protect us from Dream Walking, as well."

Yugoda sighed. "Everything we have has been corrupted by Iroh."

Aang didn't like the sound of that. "What do you mean?"

Yugoda looked across the fire at him. "We have seen images of a spider in the dreams of his people. But to us, it looks like a nightmare."

Sokka wouldn't have guessed that he'd be most interested in a room filled with plants, but then, the fact that it also contained a mechanical spider with scary needle legs probably had something to do with it.

Lian (the Maker) and Admiral Zhao (the jerk) had already shown him the Platinum Casting Room, and the Electrical Power Room, and even the Heated But Barely Big Enough To Do Your Business Bathroom (on request). All of them had their charms, but they were also exactly what Sokka expected. He knew they were working with platinum here, so they had to have some way to melt it down and shape it in different way; just because the techniques and tools for doing so were more advanced than anything he'd seen before didn't make it a big deal. Likewise the machines they had for generating electricity here at the North Pole. And when you had to go, you had to go.

But he couldn't even guess the purpose behind what Lian called the 'Hon Non Bo Room.'

The Maker led Sokka into the wide space through the simple swinging door, Zhao bringing up the rear as a guard. She didn't say anything at first, simply letting Sokka take in the rows and rows of potted trees no bigger than his forearm. They had all been cultivated to mimic the shape and proportions of a fully-grown specimen. Except for colors that usually didn't belong on trees (a blue so bright it was literally glowing seemed to be a favorite around here), it could have any old man's penzai hobby.

But then there was the miniature scale swamp sitting in a big pool in the center of the room, a mess of tiny vines and bubbling water and moss and slow-moving mud and even some buzzing insects. From the center of it all rose a single fat tree with a triangular leafy top of almost mathematical precision.

That's where the mechanical spider came in.

The shining device, clearly made of platinum, sat on top of that central tree. The main body was a riot of links and hinges that somehow gave the metal form considerable flexibility, allowing it to curl in a stable position on the tree's foliage. The legs came in a variety of sizes with various amounts of joints, and every single one of them tapered off into a long needle that was plunged into the tree trunk.

Sokka noticed that there were marks drawn in chalk on the trunk right where the needles were piercing the smooth bark.

He turned to Lian. "Let me guess: you guys just couldn't get used to kelp-chewies, so you figured you'd grow your own apples, and things got really out of hand."
Lian chuckled and smoothed her long green coat. "I'd be worried about eating the fruit of these trees. Tell me, have you seen the Spirit Forest that covers the North Pole?"

"You know, I was thinking of making a stop, but then I tripped over a weird scientific outpost and I somehow wound up captured by freaky mad scientists and racist conquerors.” Sokka shrugged. "It's odd how often that happens to me."

Zhao snorted. "It gets old for the rest of us, too."

"Well,” Lian said, "all of the plants in this room are made from samples taken from the Spirit Forest. Retrieving them was- there were a degree of engineering and security problems to solve. But these samples have been very valuable for allowing us to simulate working on larger and more robust entities. And they've led to some bonuses, such as the burs we use at the perimeter to fight off spirit monsters."

Sokka looked at the miniature trees. And the miniature swamp. And the metal spider with needle-legs. "Tell me there isn't a giant platinum death-spider hidden somewhere around here that I'm going to have to destroy with my friends."

"Oh, no. That's ridiculous." Lian shook her head. "We had it assembled at the Northern Air Temple base by a specialist in large-scale mechanics. And it's already being moved to a station closer to its mission."

Wait-

A simulated swamp?

Mission?

*Northern Air Temple?!*

Sokka sucked in a breath of humid, mosquito-flavored air. "This is it! The thing! The thing that- the map that Jet passed to Katara! That weird invasion that didn't make any sense because you guys already conquered that part of the Earth Kingdom! It's all to- to move a weird mechanical insect into a swamp so that it can get freaky with a big tree?"

"Spiders aren't insects. They're arachnids." Lian's eyebrows rose. "And now I know how much you know about it. The Avatar hasn't yet discovered the map's true meaning. See, Admiral? There's no need to interrogate a smart man like Sokka when we can just put a problem in front of him and watch how he solves it."

Sokka could feel his teeth grinding together. He was tempted to fire back with an assertion that now he knew how much she knew about how much he knew, but he was too angry at himself to make it work. He'd let his guard down because Lian was revealing things about Iroh and being polite, but she was still an enemy and working against him.

He wasn't so angry that he missed the surprise in Zhao's voice, though:

"You're after a tree?! Whatever for?"

Lian gave Zhao a look out of the side of her eye. "I expect that Fire Lord Iroh will brief you at the appropriate time, now that you've been given command of Special Operations." She looked back at Sokka and her smile returned. "So what do you suppose the spider does? Remember, there are no wrong answers here. This is a place for encouraging thought."
Sure, thoughts that resulted in playing with severed monster heads. "I'm going to think out loud for moment." Sokka looked at how the spider's legs pierced the trunk at the center of the various clusters of chalk markings. "You said that platinum disrupts spiritual energies by conducting them straight out of their natural structure. You're stabbing spooky ghost plants, or whatever they are, in precise patterns. The plants have energies, and your platinum- it leeches the energies out? You're turning them into batteries?"

Lian's eyes narrowed in a sly way; she apparently thought herself to be a clever girl. "Not a bad guess. That is possible, but there are a number of problems that keep it from being viable, yet. Perhaps you could help solve them for us. But no, that's not the purpose behind this."

Hm. Was she telling the truth? The experiment with the Unhcegila head that Sokka had watched before seemed to be about reducing spirit vines to their fundamental energy, so Lian was definitely thinking along those lines. But- what if the thing with the swamp and the platinum spider-machine was following a different track? The same fundamental principles could be informing completely different explorations, as he well knew from his time working in Fire Nation labs. That was how science worked. And clearly there was something about this specific swamp, and this specific tree, that had them building scale models using actual cuttings from a Spirit Forest.

Sokka shrugged. "I clearly don't have enough information to really say. Maybe if you told me more about the swamp?"

"Maybe you'll figure out yourself. Wouldn't that be more interesting?" Lian winked the eye that had the half-gear tattooed under it. "For now, I think you'll enjoy seeing the siphon we have set up to direct the energies we're stealing from the Spirit Forest."

She led the way out of the humid tree-lab, and Sokka made sure to follow.

He noticed, though, that Zhao didn't fall into line right away. The admiral lingered for a moment, looking at the fake swamp and its central tree.

Then he turned and stalked along in Sokka's wake.

Katara was truly interested in learning about the Dreamcatchers. After seeing her own tribe yoked under the Fire Nation's control for so long, it was heartening to see that even here in the heart of Iroh's conquests, the Northern Water Tribe had found a way to resist his tyranny.

But she would have liked to rescue her brother first. He had come across the world for her, held onto hope that she lived for a whole decade. She would never be able to match that kind of loyalty.

At least, she hoped she'd never have to.

And Ty Lee. Katara had been traveling with Ty Lee ever since Ba Sing Se, relying only on each other and surrounded by enemies. They'd shared food, rooms, beds, clothes, and a mission. They'd fought together and talked together and laughed together. It was strange to think that someone from the Fire Nation - a noble and a Weapon on top of that - could be such a great friend, but Katara couldn't imagine life with Ty Lee, now. She wanted to learn more about auras, about how Ty Lee saw the world.

She let the talking and explanations go on for as long as she could until everyone's stew was long gone.

Now it was time for action.
"So," she said to the gathering in the longhouse, "what are we actually going to do about rescuing our friends?"

Mai twirled one of her knives without looking at it. "I was wondering about that, myself."

Aang frowned, and Katara could see that he'd really been enjoying all this discussion about spirits and forests and dreams, but he was easily distractible that way. She knew he was someone who could be counted on, as long as he got reminded of the problem at hand every so often, and now he took a breath and nodded. "Katara's right. I came here to do something about Iroh, and it sounds like you can really help me. The entire world is suffering because of the Fire Lord, but what's going on up here is especially dangerous. I need to find a way to stop him."

Rafa grinned in a way that reminded Katara of a wolf. "Then don't bother with the laboratory. That has defenses made to fight the forest, and Iroh knows you're interested in that now. You want the Spirit Oasis in the city."

Hahn groaned. "The garden? I was going to use that to sneak them into the city! I knew we should have just gone straight there!"

Rafa gave a low chuckle. "It wouldn't have given you what you want. Iroh has built a full fortress over it. No one has seen the inside of the Oasis since he conquered us."

Katara couldn't help but roll her eyes. "So you want us to go to another fortress, except this one doesn't have Sokka or Ty Lee. Maybe someone could explain this 'strategy' to me so that it makes sense?"

Mai leaned over and whispered, "You might want to tone it down. You're sounding like me, and no one likes me."

"I like you," Aang whispered back, but Katara didn't bother to respond to any of it.

Yugoda looked over to Katara. "It makes sense when you know that Iroh's son, the Prince Lu Ten, is somewhere in that fortress, and no one has seen him either since the Fire Nation conquered the Northern Water Tribe."

Iroh's son?

The Fire Lord had struck at Katara's family, and now she could strike at his. She leaned forward. "Okay, I can work with this."

Rafa stood up. "Then it's agreed. Come, Avatar. My warriors and I will show you the battle plans we've drawn up. We've been waiting for years for this chance, and now, with you, we can not only find out what's going on, but bring balance back to the North Pole."

Katara stood up to join them, but Rafa glanced over at her and then his eyes fall to the ground. "The women can see to softer matters while we make our plans."

Katara's fists clenched. This garbage again?!

Yugoda put a hand on her shoulder, and leaned in with a smile to whisper, "Let them have their fun. I've been around long enough to have seen all their plans. I can see that you and the Fire Nation lady are warriors, and I'll make sure you get to take part in the fight."

Katara made herself exhale. "All right. I guess this isn't the time or place to fix all this dumb Water Tribe sexism."
Yugoda nodded. "It's an enemy that's eaten away at us for much longer than the Fire Nation. I don't know if it's true, but the accepted wisdom amongst the healers has always been that the 'Word of Avatar Kyoshi' has always been the thinnest book in our sages' archives because most of what she said about us wasn't fit to be recorded."

Katara had to bite down on a laugh. "I'd like to think that, too."

"I'm sure. But-" Yugoda leaned back. "You seem so familiar, especially this kind of anger. You're obviously a warrior. I may not be a fighter myself, but have taught Waterhealing for longer than most of my tribe has been alive. I've seen the way the men move when they use their fighting styles. The way you walk- you understand the flow of water. But you understand it the same way Master Pakku does."

_Oh._ Katara wondered how to explain this. "I- I learned from Pakku, yes. Aang thought Iroh was an ally for a while, and Pakku- he offered me help, and I accepted. But then he- I"

Yugoda waved that away. "I can tell that it's painful. So first, explain to me how Pakku was convinced to train a girl in his style. I can't imagine even Iroh had _that_ much control of him."

"Ha." It was a laugh without humor, but Katara felt that it was needed, anyway. "No, it was a favor to someone else. I- I had already been taught Waterbending forms by a master of the south, but I didn't- I grew up in a Fire Nation prison. I didn't know how to really feel the water I was Bending. And I- I'm damaged by what I went through. Pakku saw that feeling the water could help me, and- well, I think he and my Gran-Gran were an item when they were young. She came from the north-

"_Kanna!_" Yugoda's jaw dropped. "I knew you and your attitude were familiar! You're the spitting image of Kanna!"

Katara gave a smile, a real one. "Thank you. But, uh, then I found out that Pakku and Iroh were up to no good, so I had to run away. And then not that long ago Pakku died, but it wasn't because I beat him again, it was this spirit monster, and-

"You _beat_ Pakku in a fight," Yugoda said. There was no question in it, but her eyes were wide. "You must have been quite a student. You have done Kanna proud."

Katara looked down at her boots. "I didn't _really_ beat him. I had to use a trick. Master Hama - my first master, from the south - she had this idea of Waterbending a person's blood, and I-" She looked to see if Yugoda would interrupt her again, but the old woman was just staring at her. "I know it's bad. But- but before I did it, I was scared of the sky. I hadn't seen it while I was in that prison, and- and it always looked so _big_. But with Bloodbending, I knew I had power, and- and even though I'm still afraid, I can- when I'm feeling good, I know being afraid doesn't really matter, but- but what I was doing to Pakku looked so _awful_, and- and-"

With no interruption to save her, Katara just shrugged and stopped trying to put it all in words.

Yugoda was silent for a long moment. "I cannot say whether- whether Bloodbending is an art that should be condemned. Perhaps it is. But I think it is your path, Katara of the South, to find the answer. Many a new technique has been created that seems evil at first glance. That is the way of violence. That is why the women of our tribe are asked to shun it. Men do not think we have the wisdom to see the correct path."

Katara looked up again. "Really?"

Yugoda nodded. "But now that you have used this Bloodbending, it is upon you to find whether it
should be left to sink beneath the waves and be forgotten, or if it is like the more acceptable forms of violence, something to be used in defense of Tribe and Balance. It is a question that may destroy you." Despite her words, she smiled. "But I think Kanna's granddaughter is more than up to the task."

Katara smiled back. "Thank you. You must have been an amazing friend to my Gran-Gran."

Yugoda snorted. "I said no one could blame her for not wanting to marry Pakku, but only a crazy person would run away across the world over it. I was *mostly* right."

Katara laughed.

When the echoes of her amusement faded, she saw Aang coming back over to the firepit with Rafa and Hahn.

Aang looked to her. "We know what we need to do. Are you ready?"

Katara stood up and gave him a grin that she put more than a little wolf into. "Just try to stop me."

Zhao's thoughts were still on that strange miniature swamp, and Lian's vague insinuations about it, as the ridiculous tour of the laboratory for the Sokka Tribal continued on. Lian was currently showing off some of the experiments with using words written in platinum to create protective wards.

It was a better briefing than Zhao had gotten, when he was put in charge of it all.

And yet the Tribal was clearly distracted. He responded to Lian's questions, and was saying things clever enough to please the Maker, but Zhao knew that something was wrong. The Tribal had stopped throwing out barbs and insults, never mind trying to make everything he said into a demonstration of his supposed cleverness. And it had been happening since the Tribal got a look at that miniature swamp and the mechanical spider wrapped around the central tree.

And if it had the Tribal distracted, then Zhao wanted to know what was going on with it, too.

As Lian babbled on about how etymology might play into the effectiveness of the magical wards, Zhao spotted a lieutenant signaling from the lab's door. Zhao discreetly took his leave and stepped outside the room where they couldn't be heard. "What report?"

The lieutenant gave a quick bow. "Admiral, the Jorogumo Project sent word via telegraph. They're on station and ready to deploy as soon as you send the command."

And this was why Zhao was so worried about the miniature swamp. The Jorogumo Project - Lian's fancy name for the bigger version of the mechanical platinum spider machine - was well underway and already aimed at the real version of that very swamp. Fire Lord Iroh had declared it the most important and critical program in the entire world, shortly before putting it under Zhao's command.

It had been just after Iroh was crowned, and the assembly of military High Command members and Fire Sages had retired to rest before their trip back to the Homeland. Iroh had sat on a throne of ice in what seemed to be a Tribal banquet hall, a fur cloak beneath him, and said, "Zhao, I think we both know that you've disappointed me as often as you've managed to do as I ask."

Zhao had said nothing. He knew it was true, but he hadn't been commanded to admit it, and he saw no reason to incriminate himself.

Iroh sighed. "But you did complete your critical tasks in delivering the Fire Nation to me. And,
thanks to your efforts, the Avatar does live. He might not be my ally any longer, but that is hardly your fault alone."

Zhao had decided, then, that he could venture an opinion, as long as he kept it neutral. "The Avatar is a very troublesome individual. A disobedient child, when it comes right down to it."

A ghost of a smile flickered across Iroh's bearded face. "You are not a parent, are you?"

"I'm sure you know I am not, my lord."

"Yes."

"Yes."

Zhao slumped, and motioned to one of the Fire Marine guards standing at ready at the edge of the throne room. "We are entering a very dangerous stage. My becoming Fire Lord is just the beginning. I need to heal the world in order to help my son-"

(And here some further explanation would have been very much appreciated, as Lu Ten had been 'indisposed' for as long as Zhao had been at the North Pole.)

"But if something goes wrong, I have only my most desperate plan left," Iroh continued. "Lian is making marvelous progress in understanding the nature of his affliction, but there is still so much for us to learn, and the Avatar is coming. I'm afraid he promised me that himself."

The guard returned, carrying a teapot and an empty cup. He set the cup on the arm of Iroh's throne and filled it with steaming tea, and then retreated back to his station. With the pot.

Well, when in doubt, Zhao had never found that flattery could be misplaced. "You have succeeded where many men throughout history have failed, my lord. You have conquered the unconquerable and rose up despite the many enemies who tried to take what is rightfully yours. I have no doubt that you will succeed in this pursuit, too. Now, as to the 'affliction' of Prince Lu Ten-"

"That matter is classified, Commander," Iroh cut in, his voice as hard as a battleship hull and as cold as the ice of his throne. He took a sip of his tea. "But I appreciate your confidence. Desperation has driven me to great heights- hm, and perhaps it has driven you, too. But the truth, Zhao, is that I don't need you anymore."

That's never a good thing to hear from one's tyrant lord. It had chilled Zhao to the bone, worse than any of the cold and ice of this forsaken wasteland. "My liege, I assure you that I-"

"Please, do not be afraid. I certainly have no intention of punishing you. But if you want to make yourself useful, perhaps you can help with the matter of my son."

Zhao had shut his mouth and listened very carefully.

Iroh had smiled. "My Northern Fleet has been stretched thin, given all my activities of late, but I will need to extend great strength to the Southern Earth Kingdom. The Avatar is on his way for a confrontation, and that might very well go poorly for me. Zhao, I offer you a promotion to Admiral, with a position on the personal military staff of the Fire Lord, and direct command of my Special Operations military security here and throughout the Colonial Continent."

Zhao's blood had flared at the word 'Admiral,' but he was too good at staying alive to jump for it-yet. "And why would you offer me this, my lord? I barely know the nature of your special projects."

Iroh took another sip of his tea. "Well, you do have the most direct experience with the Avatar and his allies. And, as I said before, you've fed well on your own desperation. Perhaps giving you a mission that, if failed, will destroy not only you but everything you have worked for since entering my service- well, that is quite the incentive, is it not? And unpleasantly dramatic, but I think we are
well past the point of no return on that mark."

Zhao wasn't so sure.

But if Iroh went down, then Zhao had no doubts about what would happen to him. If the Fire Nation even survived, whoever wound up in charge of it would hardly be well disposed to Iroh's direct allies. And if the Avatar was the one who carried the day, it would probably go even worse for Zhao. Exile would be the best he could hope for in any scenario.

So wouldn't it be in his best interest to make sure Iroh's strange little projects succeeded?

(And get a promotion to Admiral while he was at it?)

"My lord, it is my honor to accept your most generous offer." Zhao dropped to his knees and kowtowed on the icy floor. "I will serve you to the best of my strength and abilities."

And sure enough, Zhao had been officially promoted and given command of the Special Operations security division of the Northern Fleet. But that had come with so little information, including about Prince Lu Ten. Even when the Tribal task force sent to find and capture the Avatar had returned with the Unhecigila head, and Lian had gotten so excited about the theories she could then attempt to prove, Zhao was left in the dark about why these theories were so important.

He couldn't help but suspect that he was being played for a patsy.

Well, as the Fire Lord had said, desperation was Zhao's greatest ally.

He nodded to the lieutenant. "Tell them to remain on high alert, and send the confirmations to the colonial divisions that we marked to serve as defensive reinforcements."

"Yes, sir!"

"And," he said as he made sure to keep his face neutral, "I have concerns about the security here with the Avatar and his allies running around. Put the Unhecigila lab on security level five, and prepare for an evacuation of all sensitive materials. We wouldn't want something so important to be damaged in any fighting, now would we?"

"Yes, sir."

Once the lieutenant was running off to pass on the orders, Zhao allowed himself a smile. Iroh might value all the skills and knowledge Zhao had picked up since leaving his backwater assignment at South Pole, all that time ago, but he had learned some things before then, too. And if there was one thing being stuck in a backwater could teach a man, it was how to play petty games with the limited resources at hand.

So the Unhecigila was important to Lu Ten, eh?

Time to found out how important.

TO BE CONTINUED
The Bastion

Chapter Summary

Aang and Mai find what they're looking for.

The Bastion

Ty Lee's first view of the Northern Water Tribe chilled her more than the weather, and the weather was really really cold.

It was night when the metal-vehicle-thing brought her and the Water Tribe Princess Yue into the city. Ty Lee had been asleep at the time, or at least in a kind of concussed not-quite-wakey-wakey state that was pretty close. The sudden lack of vibration through the metal floor and walls and bench-turned-bed jolted her enough to get her eyes open, and from there it was just a matter to deciding to return to reality.

Yue was leaning over her, her glorious and slightly tarnished blue aura fighting against the dull green light of the crystal lantern hanging from the ceiling. "Can you walk? I can have them bring a stretcher."

"I can walk." Ty Lee decided this was true and sat up on the bench. The world remained stable around her, and while there was still fatigue in her body, it wasn't enough to keep her down. "Being carried sounds fun, but my feet want to feel like they're contributing again."

"O- kay." Yue's dark eyebrows (and why were her eyebrows dark when her hair was white?) drew together like she was confused about something. "Here, I'll help you walk."

Ty Lee was used to walking on a tightrope, sometimes even on her fingers (although she'd never managed to make it work with her ring fingers, just the other four), but she still allowed Yue to take most of her weight as they made their way out of the passenger compartment, where a door folded down to become a tiny set of steps. (Neat!) After all, Ty Lee might need her strength later if she had to fight meanies again. An arctic wind greeted her as she emerged from the vehicle, and she raised her eyes to see where she had been brought.

That's when she saw it.

An entire city made of ice.

Well, mostly ice.

It had started as all ice, at least. It reflected the light of the full moon so brightly that not a single torch was needed to fight back the night. But, appropriately for a Water Tribe, all the ice didn't make the city feel frozen or locked in place. Ty Lee felt like she was standing at the top of the world's biggest, widest waterfall, looking down. Water was even pouring from a fountain somewhere behind her to feed wide canals that spread through the city in place of streets. Most of the canal water, though, came from portholes around the city's walled borders that that released shimmering jets to fall like curtains. They reflected the stars above to project the illusion of movement over the buildings and walls.
With the gentle downward slope of the expanse, it seemed like the Tribe here was living on top of a flowing river into forever.

Too bad all the added metal clashed so badly.

Amidst the buildings sculpted from pure white ice, boxy outposts made from dull black metal clashed with the artistic architecture around them. Trebuchets and ballista poked up across each little neighborhood and pointed out to face the iceberg-pocked ocean. And the defensive walls of ice had been covered with big metal plates, forcing all access through portals that Ty Lee knew (from 'Science & Engineering History for the Glory of our Nation' class back at the Royal Academy) could be shut with mechanical strength in the event of an invasion.

Soldiers in the armor of the Fire Navy patrolled those walls, regularly checking the ocean ahead and the sky above. They were expecting an invasion from something that could swim or fly.

Strangely, the city streets themselves seemed to be empty of guards. Ty Lee was used to the sight of a city under occupation, thanks to her time touring the colonies with the circus, and one constant was heavy patrolling in civilian areas to prevent trouble. (Ty Lee knew now how many innocent things could be called 'trouble,' thanks to Sokka's stories.) But here, people in blue parkas moved around without any supervision.

Yet, despite the lack of soldiers in their midst, the people all had auras of drab lifeless shades. They were dying while they were living. Even the poorest, most unfortunate people in the colonies hadn't been this bad; they at least had anger, even if it left them unbalanced. But these people had auras like they had given up all hope and were just waiting for the rest of the world to catch up.

Ty Lee decided that these people badly needed a circus. Unfortunately, she was too busy to start one right now, and besides, she was concussed.

But she did say, "What has Iroh done to you?"

Yue sighed. "So much. And all of it with genuine care and concern. Come, let's get you into the palace. I had them wire ahead for a healer, and if you're not feeling sleepy again when she finishes, I can try to explain."

Ty Lee nodded her agreement (she'd make sure she was awake for this gossip) and let Yue lead her around the vehicle that had brought them here.

And that's when she saw what had to be the Northern Water Tribe's royal palace. It was, of course, made of ice.

It reminded Ty Lee of a fountain, each floor layered with flaring eaves that glistened in the moonlight as if water was running over them. Water had to be coming from somewhere, because a series of small waterfalls were coming out from beneath the palace to join the canal-feeders, but she couldn't see anything. She did notice how the Fire Nation flag covered some kind of sculpture on the top of the palace, though.

And she also saw the big, black, vertical fortress that rose up behind the palace, built into the icy cliffs that bordered the city's rear. That was where Hahn had been intending to take Ty Lee and her friends, to sneak them into the city.

But there would be no entry here. It rose like a dam to hold back the natural world, with a building like an Imperial battleship plopped on top to block out the view of the sky.

Ty Lee stared as she and Yue mounted the palace steps together. "Wow, I guess Iroh really
redecorated."

"Actually," came a smug voice, "I designed and oversaw the construction of The Bastion. The Fire Lord merely requested something to protect his two greatest treasures." Coming down the steps was a bespectacled man - a Water Tribe man, judging by his features - in the uniform of a Fire Navy officer. He grinned down at Ty Lee, and his green aura swirled darkly. "Welcome back, Princess Yue. I see you're bringing a guest into my palace."

Yue's blue aura became tinged with red, but she bowed her head as though to a superior. "Chief Maliq, thank you for receiving me. I wired ahead-"

"Yes, your message was passed on to me." He strolled down the stairs and leaned directly in Ty Lee's face. "A Weapon of the Fire Nation to take care of, eh? But you didn't say how beautiful she'd be."

Ty Lee was glad that Yue was holding her up. "Um, thanks, but I got a big ouchie on my head so I'm not very good company right now. Sorry!"

Maliq smiled. "Yes, I've asked my sister Malina to prepare to receive you. You might be a traitor to the Fire Nation, but I greatly admire your culture, and you will be treated with the utmost politeness, Lady Caldera Yu Ty Lee."

Yue, without raising her head, said, "Chief Maliq was educated in the finest universities in the Fire Nation colonies, before Iroh appointed him to lead us." She finally did stand straight, meeting Maliq's eyes. "And while I appreciate your special attention on this matter, I think Misu would be a better healer for Ty Lee. She has more experience with head injuries."

Maliq stared at Yue for a moment, face as frosty as the air, but then looked back to Ty Lee and put a smile back on. "Well, only the best for a noble of the Fire Nation. I think you'll find that we've adapted quite well to the rule of your nation. The Water Tribe's primitive days are behind them."

Wow. Ty Lee hoped that Sokka and Katara wouldn't have to meet this guy. She didn't want to see what it did to their auras. "Great. So, uh, nice meeting you, and-"

That's when the alarms started.

Someone started beating a gong in a steady danger-pattern, and soon horns and additional gongs joined in with the noise. Ty Lee saw the more metal portions of the Water Tribe city come to life, the massive weapon emplacements swinging upward-

-and she followed their movement to see a cloud moving against the wind.

But she knew it wasn't a cloud. It was a sky bison, and he was her friend.

Maliq lost his smile. "Get in the palace. It seems the Avatar has come for my Bastion. I hope he won't make us hurt him."

"Come on," Yue said, and began moving Ty Lee up the steps to the palace again. Ty Lee let herself be led away, but she was no longer focused on taking in the scenery. She'd seen enough to know what was going on.

And how to fight here.

So instead, she cleared her mind and steadied her breathing. She sank into something like a meditation, focusing on the Qi that flowed within her body. It was disrupted in her head, where she'd
taken an injury from Iroh's attack, and would need real healing. Hopefully, Yue would be able to arrange for that, but Ty Lee couldn't rely on it. Not with her friends about to go into battle.

So she discreetly poked herself in a few specific places, increasing the flow of Qi to her head.

It wouldn't be as good as Waterhealing, and would take a little longer, but maybe it would be enough for Ty Lee to fight if she had to.

Just because she didn't like being a Weapon didn't mean she wasn't still the most dangerous person in this entire city.

At least, for the sake of her friends, she hoped so.

Katara looked over the Northern Water Tribe city, at the beautiful ice buildings hidden behind an array of defenses, weapons, and soldiers. All of it was assembled to kill her and everyone else up on Appa right now, a force ready and waiting for them, a force created by arguably the world's greatest living strategic genius.

She frowned. "Are we sure we don't want to try attacking the city? Maybe that will be easier."

Rafa leaned over the edge of the saddle beside her, gazing with clear yearning at the city - at the people - he had to abandon to join the Dreamcatcher rebellion against the Fire Nation. "The critical part of my plan is to get through the Bastion to Iroh's son and the Spirit Oasis. There are considerable defenses at the top, and I'd rather not fight through my city, but I will do what I must to liberate it."

Katara winced at the thought of bringing harm to the people, the families of her sister tribe, in a pitched battle against a Fire Nation army. But the alternative was this plan of Aang's, and that plan relied on, among other things, Katara herself. "Yeah, but are we really sure about this?"

Over on Appa's head, Aang turned around and grinned at her. "Now you're sounding like Sokka."

"I- I do not! I'm just being practical. Mai, be pessimistic and back me up!"

Across the saddle, surrounded by more of Rafa's Waterbender warriors, Mai looked up from the chunk of machinery she was familiarizing herself with. "Actually, I like Aang's crazy daring stupid plan. Our team has a high rate of success on those."

"But-"

Mai looked straight at Katara with eyes that glistened silver-gold in the light of the moon. "I really think you can do this. Even with all my cynical lack of hope. Take that for what it is."

Stupid Mai being a stupid good friend. Katara sighed and looked up at the sky, at the full moon shining down on the world. The view made her skin crawl, but she took that nervous energy and welcomed it, let it fill her body without granting it even a little bit of control.

She'd need all the energy she could get to shove an ocean out of the way.

Appa was passing out over that ocean right now, leaving the city behind. Aang steered him over the waters, over the floating icebergs, where the Fire Navy patrol ships were swinging to a defensive array.

And then he had Appa turn around and point them all straight at the city.

Katara breathed in. She breathed out. Then she moved forward to the front of the saddle, along with
Mai (who brought along the device she was borrowing from the Dreamcatchers), and together they climbed up onto Appa's head and took the reins from Aang.

Aang himself climbed down onto Appa's face so that he was perched right above the sky bison's nose. "Okay, I'm ready!"

Mai whipped the reins as Katara stood up and began swinging her arms to summon the attention of the lapping waves below. The Waterbenders who Rafa had recruited for this adventure all stood in the saddle as well, synchronizing their movements with hers. They'd been skeptical at having a girl lead this part of the plan, until Aang had described how she'd thrown a rainstorm at the Faceless Tribe's Waterbender warriors.

Mai drawled, "Yip-yip."

Appa snapped his tail and shot forward, diving down on a steep angle towards the outer wall of the city. Or, more specifically, where the lapping waves met the wall.

Katara closed her eyes as the catapults and trebuchets and ballista all began firing at them. There was nothing she could do about any of it, and she needed to concentrate. She reached out with her mind and body and emotion and spirit to the ocean, just as Pakku had taught her. She didn't need to see the water to feel it, not anymore. Pakku might have betrayed her to Iroh, but she knew, at least, that he hadn't liked it. Now his lessons would help liberate his tribe.

Katara leaned forward and pushed with her arms. Behind her, the other Waterbenders would be doing the same thing.

She could feel the ocean respond, curving away even as Appa continued his dive, but it was so vast, so heavy, and it pushed back against her.

But that was okay. Master Hama might have been forced to teach Waterbending, back in that dry Crescent Island prison, without the benefit of any water around, but Katara had made sure to learn the principles. Waterbending was push and pull, transference of momentum, motion redirected along the path of least effort.

So when the ocean pushed back against her, Katara went ahead and started pulling along with it.

And that created more motion, more energy. The ocean rose, the surface cresting.

Then Katara got back to pushing.

She kept this cycle up for a few seconds, and at last opened her eyes.

She barely saw the flaming projectile headed right towards Appa before Aang took care of it. He leaped ahead off of Appa's nose, kicked a wind at the ball of fire to knock it off course, and rode that wind over to a ballista bolt that was angling too close. Katara let Aang work, let him dance in the open space ahead of Appa's dive to clear the way for them all, and focused on the ocean below.

It was moving.

The water right in front of the Northern Water Tribe city's outer wall was rising up to soak the ramparts and then falling again to expose the wall's foundations, and then rising again, and then falling again, and so on. Katara kept up her motion, working with the other Waterbenders in the saddle, adding energy and movement to the unnatural lapping of the waves.

She was doing it!
Katara was moving the ocean enough for Aang's plan!

Appa diving was bringing them close to that wall, now. They had passed beneath the range of the Fire Nation's weaponry, but they weren't out of danger yet.

The water receded again, exposing the solid wall of ice and the frozen rock it had been built upon.

In a second, they'd crash into that rock with the full force of Appa's flight, enough force to kill them all instantly.

But Aang was going to take care of that, too.

Trusting the Avatar was even easier than trusting herself.

Aang knew what he needed to do, and knew that he'd need a lot of help to do it. Good thing his previous lives were all so willing to help him out.

Katara had done her job, exposing the rocky foundations of the Northern Water Tribe's city. Getting to them normally would have required swimming down through dangerously frigid waters, and while Appa was capable of such a thing, it wasn't something a sky bison could do quickly. They'd run out of air before Aang could do his part, never mind what the Fire Nation would manage to put together as a defense. If they had collaborator Waterbenders working for them-

So Aang had decided that this was a good place to be an *Earthbender*.

A second before Appa crashed into the stone beneath the outer ice wall, Aang reached within himself, emptied himself of everything but the gentle breeze that was the universe's breathing, and sought for company.

Roku answered him. As did Kyoshi. And Kuruk. Plus Yanchen. Along with Jafar and Guojiu and Schonchin and Changchub and Jimmu and Tieguai and Ouray and Sempa and everyone else. Aang paid particularly close attention to Kyoshi, but he didn't forget that he himself was part of the group, and that his own Earthbending teacher was a particularly clever and subtle warrior.

Together and alone, Aang reached out to the stone just ahead to yank it apart into a tunnel wide enough to accommodate a sky bison and passengers. The stone pushed back against him, of course, but he took on the power that all the other Avatars offered him, and rooted himself on Appa's steady and very reliable head.

It was a strange thing, to feel his own eyes glowing.

And so the rock parted just as the ocean had done for Katara, and they all passed into the tunnel as the waves crashed back down behind them and cut them off from their enemies outside.

Aang had done it! And Katara had done it! And even Mai had called it right!

Up on top of Appa's head, Mai activated the bright spotlight lantern that they'd brought along with a crack of the mechanical lever, stolen by the Dreamcatchers from one of the Fire Navy facilities up here. It lit up the tunnel ahead of them, allowing Appa to fly along easily and Aang to keep extending the shaft. He didn't know exactly where they were going, but he knew the general direction he wanted.

Under the city, towards the fortress called the Bastion.
It was as Rafa was going over the defenses of the fortress, of the metal plating and mechanical gates and ready soldiers and overwhelming weaponry, that Aang had gotten the idea to come at it like an Earthbender. Iroh would be used to dealing with Waterbenders, up here, and any collaborators would naturally be most familiar with those abilities. The Fire Nation in general knew all about fighting conventional incursions, so a direct assault was likely to be fatal.

But coming up from underground? Where the stone was buried so deep that most people had forgotten it was there?

Aang had liked that idea.

Now, he broke apart another layer of rock, but instead of echoes and shadow, the stone revealed an undulating chamber that seemed to shift to regard him as Appa banked into the space. But it wasn't the walls that were looking at him (that would be creepy), it was a whole bunch of slippery creatures with flexible necks and big shells on their backs. They barked in either alarm or welcome as the spotlight played over them, and Aang realized that he'd just found the vacation hideaway of a herd of turtle-seals.

Neat!

He leaped down off of Appa's nose, almost landed in a pool of water before he caught himself with his Airbending and floated over to solid ground. Mai brought Appa down next to him, and everybody in the saddle quickly disembarked in stances ready for battle.

But only the turtle-seals seemed to care that they were down here.

Rafa lowered his spear. "These caverns must have been carved by the shifting ice over the years. I wonder how extensive they are."

Aang shrugged before trying to pet one of the turtle-seals. "Well, if they don't take us to the Bastion, I can just use my Earthbending to get us the rest of the way." The turtle-seal angled its head away and flopped towards one of the small pools that dotted the cavern floor.

"Come on, Aang," Katara said. "We can't stop and play. The sooner we find Prince Lu Ten, the sooner we get Sokka and Ty Lee back."

Aang knew she was right, and hoped there would be a chance later to come back. He'd never ridden a turtle-seal before.

But he had friends in danger, and a world that needed saving.

He knelt down on the ground and swept his hands over it to melt the icy coating and push the resulting water away. He put both of his hands on the dry, bare rock, reaching out just as Toph had taught him back on the island of the Sun Warriors. He'd been able to feel the disturbance there that had destroyed their eternal flame, and used that same sense now to trace the extensions of this cavern and find out where they led. He knew he wasn't as good as Toph, who could 'see' by the vibrations carried through the earth, but he didn't need to be for this. He just needed to find the big empty gaps heading in the direction he wanted to go.

Satisfied, he stood up and pointed down a particular tunnel. "This is our best path for now. I'll lead the way with my Earthbending. Katara, can you keep Appa calm as we go? He doesn't like being underground. Rafa, if you or any of your warriors recognize anything, go ahead and shout. And Mai-"

She stepped into place right beside him. "I'm here. Let's go see what Iroh has locked away in that
Aang nodded. "Keep any eye out. We probably surprised Iroh's army just now, but he's good at surprising us, too."

Sokka's tour of the laboratory ended, as these things always should, with food.

And also Fire Lord Iroh, which completely ruined it.

Lian (the Maker, because some people just couldn't stand possibly sharing a name with other human beings) led the way into an office, where Iroh was seated at a table laid out with a full tea service and plates of steaming food. The smell of grilled meat immediately reminded Sokka that he hadn't eaten in roughly forever, and so he almost missed the other table in the office, despite it being much bigger than the dinner table and also dominating the center of the room.

But then he saw the painted canvas spread across it, and recognized a pretty close copy of the map that Jet had stolen from the Northern Air Temple to pass on to Katara.

"You might as well come and eat first," Iroh said, pouring some tea into cups. "If your friends haven't come to rescue you, yet, then I expect they're in no rush. We'll have time to talk business later."

Oh, great. First they do the whole 'Come gaze upon all my wonderful evil facilities because I don't fear you,' thing, and now it was the 'Let us dine together despite being enemies because we are both civilized people and also you're my prisoner so ha ha you stink,' routine. This was also probably part of the psychological games they were playing, trying to force Sokka to keep compromising his resistance, all to brainwash him or something.

(He almost preferred how Long Feng and the Dai Li had tried real brainwashing, with isolation and hypnotism and all that. It had been unpleasant before King Toph rescued them, but he and Mai had resisted that well enough, and at least it was honest.)

But Sokka was hungry, so he figured he could indulge his captors on this point. "Well, if you insist."

Iroh laughed. "I do. Lian, please join us! You've been working so hard, and I know intellectuals often forget to properly nourish themselves."

Lian's smile grew a bit tight, to Sokka's eye, as they came over and took seats. "Thank you, Fire Lord. It would be my pleasure to join you. But I actually keep close track of my nutritional needs. A healthy mind comes from a healthy body."

"Well said!" Iroh placed cups of tea in front of them. "Zhao, you're invited, too. I don't want anyone standing around hungry."

Zhao? Sokka whipped around, and found Ol' Sideburns standing at attention by the office's door. Where had that jerk come from? He'd ducked out of the tour at some point, when Sokka was paying more attention to all the science and wondering how it would be used to destroy the world.

Judging by Lian's face, she was surprised at Zhao's reappearance, too. So he hadn't been off on her business, then.

"Thank you, Fire Lord, but I will decline." Zhao dipped his head and kept his position by the door. "I could not bring myself to eat while executing such important duty as providing your security."
Iroh shrugged. "Whatever makes you happy, then. Sokka, please, try some of this! It's a variant of a local crab dish, but with Fire Nation spices. I asked the cook to go easy on those, since I expect you're not used to quite that much fire, but there's still enough to add quite a nice flavor." He held up a steaming dish with delicious-looking contents.

Sokka reached out to take it, already thinking of an insult he could deliver to the Fire Lord to ease his guilt at eating the man's succulent, wonderful-smelling food-

-and then alarms started going off.

Harsh, mechanical, and unending, the sound made Sokka and Lian both jump, although Iroh remained stone still. The brass message-tubing on the ceiling shook, and a tinny voice announced, "Wire from the Bastion, they are under attack! The Avatar is at the Bastion! Repeat, the Avatar is at the Bastion!"

Wait, the Avatar? But the last Sokka had seen, Aang was stuck in a glowy nap-time. Was he awake again? Sokka wasn't sure how to feel about the idea that this whole excursion into an evil laboratory might have been a waste of effort. But at least he had gotten some good information out of it-

The alarms continued ringing, and for a moment, no one moved.

And then Iroh snarled, flung the whole table away (including the dish of seasoned crab), and hopped up to stalk towards the door. "Zhao, bring the Tribal. We're leaving."

Sokka was hauled out of his seat by Zhao, arms being twisted behind his back, and force-marched out of the office. Over the sounds of the alarms, he heard Lian mumble, "I'll have this all cleaned up, I guess."

Oh, well. At least now he wouldn't have to feel guilty about eating Water Tribe food with Fire Nation spices on it.

Zhao pushed Sokka through the halls of the laboratory at a run, Iroh close behind them despite his shorter legs. Sokka tried digging his heels in to see if he could at least slow the parade down, but Zhao responded with a smack to the back of his head that left his ears ringing almost as bad as the alarms.

The mandatory journey continued straight out of the laboratory, where an enclosed snow-crawler, motorized ski-vehicles, and even a tank were being brought together in the whipping snow. Night had fallen, but Sokka could see soldiers hurrying about, but most seemed to be taking positions around the laboratory grounds. So they were staying here, then, instead of going to whatever this 'Bastion' was. Good to know. As Sokka tried to take in as many details as possible, he let himself be dragged into the mechanized crawler, where he was actually chained to the rear bench.

Zhao gave him one last smack on the head and then hurried off.

"Goodbye to you, too," Sokka muttered. But overall, he was thinking that his situation might have improved. Zhao was gone now, and Aang and company seemed to be running something. Sokka might be due for a rescue any moment, now.

Then Fire Lord Iroh got into the crawler with a pair of armored Firebender guards. One sat down next to Sokka, while Iroh and the other took the front bench.

Oh.

Sure.
Zhao was still mustering reinforcements to bring to the Bastion when Lian found him. And, for the first time, he got to see her absolutely furious.

"Why," she spat, marching out of the lab with her green long coat flaring out in snowy wind, "am I not being allowed in my biggest lab? I have work to do!

Zhao didn't have long to deal with this. Iroh was going ahead to help deal with the Avatar if necessary, and the Fire Lord would not be pleased if things went bad because Zhao was late with reinforcements. But Lian had been acting so smug, it would be a shame not to enjoy this moment.

Zhao smirked at her. "It is called a lockdown, and it is part of the security necessities for dealing with the emergency of the Avatar's attack. The Unhecigila head is one of our most important assets. Considering the threat the Avatar poses and how little we understand his plans, I will do what I must to protect the Fire Lord's projects, no matter how important you think your 'work' is."

Lian's face scrunched, turning the gear tattoo beneath her left eye into a jagged smudge. "You're contradicting yourself, you simpleton. If you think my work isn't important, then there's no reason to lock down the lab. You're- you're playing petty games with my science that you couldn't possibly understand and-

"Then why not," Zhao interrupted, "help me understand? Tell me the purpose behind your experiments, and their importance to Prince Lu Ten. Then I can accurately judge the needs of security against the needs of the project."

Lian pressed her lips together so tightly they lost their color. "Do you really think you can manipulate the Fire Lord? Accept your place, do your job, and I won't bring this to his attention later. Don't you military types have a thing called 'need to know'? You don't need."

Zhao could acknowledge that she had a point, but not one that would sway him. It was true that, under normal circumstances, he would have to accept that some information simply could not be spread be around, and a proper soldier would have to be content to follow orders. But Zhao was not a simple soldier, and Iroh-

Well, part of the resilience of the chain of command was the trust that the people at the top were truly serving their nation to the best of their ability.

And, when it came down to it, Zhao didn't trust Iroh.

Who could? The man had hidden up here at the North Pole for years, only reaching out make deals with enemies and plunge the Fire Nation into civil war. Yes, he had been crowned Fire Lord, and Zhao had happily (more or less) gone along with everything for the sake of survival and profit. But Iroh wasn't even pretending this was all for the greater good. It was to save his son. And Iroh still wanted to make a deal with the Avatar, if at all possible. He was still keeping secrets, even as he promoted Zhao.

And more important than the greater good was Zhao's good, which was even more questionable at this point.

Iroh's secrets involved toying with supernatural forces that had the Avatar's companions spooked. Perhaps Zhao would be the next to be burned as fuel for Iroh's strange ambitions. And, when it came down to it, Iroh was still being stymied by his enemies refusing to be manipulated.
If Zhao was good at anything, it was stealing a good strategy when he saw one.

"Very well," he said to Lian, "I will do my job. As head of security here at the North Pole, I have decided that this entire location is compromised by the Avatar's arrival and infiltration of our facilities. I need to evacuate the important materials elsewhere, until security can be reestablished or a new location made functional."


"We'll see." Zhao turned in the snow to give the proper orders, leaving Lian to gape like a fish. Then he'd have to hurry to catch up to Iroh at the Bastion, where he'd have to somehow deal with the Avatar's assault.

Perhaps the solutions to all these problems were related.

That would be gratifying.

Sokka would have liked to say that the worst part of his trip in the crawler was the awkward silence, but he was also chained to his bench and the heating seemed to be on the fritz.

And then there was the fact that the Fire Lord, the baddest man on the planet and maybe the most dangerous Firebender alive, was acting kind of antsy.

Sokka, of course, had no real desire to want to speak to his captors. The guards did their usual unmoving-glowering-presence thing, but with their faces covered by their helmets they might have been napping, and that kind of killed the sense of dread. It was Iroh who was making the whole thing awkward. He shifted in his seat. He leaned forward to look through the little window at the front of the cabin into what was probably the driver compartment. He tapped his fingers on the bench and stroked his pointed chin-beard and then started the whole routine over again.

Eventually, Iroh sighed and turned around to face Sokka. "I'm sorry about this. I wanted the chance to have a nice conversation."

Sokka shrugged in his chains. "I don't suppose you brought along some leftovers?"

He expected Iroh to act amused again, to keep up the routine of an eccentric uncle hosting an insolent nephew, but the Fire Lord's face remained grim. The skin around his eyes was tight, and his fingers twitched. "Do you know what the Avatar is attempting?"

"Sorry. Our plans hadn't gotten any further than infiltrating the lab. I'm guessing that me and Ty Lee not coming back out has set things off." He had no reason to hold back the truth, and hoped the Fire Lord wouldn't want to go all flaming interrogation to confirm it.

Iroh gave a nod, eyes shifting across the cabin. "As can only be expected. But I did not anticipate the form of the response." He tapped his fingers against the bench again. "The Avatar is strangely difficult for me to predict."

"Well, sure." Sokka couldn't believe he had to explain this to the most accomplished military leader in the world. "He's thirteen. And he eats way too many sweets."

Iroh's lip might have twitched. "I am a father. I know what young boys can be like. But this-" He gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "That's what it is really all about. Did the Avatar tell you? I just want to save my son."
Sokka decided to risk a nod. "Yes, he's mentioned that. But- uh- you know, I don't mean to be rude or disrespectful (especially being your captive and all), but none of us are clear on how most of what you're doing relates to your son. Like that house of horrors you had Lian show me."

"You didn't like it? I thought it would appeal to the intellectual in you."

"Oh, it did. But the intellectual also has to hang out with the me in me who was terrorized by spirit monsters a few times." Sokka cleared his throat. "And that's what's really worrying us. You keep saying, 'It's fine, everything's good, just saving my sick son, la de da,' but then you have a head mounted on a machine which eats spirit vines and that kind of thing just looks kind of shady, you know? We trust our guts on Team Avatar, and frankly your methods are giving us all tummy aches."

"I suppose that is fair." Iroh's gaze lost its focus, and he leaned back. "I have been pursuing this for years. At one time, I suppose I would have been horrified as well. Some of it did scare me, but I made myself endure. I must have gotten used to horrors, and now they are just part of everyday business." His eyes focused on Sokka again. "War is like that, as well."

Sokka snorted. "So is being colonized by foreign invaders. The trick is to not get used to awful things, and actually do something about them."

Iroh raised an eyebrow. "And sometimes, the only way to do something is to first become inured to the horror." He paused and then hissed and gave a wave of his hand. "But we are becoming distracted by matters of philosophy. You have questions, don't you? Ask me. We have a little time before we get back to the Bastion, and we might arrive to find a war in progress. What can I clarify for you?"

Sokka thought it over, wary of a trap. He didn't trust this any more than Lian's Happy Fun Tour. "Let's start with the Unhcegila. Why are you using it to convert weird vines into energy?"

"Simple. My son - Lu Ten is his name - is suffering from a spiritual affliction, and it drains him of his Qi. It is like how the Unhcegila itself kills its victims. The methods we are using to help Lu Ten now are crude and inefficient, and we hope to find a way to more directly give him the energy he needs to stay healthy. Imagine-" Iroh's gaze lost focus, and he mumbled something before his voice rose again to say, "Imagine if we could take a 'meal' of Spirit Vines and process it into a form he could consume. Yes, that would be the greatest help, aside from a cure."

Ew. That sounded worse than being a vegetarian.

But Iroh seemed to like the idea. He mumbled some more, and Sokka caught the mention of scrolls of some kind, and 'the Kuoda Crystal,' whatever that was.

Sokka took advantage of the Fire Lord's distraction to attack the logic of the explanation from several different angles, trying to see where any traps might be. It seemed reasonable when explained like that, give or take a giant monster head, but maybe the lack of traps was the trap? Was it an innocuous piece of information to lead up to something more awful?

Sokka waved for Iroh's attention. "But what does that have to do with the swamp and the weird platinum spider machine?"

"The- what?" The Fire Lord blinked, and then his expression brightened. "Oh. Yes. Ah, I wish we had more time to spend on this subject. You saw the map I had set up beside our dinner? I explained to the Avatar that it wasn't what it looked like, but he had already decided that he couldn't trust me. But you've seen the model of the swamp, and the experiments with the trees."
Yes, Sokka had. "Lian said the spider was already being deployed." He didn't mention that King Toph and her Earth Kingdom resistance were on their way to check things out, if they weren't there already.

Iroh smacked a pair of fingers on his bench, as if squashing a bug. "I could have shown you their exact progress on my copy of the map! It details my plans for getting the mechanical spider to a certain spiritual nexus in the swamp, and how to it will deal with opposition from either Fire Nation or rebel forces. That's it. Once that is completed, I will be happy to honor my agreement with the Avatar and begin freeing the colonies."

Sokka leaned back and tried to look as shrewd as possible with chains wrapped around him. "And what's the point? Assuming you're telling the truth, why are you doing it?"

Iroh shook his head. "I don't even know that I'll have to! It's a contingency, in case no other efforts to save Lu Ten succeed. I wouldn't even have deployed the spider, yet, if the Avatar hadn't announced his intention to come after me here. I need to be prepared in case he brings matters to a head."

"Right, sure, but let's go back to what you're actually hoping to accomplish."

"I wish Lian were here to fully explain, but essentially I want to freeze the spiritual energies passing through that nexus in the swamp. Then I can continue working to help Lu Ten at my leisure, although of course I would still want to minimize his time spent suffering." Iroh smiled, and he lowered his voice as if imparting a great secret. "I even suspect that the action might help restore balance to the world, to help undo some of the damage caused by the ashlands. Not bad, eh?"

Huh.

Sokka remembered how the little model of the platinum spider had been perched on the miniature tree with its needle legs sunk into the trunk. Freeze the energies, huh? That- it kind of made sense. If platinum disrupted spirit-mojo, then some precisely placed needles could disrupt an existing flow and knot it up. But a lot of trial and error would be needed, and- slush, all those other trees. An entire laboratory full of them. There had been a lot trial and error. He recalled the chalk markings on the trunk of the scale model of the swamp tree. They'd worked out the calculations, and tried them on the closest they could get to the real thing.

So that part made a kind of sense, or at least matched what Sokka had been shown.

But where was the catch?

Of course, if anyone with an army took exception to Iroh holding onto that swamp, then his time would still be limited to however long he could protect his big spider machine. Was that it? He wouldn't let go of the colonies until his son was cured, because he needed to be able to secure his swamp? But surely fixing the ashlands - or at least de-haunting them or whatever - was worth trading away some useless swampland. In terms of recovered territory, the Earth Kingdom would be gaining land through the trade. Unless the ashland thing was more of a remote possibility than Iroh was hinting?

Sokka decided to circle back to the beginning. "So what does a swamp on the other side of the world have to do with your son?"

Iroh grinned. It was not a nice grin. "And how much do you know about the Spiritual Balance of the world?"

Sokka sat up as straight as he could. "Lots. I spiritually balance all the time since I started traveling
with Aang."

As bluffs go, it probably wasn't his best.

Iroh's golden eyes had the look of a wolf that had just found its dinner. "Then surely you'll
understand what I mean when I say that the nature of this nexus hangs over us all."

Yeah, surely.

"But what-"

The crawler shuddered to a stop.

"Ah, we're here." Iroh stood up. "Let's hope I can stop the Avatar from doing something that will
force me to destroy him."

"Yeah," Sokka sighed as the guard next to him took hold of his chains, "let's."

Mai did a slow walk around Aang's body where it was silently maintaining a lotus position on the icy
floor of the cavern.

She didn't really feel the need to move right now, despite how the cold managed to chill her bones
even through her thick parka. But she knew that people got a little freaked out when she spun a knife
in a hand and otherwise stayed as still as a statue, and she didn't want to disturb her allies. (For now.)
Aang had already frightened them a bit with this trick, and even Mai wasn't entirely comfortable with
it, yet. Sure, it had helped her to rescue her little brother from Iroh's clutches, but she just wasn't used
to people exiting their bodies and leaving them behind like dirty clothes.

Mai continued her circle around Aang's body, letting her gaze travel over the cavern. It was no
different from the others they'd passed through over the last hour, except that Aang was sure that
Iroh's mysterious Bastion fortress was above this one, a fortress that supposedly had a garden and a
prince at its center. "I keep hearing about this Spirit 'Garden' or 'Oasis.' What kind of place, exactly,
should I be expecting?"

Across the cavern, next to where Appa was resting, Rafa and his Waterbender warriors were
chewing some jerky. Rafa swallowed and shrugged. "Hard to say. The Chief and his most trusted
advisors were the only ones allowed in. When Iroh killed Chief Arnook, the others were imprisoned
and never seen again. I just know that it's a sacred place, and it is the duty of the Northern Water
Tribe to protect it. It's why we're here at the North Pole. It's one of the most important places in the
material world."

Katara petted Appa as she said, "Is that how Iroh has kept the Northern Tribe under his control? By
threatening the Oasis?"

Rafa spat on the icy ground. "He holds us hostage with our own duty. He killed our Chief and
imprisons our Princess, but we would still fight against that. The Oasis, though? We may not know
what is there, but none of us would dare risk it. That's what fuels the Dreamcatchers' secrecy. Hn,
until now."

"You don't say." Mai didn't much care about the political significance of the Oasis. She just wanted
to know if she'd have room to throw her knives.

Appa let out a groan of greeting, and there was a glow of blue light from above them all, reflected by
the ice that covered so much of the cavern rock around them. Aang's-
-Aang’s essence descended from out of the ceiling and floated down into his body.

Then he opened his eyes, apparently whole once again. "We were right, the fortress is directly above us."

Across the cavern, Rafa and his Waterbender warriors swallowed the last of their and jumped to their feet. Katara gave Appa one last pat and hurried over.

Mai just stood still. She’d already been prepared for a fight. "What are we looking at?"

Aang looked over at Rafa. "You were right. It's a Fire Nation fortress, but it's layered. There's a series of walls, and the only way through them is mechanical doors. And at the center is a last layer of platinum that I couldn’t get through."

Rafa nodded. "That's how it was built. I don't know if the platinum was at the center from the beginning, but the Bastion started as a little fort around the garden. They just kept building shell upon shell until it covered the entire cliffside, including the waterfall. But thanks to you, we can bypass all those layers."

Katara straightened the waterskins she had strapped over her parka. "Did anyone see you, Aang? Er-see your spirit self?"

Aang’s lip twitched, and it was clear to Mai that he wanted to laugh but was trying to seem professional. "A few. I accidentally scared them, and they set off some alarms."

Mai sighed. "So they know we're coming."

"But they knew that anyway," Rafa said. "And they don’t know exactly how. So let's show them."

"But remember!" Aang lifted his staff and gave it a quick twirl. "We're not here to fight the whole fortress. We push through to the center as fast as we can, get to Prince Lu Ten and the Spirit Oasis, and find out what's going on. We're doing this to get our friends back and force Iroh to deal with us honestly."

Katara nodded. "We're ready."

Mai pulled the hood of her parka back to expose her head. It was cold, but she'd need her full range of vision. "Ready, I guess."

Rafa and his Waterbenders arranged themselves into formation. "Ready! For the Tribe!"

Aang looked over to Appa. "We're going now, buddy. Thanks to helping us get this far. Go back the way we came, swim back up to the surface, and you know where to meet the rest of the Dreamcatchers. We're going to be counting on you."

He waited for Appa's grunt of acknowledgement, and then jumped straight up at the ceiling and smashed through the rock.

Katara went into action immediately, liquefying the ice around her and throwing the water right where Aang had just been. It absorbed the falling rubble and then froze into a spiral that she rode up through the hole in the ceiling. Rafa's Waterbenders followed, expanding and stabilizing the ice into something like a staircase. Mai put aside her distaste for ice (there was just no getting away from it, lately) and ran up after them. She felt her boots slip on one of the steps, but Rafa was right behind
her and a quick hand on her back kept her up and moving into the dark of the hole in the ceiling.

Stuck behind all the Waterbenders, she didn't get to see what Aang's Earthbending was doing to the metal floor of the fortress, but she did hear it. Rock pressed against steel, and it sounded like Iroh would have to completely replace the plates. Good.

The dark and the ice came to an end, and the Waterbenders ahead of her were vaulting up into a hallway lit by the red gas lanterns that the Fire Nation liked so much. Mai jumped up after them and plucked a pair of razor disks from within the sleeves. She already had the disks ready to throw before her boots touched the floor, and she scanned for threats in the dim light. She saw thin pipes and insulated wiring and caged lamps and bolted air vents—all the typical decor that characterized fortresses and warships, but no enemies. Aang had picked his spot well. But then, he'd already had a look at it.

The only odd thing was the sunken panels in the walls that might have been covers of some kind, features Mai hadn't seen anywhere else. They weren't sliding open and unleashing any attack, so she pushed them back into the part of her perception that kept track of passive threats.

The alarms Aang mentioned—ringing, electrical in sound—echoed through the hallway.

"This way," he said. He pointed his staff down the hallway, and the stale, cold air picked up in a breeze the followed him as he started to run. Mai ran along with him, Katara, and the Dreamcatchers, trying to shoulder her way to the front so that she could more easily protect Aang, now that she could trust her footing on proper metal floors.

She heard the soldiers before she saw them, the sound of clanking boots ahead, but she wasn't yet at the front of the line. Aang could probably handle them, and there was no reason any of the others in the group couldn't help out, but—well—

Mai vaulted to her left, kicked off the wall, hooked her arm around one of the pipe-lines running overhead, and threw her razor disks. They sped ahead into the blood-colored murk—

—twin cries of surprise were followed immediately by the sound of armor crashing into a wall—

—and Mai swung herself to land right next to Aang. "Hey."

He smiled at her, his eyes shining even in the dim light, as they ran past a pair of guards pinned to the wall by a razor disk each stuck in their scarfs. "Hey! Nice shot."

"Of course." They came up on a doorway that someone was trying to close on them. "Yours."

Aang didn't slow as he swung his staff, sending a burst of wind at the door. It whipped back the other way, crashing into whoever was trying to close it. They passed through, finding another Fire Nation soldier struggling to his feet. Rafa fell on that guy with his spear, and the rest of them continued running—

—into a chamber with grated flooring and a high ceiling, tall enough that the alarms echoed back onto themselves to create an endless din. The red light of the lamps struggled to illuminate the space, leaving swaths of shadow, but Mai's eyes were drawn to the series of walkways snaking across the space above. They shook and the clanked with the impact of more boots, heralding the arrival of additional soldiers. Firebenders emerged from the shadows to send fireballs down to the group, but Katara and the Waterbenders intercepted them with streams of water that became bursts of steam.

More soldiers surged out onto the looming walkways from the darkness. It was a real party up there.
Mai kept pace with Aang as they ran on. Soldiers with spears rushed across their own floor to meet them, but Aang could manage those with his Airbending before they even got close. Mai focused her attention upward, since the Waterbenders would eventually run out of their element. She had a limited supply of her own element (Glistening Death, a fundamental force in the universe), so maybe they could help each other. Mai raised her arms and shot a pair of bolts from her wrist-launchers up through the grated walkway at a cluster of Firebenders. One of them cried out and tripped over a bolt, while another cried out and fell onto his face from the bolt that had pierced through his boot, and a bunch behind them cried out and proceeded to trip over the first two. Cry, cry, cry.

It was a nice effect. As Aang led them past the spearmen he'd wiped the floor with towards an opening into yet another hallway, Mai produced a pair of razor disks that she could curve around to the top of the walkway-

-and with a grind of machinery, panels beneath the latticed flooring slid aside to reveal a red glow-

-Katara shrieked and cried, "No, no, no, no, not this not again-

-and Mai was nearly knocked off her feet by a blast of hot air coming from below-

-and then they all reached the next hallway and hurried around the first to corner to escape the suffocating heat. Aang slowed and came to a stop, looking back at the group with wide eyes. "Is everyone okay?"

Mai didn't bother answering him, instead scanning for threats. It seemed clear, but more soldiers would be here soon, and those alarms were still going. "We need to-

"They have a drying engine," Katara hissed. "Just like at Crescent Island!"

"What?" Rafa peeked his head back around the corner. "What is a drying engine?"

"They powered it with lava," Katara continued as if she hadn't heard him. "They must be doing something else here, but- but- our supply of water is going to run out a lot quicker. And- and we'll get tired. And weaker. And-

"Firebenders are on their way," Rafa barked. "We need to move."

But Katara hesitated, and Aang in turn hesitated out of worry for her.

Mai rolled her eyes, grabbed Katara by her parka and Aang by his robes, and shoved them both into motion. Then she ran, too. The Dreamcatchers moved right along with them.

"I- I think the platinum wall is around the next corner," Aang said. "But there's a guard station right-

A section of the wall opened to reveal a door, and a dozen swordsmen spilled out to block the path.

"-there," Aang finished.

The group skidded to a stop.

And then the sunken panels in the walls, the weird things Mai couldn't identify that ran up and down the whole hallway, whined with the sound of gears and slid away to reveal glowing hot metal that radiated dry heat.

Ah.

Iroh was really worried about Waterbenders getting in here. He hadn't expected an Earthbender to
come up through the floor, but it might not matter if they if they got stopped here.

Well, Mai wasn't at all inconvenienced by a little dry heat. In fact, it was her preferred climate. She quickly unfastened her parka and threw it to the floor. Then she reached into her loose, flowing sleeves and filled her hands with as many sharp, intimidating pieces of metal as she could fit between her steady fingers.

She had time to give a contented smile to Aang before she dashed towards the dozen swordsmen and filled the air with blades.

The swordsmen actually faltered against her charge, intimidated by a teenage girl with a thing for knives, but then, they had good reason. They were fighting with dao blades, big chopping swords that were the preferred weapon of regular soldiers. Mai usually operated best at a distance, but in these cramped quarters, in the middle of a group of soldiers who hadn't taken the time to properly space themselves out, knives were the ideal weapon. They were small, and quick, and in the hands of someone who knew what they were doing, they could strike where armor couldn't cover.

Mai knew what she was doing.

She had taken down half of the swordsmen with debilitating and bleeding injuries when Aang and Katara joined her. The other half went down even quicker.

But that didn't help at all with the Firebenders who came up from the other end of the hallway. Mai heard Rafa's cry of pain first, and turned to find his Dreamcatchers struggling. They were fighting well, but even she could see how each waterwhip, each thrown ice-shard, each shielding splash diminished the water supply that each one was working with. Rafa and his spear might be the last man standing, among the good guys. There would be about twenty men standing on the other side but that point, judging from the sounds of boots echoing down the hall.

Mai could see the reinforcements' shadows stretching into view, extended to giant proportions by the red glow coming from that big room with the walkways and burning floor.

Slushing ash.

Mai might be able to fight all these soldiers, but that sounded dreadfully inefficient. When faced with a tricky knot, she preferred to go ahead and cut it. Actually, that was her solution for most problems.

So she grabbed Aang and Katara and yanked them along down the hallway. If they could get to Lu Ten, they would automatically win.

It was the surprise that enabled Mai to get her friends to the next turn without them resisting, and then they rounded the corner to nearly collide with a trio of Firebenders. Katara threw a wave of water that washed all three into the nearest wall, and the chilly breath that followed froze them in place. But the glowing panels were here, too, and Mai hoped that the ice would last long enough for them to-

"This is the door," Aang said.

Oh. Good.

Mai turned to see that it wasn't an impressive door at all, although it was unique. It was circular, just a bit taller than her, and covered by a spiral metal shutter. Platinum, of course. Even in this red light, it gleamed differently than other metals.

Katara shook her head. "I don't know how to get that open."
Mai didn't either. "I forgot my blasting jelly at home."

But Aang skipped forward. "I have this. I've been thinking about it since I did my spirit-exploring, and—well, it's faster to show you." He landed right in front of the door in an arrow stance that he used to shift his body back and forth, extending one leg even as he bent the other. He moved his arms with his body, almost as if he was pulling a cord, and—

—and the big shutter shook as air began leaking out through the metal slats.

Aang kept it up, speeding his movements up, and the big door rattled as if being battered by a storm.

It was impressive, but Mai doubted that Iroh had built a door that could be knocked over by a wind, no matter how strong.

But Aang was apparently more clever than her. He suddenly snapped forward, making a shoving motion that he transitioned into the circular hand motions he used to create his Air Scooter—

—and a ball of air ballooned into being at the center of spiral shutter, pushing the slats apart to create an opening into what seemed like a royal garden lit by starlight as something mechanical emitted a sharp angry buzz—

"Go," Aang cried.

Mai made a flying leap, passed through a tornado, and landed on soft, sweet-smelling grass.

Okay.

She rose and turned back for her friends—

—and saw one of the Firebenders iced to the hallway wall smash through the weakened ice to throw a fireball at Katara—

—who shoved Aang—

—who landed on Mai, ruining the shot with the needle she'd been lining up—

—and the airball died—

—and the door slammed shut.

For the first time in what seemed like forever, Mai couldn't hear any alarms.

Aang leaped up and over to the door, launching back into the Airbending form he'd just been using on the other side. Mai could feel the wind he was working up, but this time, the door didn't so much as twitch.

"That probably won't work again," a familiar voice said. "If you trip the tampering detector, a mechanical lock activates that can only be removed by a key Dad has."

That voice—

Mai got to her feet and turned.

She was in a garden, all right, but one that somehow existed in a shell of platinum. They were at the bottom of a shaft of some kind, faint light coming from somewhere above, but here in this dark, isolated metal space there was grass and a puddle that looked like a koi pond and a wooden spirit
gate and lush bushes covered in flowers and berries. The Oasis.

And in a plush chair right next to the koi pond was a man in the dress uniform of a Fire Navy commander and a precise topknot with a golden crown nestled into it.

The man - a man Mai recognized - stood up and smiled. It was a smile she knew well, a smile of reassurance and confidence. He wanted the person he was smiling at to feel okay, and he had no fear that the situation at hand was anything but okay.

He smiled that way at her when he was first introduced as the man she was lawfully bound to marry. That betrothal was broken, now, but it was still the same smile. And the same man.

Fire Prince Lu Ten.

"Hello," he said, bowing low at the waist. "I recognize Mai. You've grown older, but you still very much look like you, if you take my meaning." He lifted his head for a moment, eyes shifting over to Aang, and fell to his knees to push his forehead against the grassy ground. "And you must be the Avatar. It is an honor to welcome you into my home, such as it is."

Mai looked around. This had to be the Spirit Oasis, right? "About that-"

"Yes, it's quite a story," he interrupted her, rising to his feet again. His smile quirked into something bitter, and his brow drew together. "But it all comes down to one fact, and it has me very worried. I'm actually hoping for your help with it. You see- well-"

"I'm afraid my father has taken an odd turn."

TO BE CONTINUED
The Crown Prince

Chapter Summary

While everyone else hears about what's really going on, Aang and Mai get the full experience.

The Crown Prince

Katara's blood was thundering in her veins.

It wasn't just the exertion, not just the weariness of battle. It was the taste in the air, that sharp flavor of metal not quite at its melting point. It was the oppressive blanket of dryness that made her body twice as heavy. It was the way those sensations put her back in a cage that would always be in her memory, a cage that had taken away a decade of her life. It made her heart pound and her breath grow shallow and her blood thunder-

But blood wasn't really the problem. Water was what truly had her worried, or rather the lack of it. As she fought back against the Firebenders and spear-fighters and swordsmen, deep in this fortress of metal and heat, the arid air of the Bastion's deepest passages was sucking the moisture from her waterwhips and skin and eyes and tongue.

But if she didn't solve that problem, then she'd be back to worrying about blood. Specifically, the Fire Nation spilling hers all over the place as they took her life away from her.

Took her life away again. Permanently, this time. She knew she wouldn't simply be locked up, not for this.

At least she had people fighting with her. Here, in the heart of the fortress called 'the Bastion,' the rebel Dreamcatchers stood at her side. To her left, burly Tulok raised his hands to create another shield of water, half it ice thanks to nimble Silla's work behind them, and it did the job of blocking the latest wave of fireballs. But the impacts created bursts of steam that were slurped up by the dry air, splattered the water into droplets that never got a chance to land anywhere. The Bastion was a lesser version of the Dryness Engine that had kept her captive on Crescent Island for her whole childhood, but it was still effective. Katara and the others were running out of water. And with the alarms echoing through the metal halls, the army here wasn't running out of soldiers to throw into the fray.

But Katara wasn't going to give up. Aang had reached the inner sanctum where Iroh's son was supposed to be, and Mai had gone with them. She believed in those two.

They had helped her brother find and rescue her, even though they had no practical reason to. She believed in them so much she was willing to die for their cause.

But she would like to stay alive, if possible.

Rafa's gravelly voice rang out with, "Fall back! Fall back to the door!"

The Dreamcatcher Waterbenders responded instantly to their leader, and Katara followed them back
down the hallway to the next - and the last - corner. Fire and spears and even a few arrows nipped at their heels. Once they turned the corner, they had the cover they needed to catch their breath and prepare another defense, but no path of escape. The hallway here led straight to a wall and a spiral-shutter door that they couldn't get open. Aang and Mai had gone through that door, maybe a minute ago, or maybe it was a thousand years, but there was no way to follow them, now.

Rafa strode past them, a machete in each hand and a grim look on his gray-bearded face, to peek around the corner. "The soldiers are realizing that we're not coming out again." He turned back to look at them. "Water supply?"

Katara corked her last waterskin before shaking it. "I have one minute's worth of fighting left and I'm going to need to be very accurate." She leaned against the wall next to her, between glowing red panels that were cooking the air, wincing at the heat but needing to not be standing for a moment.

"Same," said Tarkik. Yuka, Tulok, and the others gave similar reports. Silla added, "I regret going to the bathroom before heading out on this mission. Then at least we'd have-"

"Don't care," Rafa grunted. "Unless the Avatar saves us, this is our last stand."

Katara felt tears welling in her eyes, but she squeezed them shut to preserve the moisture. She wished Sokka and Ty Lee were here. This was all to rescue them, and maybe save the world from Fire Lord Iroh if things went well. Would she even live to see if it succeeded?

Her blood thundered in her veins.

And in that thunder was the whisper of an answer. A way to survive.

A way to win.

"Cover me for a few seconds." She tossed her waterskin to Tarkik and stretched her arms. "Then I'll hold the hallway for us."

Everyone stared at her. Rafa said, "You found something? A trick?"

Katara shook her head. "No trick. It's- it's something I was talking about with Yugoda. I know a way to hold back the soldiers. But I need a little time to concentrate. Can you manage?"

Rafa looked at her. Then he snorted. "You remind me of my sister Misu. When she sets her mind to something- Yes, Katara of the South. We can give you your time."

"I am honored by your faith." Katara brought her hands together and bowed. "Thank you."

Rafa turned to the others. "Get your water ready. The hotheads are closing in. We wait, I take out the scouts, and then you all bring the last of the water. Ready?"

The Dreamcatchers all raised their fists and roared.

Katara raised her arms with them, but her mind was already drifting away from this horrible place, away from the heat that choked the metal halls. She was reaching out and up, to the full moon that was shining down on the North Pole. She had seen it when their group had flown over the city on Appa, before heading underground to infiltrate the Bastion. She had used its power to push the ocean out of the way for Aang's Earthbending, had let it help her lift and push and pull and flow.

Now she would need that power for something else.
Katara heard the vague din of battle start up again, but she was still focused on the moon. She could feel its draw, just as she could feel her blood thundering in her veins. It was almost like the moon's influence was a part of her. She had joined with it.

And it would now let her join with all those Fire Nation soldiers trying to kill her.

She shrugged off her parka and stepped out around the corner. Her boot bumped against a body, an armored figure leaking blood from wounds the width of a Water Tribe machete. She was sad at the loss of life, but her attention was captured by the blood.

She could feel her blood within her, and this blood on the floor.

And she could feel the networks of blood flowing amidst the Firebenders massing to attack her allies.

Katara stepped out past the line of the Dreamcatchers, reaching out as though beckoning all that blood toward her-

-and she didn't need to open her eyes to know that the Firebenders had suddenly stopped, their limbs no longer obeying them. But it wasn't their limbs, not really. It was the flowing blood within them that refused to move. Their muscles tightened against it, the veins and arteries shivered, the meat of the bodies struggled to exert control, but the blood resisted. The blood was Katara's.

So she used it.

She swung her arms to one side, shoving the blood - and with it the bodies of the group of Firebenders - in the same direction to crash into the wall. Then she swung to the other side, arms loose and curled, slamming the Firebenders into the other wall. She let them drop, and they did so, no longer even trying to stand.

That was good. If they didn't try to stand, she wouldn't try to do worse to them.

The wave of soldiers behind the fallen were now exposed, and Katara opened her eyes stare at them, the blue eyes of the little girl their nation had tried to lock away forever. They were all staring back at her.

And they all retreated.

Katara watched them flee down the hallway, into the darker innards of the Bastion. When was sure that they weren't coming back any time soon, she turned to see if the Dreamcatchers were all right, and saw that the spilled blood, the liquid that had leaked from the soldier Rafa killed, had formed concentric rings around her on the floor.

Rafa and the Dreamcatcher Waterbenders were staring at her the same as the soldiers who had retreated.

She nodded an acknowledgement of their fear. "I hate doing this, but I can hold the hallway. Please see if you can get us through that door. I don't know what Aang and Mai are facing in there, and I'm worried it's something worse than what's out here."

She wasn't sure if she meant the soldiers or herself.

Aang stood in the Spirit Oasis of the North Pole, and knew that he had felt something like this before.
When he had returned to the Southern Air Temple a hundred and one years after running away, he found the place abandoned and dusty and dead, but still the same temple that was part of his heart. It had once been a place of peace and tranquility, a place for cultivating balance, with the layout of the paths and shape of the buildings designed to help people slip free of the shackles of the material world and get in touch with something greater. But over that, like a layer of dust, had been a wrongness, a rot that existed beyond the physical senses.

Aang found, a hundred and one years after his people were all murdered by the Fire Nation, that those unjust deaths had corrupted their resting place. The feeling had poisoned the whole experience of his return home.

Poisoned it even before the fall of night brought the walking corpses of his people to terrorize him and his friends.

So he wasn't feeling very good about this Spirit Oasis, even if it was a lot warmer than the rest of the North Pole.

With that in mind, Aang looked at the Fire Nation man in the Navy uniform with the gold crown in his top-knot. "You're Prince Lu Ten."

A smile and a nod met his non-question, although the good cheer didn't quite reach Lu Ten's eyes. "I hope you weren't expecting to find someone else down here. This is awkward enough already."

"You have no idea," Mai mumbled.

Aang chose to ignore the fact that Mai was betrothed to Lu Ten at one point in their shared history. "It's fine, we came to see you. Uh, Fire Lord Iroh didn't make it easy, but- um, you said he's been odd?"

Lu Ten began ambling around the koi pond at the center of the garden, leaving his chair - and a small pile of books next to it - standing out oddly. It was a beautiful place, an island of fluffy grass bordered by leafy bushes and even the occasional smooth white stone. It could have been a spot anywhere in the Earth Kingdom but for the Spirit Gate just behind the koi pond with the ancient character for Elemental Water on its crest.

Aang would have thought this place a little piece of the Spirit World left behind, were it not for the curved walls of platinum that enclosed it and rose up into darkness. Something like starlight twinkled down to light the space, not the harsh red lantern light of the rest of the Bastion.

"My father means well, I'm sure." Lu Ten looked down at the pair of koi - one black with a white spot on its head, the other white with a black spot - that circled each other in the pond. "He- he thinks I'm sick, and he loves me very much. He just wants me to be well." He looked up, and his eyes met Aang's. "But he's going about it the wrong way."

Aang sighed with relief. "Yes, he is. He's planning to hurt people, and we need to find a way to stop the fighting."

"I'm so glad we're on the same page." Lu Ten's face stretched with a wide grin. "I'll do whatever I can to help you, but first we're going to have to find a way out of this place."

Aang began looking around. The door he'd come in through was shut tight with mechanical strength, and according to Lu Ten, a bolt had been activated to keep him from using his Airbending to force it open again. The platinum walls were smooth and thick, the plates welded together until they were one. Fresh air was coming down from somewhere above, but he'd left his glider outside in the
hallway with Katara and the Dreamcatchers. Maybe he could jump and float his way up to a perch where he could find a vent?

As an Airbender, he also had very good hearing, and he thought he detected something rumbling or roaring through the platinum walls. Some machinery, maybe?

He was still thinking it all over when Mai said, "So why are you locked up in here? Iroh said you're sick."

"Oh, yeah!" Aang snapped his fingers at the reminder. "This place feels kind of weird, as nice as it looks, and I'm not sure it's good to be here for very long. And then there's the platinum walls. What's with that?"

Lu Ten meandered away from the koi pond, to one of the two pillars of the Spirit Gate, and raised his hands to touch it. His posture slumped. "Well, my betrothed is right. I am sick. Don't worry, you can't catch it." He looked over at Aang, and for a moment, there was a twinkle in his eye, but then the weariness returned. "My father thinks this place is good for me, but-" He turned to Mai, making an obvious effort to smile. "He thought us marrying would be good for me, too."

Aang forced a laugh out. "Well, Mai said that Iroh broke the betrothal, so, sorry about that."

Her eyes flickered to Aang, and he thought she might have been scowling a little. Did she not want the betrothal broken? But she said, "Aang's right. Shortly after the North Pole fell, Iroh sent word that the wedding was off."

Rather than looking upset, Lu Ten's smile finally reached his eyes, and he stood a little straighter and chuckled. "That must have been a relief for you. I tried to make you comfortable at our meetings, but you were just ten years old! When Father conquered the North, you must have been- barely thirteen? I had a long wait for you to be anything but a child to try to protect. A little sister who would become a wife, maybe, just like in the stories. Although, you were never quite like the little girls in the stories, were you?"

"I was eleven and fourteen. I'm a year older than Azula." Mai's face never changed, the whole time he was speaking, and her hands were folded together in her sleeves. "And I never needed your protection."

Aang wondered what Mai had looked like back then, at eleven. She seemed so grown-up now, even more than Sokka, who was the same age. Imagining her as a little girl was hard.

Aang's thoughts were brought back to the present when Lu Ten shuddered, moaned, and collapsed to his knees against the pillar. Aang immediately jumped over the koi pond on a breeze to catch the prince before he could tumble. "Are you okay?"


Aang frowned. Lu Ten didn't seem emaciated at all. "Um, I think the Dreamcatchers have some jerky, if we get out of here. I didn't bring food."

"I know you didn't." Lu Ten looked up at him, and a wild smile twisted his face for a moment before settling into a grimace again. "I'm sorry. I- I just need a moment. If only I could get out of here."

Aang looked up again, into the darkness above the garden. "I was thinking I could see if there's an air vent up there we can get out of. But that's going to be tricky, especially with you and Mai. You don't know of anything like that down here, do you?"
Lu Ten blinked. "Why not just use your Avatar power to break through the walls? There's earth and water and air here. And we carry Fire in our hearts at all times."

"Yeah, about that-" Aang looked around the garden, at this place that should be so tranquil and in harmony with his spirit. "I can't reach the Avatar State while I'm here. There's something- something wrong about this place. The air is muddy. It'd be worse than trying to meditate while someone is chatting right behind me."

"Oh, is that all? Well, this isn't just a garden. It's nice enough, but the thing to really pay attention to is the koi pond. Surely you know of the positive influence that koi fish can invoke?" He pulled himself up and stumbled over to his chair, practically falling into it, but looking more comfortable.

Mai leaned over the koi pond. "Those are some funny-looking fish. But unless they do tricks, I'm not getting it."

Lu Ten abruptly stood up from the chair and motioned theatrically at the pond. "Please, show some respect. You are in the presence of the Moon and the Ocean Spirits themselves."

The *Moon* and the *Ocean*?!

Aang looked down into the pond, at the black and white fish circling each other endlessly.

Here?

With Lu Ten?

Why?

Sokka was tired of being a prisoner.

Sometimes, it seemed like he spent most of his adventures in the custody of one tyrannical entity or another. But at least he was moving up in the world. A couple of years ago, he was just another resident of the Fire Nation's South Pole labor camp. Now, he was the personal chained-up prisoner of the Fire Lord, and was being dragged around to see all kinds of interesting things, like monster-heads mounted on freaky electric machinery, and mechanical spiders made of platinum, and magic trees grown from clippings of ghost vines.

(His autobiography was going to be *amazing*, if he lived long enough to write it.)

A pair of Royal Fire Crimson Guards marched him out of the snowcrawler that had brought them all from the Spirit Forest Laboratory to- wherever this was? It obviously wasn't the Northern Water Tribe city, not in the light of the full moon, not even with a little snowfall to obscure things.

Sokka made himself look up past Fire Lord Iroh to find a fortress in the shape of a warship looming over them. It was pretty impressive, as far as these things went- not quite a mile-deep armor-plated sinkhole, but still showing some unique style. He wondered why it had been made to resemble a ship, unless- perhaps it really was a ship? Somehow moved up here to serve as a fortress? Interesting idea. Waterbenders could manage it, and for some reason Iroh had command of quite a few.

And, apparently, not just Waterbenders. A Water Tribe man in a Fire Navy uniform and oversized glasses was scurrying through the moonlit snow to meet them. "Fire Lord Iroh! They're in the bottom level! We're closing in and will have them captured soon, but- but the Oasis Lock activated! I- that is, we think one or more of them might have-"
"Lu Ten," Iroh hissed, the heat in his words almost enough to fight off the wind. "You let them get to Lu Ten?! They fought through this whole fortress?! I made you Chief, Maliq, so you could protect my son!"

'Chief' Maliq, in his pressed Fire Navy uniform, dropped to his knees in the snow and kowtowed. "I apologize, my lord! But the- uh, the Avatar did not fight through the fortress. It is still as secure as designed! But- well, it was conceptualized to keep my Tribemates out, and any Fire Nation defectors. The Avatar- he, ah, is an Earthbender, which was outside the design parameters-"

"Shut up." Iroh's voice had gone cold. "Get me down there. If the Avatar has accessed my son's room-"

"Then," Sokka interrupted, "it's time to open negotiations. We can talk while we walk."

Iroh made a sound like glaciers scraping together and turned to regard him, but it was Maliq who managed to speak first, saying, "You're a prisoner."

Sokka shrugged in his chains. "Yes, my release is going to be one of the terms of your surrender. Also, the lives of my sister and Aang and Mai and anyone else down there and also I think you have Ty Lee stashed somewhere? Yeah, all of that and my release in exchange for Lu Ten's life. For a start."

Iroh covered his face with his hands and rubbed at his eyes.

Maliq snorted and stood back up. "You're bluffing. The Avatar is a child and an Air Nomad! He wouldn't hurt anyone like that."

"No." Sokka smiled. "But Mai would. She's mean. And she carries knives everywhere. Including the bathroom. That's confirmed. And then there's my sister, who the Fire Nation imprisoned for a decade, and she's still working through some issues, if you get me. Never mind whatever other rebels they've managed to scrape together while I've been hanging out with Fire Lord Spooky, here."

Maliq opened his mouth to say something, but then stopped and looked at Iroh. Sokka followed his gaze to the Fire Lord.

Iroh had revealed his face again, and he had the same expression that Gran-Gran brought out when she was less than impressed with a child's reasoning. "An admirable attempt, Sokka, but you're going to help me for nothing in return."

Sokka straightened his back, projecting as much confidence as he could fake. "You can't threaten me. I'm expendable. And also none of my friends know where I am, so you can't threaten them with me, either. Ha!"

Iroh shook his head. "We don't have time for this! I'm not threatening you. I'm offering to help you."

What? "What?"

Iroh looked at him - really met his gaze- and Sokka was struck by how old and tired the Fire Lord's eyes seemed. "I am worried for my son, but not for what the Avatar is going to do to him. Aang is the one in danger from Lu Ten."

What?! "What?!"

Iroh motioned, and the Royal Fire Crimson Jerk Guards pushed Sokka along towards the fortress.
Sokka didn’t resist. It all fit together too neatly. "You have not been doing nearly as much revealing as you could have been, you know."

"Well, there's been so much to tell, and so little time." Spotlight projected from somewhere on the fortress's- roof? Main deck? The spotlights converged on Sokka and Iroh as they approached the gate built into what seemed to be side hull of the ship-

And then big glowing monsters burst out of the snow.

They popped up like eel-sharks leaping for albatrosses, their bodies expanding in the air from something like a fish shape to hulks with arms and legs- although they didn't apparently feel the need to make all the limbs match. Sokka glimpsed claws and tentacles and feet and fists, and always a face like a catfish with whiskers that wafted independent of the creatures' motion. The things were huge, which was weird because the snow here wasn't even as deep as Sokka's knees, but if they could change their limbs then maybe they could alter their size at will, too.

He groaned as the Royal Fire Crimson Stupid Jerk Guards shoved him into Maliq's arms. "This is why you shouldn't mess with spirit stuff! Someone always gets eaten in the end!"

The guards stepped forward punched fire out as the monsters came in at them. Sokka angled his head to try to see the fight as Maliq yanked him along towards the fortress, but all he saw was flashes of flame and scatterings of snow and those glowing monsters moving like darting fish and the one of the guards getting knocked down by a lashing from a back limb black limbs. Somewhere ahead a gong was being rung. The spotlights flashed around, chasing the monsters-

And then the snowy air itself materialized an arm that punched Maliq in the face and pulled Sokka away.

It took him a moment to realize that he wasn’t being kidnapped by yet another kind of spirit, but rather liberated by a person wearing white furs and cloaks to obscure their shape and blend into the snow. It took another moment to notice that there were more of the white-clad interlopers with spears and machetes. They moved in towards Iroh, but he held them back with a snapping of his arms and a wave of flame.

Sokka dug his heals into the snow to keep his 'rescuer' from carting him around just like the Royal Fire Crimson Stupid Jerks had been doing. "Hold on, who are you people now? This is getting too complex too quickly!"

The rescuer pulled a hood and scarf away to reveal Hahn, the guy who Aang had recruited to guide them to the North Pole. "Sohkka! It's me! I'm rescuing you. Do you have the key to the chains?"

Sokka blinked. "Why would I have the key to the chains? I'm a prisoner!"

"Not anymore!" Hahn grinned and raised his chin as though summoning applause. "I rescued you, like a true Water Tribe Warrior!"

Is this what Sokka sounded like when he tried to remind his friends of his considerable competence? Wow. He'd have to remember to tone that down.

He looked back at his former captors to find the last of the guards being hammered into the snow by the monsters, who turned their attention to the fortress. Fireballs arced down towards the monsters, but giant catfish with limbs apparently didn't have a problem moving around on land. Meanwhile, Iroh was still holding half a dozen- no, it looked like there might be a full dozen, maybe more (the
night and the snow made it really hard to see these guys in their camouflage) of Sokka's rescuers without so much as shifting his feet. Somehow, there was just always an arc of fire wherever one of the white-clad warriors tried to get in close.

The flames died down for a moment, and the Fire Lord stood with his robes whipping in the winds and his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "We don't," he growled, "have time for this!"

The weird thing?

Iroh was right. They didn't. Katara was somewhere else, fighting for her life. Aang was probably having some kind of trouble with Lu Ten. Even if they killed Iroh right now, the world might be saved, but what about everyone else?

"I think," Sokka began to say-

And then a bright light from a new source flicked on to blind Sokka and another snowcrawler arrived on the scene spitting fireballs out of its passenger-compartment door.

Oh, come on.

The newly arrived snowcrawler came to a stop, and Zhao of all people ran out leading a dozen Firebenders and shouting, "Defend the Fire Lord!"

Hahn gave Sokka a shove. "Go with Yugoda! We're going to liberate my Tribe today, one way or another!" He raised a club and rushed at Zhao's troops, along with some of the other snow-camo rebels.

Before Sokka could ask who 'Yugoda' was supposed to be, another set of hands settled on his shoulder, and Sokka turned to find an old woman in white (of course) with Momo perched on her shoulders smiling at him. "You must be Katara's brother. Come along and let's see if I can't freeze these chains so that they'll break."

Monsters attacked Firebenders.

Firebenders attacked ghost-like rebels.

Everyone was fighting.

And no one was paying attention to what was really going on.

"Actually," Sokka said to Yugoda, "I need a way to talk to everyone. If you're a Waterbender, can you make me, like, a big horn I can shout through so everyone can hear me?"

Yugoda regarded him with an evaluating stare that reminded him a lot of when Gran-Gran would patiently listen to some of his more innovative ideas. But she didn't delay too long before nodding. "Yes. But it will draw attention to us, so be ready to run."

Hopefully, they wouldn't have to.

It was the work of only a few moments to turn the snow around them to water and then a sideways whirlpool as tall as Sokka and then freeze it into a big horn. Sokka scuttled over to the tiny end, took a deep breath, and then shouted, "EVERYONE STOP FIGHTING!! AANG AND KATARA ARE IN TROUBLE AND ONLY THE FIRE LORD CAN GET US TO THEM IN TIME!!"

It was louder than Sokka expected, but that was good. It startled everyone into stopping in place,
even those in the middle of awkward attack positions. They all looked towards Sokka (including the monsters, which was disconcerting), and then no less than four different spotlights were blinding him. He probably made quite a sight, squinting in his chains next to his big horn.

And then Iroh barked, "Listen to him! I command all Fire Nation forces to cease attacking. Act in self-defense only!"

But Hahn pointed his club at Iroh. "We can kill him now!"

"No," Sokka began. Then he remembered his horn, and moved to speak into it so that his words would be projected again. "NO!! YOU HAVEN'T EVEN TAGGED HIM YET, RIGHT? FIGHTING IS JUST WASTING TIME!! I'VE SEEN WHAT'S GOING ON AND I THINK WE NEED HIS HELP. AND HE DEFINITELY NEEDS OUR OURS. LET ME GO WITH HIM TO SAVE MY- MY PEOPLE!! SORRY FOR THE SHOUTING!!"

There was no immediate response, aside from some growling from the catfish monsters.

It was Yugoda, standing just out of the ear-watering glow of the spotlights, who finally said, "This has something do with the Oasis, doesn't it?"

Immediately, the mood amongst the Warriors In White changed. They didn't quite relax, but they did back away from Iroh and lower their weapons to defensive positions.

That, apparently, was all Iroh needed. He pointed at Sokka. "Zhao, get his chains off. Maliq, order the defenses inside the fortress to stand down. In fact, order all the soldiers out. Evacuate the place and lock down the lowest floor."

Sokka nodded. He liked the sound of getting all the soldiers out of the way. "We'll keep it simple. Just me and you."

"No." Iroh motioned some of his soldiers to drag their fallen compatriots away. "Your people are still inside. We'll take Zhao for my security. And we'll need Maliq to get us through the fortress, and to handle my- handle Lu Ten's room."

Sokka swallowed. He'd be outnumbered again, not that he would have been able to fight against Iroh if a betrayal popped up. Still, it was the principle of the matter. He wasn't even sure if taking any of these rebels would be a help at all.

But then Yugoda said, "You might need a healer. I'll come, too."

Hahn began, "But-

"If this relates to the Spirit Oasis," Yugoda cut him off, "then this is more important than freeing out tribe. Besides, I think we'll bring Mashenomak and his shole if there is truly a danger to the Avatar."

Mashenomak?

Five of the big catfish spirits lumbered over to Yugoda.

Oh.

Okay.

Iroh looked up at them with something like awe. "You can command them? Amazing. I wonder how- but we have no more time to argue. Very well, I accept your terms."
Zhao stepped into the spotlights with a key and approached Sokka. "Congratulations, Tribal. You've brokered a small truce with a single conversation." The was a click, and the chains loosened. "But you've failed to get anyone to admit what we're really walking into, specifically."

Sokka let the chains fall away, and flexed his arms. "Yeah, that's next. I have some choice questions for Iroh as we walk."

Before he joined the Fire Lord's makeshift excursion to save the Avatar from Prince Lu Ten (and how bizarre was *that*?), Zhao gave some last minute orders to one of his subordinates. "Move the snowcrawler with the Unhcegila head into the fortress's garage, and keep it under guard but ready to move. *Your* command, not the Crimson Guard."

The captain nodded. "You have a plan, sir?"

Zhao considered how much to reveal. "No. But I need my most valuable piece ready to play."

Then he turned to follow his Fire Lord.

Mai looked down at the koi pond and couldn't hold back a snort. "Spirits? The little fish are important spirits? And they just swim in circles while running the moon and the ocean for the world?" Lu Ten must have developed a sense of humor since she saw him last, not that this was her idea of real comedy.

But neither Lu Ten nor Aang were smiling.

Aang came over to crouch over the koi pond. He reached for the surface of the water, but drew his hand back before he disturbed it. "Sometimes the most important stuff don't seem that way. Little things can matter."

Like him.

A kid who could save the world, who had completely twisted the trajectory of Mai's life into something like heroism.

Fine, the fish might be big shot spirits, after all.

Lu Ten strode - showing something like the proper grace of a Firebender, now - to loom over Aang. "The Avatar is wise. The Moon and the Ocean Spirits chose fragile, small mortal forms, but their presence is what nourishes this garden."

Mai reached out a hand to Lu Ten's shoulder and gave him a slow but firm push. "Give Aang some room."

"Don't you trust me, Mai?" He turned his blue eyes to her as he took a step back, and for a brief moment he might have shuddered, but then again this place was shadowy, and maybe it was a trick of the light.

"Getting in someone's personal space is impolite." She kept her face completely blank, and spoke in a tone she had cultivated under her mother's guidance. "I expected better of a Prince of the Fire Nation."

His face twisted in confusion for a moment, and then settled into a smirk. "Of course. My apologies. You've grown into a true Lady." He stepped around to the other side of the koi pond.
Aang looked up at her with a question in his eyes, but Mai didn't have an answer for him. Something was wrong here, but she couldn't figure out what. She felt watched. Her hands were almost shaking in anticipation of a fight. But that couldn't be right, because her hands *never* shook, especially not when she might need them to throw sharp things at people.

But she was a Weapon of the Fire Nation, and if Lu Ten had been training with his father, she was sure she could beat him in a fight with Aang's help. If it came to that. She was sure of it. So she had no reason to be nervous. Obviously.

Lu Ten meandered towards the locked-down portal that was keeping them all in here, his shoulders hunched. "The spirits give us light in the darkness and the power of Waterbending, the richness of the deep seas and the sustenance of their waters. They give us so much, even when we take." His voice grew soft and trailed off as he turned to look at Mai. The intensity of his blue-eyed gaze sent a chill up and down her spine. "We take, and they give us... life."

Huh. Was a prince of the Fire Nation really praising Water Tribe spir-

*Wait.*

*Wait.*

Since when did Lu Ten have blue eyes?!

He was supposed to have golden eyes, just like his father and uncle and cousins. She'd *seen* them, back when they were betrothed, when he used to crouch in front of her so that their faces were level, speaking softly of how nice she looked and how well his Firebending practice had gone.

She'd tried to avoid spending time with Lu Ten, but she'd failed often enough to get a sense of him. He had been warm and charming and boisterous and all those other things that always scared her. He wasn't like Ty Lee, whose charm was completely lost on Mai. Or Zuko, who was only boisterous when he was angry or sad or frightened. But now Lu Ten was *threatening*, in a way that had her hands shaking, but-

But he was diminished. And had blue eyes.

Maybe Iroh wasn't the only one who had taken an odd turn.

Ty Lee had said that the North Pole's aura was wrong, and while auras weren't real, Ty Lee nevertheless could be very insightful in rare cases.

Mai reached for her platinum knife. Maybe she'd need to figure out how to gut and clean a fish in the next few minutes.

Lu Ten turned and came back over to crouch down beside the pond, directly across from Aang. "The spirits can help us access your Avatar State. They can provide the harmony you need to join with your past lives."

"Wow," Aang breathed. His eyes were on the circling koi fish, wide and unblinking. Hey, when had that started?

Mai slipped her platinum knife free of its sheath and held it so that it was covered by her sleeve.

"If you forge a connection with the spirits, you can add their power to your own." Lu Ten held a hand out towards Aang, right over the pond. "They've been my roommates for years, so I have my own connection. Explore it, and use it to create one for yourself."
Aang reached his own hand out, his eyes still on the circling fish-

"How," Mai said with the same tone her mother had always used to address Misbehaving, "do you know all this stuff?"

Aang blinked. He raised his eyes from the koi pond and pulled his hand back a little. He glanced up at Mai before returning his attention to Lu Ten. "Wait, the koi fish are going to- to put me in the Avatar Spirit? Are you sure?"

Lu Ten gasped and dropped his arm. He just managed to catch himself from falling into the koi pond head-first.

Aang nearly jumped up to go to help, but Mai used a firm hand to put a stop to that. She used the other hand to reveal her platinum knife.

He looked up at her, from his side of the water, and actually nodded. "I'm fine. I just- It's getting bad. I need to get out of here. If it gets any worse, Father or Princess Yue will come, and- and they really can't do anything for me. They know that. But Father doesn't want to admit it. It's killing him. And I'm afraid of what he'll do if I- if he gets any worse."

Aang got to his feet to stand beside Mai. Now he was seeing it, too. "Prince Lu Ten, I want to do everything I can to help you and your father. But I need to know what's wrong, first. How, exactly, are you sick?"

Lu Ten curled himself up. "I'm empty. I feel empty. What they did wasn't enough. It can't be taken. And maybe a Firebender can't even receive it, not the way she did."

Mai traded looks with Aang again. "Um, what are we talking about? Who is this she?"

Lu Ten suddenly inhaled, and then he straightened and stood with a polite smile on his face. "I'm sorry. I can get a bit dazed. I'll explain everything after we're out of here, but I'm afraid it's long and complicated, and I might not remain coherent the whole time. Let's get the help of the spirits and find my father. Then we can set everything right."

It was more nonsense. Lu Ten was dangling what he thought they wanted to hear in front of them. Mai's eyes flickered to Aang, but even he wasn't fooled anymore. He squared his shoulders in defiance, and she let a little bit of a smile curl the corner of her lip as she got a proper stabbing grip on the platinum knife.

Aang said, "We need to know what's going on. Right now. Spirits can be dangerous, even if they're not evil. As the Avatar, I have to know what I'm dealing with. Please, Prince Lu Ten. Tell us what's wrong."

Lu Ten stared back.

Then he blinked, and shining tears trailed down his cheeks.

That wasn't an exaggeration. Lu Ten's tears were literally shining. How-

Mai tensed-

"I'm so sorry," Lu Ten whispered, leaning forward-

-and she moved to push Aang out of the way-
-while Lu Ten splashed down into the koi pond. Despite the fact that it was a pond, somehow it completely absorbed a prince of the Fire Nation and his body was lost to view.

But the fish were no longer circling.

They were writhing.

And then the pond began glowing an oppressive red, and the gentle starlight was completely lost.

---

Ty Lee marveled at the blue light that danced over her head. "It's so pretty! Katara heals people with glowy water too and that's always pretty, but this is the first time I've gotten healing on my head, and it's much prettier up close. It's weird that I've never gotten my head healed, though, because Mai says I must have taken way too many blows to the skull. But she likes being mean. It's a major character flaw, and I put real work into loving her in spite of it."

Leaning above her and the pelt-covered bed where she was resting, her two Waterbender healers were giving those wide-eyed stares that so many had whenever she tried to be friendly. She had no idea why people had such a problem making friends. It was probably the war; it really hurt the world and made people so much sadder.

Behind the Waterbenders, Princess Yue pulled her attention back from something either invisible or very far away. She blinked as if seeing the large bedroom around them for the first time, and then focused on Ty Lee. "You sound like you're feeling better."

"My sisters fight with tonfa sticks and we used to train together." Ty Lee smiled as the two Waterbenders let their healing water go dull again and together moved it back into a big bowl. "This isn't my first concussion. Hmmm, which might mean Mai is actually right."

"Well," the younger of the Waterbenders, Malina, blurted, "head injuries can be serious, so we shouldn't make any assumptions. Right, Misu?"

The older Waterbender, Misu, looked straight into Ty Lee's eyes. Ty Lee liked how blue her eyes were. "Correct. This one seems surprisingly resilient, but we'd best not take any chances. I'm sure your friend- ah, Mai was it? I'm sure she'd make a joke about you having a thick skull. Mean people like that one."

Ty Lee giggled. "Yeah, she would. You have mean friends, too?"

Misu leaned back, and her aura - which had been a glorious sky blue - grew dark and muddy for a moment. "I had a brother. He liked to laugh at others."

Oh.

Ty Lee lost her own cheer. "Sorry."

Misu sighed and shook her head. "Thank you. But yes, as well as you seem to be healing, Malina is correct. You should continue to rest. Princess Yue, you will watch over her?"

Malina frowned and opened her mouth to say something, but Yue spoke up first with, "I will. She is my guest. Her welfare is my responsibility." Yue's hands closed into fists at her sides, and her aura went violet. "Fire Lord Iroh granted that to me."

Malina shut her mouth again when Iroh's name was mentioned.
Ty Lee was glad that Yue was staying, because she was nice, but it was also a little worrying. Ty Lee wanted Yue to get a chance to talk to Sokka, not wind up in trouble with all the mean people around here like Zhao and Maliq and Iroh and the many, many, many soldiers.

As Ty Lee settled back to rest on the pelts that formed her bed, six of those soldiers hurried into the room and took stations by the door. Their dark armor, black and red, mixed horribly with the carved white walls of ice, the purple stone of the pillars, and the blue banners with their woven scenes of Water Tribe history.

The soldier bowed to Malina and said, "My lady, we are under a lockdown. On the Fire Lord's orders, your brother is evacuating the Bastion. We are keeping everyone in the palace under guard. It is a matter with the Oasis and the intruders."

Malina's blue-green aura emptied into a muddy gray. "The Oasis? My brother-"

"The Fire Lord is seeing to the matter." The soldier's voice echoed flatly in his armor. "Please remain calm, and do not attempt to move about the palace. We will keep you safe here."

"I-" Malina looked around at all the soldiers blocking the room's entrance. "Yes. I see. Thank you for your protection."

Malina's aura was shifting colors again, but Ty Lee was paying more attention to Yue, now. The princess's aura had gone black.

Yue's whisper was nearly lost in the chilly air: "Lu Ten."

Okay.

Ty Lee knew who that was. And she knew who the 'intruders' were, too. If guards were running around asking people to remain calm, then that meant important things were happening. Her friends might need her.

Good thing her head was feeling better.

She got up from the pelts and moved towards the door.

The spokesman soldier held up a hand. "Do not approach, or we will use force to subdue you."

Well, that was mean.

Ty Lee tilted her head to the right and then the left. It felt pretty good. The Waterbenders said she was doing fine, but should continue to rest. Normally, they'd be right. But Ty Lee had been focusing her Qi to her head, energies that would enhance her physical self and take advantage of the Waterhealing.

Ty Lee was feeling good enough to have some fun.

The soldier didn't speak again. He punched his right fist into the air in her direction and birthed a plume of fire.

But Ty Lee was already flipping over it, landing behind the fire and right in front of the soldier to jam a pair of fingers into his armpit. He cried out and his arm went limp, but Ty Lee grabbed it and spun him around to send him crashing into his five friends.

They didn't catch him, because they were too busy getting ready to fight her.
That didn't help them.

Ty Lee didn't overwork herself. She kept her moves efficient and effective, letting some of that circus showmanship slide so that she didn't stress her body. It was important to pay attention to your body and live in harmony with its needs.

She was feeling very harmonious by the time the six soldiers were all on the ground with unresponsive bodies.

There was the sound of water moving behind her, and Ty Lee spun to find Malina about to throw out a forming icicle-

-and then Yue smashed the empty waterbowl down on Malina's head to drop the Waterbender to the floor.

"Oh my," Misu said.

Yue dropped the last shards of the bowl. "You're good with concussions, Misu. Could you please take care of Malina while we're gone?"

Misu bowed deeply at the waist. "My princess."

Ty Lee clapped. "Thank you? But I didn't want you to get in trouble, too."

"We're all in trouble. You're going for your friends, and they'll need my help, too." Yue's aura was royal blue with purple arching over her head. "My Tribe- the world needs me, and it is time for me to finally do something about this."

Oh.

Ty Lee clapped again. "Wow, that's really brave of you, and you sounded super heroic just now! Are you a trained warrior or acrobat?"

Yue frowned. "Um, no."

"That's fine. I just needed to know so I could plan." Ty Lee grabbed the princess's hand and pulled her along as she raced down the corridor of the pretty ice palace. "I don't usually like to plan, but Sokka says it's the only way to make sure things go right when everything is all complicated. See, I was just going to fight my way to the Bastion, but since you're here I need to be smart about it, like him." She found a staircase and started following it up. "You'd like Sokka, I think, because he's really smart but he uses it to try to help his family and friends. If his sister wasn't super great, and his aura didn't go all muddy every time I talk about auras, I'd give him a shot. So, you know, you should really consider it."

Yue blinked as she tried to keep up. "Um, why are we-" She paused to breathe as they ran. "-going up?"

Ty Lee smiled. "It's my plan." A pair of soldiers peeked their heads into the stairwell, and Ty Lee unleashed her arts upon them like her sisters on a fruit platter. "See, I was saying that we can't just fight our way to the Bastion since you're not a real fighter. So we're going to be clever."

Somewhere, horns started echoing with a standard Fire Navy alert pattern.

Ty Lee huffed. "I was hoping to avoid that. Now we run faster!"
"Hnnnn," Yue said as Ty Lee grabbed her hand again and helped her run.

They reached top of the staircase soon, and to Ty Lee's delight, found a door in the ceiling with an ice ladder leading up to it. "Yay! Now we don't need to climb out a window!" The door was locked, but it was just ice, and Ty Lee knew how to punch to shatter solid oak. Ice wasn't much worse than that. She sent Yue up the ladder first-

-more soldiers rushed up the stairs to attack them, and Ty Lee gave them a little tappity-tappity-tappity to get them out of the way again-

-and then she climbed up. Once she was through the hatch, she gave the ice ladder a very precise, very hard smash. It shattered, stranding them up on the roof of the palace, and she shut the door behind them.

The Water Tribe city would no doubt be a beautiful sight from up here, but Ty Lee had no time for it. She instead looked in the opposite direction, at the dam-shaped fortress called the Bastion, looking for something that-

Ah, that would do.

Ty Lee turned to where Princess Yue was panting for breath. "I'm sorry, I know you're tired, but could you help me untie this?"

"This?" Yue took a deep breath, looked around, and immediately shut her eyes. "Um, we're on the roof and very high up. Very."

"Huh?" Ty Lee needed a moment to switch her mind from thinking about her plan to realizing that there were some people in this world who couldn't dance across a tightrope while laughing. She paused in trying to untie the Fire Nation flag from whatever sculpture it was covering "Okay, so why don't you tell me why you need to be the one to help with Lu Ten? I'll do the untying."

Yue's eyes opened again, slowly, but they were focused on nothing in particular. "I- my birth did not bring joy to my parents. I did not cry. Did not open my eyes. I had been given just a taste of life, not even enough time to be given a name. But my father - the Chief - would not accept it. He brought me to the Oasis and pleaded with the spirits."

Ty Lee moved to the last knot. The hatch was glowing with a flickering orange light. A Firebender was trying to melt through. "What's this Oasis that everyone is so excited about? Hahn just knew that it's special."

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Yue turned to look at the Bastion. "The shelter of the incarnate Moon and Ocean Spirits. The Tribe protects them. We have an oath: 'Friends, Family, Tribe, and Oasis.' We give loyalty to our friends, except when it hurts our family. We sacrifice our family for the Tribe, if necessary. But most important of all is the Oasis. Iroh built this fortress around it, and held it hostage. My Tribe would have even let me perish, rather than serve him, but we could not forsake the Moon and the Ocean Spirits."

The actual Moon and Ocean spirits? Wow. Ty Lee would like to see that.

She pulled the Fire Nation flag down, revealing a circular medallion statue made of ice. It had the symbol of the Water Tribe - a crescent moon over the wavy lines of the ocean - at its center. "So the Moon and the Ocean helped you?"

Yue nodded. "That was when my hair turned white. The Moon Spirit gave me the life that I had been denied. Even my name is in homage to the moon. I proudly embody the generosity of the spirits
we protect." She finally turned to look at Ty Lee. "And that is what Iroh saw, and helped him realize what he could force us to do." She blinked. "What are you going to do with the flag?"

Ty Lee smiled her biggest, most reassuring, bestest 'don't worry, Mai, I'm sure no one will notice' smile. "It's just going to help us with something. Could you please close your eyes, not react when I grab you, and promise not to scream?" She considered her own words. "And please ignore how that sounds like I'm going to do something really bad to you, mkay?"

Yue blinked again. "What-"

That's when the fireball burst through the hatch.

Oh, fooey. No time for being nice, anymore.

Ty Lee grabbed the flag and ran at Yue, cartwheeled, landed on Yue's shoulders, and then flipped.

They went right over the edge of the roof together.

Before they could drop, Ty Lee spread her arms so that the Fire Nation flag spread out wide above them. It snapped in the wind, but gravity still had a really firm hold on them-

-and Ty Lee puffed out her cheeks and blew into the flag with all the Airbending power she could muster.

The flag billowed, and gravity's hands fell away from Ty Lee's body. She was rising, with Yue flaying in the iron-grip of her legs, the ice palace falling behind them. It made Ty Lee's heart pump in that special way that only the best acrobatics did, but she was a professional and didn't let herself get distracted. She continued blowing air, keeping herself and Yue in the sky, while she watched the front of the Bastion flash by. She looked for the spot she'd picked out over on the palace roof-

-there-

-and stopped blowing, surprising gravity with the sudden weight of two pretty teenage girls. The flag snapped again, helpfully trying to slow their fall, but they were indeed falling, and if Ty Lee aimed this right-

-she and Yue dropped onto a platform halfway up the Bastion with a railing and a metal door that led inside. She relaxed her legs as soon as Yue touched down and flipped off the princess, landing smoothly right in front of the railing.

Yue stumbled on her landing, tripping towards the door that would hopefully be unlocked so that they could get inside and find their friends-

-and the door popped open and Yue came to a stop in the arms of a very surprised Sokka. "Wha- Ty Lee?! And Princess Yue?!!"

Behind Sokka, several more figures emerged from the doorway. Fire Lord Iroh and Admiral Zhao had their arms raised defensively, while behind them Chief Maliq cowered and an old woman in a white coat. There were more shapes past the doorway, shapes with glowing eyes that made Ty Lee's skin prickle, but they remained still and the old woman was even reaching to pet one of them.

Ty Lee raised her fists. "Um, who's on who's side right now? I just got here."

Sokka opened his mouth to answer, but Yue clamped onto him with a hug so tight and forceful that even Ty Lee had wince, hissing, "Never let go of me and do not let her throw me off another
"Um, okay," Sokka said, looking uncertain whether he was expected to hug her back. Ty Lee tried to give him a nod, but he didn't seem to catch it. "And, uh, as for who's on who's side, we're kind of teaming up for a truce for the greater good, or close enough. We need to go save Katara and Aang and Mai. Wanna come?"

Ty Lee's aura went pink. She'd arrived just in time to save all her favorite friends, and she'd managed to get Sokka and Yue in each other's arms. This was turning out to be a great day!

Then the moon turned red.

The soft white light that had made the city of ice shine even in the night was replaced in an instant with a red glow that reminded Ty Lee of the gas lamps they used in the ships and fortresses of the Fire Nation. It was a light that was also somehow a darkness, allowing her to see but turning all within her gaze to a mix of shadows.

The old woman stopped petting her monster and let out a moan. She stumbled against the doorway, and said, "The ocean! I can no longer feel the ocean!"

Ty Lee hugged herself, wrapping the Fire Nation flag over her shoulders. "What's going on?"

It was Yue who answered, straightening and easing out of Sokka's arms. "Lu Ten. Something has happened with Lu Ten, and that's why you're all working together."

Sokka gaped up at the moon. "Iroh was just explaining about how he breached the Oasis during his final conquest of the North."

Yue nodded. "And I was just explaining to Ty Lee about how the spirits gave me life as a baby when it seemed that I would die. The next part, for both our stories, is how Prince Lu Ten of the Fire Nation drowned during his father's siege. And the Prince-Admiral, in his mad grief, took the spirits themselves hostage, forcing us all to repeat what had been done with me as a baby."

Ty Lee wasn't sure what that meant. If Lu Ten had died, then how could he-

"That's it," Zhao gasped. "That's the key! All this about Lu Ten-"

Iroh lowered his head, and even in the red light, his grief blazed across his aura.

Yue continued, "The Moon Spirit pulled Lu Ten back from beyond death itself. But it was too much. When Lu Ten came back, he was wrong."

Ty Lee felt like crying. First the ashlands, and now this. Was there any end to the ways her nation had ruined the world?

Aang stepped back from the glowing koi pond, trying to figure out what was going on. "Where did Lu Ten go? What's wrong with the fish?"

"Yes," Mai muttered, backing up along with him and holding her platinum knife up in front of her, "those are the correct questions."

Aang bumped into one of the pillars of the Spirit Gate and came to a stop. He circle-walked around the pillar, ready to dodge or fight or maybe just scream, but the Oasis seemed unchanged except for the red light. Well, it was unchanged as far as Aang could see. But the feel of place had shifted
completely, the 'wrongness' increased in pressure so that now it was like a rot. His skin was crawling and the air was thick and foul-tasting. It was all he could do not to gag. The bushes that ringed the Oasis garden rustled in the breeze, and-

Wait.

There was no breeze here.

Yet the whole ring of foliage was shifting the gently, the leaves rubbing to create a chorus of inhuman whispers that nevertheless seemed to singing something that Aang could understand-

He stepped away from Mai to prod one of the bushes with a hand.

His palm came back wet and sticky.

There was a coating on it, something dark, and in this red light, it almost looked like-

Aang quickly wiped his hand on the leg of his pants. "Okay, we're leaving. I'm going to try get into the Avatar State. Mai, can you-"

"I'll do everything I can to keep you safe," She gave him a smile, and then let her face fall free of expression as she raised her platinum knife in a high guard with one hand and pulled a hinged razor disk from her sleeve with the other.

Aang nodded his thanks, and then (stepped away from the maybe-bleeding bush and) closed his eyes as he breathed out slowly, seeking some kind of peace or harmony or maybe just not the feeling that he was being hunted. He asked the universe and his past lives for help.

Instead of peace, he was given a low rumble that he first felt in his teeth. He opened his eyes to find that the platinum walls were vibrating along their full length, shaking the bushes and the ground and the very air itself. Aang called the air to keep him upright.

But there was a splash and a squeal that could have been from pain or aggression or fear or fury-

-a shadow passed by Mai and she swiped with her platinum knife-

-and then everything went calm again.

Mai's head whipped from side to side, sending her hair-tails flying. "Did I get it?"

Aang tensed his arms and reached for his Inner Fire. Maybe he'd have to win this fight before he could escape it. "Keep an eye in that direction. I'll watch over h-"

A shadow passed in front of him, and he chopped a wave of fire out, flame that was almost invisible in this red light.

And then Mai cried out.

Aang spun to see her stumbling as though shoved, and there was a shadow looming behind her. He let his Inner Fire fade a bit and instead pulled on a wind to catch Mai. She leaned into it as though expecting it, finding her balance again, and she spun and threw her razor disk at the shadow that was no longer there as she came to a stop right underneath the Spirit Gate-

-and then the wooden gate burst into flames, an explosion of light and heat that turned Mai into a a mere silhouette-
And then even that much was gone, leaving Aang along in the garden with the fire.

Mai?

Mai?!

Aang reached for the flames with his Firebending to put them out but found them beyond his control, and he couldn't see Mai anymore and he had to help her-

But she was gone.

At last, he found the path to the Avatar State, but it was not one of harmony and balance.

It was one of loss and fire and rage.

The flaming Spirit Gate flared.

The waters of the koi pond boiled.

The ground shook with the force of an earthquake.

And the air- the air thickened and pushed outward and the platinum walls bent and groaned and tore-

-and then sticky wet hands grabbed him. He was yanked out of the air by arms with a strength surpassing the earth itself, and flung right into the koi pond.

He sunk so far down that the water covered him completely even though the pond couldn't be that deep, and when he flailed his arms he found nothing but empty currents. The only light came from somewhere far above him, a little circle that he realized must be the surface of the pond, but when he tried to swim towards it he gained no distance. He tried Waterbending, tried beckoning the water to carry him back to where he could breathe, but instead of answering, it pushed him further down.

Aang looked up one last time at the circle of light that was the way back to the garden.

And then the red light was eclipsed by the blue-lipped, silently screaming face of Lu Ten.

And then there was no more light.

TO BE CONTINUED
The Hunger

Chapter Summary

Everyone struggles with when to let go.

The Hunger

Beneath the dark waters, Aang could not see, could not hear. He was removed from the world, or perhaps the world was removed from him.

But he could feel. He could feel the tepid waters that engulfed him, could sense the currents within them. Perhaps he was imagining it, a hallucination born of the lack of anything to see or hear, but the currents that flowed over him were almost like the echoes of a scream.

Aang wondered, in the cold and the dark, how he might know he was crying, with the waters submerging him and drinking up all his tears.

Sokka couldn't say his was enjoying his first ride on a mechanical cargo elevator. Usually, even a mysterious, weirdly warm trip to the bottom levels of the Bastion could have some appeal, if just for the chance to speculate on the power source.

But then, the story Yue was telling could have ruined an all-night jerky party, never mind a descent into danger.

Her voice echoed in the shaft as the platform creaked downward on its chains: "Our Tribe was already defeated. The fighting was done. Our city- the palace- our homes- all of it had been taken. My father and I were prepared to declare the final surrender. We expected to meet a conquering hero, perhaps a cruel man, perhaps just one who thought to wipe out our culture and call it progress. What came to us was a confused man carrying frosted body of a youth who had drowned during the fighting. Our conqueror seemed to gaze at nothing until he noticed my hair, and then-"

The group - Sokka, Yue, Ty Lee, the Waterhealer Yugoda, Zhao, this Maliq guy with a Fire Navy fashion-sense, and Iroh himself - had enough room on the platform that they didn't need to crowd, even with Yugoda's pet catfish spirits slithering around in a convenient shrunken form.

No one looked at each other, not even at Yue. They were all trying to grasp the story being told to them. It was one of those slippery stories, without any convenient handles, not even for someone like Sokka who could understand the desire to save family. He could only see himself balking at the idea of raising anyone from the dead with forbidden power. That *never* ended well.

Case in point: the current situation.

Iroh simply kept his eyes closed.

Yue's tears traveled down her cheeks and went untouched. "It was a choice. Restore life to his son, or watch the Moon and the Ocean Spirits die. I myself carried Lu Ten's body into the Spirit Oasis and then the koi pond. We-" Her voice wavered, and royal dignity faded with a helpless gesture. "It's hard to describe what I experienced next. The pond filled with red light. I'm told by some that the
Zhao grunted. "I've had no reports of any such phenomenon. But, as I found while investigating the eternal snowstorms at the South Pole, there are always those who claim to have some extra-sensory insight."

Sokka didn't like the sound of that. He'd seen some weird stuff since signing on with Aang's whole epic quest thing, and now some of it could only be seen by especially weird people? It made him feel like prey. He *hated* to feel like prey.

And so he nearly jumped out of his skin when the elevator reached the ground floor of the Bastion and jolted to a stop. He did manage to keep from screaming, which was good, because he didn't want to spook his teammates. And he might need his voice for more terrified screaming later.

Sokka tried to cover his alarm by stepping forward to unlatch the gate and lead the way off the elevator into an oddly familiar dry heat. "I think we can figure out the next part. First it was a miracle, Sonny Boy was alive, hooray, let's eat now, and then came the creepy stares, the frigid wind whenever he showed up at dinner even though the windows were closed, and then poor Captain Firehead's bones were discovered in the prince's closet. After that came the fighting and the screaming and the construction of unholy fortresses to hide the monster away while obscene scientists tortured other monsters in vague hope of a cure. A classic story."

The catfish spirits scurried out past Sokka, dashing up and down the hallway in front of them and poking their weird, wide, whiskered heads into every nook and cranny. Hopefully, they were checking for danger or something useful.

But Sokka didn't like the way they were hissing.

They were also, with their strange dark bodies that somehow had a kind of light shining out from within, casting more effective illumination than was already here. The gas lanterns on the walls were dark, and the only light came from glowing metal panels set into the walls at regular intervals. That seemed like a fairly inefficient way to warm and light this place. The amount of energy it had to be taking was ridiculous, never mind how difficult to regulate it would be.

Yue stepped out beside him, and gave him something like a smile. "It was a bit more sudden than that. Iroh had Lu Ten locked in the Oasis, and then this fortress was constructed around it. We worried for the spirits, but they proved to be in no danger. The problem came when Lu Ten's hunger was discovered-"

Sokka's stomach flipped, and he turned as Iroh stepped off the elevator. "Please tell me you didn't run some kind of a lottery where random members of the Tribe were turned into human sacrifices and now their bones are littering this oasis place!"

"Ew," gagged Ty lee.

"What?!" That finally shocked Iroh into opening his eyes, and he stopped short so suddenly that Zhao and Maliq nearly collided with him. "No! Why would you even think that?! Lu Ten merely feeds on Qi energy, and we gave him only pirates and criminals! I'm not a *monster*. I just wanted to save my son. It's still all I want!"

"Oh, because that's makes feeding people to your monster kid better," Sokka groaned. He tried not to imagine Aang and Katara and Mai having their breath sucked out by something like those Air Nomad Di Fu Ling monsters or the Unhcegila thing. Instead he focused on the weirdly hot hallways,
noticing how it seemed to leach the moisture from his tongue as he talked.

Wait.

He knew why this was familiar!

If Iroh wanted to keep Water Tribe rebels out, including Waterbenders-

Sokka squeaked, "This is a *Dryness Engine!* Like at Crescent Island!"

And 'Chief' Maliq, in his Fire Navy uniform, smiled. "I like that! We just called it the Waterbending Inhibition System. I toured Crescent Island years ago and was so impressed at its effectiveness with the prisoners that I used all my education and intelligence to implement a version here. Although I don't understand why the lamps-"

Sokka slammed a fist into the Maliq's face.

Pain exploded in his knuckles as Maliq went straight down to the floor, but the satisfaction was worth it. He almost wanted to do it again, but Zhao and Yugoda grabbed his arms and pulled him back.

Sokka had been a Fire Nation collaborator, too, once. But he'd never taken pleasure in the damage the work might have done, and never knowingly worked on something as horrible as the device that had tortured his sister for a decade. Maliq had *seen it in action* and still wanted to duplicate it-

The catfish spirits hissed even louder than before, a sibilant song that echoed off the metal walls. It was the same sound as the rushing in Sokka's ears.

"Maliq," Iroh said, voice sharp and steady, "when you are able, please turn off the 'Dryness Engine.' We will need the help of any Waterbenders still down here, I think."

Down on the floor, Maliq was trying to stem the flow of blood from his nose and lips. "This savage just-"

"I gave you an *order*, Chief Maliq." Iroh smiled and added, "Please, if you would be so kind."

"Y- yes, my lord." Maliq crawled over to a console near the elevator, one covered in dials and levers, and leaned on it to haul himself to his feet. He produced a key from within his uniform, put it into a slot on the console, pulled a lever down-

"There," Iroh said, "now everyone is happier." He looked to Sokka. "Now, may we proceed?"

The heat was dying, the glowing panels sliding back into the walls. Covers fell into place over them, and the air immediately cooled, although it still wasn't at all comfortable.

And it left them in the dark, the only remaining light coming from the luminescent bodies of the catfish spirits.

"No," Sokka grunted. "Not happier." But he shook the rushing sound out of his ears, and let the tension drain from his body. The catfish spirits stopped their hissing.

A burst of light came into being atop Iroh's raised hand, a Firebending torch that brought something like normality back to the scene. "Nevertheless, I fear we must get moving. Reports put the Waterbenders near the Oasis entrance, but they might have moved after we evacuated the soldiers."

Zhao let go of Sokka and gave him a little push. "Keep moving, Tribal. Let's find out how necessary
you are for this mission."

Yugoda let go of Sokka as well, but she patted his shoulder in a way that reminded him of Bato. She and Ty Lee (who gave Sokka a smile and a wink and a fist raised in victory) fell into position right behind him as he followed Iroh, with Zhao and Maliq bringing up the rear of the group like the 'practical' guys they were.

And Princess Yue kept her eyes on Sokka as she walked alongside him.

He bowed his head to her and whispered, "Sorry if punching that guy will make things harder for us. Or your tribe. I- I couldn't keep the Fire Nation from taking my sister away- to that Crescent Island place, with the original Heat Engine. I still have trouble with it."

Yue blinked, and her pink lips parted slightly. She stared at him for a moment, and then bowed her head to him in return and returned her attention to the path ahead.

He wondered what that meant. Maybe, if they all didn't get their hearts eaten by a Fire Prince, he could find out later.

The group moved as fast as they could, with just Firebenders to light the way. Zhao created his own hand-torch, which helped a little. Sokka couldn't keep track of their path, as the halls of this crazy fortress were labyrinthine. But then, that was probably the point, if this was all just to keep people away from Prince Lu Ten. Maliq and Iroh at least seemed to know the way, although even they had to stop every so often to confirm where they were with a landmark of some kind.

The catfish spirits kept pace with Iroh, and no longer seemed to want to go exploring. That was a shame, as their light would have made them helpful scouts.

But Sokka wasn't sure he wanted these strange spirits running ahead beyond his vision to become vague lights bouncing through the darkness. That could get spooky.

And then the group started finding the bodies.

They were soldiers, Firebenders and swordsmen and archers and spear-wielders. Most of them were casualties of a war of some kind. Sokka checked them out (once he was sure they weren't going to open their eyes and jump up and try to suck his spirit out through his nostrils or something), and found that most had standard injuries, the kind that would bleed out or send the victim into fatal shock, and could have come from knives or spears. A few larger cuts might have been made by broadswords or angry Waterbending.

But there were also some bodies that didn't have any injuries.

And they were colder than the others.

The catfish spirits were hissing again, and more insistently.

Sokka glanced at Yugoda. "Does that mean anything?"

"I don't know. I've never heard them do that before." She didn't look like she considered a good thing.

Great.

It was distracting enough that the group didn't hear the attack until it was almost too late.
They turned a corner and the catfish spirits turned their hissing into a roar. Sokka froze mid-step and spotted shadowy figures at the edge of Iroh's torchlight and suddenly Sokka couldn't move his arms or his legs and it was like he had sticks in his veins and he screamed-

A familiar voice said, "Sokka!?"

The tension in his limbs went away in an instant, allowing him to move again. That was freaky. He barely had enough time to wonder what it was when one of those shadowy figures dashed right past Iroh and slammed into Sokka with a crushing hug. A hug as familiar as its voice.

He wrapped his arms around his little sister. "Found you."

Lian the Maker, the highest-ranking Privileged Colonial Contractor in service to Fire Lord Iroh, was getting fed up with all of this garbage.

When the Fire Lord - merely the crown prince at the time - had come to her, he'd promised the chance to define a whole new field of scientific knowledge. Iroh's troubles with his son had confounded the Sages, Wise Men, Shamans and other spiritualists, leaving no other choice but to apply science to the situation. Lian had already been studying the phenomenon of Bending, how it really worked and if it might be replicated by mechanical constructs, and so Iroh's search had taken him to her doorstep with an offer to explore and classify the very nature of the Spirits themselves. She had no love for the brutish ways of the Fire Nation, but Iroh himself was an impressive person and much more enlightened than most of his countrymen. Plus, the gains to science could not be ignored.

And for a while, it had been nice. Lian had indeed created a brand new science out of nothing, and Iroh had been every bit as supportive as she needed.

Then he became Fire Lord.

And now war and politics were interfering with everything.

So she was hardly in a good mood when she stepped out of the snowcrawler that had brought her to the Bastion, into the strange red moonlight, and greeted the guards with a snarled, "I'm here to reclaim all the materials the degenerate Zhao had removed from my lab. Take me to them or the Fire Lord right now."

The soldiers were the Crimson Guard types who directly served Iroh, so she couldn't see their expressions beneath their helmets as they all traded glances. One of them said, "Admiral Zhao unloaded no cargo. He went with the Fire Lord into the fortress on an urgent matter regarding--"

"Yes, an attack by the Avatar," Lian cut the man off. "That's why it's so egregious that Zhao brought my Unhcegila head here! He's endangering valuable, irreplaceable material for the sake of politics. I bet this oddly colored moon is his doing, too. This is impeding my work regarding Prince Lu Ten's cure."

The Crimson Guards stiffened. She had said the 'magic' words, and they had their orders about the matter. The lead guard said, "Zhao's snowcrawlers have been parked in the garage. Come with me."

They led her to the battleship that had been scuttled at the top of the cliff overlooking the Northern Water Tribe village. Iroh was still using it as the front gate for the Bastion fortress, but Lian had no idea why. Chief Maliq was a good architect and engineer, and could have something more suitable made to replace it. She suspected that Iroh simply liked the look of it, or perhaps wanted a reminder of the early days when he'd needed to cobble together a holding pen for Lu Ten.
The garage was a portion of one of the battleship's holds that had been cut open and given a large door. As expected, a squad of snowcrawlers was parked within, still dripping with slush, under guard from a squad of Zhao's marines. Their body language became wary as the Crimson Guards led Lian into the hold.

She called out, "Which of these contains the Unhcegila head? I presume Zhao took an inventory of the materials he stole?"

One of marines held up a hand. "Come no closer. Admiral Zhao has ordered-

"Stand aside," the lead Crimson Guard snarled, "on the authority of the Fire Lord." Several of the masked Guards raised their arms into Firebending stances as they walked.

Lian waited to see what would happen. Perhaps Zhao had instilled some true loyalty in his crew, but from what she had observed-

"Okay," the marine said. He shifted so that he was no longer blocking the path to the snowcrawlers and kept his hands down and clearly visible. The other marines did the same. "The chain of command seems clear in this case. Sorry for the trouble."

Lian grinned and trotted past the Crimson Guards.

It didn't take long to find the snowcrawler in which Zhao had stashed the Unhcegila head, and Lian was relieved to see that it wasn't damaged in any way. Of course, she'd need to get it back to the lab and run some tests to truly make sure that nothing had gone wrong. But first, she needed to take the opportunity that had been handed to her. She emerged from the snowcrawler and went back to the lead Crimson Guard.

"Luckily, no damage was done that I can't undo, but we've lost valuable time. Admiral Zhao has impeded my work. I think the Fire Lord needs to know about this."

The Guard gave a shallow bow. "A report will be made. Currently, the Fire Lord is seeing to a matter regarding his son, as I tried to explain-"

And then the glow of the moon, reflecting into the garage off the snow fields, flickered.

Lian was, thankfully, too much of a professional to feel fear.

On the contrary, this was a valuable new opportunity to expand the scope of human knowledge.

"Forget your mere explanations," she told the lead Guard. "I need a full briefing. It looks like I'm going to have to divert from my research to save the world."

Aang could feel the approach of his friends, their energies traveling along the ethereal connections they shared to send both hope and dread to his heart. He tried to warn them away, tried to warn them of what had found them, but when he opened his mouth, his voice was drowned by the infinite waters into less than a whisper. The salt in the water stung his tongue, and the pressure threatened to burst his lungs.

Instead he tried to reach out along the connections, the web of light that bound them all together. But none of his self was able to survive the journey. It was overwhelmed by the hunger that overflowed from another connection, one that had been forced on him. It wasn't a complete connection, as there wasn't a complete person on the other end. Instead, there was a vague remnant of a person, a space that had once been defined as an individual but now was smeared with the glow of the moon and the
roar of the ocean and a deep, relentless hunger.

That hunger was so terrible that pushed back against Aang, against everything he was, and filled him up with nothingness. He felt his own definition blurring, and through the gaps flowed names like Roku and Kyoshi and Kuruk and Yangchen and so many others. They drifted out of him, and with each one of them went a little piece of the being that had once been called Aa-

A-

What had his name been again?

Behind him, his only companion here in the dark shook, sending bubbles filled with both laughter and sobs to float up into nothingness.

As much as Sokka would have liked to just pick his sister up and carry her out of this horrible Bastion place, he knew his only real option right now was to let her go. As soon as he did, Ty Lee and Yugoda greeted her with their own enthusiastic hugs.

While Sokka watched it all, he felt a hand rest on his shoulder, and turned to find Princess Yue giving him a smile. She said, "You found your sister when she needed you. Don't forget that. You're a good brother."

Sokka couldn't figure out what to say to that. The combination of Yue's beauty being so close, her warm hand on his shoulder, and the sentiment that he didn't dare accept all combined to keep his tongue firmly stuck to the roof of his mouth.

He was still staring at her in awe as more figures emerged from the shadows into the light of Iroh's torch-like Firebending.

They were obviously Water Tribe, and they wore the same white clothes as Yugoda and the 'Dreamcatcher' warriors who had come with Hahn to attempt a rescue, back up outside the fortress. But only one of them had a weapon (a rather nice machete).

That one kept gaze and weapon pointed straight at Iroh. "I don't suppose the whole Tribe was liberated while we were down here and this colonizer is a decorative prisoner?"

"Rafa!" Yugoda came over to him and examined some of his scrapes. "I must admit, I'm surprised to find you alive, but very glad. And no, I'm afraid the situation has gotten worse since we last talked."

One of the catfish spirits joined the reunion, bopping its head against Rafa's back in some kind of greeting. In return, Rafa actually reached out to pet it. "Mashenomak! Come to help me, have you? Then things must be very complicated, indeed."

To Sokka's disappointment, that seemed to be the extent of the reunions. No one else stumbled out of the darkness to express how glad they were to see him, or even to beg for a way out of here. Specifically, there were two people whose bodies he (thankfully?) hadn't yet found down here. "Where's Aang? And Mai?"

Katara shook her head. "They broke into the heart of the fortress! Aang thinks Lu Ten might be there. But they've been gone for a while, and I- we held the door against the soldiers, but then the whole place shook and the lights went out, and- and-"

The Rafa guy finished with, "There's something here. Besides us and the soldiers. Something hunting us. We had to flee, and we think it managed to get some soldiers, before the rest of them
"Lu Ten." Iroh sighed. "It's just as bad as I feared. It's likely the Avatar is dead, and the problem is up to us to resolve."

Katara blinked, and seemed to finally realize that this was more than a rescue operation. "What's going on? How can Aang be dead?"

Sokka said, "It turns out that Iroh's big secret is that the Northern Tribe has these spirit fish that can raise people from the dead but it only goes right in certain situations so now Prince Lu Ten is another one of those crazy monsters that eats people's lifeforce or something."

Katara blinked, and then looked to Ty Lee, who confirmed it with a nod.

Sokka didn't say anything about Aang. He could see Iroh's logic, and they had to assume the worst in this situation. But he wouldn't be leaving this place, one way or another, until he knew for sure. And if Aang was still alive-

Well, then Sokka would have to come up with something clever.

He hated having to be clever.

Iroh looked up at the ceiling, as if he could see through it to the sky above. "The red light of the moon must mean that the darkness within my son is ascendant. He wavers between lucidity and- and more troubled states. I'm afraid bringing him out of those is no easy task. But he has not yet attacked us, so we might have enough power to contain him."

It was Ty Lee who said, "So how do we find him?"

The whole group went quiet.

It was Rafa who eventually answered with, "We won't have to. He knows where we are. He's just waiting for the right opportunity."

Zhao raised the hand he was using as a Firebending torch even higher, as if trying to send the light farther. "Well, we aren't going to give him one. Fire Lord, I recommend we move towards the inner sanctum. The platinum walls might protect us, and perhaps we will find a sign of the Avatar."

Sokka realized that it was a little darker down here than before. That's why Zhao had raised the torch, but he didn't seem conscious of it. What could that mean? Imminent death, sure, but something more specific might help them prepare.

"An insightful recommendation, Admiral Zhao," Iroh said. "Yes, that shall be our plan for now. If I could ask everyone to keep an eye out as we move-"

Maybe the weirdness was having more people around? No, wait, something was missing. But everyone was still here- no, all the humans were still here.

The glowing catfish spirits were gone.

"What was that," Sokka interrupted, "the pet was named? Mashy something? Does he tend to hide in shadows and stop glowing sometimes?"

And then Rafa noticed it, too. "No, he doesn't. Nor any of the others."

Iroh stiffened. "We need to move. Now!"
And everyone did-

-except for Yue. She grabbed Sokka's arm and hissed, "Wait! I feel something."

From somewhere behind Sokka, Maliq screamed.

And then the path ahead lit up with a light the color of dread.

(Dread was red.)

The source of the radiance was a hulking figure of almost-human proportions, two arms and two legs coming off a central body, but the legs were too short and the arms were too long and everything was still shifting and changing shape. One arm stretched to become a whip-like tentacle and the other grew fingers that came to very sharp points.

The face remained that of a catfish, with floating whiskers that brushed the ceiling and walls as the creature forced its bulk a step forward, but its mouth was that of a shark as it opened to reveal fields of sharp teeth.

A similar red glow was coming from behind them, as well. All the paths were cut off.

"Mashenomak," Rafa called to the creature in front of them, but it only responded with a warbling growl.

Sokka wished he had borrowed one of Mai's platinum weapons, but there was no way he could have kept a hold of even a knife while stuck as a prisoner.

"We'll have to fight our way past," Iroh said. "Firebenders and Waterbenders together!"

Katara shook her head. "We're out of water."

Great. So, what was their plan supposed to be, then? Iroh had wanted to get down here to fix things, and Sokka had kind of assumed that the big bad mastermind with all the secrets actually had a plan. Which was stupid! Never assume things! Never!

Yue was the first to step towards Mashy.

Sokka grabbed her arm. "What are you going to do?"

She looked at him with wide eyes, and her lips were trembling. "I don't know, but I have to try some-"

And then, one by one, those spirits began screaming.

It was a horrible, keening sound, something between an injured polar bear dog and the blade of a knife scraping against a whetstone. It started with Mashenomak in front of them, the din echoing up and down the hall, but it was soon a chorus. Lu Ten was no longer the only thing hunting them.

Or, maybe, he still was. In a way.

But he was Iroh's son, and didn't see the need to get his hands dirty when he could force other people or catfish spirits to handle things for him. So he was a monster and a tactician. Great. And this was his home turf.

But, as Yue had said, they had to try something.
Sokka acted on pure instinct.

He shoved Katara towards Ty Lee and Yue towards Yugoda, and then ran out in front of Mashenomak. "Hey, Mashy! I didn't want to tell you this before, but you're ugly and you totally creep me out!"

Mashy swung a clawed hand towards him, but he dove between the thing's stubby legs and rolled and came up in a run and took the first turn he found. He was yelling the whole time he ran, but only partially because he was terrified. He needed the corrupted spirits to know where he was going. Away from his friends.

Mashy gave chase.

Lu Ten wasn't the only tactician around here. But Sokka hoped someone else came up with another plan, soon, because this one stunk.

He tore down the hallways, taking turns at random, getting himself hopelessly lost and probably hopelessly dead, as heavy bodies stampeded after him.

The Airbender boy floated in the endless ocean, surrounded by figures that were both familiar and strangers. He didn't know who they were, but the sight of them bobbing through the currents made him feel like he had lost something. And he was so hungry.

"I feed," hissed a voice through the water, somehow. It came out of bubbles that ticked the back of The Airbender's bald head and burst around his ears. It was a desperate, whining voice, and filled The Airbender with even more hunger. That hunger was like the ocean, endless and surging.

But through the connection to the owner of that voice, The Airbender could feel the anticipation of sustenance. The feeding was about to begin. Right now.

Somehow, The Airbender couldn't help but prefer the hunger.

Maliq had decided that there was no longer any call for his expertise on this mission.

His job had been to keep saboteurs out - and Lu Ten in - the Bastion; he had accomplished the former (...as well as he could since it was unreasonable to expect an Earthbender infiltrator), and now that Lu Ten was free there little more he could do on the latter.

And he had his responsibilities as Chief of the Northern Water Tribe to consider. He had to remember his people! Without him, they might never be made to see the glory of Fire Nation civilization, or the ways their lives could improve if they only embraced a sense of order and mechanical innovation.

Otherwise, they'd be doomed to savagery like this Sokka brute, unable to see the beauty of things like the Dryness Engine.

(But the guy had a knack for names; Maliq could give him that.)

So, completely selflessly, Maliq screamed and ran for his life as the rogue spirits gave chase after Sokka and everyone else tried to flee deeper into the Bastion. He knew this fortress better than the back of his hand, because he'd designed the thing, while the back of his hand was an accident of nature. He knew how long it had taken to construct, the materials used in every system, and the
hidden infrastructure that made everything work. He knew that, if the lights were out, the natural waterfall that had been harnessed and locked away to power the Bastion was probably escaping somewhere. And the waterfall was right behind the Oasis.

That's why he didn't take the most direct path back to the elevator. It might be quicker, but whatever else was down here wasn't entirely human, if at all. He knew the effects that platinum had on spirits, and knew where all the hidden platinum components were that might protect him from observation and manipulation. Some of the platinum had gone into walls and pylons to prevent the flow of unwanted energies, and the rest went into ingenious systems like the polished platinum mirror network that brought natural light down into Lu Ten's chamber.

Maliq chose his path based on where those constructs were and how they might shield him from detection. That was how the platinum worked, right? He was a genius, so he was sure he was correct.

It was thinking like that made him stand out from the rest of his tribe, which was looked down upon by the rest of the world. Even his sister Malina sometimes worried about disrupting people's lives with his improvements, as if a few lives could stand in the way of progress. She supported him, but without his influence, would she stay on the true path of Fire Nation glory?

Yes, he had to get out. He had to escape. He had to-

He had to find a light.

He'd let his thoughts wander. Had he taken the second left or the third? Without the lamps or the sound of machinery, it was hard to tell where he was right now. At least he was alone, while the others distracted those awful spirits. Imagine, being stupid enough to take 'tame' spirits into battle. That mistake would cost them their li-

Cold, wet, sticky hands pressed against his face.

Maliq screamed.

He screamed as the darkness faded away, and the sun rose on the horizon. The light reflected off the ocean, making it a beautiful glistening ruby. But as he looked out at the light, he realized it wasn't the sun that was rising- it was the Fire Nation itself! The 'Homeland' that its soldiers spoke of so lovingly had come to the North Pole - to Maliq - to share its glory. The ice would melt, bone tools would be replaced by metal, frigid air would be tinged with the bracing smell of oil and ash, and his genius would finally be recognized the world over!

Maliq reached for that sun- but it was out of his grasp.

His body filled with a need, a hunger, and he knew he had to do everything in his power to sate it. He needed the Fire Nation, needed its ways. He would swim the ocean, or walk across the planet, or even learn to fly. It was the only thing that could feed this clawing emptiness in him. He channeled all his energy, all his self, into grasping it. But his hands fell short, and so he gave more of himself, and the horizon grew no closer, and so he grasped and grasped and grasped and grasped- but he wasn't the one grasping.

Another body, strong and limber and soaking wet, was twisted up with Maliq's, and he was losing heat everywhere it was touching him. The horizon was an illusion, while the dark-
"I feed," something hissed right in Maliq's ear, the breath warm and fetid and more than a little damp.

He tried to scream-

-and the last of his self was yanked up out of his mouth in a gasp, leaving an empty body in the dark of an empty fortress. His last sounds echoed, and then there was only silence.

Mai woke up to the most awful racket. It was like an army of lemurs was making a hooting retreat from a shark-mandrill. She wished the stupid things would shut up and go away. She had half a mind to get up and encourage that thought with some flung razors, but when she tested that idea out with her body, it protested with some whiny excuses about pain. Typical.

So Mai just groaned.

Surprisingly, there was an answer. A bright, familiar voice called back something like, "I heard something! I think it came from over there!" Something about the unoriginal wording made the voice seem fairly slow on the uptake, which struck Mai as completely natural and more than a little comforting.

And she was pretty sure she knew the voice's name.

Ty Lee.

Just thinking the name made Mai feel a little better.

So when soft hands grabbed her, lifting her off the grass, she didn't make an attempt to stab anyone with anything.

There was more talk after that, stuff about someone being burned and gratitude for finding some water. More voices sounded, and one of them struck Mai as reassuringly steady and recognizable. Another name - Katara - emerged into her thoughts. She was pretty sure things would be okay if Katara was here, for some reason.

And then a feeling both warm and cool covered Mai's body, pulling the pain and stiffness straight out of her, leaving behind strength and relief.

Mai opened her eyes to find her two favorite girls leaning over her, something like starlight illuminating their faces. "Hey. Thanks for that."

Ty Lee and Katara both broke into smiles. Ty Lee said, "How did you get so burned?"

Mai sat up gingerly, trying to figure out the answer herself. The pain she'd had was consistent with burns, and her robes were a charred mess but thankfully weren't falling off of her, so all clues pointed to burning, sure enough. She was still in the Spirit Oasis, only now the foliage and wooden Spirit Gate were blackened ruins.

Ah, yes.

She remembered them somehow bursting into flames when Lu Ten went feral or whatever, and she had the bad luck (or perhaps it was more purposeful?) to be standing right in range of the fireblast. But what had happened after that?

The formerly secure platinum walls were twisted and punctured by rocky outcroppings with the distinctive smoothness of Earthbending, which she didn't remember at all and didn't consider a good
sign. The back wall had been damaged enough to spring a leak, and now something like a waterfall was pouring through a burst seam to create a moat around the garden.

And standing behind Katara and Ty Lee was some woman with weird white hair along with-

*Fire Lord Iroh*?!

But he didn't have any soldiers with him, not so much as a pair of guards. Even if Lady Prematurely White was an enemy, the good guys had numerical superiority. That didn't mean they actually could beat Iroh, of course, but he wasn't attacking anyone right now. That was either kind of good or very, very bad.

But there was one thing, one very important thing, that Mai couldn't find anywhere in the Oasis.

Aang.

And the koi pond-

-was completely opaque, as dark as oil.

"Where did Aang go?"

Ty Lee and Katara both frowned. Katara said, "We thought he was with you! How do we keep losing the boys?!"

Boys? Plural? "Sokka's in trouble, too? Is he with Aang?"

"No- Maybe- I don't know!" Katara blinked tears from her eyes. "The Dreamcatcher spirits got* corrupted* and Sokka led them away, and we can't find him now, and we lost Rafa and the other Dreamcatchers while we were running, and we found the entrance to this place twisted nope, and now we're stuck in here while that thing is out there with our friends killing people and now Aang is gone too and-"

"Lu Ten," Mai interrupted, looking at Iroh. "Lu Ten is the thing killing people. And he got Aang." She hopped to her feet, letting the ruins of her sleeves fall over her hands as she sought for some weapons. A rain of needles to throw Iroh off guard before a more lethal attack? Or should she just go for it with her first throw and try to sink one of the bigger blades right in his skull? No matter how she did it, she'd likely leave him a chance to get in a fatal blow of his own, so she was about to die, but that was okay because she'd failed to protect Aang.

That was her whole purpose. She had, at one point or another, betrayed everyone and everything in her life. Aang was the one - the only one - to see her full awfulness and decide to forgive her anyway. Tom-Tom didn't really know her, and Mother and Father were now her enemies. Katara and Ty Lee were too optimistic to really see her, and Sokka was too flawed himself to hold it all against her. She and Zuko had left each other behind. Azula had wanted her dead before losing all sanity.

Aang was the one she had betrayed who went on to eventually- well, fall in love with her. He was the best person she knew, someone who had every right to look down on her, and yet he thought she was the best thing since sharpened flint.

And she'd let Lu Ten destroy him.

The least she could do to make up for it was murder the old man who caused this whole mess, even if it killed her. Not that, without Aang, anyone had any chance at all.
But before Mai could let loose with her last rain of metal, Ty Lee grabbed her wrists and cried, "Wait! I think we can still save them!"

It was such an odd thing to say that Mai could only stop and blink. "How?"

"I dunno." Ty Lee smiled. "But Fire Lord Iroh's aura hasn't gotten any worse since we got down here. So he thinks we can."

Mai looked to Iroh, momentarily not evaluating him for attack, and had to bite back a groan when she realized she'd been trying to see his aura for herself.

Iroh nodded and crouched down beside the fetid koi pond. "I hesitated to say anything, as I do not know for sure, but look at the damage here. Lu Ten cannot Earthbend, as Maliq pointed out when justifying his failures. And yet these rocks very clearly broke the seal of this platinum chamber and allowed Lu Ten to exert his influence before escaping. Nor do I think it was a coincidence that our aggressive Lady Mai was injured by Fire, which is well within Lu Ten's control even during his- er, little episodes."

Ash, it was like listening to Sokka ramble on about his stupid deductions, except slower and coming from someone Mai hated. "Get to the point."

But it was the girl with the white hair who continued, "The Spirit Oasis is a point where the Spirit World overlaps with the Material World. It is how the climate can be so warm. And there is more to this space than we can see. The Spirit World is infinite, its landscape changeable. Entire lands can exist in its shadows." She turned to the koi pound. "And an entire ocean and moon can be contained in a mere pond."

The koi fish spirits. Lu Ten had been going on about them. "And how do you know all this?"

Ty Lee grabbed a bit of the girl's white hair and held it out for inspection. "This is Princess Yue! She's my friend, and she was born dead but the magic fish brought her back to life and made her hair white! She's like a storybook!"

This 'Yue' managed to give a stiff smile. "That's accurate enough. I have a connection to the Moon Spirit. But-" She moved towards the pond, pulling her hair from Ty Lee's loose grip. "Something is wrong. I can feel Lu Ten's influence, but it's never been this strong before. He's been feeding on the people in this fortress, but there's something else going on. Another presence older even than the Moon and Ocean, but far weaker than it should be."

Mai looked at the inky blackness of the pond. "So let me get this straight- the pond is a magic door to the Spirit World, Aang is probably inside waiting to be rescued, and it might be the only way to stop Lu Ten. So, how do we do this?"

"We don't." Yue closed her eyes for a long moment, and when she opened them again, they were as dark and glossy as the koi pond was now. "I share the lifeforce of the Moon Spirit, and am bound to Lu Ten. I will end this." Oily black tears oozed down her cheeks.

Mai found herself taking a step back. "Okay, then. Good luck?"

Ty Lee leaned towards Mai and whispered, "I don't think we should tell Sokka about this. He thinks she's cute."

"Wait," Katara whispered back, "he does?"

Mai chose to not have anything to add to this conversation.
Yue stepped into the koi pond, the sludgy waters coming up to her ankles. The hem of her dress floated on the surface and absorbed the staining liquid. Yue centered herself in the pond as Iroh shuffled away from it, leaving her a lone figure about to undertake a journey into the unknown.

Then the entire Bastion thundered with an echoing, "NO!!" It shook the ground, and Mai was barely able to keep on her feet. The light in the room shifted and flared red, making her eyes water, but she squinted through it and managed to see what was going on just in time to call, "Ty Lee, incoming!"

Her friend moved too fast to have thought about it, moving her arms in a blur. Mai felt a wind rise up and whip at her hair just in time for it to cushion Yue's landing. Even so, the princess still had enough momentum to collide with the other girls, but they grabbed her together and managed to avoid a fall.

The red glare faded, and Yue pulled away to stand on her own. She wiped sticky dark muck from her eyes, revealing vivid blue irises of the normal human variety. "He's coming. Lu Ten knows what I tried to do."

Oh, great. Mai grabbed her platinum knife with one hand and a razor disc with the other. "Then we fight."

Iroh stepped to stand in front of her, a head shorter than her but disconcertingly solid. "No, we defend. And we continue to try to find a solution. There must be something we can do. Perhaps our friends Ty Lee and Katara can disable his Bending and freeze him in place?"

Ty Lee and Katara exchanged glances that didn't have a lot of confidence between them.

Mai eyed Iroh. "And what about me and you?"

"I will direct the efforts. You should guard Yue. The connection she shares might be the key to victory, or the path to our defeat. And you, my dear, have a limited choice of options against a foe who does not lack the strength to pull his clothes free from a knife in the wall. Now, quickly, before my son gets here, we must prepare defenses." He moved over to the entrance to the Oasis, the shutter-like door that Mai and Aang had slipped through, before. It was bent and broken now, with a clear view of the obscuring darkness beyond. Katara and Ty Lee followed him, both of them looking back at Mai with helpless expressions.

She could only shrug at them. Iroh was right, and he was one of the greatest tacticians the Fire Nation had ever produced. As awful as he was, and as responsible as he might be for this, he was their best option for a leader right now. After all, Aang and Sokka might be dead; they were the clever ones in the group.

But maybe Mai could be the surprising one. She'd managed to make friends with the Dreamcatchers by choosing not to fight, before. Perhaps she really was capable of accomplishing things that didn't involve stabbing people.

So she turned to face Yue and whispered, "What's your opinion on this?"

Yue frowned. "The key is still the Moon and Ocean Spirits. We must reach them. But Lu Ten- his power pushed me back from the pond. I- I don't have the strength of spirit to push back."

Mai gave the girl her sharpest smile. "You're not a fighter, are you? Strength is for losers. Real fighters cheat." And then she held up her platinum knife.

Yue blinked at it in confusion, and then she got it. She looked up at Mai and nodded.
And so, while the others worked, Mai and Yue went hand in hand over to the koi pond. They stood at its edge, looking down at the obsidian sludge that glistened in the dim lighting.

Ugh, only for Aang would Mai subject herself to getting messy like this.

She held out the platinum knife in front of her, took a deep breath, and then - together with Yue - dived into the pond.

The tip of the blade touched the surface first, and in that moment the dark muck broke apart into blazing crimson light. Mai shut her eyes against it as she fell, but as the air brushed past her face, the knife in her hand blazed with heat, she reflexively let go and opened her mouth to cry out in pain from the burns on her fingers -

-and her cry was drowned by a torrent of saltwater before it was even born. She was underwater, her clothes soaked and her hair floating around. Her only anchor was Yue's hand in her own. She opened her eyes to try to get some kind of sense of where they were.

The ocean around them was endless, and somewhere in the infinite above, filtered by the depths, a red moon provided the only light.

The platinum knife was nowhere to be seen.

Her only effective weapon was gone.

**TO BE CONTINUED**
The Price

Chapter Summary

The messy matters at the North Pole come to a messy conclusion.

The Price

Sokka's death came at the end of sharp claws made of luminescent darkness, which was the kind of stupid contradiction that had always annoyed him. Appropriate that it would be the end of him, really.

He'd led the corrupted Dreamcatcher cat-fish spirits on a merry chase through the bowels of the Bastion's lowest level, if 'merry' meant confused and frantic and far too dark to see anything, accompanied by screaming terror and a few stubbed toes. It was as dark as his stay in the basement of Long Feng and the Dai Li Earth rebels, back before his and the gang 'liberated' the Fire Nation for Iroh, an unpleasant memory that did nothing to improve his hopes right now. In that evil prison basement, Sokka had been forced to endure treatments that had left him tumbling through nightmares and gaps in wakefulness, not unlike the experience of running from monsters in the dark. King Toph's arrival had gotten him out of there, thankfully before Long Feng could do anything permanent, and he knew he wouldn't have been able to do it himself.

This time, Sokka didn't want to escape. Not from this 'Bastion' fortress, or the Northern Water Tribe settlement around it.

His only goal was to lead the spirit monsters away from his friends and family, which he had to hope he was doing because this place had the most convoluted floor-plan of any evil fortress he had ever visited, and that included the impractical vertical one built into a mile-deep sinkhole in the Earth Kingdom, the time he and Mai had fallen on Ty Lee. Either that traitorous Maliq guy was a pretty sub-par architect, or he had done this on purpose, the jerk.

But running and taking random turns and hitting things with a salvaged spear and dodging around the claws and toothy bites could only work for so long.

Specifically, it worked up until the point when Sokka tripped over a long solid object at shin-height that had no business being in his path.

It was tempting to hope, amidst the pain, that it had just been bad luck.

But then the red glow of one of the Spirits Gone Bad - a glow that somehow emanated from dark bodies that didn't have the healthy coloring of Water Tribe skin but rather the substance of shadow itself - lit up the hall in front of him, joining the similar light from behind, and he realized that this had been planned. The pipe had been torn from its boltings on the wall to hang across the path.

Sokka had been set up.

He wasn't fair enough to acknowledge it. He was too bitter as he jumped to his feet and raised his spear- and a massive clawed hand the size of his whole body swung and a cold pain lit up across his middle.
It was just as well that the lighting provided by the spirits was red; the liquid that splattered on the wall - that was dripping on the ground from the holes in his body - looked like water. Still, he knew exactly what it was.

"Aw, man," he said.

He looked up at the spirit in front of him, and was surprised that it wasn't snarling or sneering. It wasn't displaying those endless rows of teeth in that wide mouth. The face was twisted, and the whiskery things on the sides and top of its head were droopy.

Sokka thought it might be Mashy - Mashenomak - the leader of the spirits that had once served the 'Dreamcatchers' Water Tribe rebels. Before Lu Ten had taken over that service without so much as asking. But Sokka didn't have time to wonder about it. His legs decided that they couldn't support his weight anymore and he fell into the puddle of his own blood.

He knew he was dying, alone in the dark, bleeding out on floor. The life and warmth were ebbing from his body. He was on his way to reincarnate as a prey animal, to take on the twin duties of testing a hunter and feeding a Tribe. He could already feel himself being pulled away from this world.

As he listened for the calls of his ancestors welcoming him to his next life, he could only hope that someone else was taking a turn being clever about this situation, because he was obviously going to be done with that kind of thing very shortly.

Mai was about to panic before Yue said, "This isn't real, not in the way you think. Your body is not here, so you cannot drown. Be at peace, my friend."

Clearly, this Yue girl hadn't heard much about Mai, otherwise she'd know that saying garbage like, 'Be at peace,' was a good way to get Mai to do the exact opposite. But, in this case, the opposite consisted of drowning in a panic, and she wasn't quite that spiteful.

So she closed her eyes, shutting out the moonlight ocean she was immersed in. She should be drowning, but Yue had spoken, the words audible without any bubbling or gagging or choking. So the water wasn't real, or breathing wasn't required, or some other stupid spirit nonsense like that. So Mai didn't have to worry about it. She could focus on something else.

Like Aang.

She thought of the boy who believed in her. Who loved her. The kid with more responsibility than a whole dynasty of monarchs. The young man who had been hurt and manipulated and betrayed but who still smiled.

"Ah, that's a good idea," Yue said.

Mai's eyes snapped open.

She was still in the depths of an ocean, her hair and robes bobbing on the underwater currents, but now there was no longer just an endless view of blue.

Now, a glowing line like the light of the summer sun traced a path from the center of Mai's chest across the endless ocean.

And beside her was a water-distorted collection of moonbeams that somehow look a lot like Yue, her illusory body clothed in a glistening, snowy wind.
Yue held out a ghostly hand. "Your connection to Aang is strong. Come, let us follow it. I think we'll like what we find at the other end."

Mai reached out for Yue's hand, closing her eyes just before they made contact, and felt warm skin against her own. She didn't open her eyes again until they started moving through the water, and saw that Yue was still there, still made of light, and somehow was propelling herself without the tediousness of swimming, following the glowing line coming out of Mai's chest. Questions burned in Mai's mind, but she did her best to ignore them, lest they take her down a path of once again wondering why she wasn't drowning.

So she returned her thoughts to Aang and said, "Do you come here often?"

Yue's ghostly lips might have quirked. "I have been here since the beginning of time, and this is my first time here. It's confusing to me, too."

Great.

Stupid spirit nonsense.

The cargo elevator rose into the cold air of the Bastion's surface-level facilities with a racket of clanking chains, and Zhao found himself facing an array of Crimson Royal Guard soldiers in Firebending stances.

Ah.

Well, he'd just survived inhuman monsters from a world beyond mortal understanding. Bamboozling a group of warriors should be no problem, especially considering that they couldn't conceive of greater success than guarding a man who could fight better than them.

Zhao scowled at them and stepped off the elevator platform without fear. "What are you waiting for? The Fire Lord is down there and Prince Lu Ten has escaped! We need to-"

"Admiral Zhao, you will surrender yourself on suspicion of treason." Two of the Guards moved to block his path. "Where is the Fire Lord?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you! I came back to- to bring reinforcements! Lu Ten has escaped, do you understand?" Zhao couldn't know, though, how much they really did understand. He hadn't been apprised of the full situation. Otherwise, he never would have gone down into that- that disaster on the lower levels. Even now, there was so much about Iroh's plans that he still didn't know.

When the spirits had become corrupted and turned on their allies, Zhao knew it had been time for him to leave the Bastion. He'd let The Annoying Tribal, Sokka, lead some of the spirits away, and then the collaborator Maliq had fled and drawn even more pursuit, while everyone else pressed on towards the supposed Spirit Oasis, a place that (by design) offered no escape. Ridiculous. That's when Zhao had started making his own way back to the elevator, retracing the steps he'd memorized. With his Firebending, he'd had light enough to see by, and he'd ignored the echoing screams that meant the others were serving as excellent distractions.

Really, he'd probably been in more danger back in the Capital, when Piandao had hunted him on the orders of the late 'Prince Ozai.' If the past year had proved anything, it was that he had formidable survival instincts.

So he didn't flinch when the Crimson Guards all took a step towards him-
"Wait," came the voice of Lian the Maker. "Considering what the moon's been doing, I think we better hear him out."

Zhao couldn't stop himself from grinning.

Lian stepped past the guards, her face tight enough to stretch the tattoo of the gear teeth under her left eye into something like a transcribed telegraph signal. "Lu Ten has escaped? That's confirmed?"

"The Avatar, as Fire Lord Iroh feared, has created the worst-case scenario. The Prince is free, and he's corrupted the spirits that the rebel Tribals took into the Bastion. We already have casualties. We need new solutions, now." Zhao spread his hands out. "And I am here to provide you all the information you need to save the day, Lian the Maker."

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't think you're going to save yourself. You stole my Unhcegila head, and my work-"

"Wait," Zhao said. Her outrage - or rather, the subject of it - gave him an idea.

This.

This was why he pushed forward, and put as many elements in play as could serve him. He might not be the omniscient planner that Iroh claimed to be, but that was fine. Iroh's machinations were currently falling apart, and Zhao was proving skilled at improvising.

Before Lian could start on her rant again, Zhao continued, "We need a weapon to use against spirits down there, and we've seen how limited a platinum blade can be. This 'Unhcegila' thing can destroy spiritual entities at a distance, yes? Like the vines in your demonstration? There must be a way to weaponize it."

Lian opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it again. Her eyes lost focus. "M-aaaaybe if there was a power source. And an amplifier. And enough platinum wiring. And a regulator. And-"

"Don't tell me," Zhao cut in. Honestly, sometimes it was like everyone outside the military lacked all brains. "Get to work. I'll make sure every soldier here is at your disposal. Thanks to my efforts that you call theft, you have materials from your lab, and this is a functioning military base with the best of Fire Navy technology. If you can't cobble together the necessary components, perhaps you aren't the genius the Fire Lord thinks you are."

Lian glared at him. "Don't think this is over. The Fire Lord will eventually get a full report." She spun on her heel and hurried out of the room.

Zhao wondered if he'd have to ensure she suffered an 'accident,' after she put together a weapon he could use to eliminate the threat of Lu Ten. Perhaps the same accident that would befall the Fire Lord.

But he could worry about that later. He was, apparently, very good at improvising.

Zhao looked to the Crimson Guard still standing around at a loss. "Well? Shouldn't you be trying to save the Fire Lord's life? I can point you in his direction, if you like. I am in command here, after all."

Unless time worked differently in this place, Mai's golden glowy tether had not brought her to Aang.

The man's age was hard to determine, but he was definitely an adult, older than Mai, even. He
seemed worn and drained, and in the silvery light that struggled through the vast waters around them, his long hair shifted between darkness and grays. But there weren't any traditional signs of aging, no wrinkles or distillation on his face.

And when he opened his eyes to watch her approach, his gaze and smile were youth incarnate.

"Hey," he said, "I know you." The voice was completely unfamiliar, and in no way echoed Aang's. This couldn't just be an adult version of the boy who she had followed around the world. Besides, there were no arrow tattoos, and there was a hint of gold in his eyes.

Mai shook her head. "You're not who I'm searching for. So shut up." She looked to the collection of light that was Yue, still at her side. "What's going on?"

Yue's form wavered for a moment, almost becoming lost in the currents of the waters. "I don't know. But you are definitely connected to this man. Are you sure you don't know him?"

Mai was going to deny it again, but the man's grin widened, and he cut her off with, "Mai knows me, but she's not aware of it. Just like Aang how knows me as well, but only when he's in full communion with the Avatar Spirit."

The light that was Yue's eyes flared. "You're one of Aang's past lives! You were once the Avatar!"

Oh.

More spirit nonsense.

But the man brought his hands up to cradle the tether of light that joined his heart to Mai's, and then he blew on it, somehow, despite the water they were all floating in. And it was as if a cold wind tickled across her back, the sensation skipping over the skin she didn't have in this world to flow directly into her consciousness, flooding her with light and knowledge.

"Wan," she found herself saying. "You're Avatar Wan. The first Avatar."

And then, properly this time, she looked at him.

It wasn't like before, when she was taking in his appearance. This time, she saw more than just roguish eyes, tiny nose, and tuft of hair on his chin. Reincarnation was a hard concept to process, sometimes, because new lives could be so different. Fictional stories liked to carry forward some aspect of the previous life to the next one, so that the audience would know for sure that the same spirit resided in each, but that wasn't how real life worked at all. Regular human perception couldn't find the trace of the old life in the new; a similar smile was at best coincidence and at worst a willful.

But Mai wasn't really looking through her own eyes, here. Wherever her body was, it wasn't in this fake ocean. And so when she looked at Wan, it wasn't her eyes that found the Aang within.

But vision was a hard thing to let go of, especially for her, and so she tricked herself into seeing the thread of light that connected her to Wan extending out of his back and onward into the ocean.

"Good," Wan said, giving her a smirk that made her heart skip a beat despite the lack of physical, meaty heart. Aang's past life was rather nice-looking, she had to admit. "All of his past lives have been scattered, and Aang has been left alone, but you can find us."

"She can," Yue confirmed, which was nice, because Mai herself wasn't sure at all.

So she shrugged and tried to scowl. "We're in a bit of a hurry, though. There really isn't enough time
for a whole quest. I've already got one of those."

Wan winked at her. "Good thing the first Avatar was a thief, then. I've stolen all the time you need." And then he spread his hands out at his sides, and his form faded into a blue glow-

And then Mai was flying through the trail of light, deeper into the ocean, so fast that bubbles (which made no sense at all) swirled around her. She was glowing, and realized it was the same full moon light that Yue was made of; the princess was probably hitching a ride.

Mai decided she must be traveling pretty fast, or whatever the closest equivalent was in the Spirit World. She lighter than before, but also heavier.

It didn't make sense until she realized that she was carrying Wan inside her.

And, increasingly, more spirits. They clung to her essence as she flew through each of Aang's past lives on the way to his endpoint.

Fire Lord Iroh stood in the ruins of the Spirit Oasis, hands folded in the sleeves of his royal robes to keep them from shaking.

How he had come to be living his worst nightmare, he could not be sure. He had worked so hard to prevent this, done so much- and, yes, inflicted so much hurt. It wasn't yet wasted effort, but it was becoming a wide avenue for doubt, at least.

Although, he could not help but feel a little bit of wonder, as well, at how this had finally come to pass. He never could have imagined that when this moment finally came, he would be confronting his son alongside a Waterbender and a circus acrobat. Soldiers would have been a reasonable guess. Lian, certainly, had been a strong possibility. Pakku at one time, had been compelled by Iroh's control of the Moon and Ocean Spirits to offer his assistance, before his death. Even Zhao might have had to play a part. Iroh had also been hoping for the Avatar, or some of the more spiritual members of White Lotus. But none of his plans had come to pass in the way he either hoped or planned for, which just proved how interesting and adventurous life could be.

Honestly, Iroh could do with a bit less interest and adventure, especially in this matter.

So he stood in the Northern Water Tribe's Spirit Oasis, right next to the door, patiently waiting for the hungry presence he could feel approaching, and quietly listened to the panicking of his companions.

"They're gone," Katara of the South said. "Where did they go?! Mai and Yue were right here and- I thought they were supposed to find a way to free Aang!"

"I think that's what they're doing." Lady Caldera Yu Ty Lee (although a reordering of titles was in order once the devastation at the capital was fully processed) picked up a glistening object from amidst the Oasis's charred grasses. "But why would Mai leave her platinum knife behind? She loves her knives! And this one seems to be especially comforting to her when she's dealing with the supernatural."

"What do you mean that's what they're doing? How is disappearing like Aang supposed to bring Aang back?" Katara moaned. "We need less people disappearing, not more. Not after Sokka- we can win this by staying together!"

Iroh recognized the tortured desperation in the girl's voice. She was losing companions - losing family - one by one, and it was destroying her. From what he'd pieced together, she never had much
to lose in the first place. Her parents had died trying to protect her from the Fire Nation, and then she'd grown up in captivity on Crescent Island. The fact that she wasn't turned into a festering figure of fear and anger was a testament to a resilient spirit, but since her liberation she had been given a taste of comfort and freedom and family. Truly, the cruelest thing to do to a person dying of thirst was to give her a drop of water before leaving.

Perhaps that was why Iroh had done what he did. After his father, his wife, his brother—well, after a life with so little expression of love, how could he not invest everything in his son?

He shivered as he remembered that day, when the triumph of conquest gave way upon the sight of his son's body, soaked and blue, a mere physical object with no sense of life. That sight had nearly killed him. Was it any wonder—

But then, that was just another way of shifting the blame. Iroh had made his choices, elevating his love for his son over all other concerns.

And now it was time to face the consequences. Literally.

"I sympathize with your worries," Iroh said to Katara. Her gaze moved to him, and her eyes begged him for wisdom that could save her family. Of course, he had no such wisdom to offer. "However, I am afraid we have more immediate concerns. L-" His voice nearly hitched, and he quickly shifted his words. "Our enemy is here."

Katara and Ty Lee both turned to face the Oasis's damaged portal. He didn't miss that Ty Lee tossed Mai's knife to the Waterbender, which was quite wise, considering that Waterbending had probably been nullified by the strange phenomenon with the moon. There had been reports of the same thing happening years ago when—

-when-

Hopefully, that knife would not be used. But let it comfort the girls, for now.

"Lu Ten," Iroh called out. "My son, please, let us not fight."

The darkness remained silent or a long moment, and then- "I am hungry, Father."

Iroh forced himself to smile for his little boy. "I know. It must be awful for you. But none of this is helping. If you could just—"

"You are trying to take the Avatar away." Something moved in the shadow of the gate. "I feel them. But he is mine, now. Mine."

Katara and Ty Lee each moved towards the gate, but Iroh waved them back. Either in victory or loss, there was no way violence could bring this to a good end. "My son, the Avatar can help you, but only if you let him go."

"I-" The voice choked, and it no longer had any strength in it. "I don't think I can. I'm sorry, Father."

"It's okay, Lu Ten. It's okay." He hoped that was true. He wanted to go to his son, to wrap his suffering boy in a hug, but he knew better. "You don't have to do anything, then. Princess Yue is going to take care of it. You know her."

"Y- yes. Yes." The voice wavered, as though holding back sobs, and something hunched over in the shadows. "She was- she was there. When you did this. To me. Made me like this."
Iroh found himself struggling to breathe. "I- Lu Ten, I didn't do- I didn't want you to be like this. I never wanted you to suffer."

"Then why didn't you let me die?!" A figure lurched out of the shadows, into the starlight-like illumination created by polished platinum mirrors.

Iroh forced himself to look at his son. The burn wounds across the face were new, perhaps a legacy of the flames that had torn through the foliage of the Oasis. Incongruously, Lu Ten's uniform was soaking wet, dripping as he stumbled forward, and Iroh caught a scent of the sea, of the night that Lu Ten had drowned.

But the worst part went beyond Lu Ten's mere appearance. Iroh had seen so many things since that awful night, learned so much, and traveled to the Spirit World. He had not emerged unmarked from any of those experiences, leaving him with perceptions that went beyond the human senses and opened the door to awareness of so much that existed beyond the elements.

There was a lack of realness to Lu Ten that could almost allow Iroh to believe this was all a dream - or, more accurately, a nightmare - were it not for the extra heaviness that made him more real than anything around him.

But Lu Ten seemed oblivious to it all, his eyes unfocused and his expression twisted in grief. "I was dead, but you wouldn't let me stay. I was pulled- yanked. I was warm, and then it became so very, very cold. It was wrong. Felt wrong. And, I- I'm always hungry, now. So hungry I can't think, except how I can- how I can feed. You could have just let me die! Why didn't you let me die?!"

"No, my son. What kind of a father - what kind of family - would I be if I did that?" Iroh could smell the waters of that night. The ash and burning oil of his assault on the Northern Water Tribe had been unable to completely cover the frigid, stinging scent of saltwater. It was the seawater that Iroh most remembered about holding his son's lifeless body in his arms. He knew he had seen his son's body-he had to have seen it, but his memories were so faded. Just little glimpses remained, like Lu Ten's pale skin and blue lips, or of the way his wet hair clung to his forehead. But the full picture would never come to him. Perhaps his mind would not allow it; perhaps it was self-preservation, of a sort.

But Iroh remembered the smell of the seawater, and the way his world had smashed to pieces when he realized Lu Ten wasn't breathing.

And, of course, he remembered what he had demanded of the Water Tribe.

"I saved you," he told his son. "I know you've paying a terrible price for that. So many others have, as well. But I will save you from your hunger. I've done so much work, and we're so close. Leave it to us. Go back outside, and please do not hurt anyone. This will be over soon."

"I can't- I- there's people hurt out there, Father." Lu Ten giggled and ran his hands over his burned face, through his soaked hair. "There's people dead."

Iroh raised his hands again to motion the girls to remain back from the gate, but Katara was already stalking forward, tears trailing down her cheeks.

She held the platinum knife in front of her. "Where's Sokka?! What did you-"

And Lu Ten sprang towards her-

-Katara bent her arm and shifted her stance in preparation to stab with the knife that might very well kill her attacker-
-and before Iroh could leap between them he was nearly thrown off his feet by the shaking of the entire Oasis. He dropped into a squat to give himself more balance, and felt the air rise into winds as Ty Lee pranced across the ground towards Lu Ten with a lightness that didn't match even her meager weight-

-but Katara had been shaken to the ground and dropped the knife on impact, leaving her vulnerable.

Iroh could have punched a fireball out to intercept the attacking figure.

But his body was frozen, because he knew-

-he knew-

-that it would hurt his son.

So he just stood there, leaving Ty Lee as their only defense, and hoped that Yue and Mai would fix things soon.

It turned out that finding Aang was only the beginning of Mai's problems.

She felt crushed, pressed in all sides with impossible amounts of weight. She felt that at any moment she would be compressed down to the size of a single fleck of dust, and somehow that pressure was coming from inside as well, giving her the sensation of imminent explosion into ten thousand motes of light.

She hadn't been bothered by the weight and vastness of the endless ocean around her until she'd begun taking on the spirits of Aang's past lives.

She had lost count of how many she'd picked up as she followed her connection to Aang, the line of golden light that floated through the ocean. Each one was different, each one heavy, and she'd felt herself slow down as they accumulated within her essence.

She wondered how many spirits she could take on before she was dragged to a halt.

Not enough, it turned out.

Mai came to the end of the line, approaching a dark spot at the end of her glowing tether, which soon was discernable as two separate bodies.

Aang was in the clutches of Lu Ten, the prince's arms locked around Aang's neck and shoulders. They were floating together in the waters, and neither one seemed conscious.

The corona of moonlight around Mai drifted away to form an image like the body of a beautiful Water Tribe princess named Yue. The ghost princess shook her ghost head. "I cannot interfere with them. If I do, I-I may not remain myself. Lu Ten and I are drawing on the same Moon, and share a connection to the same Ocean. His hunger is so great, and I- I-"

Mai got it. Yue didn't think she could fight.

Well, whatever. Mai herself was only about to be crushed under the power of a dynasty of Avatars that stretched back beyond time, and her own experience with fighting consisted mainly of throwing sharp metal at people. But yeah, let the Moon Princess take a break while Mai figured things out.

If only she had her platinum knife, she could just jam it into one of Lu Ten's ears and get on with life. "Any help from the passengers? Wan? Roku? Anyone?" Mai tried looking within herself, but just
ended up looking down and spinning herself around in the water. "I'll even take Suki's favorite—what was her name? Kyoshi?"

Voices filled her head like the patter of raindrops during a storm, and there wasn't a single word she could understand in the whole mess.

Fine, then. It was up to her. She reached out, pushing past the crushing weight of water and spirits and expectation, grabbing Lu Ten with one hand and Aang with the other and pulling them apart—

And she dropped like a stone as heavy as the moon, plummeting into the darkest depths of the ocean.

Zhao had a heavy feeling in his stomach as he looked on Lian's contraption, assembled in the center of the Bastion's garage, and that was only partially because of the severed monster head in the center of it. "You're sure this is going to work?"

"Of course not." Lian adjusted the green skullcap on her head, perhaps making sure that the platinum ring hidden within was properly protecting her mind, or maybe just getting it to rest more comfortably. "I'm applying the principles of a brand new science, with an unknown number and nature of factors in play, using whatever materials I could scrounge around here, in extremely stressful circumstances. But I am a genius, so we have that much going for us."

Zhao resolved that if this didn't work, Lian was getting all of the blame. "Wonderful. And what, precisely, is this supposed to do?"

Lian moved over to the device, joining the various mechanics and mechanically inclined soldiers who were using plyers and clamps and hammers to get the last pieces in place, and tweaked a fastening around which platinum wire had been coiled. "Well, I had to be careful. We have people still inside the Bastion, including the Fire Lord. It wouldn't do to kill everyone and everything within."

Zhao didn't voice his disagreement. With Iroh and Lu Ten both dead, and Zuko and Azula in self-imposed exile on the Colonial Continent, there would be a power-vacuum in the Fire Nation. The military council might still be sailing back to the Homeland, or perhaps just arrived, but the seat of government was still buried within an active volcano. It was entirely possible that, with the last Fire Lord having made his home here at the North Pole, and Zhao being that Fire Lord's most recent direct promotion—well, ruling the world had a certain appeal, didn't it?

But he knew the limits of his ambition, of course. "So what is your device going to do?"

Lian looked back at him. "We need something that will have an outsized effect on spiritual entities, compared to regular humans, but not one so powerful that we'd destroy anything. Fortunately, the Unhcegila process that we've replicated is still fairly inefficient, and that's with the best materials, so the device might not have any noticeable effect at all."

Zhao waved the possibility away. That would be easy enough to blame on the Maker, too. "And if there is an effect?"

"Then with the platinum installments throughout the Bastion acting as a focusing array, the Unhcegila's feeding power should be channeled down through the structure, where it will weaken any non-biological entities." Lian shrugged. "That might be enough for whoever's down there to take control of the situation, or at least allow us go ourselves to determine if there are any survivors."

Hm, that's it? Well, Zhao could live with providing a factor that turned the tide, if he couldn't be the conquering hero. Time was running out here, after all. And, as much as he might enjoy the thought
of becoming Fire Lord, all he was really looking to do was survive. Survive Iroh, survive the forces he was meddling with, and survive the Avatar.

"Very well," he said. "You may activate the device when ready."

Lian turned a glower at him. "I don't take your orders. But I agree with your recommendation." She waved the soldiers away, and flipped a switch wired into the device just below the Unhcegila head.

The device began shaking. All the soldiers got some distance.

The main structure of the contraption had started as a snowcrawler. Its internal combustion engine, as well as those of the rest of the crawler fleet, started first, providing the power necessary to start the process. Gears turned, glass bulbs began glowing, and metal wires heated until they were shining.

Lian pointed at the soldiers she'd recruited. "Initiation is complete. Make the connections!"

They scrambled into motion, snapping together structures made out of scavenged metal piping into makeshift circuits. The piping shook as it conveyed power from the hydroelectric heart of the Bastion, transferring the motion of the waterfall that had once fallen into the Spirit Oasis into the energy that fed the fortress. The power was out on the lower levels, indicating a problem somewhere in the mechanism, but the scuttled battleship that was serving as the head of the Bastion was right above the start of the waterfall, and was still producing power-

The lights went out, except for the gas lanterns.

The device shook even harder, and the Unhcegila-

It opened its mouth and began screaming with a voice that scraped somewhere between the sound of a large animal and the cries of a hurt human baby.

Lian clapped. "It's working!"

"Oh," Zhao said over the din, "good."

Katara started to feel hope again when Lu Ten suddenly doubled over in pain, because, up to that point, she and Ty Lee had been losing pretty bad.

Iroh hadn't been any help at all. He'd just stood there as Lu Ten rushed in towards the koi pond. It had been up to the girls to fight him off.

Not that Katara was much help.

Her Waterbending wasn't working. She'd felt something, earlier, when the lights went out. Ty Lee, when she'd passed on Mai's knife, had described how Yugoda lost the ability to feel the ocean when the moon turned red. And now Katara couldn't work with even the waters right here in the Oasis, neither the waters of the koi pond or the moat being fed by the rushing leak in the broken wall in the back of the room.

And yet, even after the lights had gone out and Lu Ten escaped, Katara did Waterbend, once. It was when she and the Dreamcatchers had been lost and alone and had seen a light approaching them. She'd reached out to the approaching shadow figures, seizing the blood of the person in front-

And Sokka had cried out in pain. She stopped immediately.

She'd used Bloodbending on her own brother.
The very memory made her feel sick.

So she made do with the platinum knife that Mai had left behind.

Or rather, tried to make do but mostly just failed to help Ty Lee at all.

Lu Ten was unstoppable. He was fast and tricky and could hold his own even against a Weapon of the Fire Nation. Katara had learned self-defense from Mai and Ty Lee, but couldn't even tag the prince. He had inhuman strength and movements that didn't seem to match the way a body was supposed to move. He didn't use Bending the way Katara had always experienced it; it was as if the elements themselves were fighting as his allies, without him even calling for them, shaking the whole fortress and freezing the air in her lungs and lighting the very ground on fire-

The flames licked at her boots and pants, sending Katara dancing away even as Ty Lee leaped the flames and rode a wind to close in on Lu Ten.

Well, if she couldn't command the water, she might still be able to use it! She jumped into the haphazard moat that ringed the room, escaping the fires and dousing the bit of her coat that had caught aflame. She waded 'downstream' until she had circled around the brawl, and then climbed up into the garden proper to hopefully get a chance to stab Lu Ten in the back-

Lu Ten was gripping Ty Lee by the wrists and forcing her to the ground, leaning over her and hissing, "Hungryyyyy..."

Ty Lee gasped, eyes unfocused.

Katara readied the knife-

And that's when Lu Ten let out a cry of his own, let go of Ty Lee, and hunched as if a spear had been shoved through his stomach.

(Katara knew what that looked like. She'd seen her mother die that way.)

Ty Lee scrambled away, holding her arms too stiffly, and Katara stepped out to defend her friend if necessary-

But Lu Ten was turned back towards the entrance to the Oasis, snarling, "Something is happening. My hunter spirits- dying- why-"

And then he leaped up to the ruined and twisted metal walls of the oasis. He grabbed on to one of the loose plates and climbed up into the darkness of the distant ceiling. Katara heard the pounding of metal from somewhere up there, but couldn't place the source of the echoes. Was he trying to escape? Or break something up in the darkness?

There was a shattering, and then silence. Katara wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

So for now, she focused on Ty Lee. "How badly are you hurt?"

"Just a sprain." Ty Lee forced a smile that almost covered her whimper. "In both my wrists, both my elbows, and I think he tore something in at least one of my shoulders, too."

Ty Lee was out of the fight. If only Katara could still use her Waterbending!

And then a cry came from the broken gate of the Oasis, the worst thing Katara could ever think to hear:
"Quickly, Sokka's dying!"

It was purely by instinct that Mai grabbed at the line of shining sunlight that connected her to Aang.

It didn't make any sense, of course. That light was just a visualization of the emotional bond they shared, and her hand couldn't have any substance, either, since this was the Spirit World. There was no friction, no materials to catch on to, nothing that should have prevented her from plummeting further into this endless ocean that also wasn't real (probably).

And yet, somehow, she was saved by her connection to Aang.

The Spirit World, apparently, was the place where metaphors went to roam free.

She held onto that line of light, and began pulling herself upward, one hand at a time. She was still weighed down by the past lives of the Avatar(s), but the line didn't break, and she found the strength in her arms to keep pulling herself up. It was no harder, really, than sticking by her friends even after she had betrayed them. Compared to that, hauling up ten thousand lazy dead slobs was no problem.

Eventually, she reached up a hand, and instead of finding more solid light, her fingers encountered fabric and the thin body beneath it. She looked up into the face of Aang. His eyes opened, and he gazed down at her as if from across a distant dream. A cluster of bubbles escaped from his mouth.

"Hey," she said.

He stared at her. "Who are you?"

She looked at the glowing line that represented her connection to Aang. So much for metaphors. "Aang, it's Mai. Do you remember? When you came out of the iceberg? And- and all this time-"

He blinked sleepily. "Who's Aang?"

Above him, Lu Ten let out a bubbling noise that could have been laughing, could have been crying, or could have just been the sound of drowning.

Ty Lee's heart ached as Katara's aura went a mix of black and bright yellow, an ugly combination that was all the fear and pain of losing a brother like Sokka.

Rafa and Yugoda stumbled through the gate of the Oasis, followed by the Dreamcatcher Waterbender warriors, all of them working together to carry a body as quickly and comfortably as possible.

It was Sokka.

The first thing that Ty Lee noticed about him was that he had no aura whatsoever.

The second thing she noticed was the blood all over his coat.

Yugoda reached out for the water of the koi pond as the other Dreamcatchers laid Sokka out on the burnt grass, but nothing happened, and the healer's aura fizzled with black. "Oh. Waterbending doesn't work here, either.

Ty Lee's own aura went murky brown. Katara and Iroh both hurried over, but Ty Lee remained where she was, starting a breathing exercise and beginning the process of reconciling her negative emotions. She didn't meant to be negative or leech the energy from the room, but she had seen
enough life to know what its absence looked like.

Even so, she realized this was the first time in her life that an actual friend was dying on her.

People she knew had died in the war, of course, including her own father. But he had only come home from the war a few times, and he spent all of those visits ordering her to learn how to fight and calling her stupid for not wanting to hurt anyone permanently, so she didn't really consider him a friend. A secret she'd never tell her sisters is that she had been kind of relieved when they heard about his death at Omashu.

But Sokka- she loved Sokka. He'd been nice about crushing on her, and let it go when he realized she didn't love him that way. He wanted to take care of everyone while pretending to be cranky about it. It made him one of the most generous people she knew, even if he hated sharing his food.

But death was part of life. The price for living was dying, and the reward for dying was getting to live again. Ty Lee focused on the fact that Sokka had died saving his family and friends. The best way to honor his passing was not an outpouring of grief, but by taking over his role and making sure that everyone got out of this to live happy lives. She took her urge to cry, to just sit down and give up, and rolled it into a little ball. She balanced the ball on her nose, just to let it know that there were no hard feelings, and then tossed it away. What was left was sorrow, but sorrow was okay. It was a color on the path to a glorious pink aura, a path that had to be walked time and time again.

She knew Sokka would approve of this.

After all, she had to keep it together for his sister.

Katara was already bawling as she ran over to her brother's still form. "Sokka! Sokka! What- what happened?!!"

"We tracked him as best we could, but we were too late." Yugoda shook her head. "He was still breathing when we found him. It was all we could do to get him away from the spirits. We barely made it here! If they hadn't just stopped chasing us when they did- And we hoped that the special Spirit Water here would help him, considering his injuries, but-"

That's when Yugoda looked down and noticed that Sokka had, in fact, stopped breathing.

The silence that followed hung over them all.

Katara raised her platinum knife and sliced the blade across the palm of her hand. "Tell me about this 'Spirit Water.' Please." Her aura flared a bright, beautiful red.

Ty Lee had no idea what was going on, but she could see that it was going to be profound.

Yugoda's eyes were wide, but she kept her voice even. "The waters of this Oasis are said to have unique healing power. Certain death has been staved off more than once by them, and many think they bring similar healing to the spirit."

"I see." Katara cupped her hand so that the blood of her wound pooled in the palm. "Ty Lee, could you please get me some?"

Ty Lee remembered how Katara had used her Waterbending to defeat Master Pakku, when they were trying to escape from the secret Fire Navy base near the Northern Air Temple. She'd taken control of Pakku's blood, and so his whole body. Katara hadn't seemed happy about it.

But Ty Lee knew that Katara would rather the pain of Bloodbending than that of losing her brother.
"Okay."

Moving carefully to accommodate her sprains, she got a waterskin from Rafa and used it to collect some of the water of the koi pond. She didn't see any actual koi, which was too bad, because she couldn't help but wonder what a spirit fish looked like. At least the water was clear, proper water now, and not the black sludge from when they had first arrived. Mai had fixed that, somehow.

Ty Lee brought the waterskin back to Katara, and at a nod, poured it into the cupped hand along with the blood.

Katara used her other hand, her fingers waving precisely in intricate patterns, to float the diluted blood into the air.

This time, Yugoda stepped back, and her aura flickered with yellow fear. "How are you doing that?! Our Waterbending-"

"-isn't working," Katara finished. "But Bloodbending is. I don't know how, but maybe I can use it to save Sokka."

Ty Lee twiddled the empty waterskin in her hands. "Well, it makes sense. Lu Ten and Yue both draw from the Moon Spirit. Lu Ten is probably the one messing with the Waterbending. And maybe the moon is what usually make Waterbending happen, like the sun and Firebending, but- well, blood has some salt in it, right?"

Katara inhaled. "Our blood is just a little ocean we carry inside of all of us. And the Ocean Spirit wants to help us!" Her aura went iridescent.

Ty Lee smiled. "So use your little ocean to save your brother."

And so Katara went to work. She floated the mix of blood and Spirit Water into the gashes of his coat. She closed her eyes as she worked, moving her hands back and forth in the air, and tears leaked down her face. "I- I can't find- there's so little Qi. I don't know-"

Ty Lee leaned against Katara's back, reaching out to lay her hands on top of Katara's and intertwine their fingers, and said, "I know how Qi flows, and I've seen Sokka's aura. Let's see if we can find a little, together."

Katara's eyes opened a bit, and she gave a nod.

Ty Lee watched carefully as she guided Katara's hands. She watched for even the slightest flicker of an aura, of any of Sokka's usual tans and blues and deep reds. Sokka's aura didn't return now, but there something of increasing brightness within, a light that wasn't a light that was shining through his skin. Ty Lee wasn't even sure if anyone else was seeing it. They weren't reacting at all, and it so beautiful that she couldn't imagine anyone ignoring it.

Too bad it didn't work.

Eventually, Katara let herself go limp. "It's gone. The blood and water are mixed in with his. I can't."

Her voice cracked, and she raised her hands to cover her face.

Ty Lee had to fight off her own urge to cry. Knowing how much this would hurt Katara- Ty Lee turned her posture into a hug, letting Katara know that she wasn't alone, that the universe wasn't all loss. Sometimes, that was all Ty Lee could do, for Mai or Katara or any of her friends- let them know that they weren't alone. Sometimes, that could be an important job.
And sometimes, it wasn't enough.

Katara said nothing. She stood up, shaking free of Ty Lee. She stared down at Sokka, perhaps searching for something, or perhaps just taking one final look at him.

Then Katara's aura went fully black, and she turned to the koi pond once again.

Ty Lee didn't get it until Fire Lord Iroh said in a low voice, "I will help you, if this is what you want." He walked over to Katara and put a hand on her shoulder. "Knowing your grief, I could never stand against you. In fact, it occurs to me-" His eyes went over to the Dreamcatchers, who were standing in mourning, and then back to Ty Lee and Katara. "If we both have family troubled in the same way, it would be so nice to work together to-"

"No!" Ty Lee's own aura swirled with browns and grays, her imagination providing vivid images of Sokka tortured in the same way as Lu Ten- and what being responsible would do to Katara. "He'd never want this! Katara, he-"

"I know what Sokka would want." Katara's hands became fists. "Even if it meant living on like Lu Ten, Sokka would do whatever I need. He started on this whole path to save me, after a decade of not even knowing if I was alive. I don't know if I'm strong enough to survive without my family."

Ty Lee's heart broke. "Katara-"

Katara squared her shoulders, shook off Iroh's hand, and stepped away from him. "But he gave me the chance to try, and with people like Ty Lee and Aang and Mai and- and everyone beside me, I'm not going make the same mistake you did."

And Katara's aura turned golden, shining with enlightenment.

Ty Lee's heart skipped a beat at the wondrous sight.

Iroh lowered his head. "You are right. It would be to my benefit if you agreed, but- you have made the right choice. And so I must apologize for not heeding your wishes."

Ty Lee was so dazzled by Katara's aura that she almost missed Iroh's attack.

Almost.

Iroh had beaten her back in the laboratory, but even though he'd knocked her head hard enough to give her (yet another) concussion, she remembered very, very clearly how he had beaten her. He wasn't faster than her. No one was. He'd just known where she was going to be, put his hands and legs into those places, and then used leverage and a really good knowledge of hand-to-hand fighting.

So, this time, Ty Lee didn't do what anyone would expect her to.

And so, as Iroh raised a hand towards Katara that was accumulating flames as it rose, Ty Lee didn't use her arms or her fists, the way she usually did. They were injured, anyway. Instead, she threw herself into a forward flip and kicked out a stormwind towards her Fire Lord. He responded by abandoning his attack and falling into a low stance with crossed arms. But the great thing about Airbending was that it didn't need to obey the usual rules of fighting. It was all around. So while Iroh was dealing with her frontal attack, she backflipped, this time using her kick to pull a stormwind towards her. And Iroh's back.

He stumbled forward, his hands flailing out in front of him instinctively to break a possible fall-
And Ty Lee’s knuckles were there to meet them.

Pain exploded in each of her sprained joints, and she wasn't even trying to use the arm with the torn shoulder. That slowed her down a little bit, so even as his arms dropped limply, Iroh looked straight at her and huffed a fireball at her face.

She was so shocked and appalled that she blew a gust of wind right back at him. It didn't do much as an attack, but it dispersed the flames long enough for her to duck and jam a fist into one of his thighs, and then the other.

Fire Lord Iroh fell flat on his face, and Ty Lee let herself have a little smile.

Then Lu Ten dropped down on her head with a screech of, "Father!"

Mai was being pulled in two directions at once, and she knew it was only a matter of time until she was torn apart.

The weight of the Avatars and whatever forces controlled this stupid spirit ocean world were pushing her into the darkness. The only thing keeping her from falling was her connection to Aang and the metaphorical arms she was using to hold onto it. She knew the weight would never go away, while the connection could not be broken this way. And she refused to let herself fall.

Aang couldn't help. He didn't even know himself, never mind her.

So she would be torn in half- or whatever that represented in this metaphorical place. There was no fighting this situation.

But - maybe - she could do something clever.

So Mai pulled herself up just a little further and pressed her lips against Aang's in a kiss.

It probably wasn't a real kiss, since they weren't physically present. It was a connection of spirits, a conduit between their hearts, and through that conduit, Mai passed on everything that was weighing her down. She sent every single one of the past Avatars into the embrace, and it was like kissing them all one by one. It started with Wan and progressed through a line of faces and lips and lives that blurred together. It was the strangest sensation of her entire life, but - somehow- also a familiar one.

She passed each one to Aang, and in turn felt a hunger that threatened to drain her of all life. She knew it wasn't Aang's hunger; it felt nothing like him, and Aang didn't use things up like that. Well, she didn't take kindly to threats, and she had every Avatar who had ever lived to back her up.

She was betting that, together, she and them - she and Aang - were better than a little unnatural hunger.

So she gave it all up. She sent all of the Avatars into the hunger, as well as all of herself- her experiences and thoughts and real emotions and the fake emotions she used to cover her real emotions and her quirks and fears and joys and flaws.

Because if Aang liked her so much, maybe there was something to her, after all.

The kiss stretched on for an eternity, but she wasn't just kissing Aang. Or, at least, not the Aang she knew back in the material world. She was kissing the baby he once was and the child who had so many friends and the growing boy who lost them all for a title he didn't want and the near-adult who ran away from everything and the Avatar Returned who worked so hard to run back to everything to
set it right. She herself was the baby left alone while Mother and Father did important things and the child who was slapped for singing too loudly and the growing girl who was so good at disappearing into the background of life and the near-adult who lost her prince to corrupted honor and the Weapon who worked so hard to hurt the world before it could hurt her first.

The kiss broke, and Mai found that she was no longer sinking. She was a bubble of individuality in the endless ocean, tethered to another person-like-bubble who looked at her with gray eyes and smiled.

"Mai," Aang said, "you found me." His form flickered through all the Aangs she had experienced, the baby and the child and the boy and the teenager and even a handsome adult she hadn't met yet.

Was she doing the same thing?

She decided not to worry about, and gave him a smile in return that probably looked awkward on every single version of herself. "Well, I couldn't just let you go. You never let me go."

They turned together to check behind Aang, and found that while Lu Ten - or some version of him - was still there, he no longer had a grip on Aang. Lu Ten drifted on the currents, reaching out futilely, lips blue and face puffy.

Yue, the collection of moonbeams in the form of a woman clad in snow, floated over to Lu Ten and laid a hand on his forehead. "I'm sorry for what was done to you. I wish you well in your next life." She pushed, and Lu Ten glowed until the light was all there was to him. Then his light faded, and hers grew brighter. "Goodbye. When your body is destroyed, you will at last be at peace." She turned to Mai and Aang. "Are you ready to go?"

Mai looked to Aang - all him - who nodded back at her. "Let's get out of this stupid, stupid place."

Her non-lips were still tingling. How many people had she kissed just now?

Sokka woke up when he heard something scream with what seemed like a human voice mixed with the sound of reality turning itself inside out.

He wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew he couldn't be dead. He hurt far too much, unless he had been reincarnated with full knowledge of his past life into something like an ant that had been stepped on the moment it was born, which admittedly would be pretty much his luck.

Still, he was reasonably certain that even Avatars didn't have to put up with that kind of nonsense, so he was probably still alive.

He opened his eyes.

He seemed to be in a garden that someone had burned down, contained with haphazard metal walls that had seen better days and were letting in leaks of water and outcroppings of stone through the gaps. He looked down at himself, and saw that he was wearing a well-made Water Tribe parka that had been ruined by scary-looking gash marks and massive still-damp blood stains. So, he was definitely himself, although this raised other questions, none of which were very pressing at the moment, such as why he was alive.

He sat up (and ow, he might not be bleeding anymore but his abdomen did not like this kind of motion) and looked around.

A fight must have just finished, on the other side of the garden. People were scattered on the ground,
and Sokka didn't recognize all of them. Their white Water Tribe coats seemed familiar. Yeah, hadn't he teamed up with people like that? And there was one in pink - Ty Lee! She wasn't moving. In fact, no one was moving. Iroh was down, too, but he was different from the others: his eyes were open, his expression twisted in outright terror, and he had that loose-limbed look of Ty Lee's victims. This situation did not seem to be anything close to good.

And then Sokka saw that one last person seemed to be in the fight. A man in a Fire Navy uniform was advancing on-

-on Katara!

She had her hands out as if she was Waterbending, but there was no liquid in the air. The man - he had to be this Prince Lu Ten guy, the monster - seemed to be struggling to approach her, one crooked step at a time, so maybe the water was invisible?

Whatever it was, it was only delaying Lu Ten.

Sokka felt really awful. His body was fragile, like it was barely holding together, and he was tired in a way that he'd never experienced before. He'd felt exhaustion, real exhaustion, several times in his life, and this was worse. This was a weariness that went even deeper than his bones. The closest thing he could compare it to was waking up from a really deep and vivid dream, when reality itself seemed less real than the dream that just ended and was still echoing through the brain. Only this was about a million times worse. Sokka felt like he had walked from a whole other world to get here.

He was suspicious that Spirit Stuff was involved.

He was pretty sure he remembered dying-

But he was still him. That much he knew. So that's good.

Well, he could get the answers later, if he decided that he wanted them. For now, it looked like his sister and allies were in trouble. Again. And he wasn't feeling at all clever right now.

Well, well in doubt, stick with the basics. First, he needed a weapon. He looked around, dismissing charred grass, his boots, a piece of burnt wood that seemed to be more ash than anything, a shiny pointed thing with wet blood on one edge-

Oh.

He had no idea why Mai's platinum knife was here and not Mai herself, but that was one of those Later Problems he was starting to collect. For now, he solved one of his Now Problems by picking the knife up. There, he was armed. He had one less Now Problem.

Lu Ten was the other big Now Problem.

Well, hey, as long as Sokka was keeping thing simple, perhaps the Platinum Knife Solution that had worked on the first problem could also solve this one.

He got to his feet. He took his time with this, because his abdomen and all the squishy things inside it still weren't so crazy about the newfangled Moving Around business, and his legs seemed to have forgotten how to support weight. Plus his head had taken up dizziness as a hobby while he was asleep (or dead or whatever), and that wasn't helping anything.

But he kept his eyes locked on the fight. On Lu Ten, who got closer to Katara one stiff step at a time. The Monster Prince didn't have much further to go. But he didn't look like he was winning. Or even
hoped to win. He looked like he was trying not to cry, and it was all he could do to still pay attention to the woman he was about to attack.

Well, okay. Sokka liked a distracted enemy. He made himself walk, but that didn't work and he wound up falling into a crawl. But crawl he did, because he had to help. No one seemed to be paying any attention to him as he came right up behind Lu Ten.

Monster Prince's hands grasped towards Katara—

—and Sokka shouted, "Sneak attack!" as he jammed the platinum knife right into Lu Ten's back.

Lu Ten jerked away and screamed like a storm- and yeah, it was the same weird noise that had woken Sokka up. What could have caused the prince to scream like that before?

And Iroh was moaning, a long tortured sound that made Sokka think of a wounded wolf stuck alone on an iceplain.

But, more importantly, Katara was looking at him with tears in her eyes and a smile that could heal the world. It was like she wasn't expecting him to save the day, which was ridiculous. He'd done that at least a few times before, right? Probably. Who was keeping count anymore?

Lu Ten was still screaming, on his knees in front of Sokka. Best to finish this off before another alarming twist caused trouble again. Sokka angled the knife for another stab-

And then Iroh said, "Sokka, the Earth King invites you to Lake Laogai."

Where did that come fr-

Reality turned itself off.

Aang felt happier than he had since he'd woken up at the South Pole, even though he was on his way to a fight he maybe couldn't win. His lips still tingled from the kiss Mai had given him, and her hands were firmly clasped in his as they rose up through the ocean waters with Yue's power.

The princess's ghostly form floated above them, as insubstantial as a soaked piece of silk, but nothing about her strength was flimsy. Mai had introduced her as someone who shared the power of the Moon Spirit with Lu Ten, their guide here in this manifestation of the Spirit World. They were all ascending so quickly that the moonlight was growing visibly brighter with every moment, but who said distance and speed meant anything in this place?

Aang and Mai were on their way back to the real world, to all the dangers and enemies waiting for them. Yet they had conquered so much already, even the Spirit World itself. There had been losses, and pain, but they'd kept moving forward. Perhaps, soon, they'd emerge into the fresh air.

The light grew brighter until there seemed to be more of it than the ocean itself. And then there was no more ocean, no more salty water, no more resistance. Just the light.

Aang felt the air against his face - real, living air against real, living skin - for the first time in an eternity. He opened her eyes, letting the light in, and shook off the water of the ocean.

He was rising in the center of the Spirit Oasis, still half-submerged, Mai beside him and Yue behind them both.

Except the garden was nothing like Aang remembered. When last he saw it, it was a perfect little
piece of paradise fully contained in a polished metal prison. Sweet grass had ringed the shallow koi pond, while a backdrop of healthy bushes stood at worship to a carved wooden spirit gate, and something like starlight twinkled down on it all.

Now, the grass was ash and bushes and spirit gate were all just a mix of scorched remnants. The platinum walls were ripped and twisted and battered by stone spikes. One gash even had something like a waterfall spilling out of it to create a messy moat around the Oasis.

And the razed garden was littered with bodies- Ty Lee and Sokka and Iroh and Lu Ten and the Dreamcatchers. Katara was the only one upright, and she was kneeling over Sokka, shaking him and calling for him to wake up.

What had happened here?

How was Lu Ten defeated?

Aang hopped out of the koi pond first, riding a wind over the biggest cluster of bodies. He landed near Lu Ten, who turned his head slowly and forced his eyes open. He mumbled, "Thank you f- for freeing- us- b- both-"

And then his body collapsed into black dust.

Yue gasped, and the koi pond flared with white light.

Aang turned around and had to squint through the light. Katara was still calling for Sokka, but Mai hadn't gotten free of the koi pond yet, and Aang had to make sure she was all right. He blinked repeatedly against the glare and was able to make out Yue collapsing onto the scorched grass and Mai pulled some razor discs from her sleeves and stumbled over to the pond's edge-

-and beyond her, Iroh had risen to shaky feet and was moving towards the pond-

-Aang leaped back to try to reach Mai-

-and then Iroh's voice rang out, echoing against the ravaged metal walls, saying, "Mai, the Earth King had invited you to Lake Laogai."

And Mai collapsed in an instant, falling into the unreal depths of the shallow koi pond and becoming completely lost to sight.

*She'd fallen back into the Spirit World!*

Aang shifted the winds to carry him in after her and he straightened himself into a dive as his hands splashed into the pond-

-and then a fireball struck the water, making it boil in an instant. Aang's hands were burned by the steam and the liquid heat, but he was able to grasp something alive, something moving-

-and the koi pond exploded into scalding mists, sending Aang crashing back.

His face burned and his wet clothes stung against his chest, but he concentrated on the living motion in his embrace. He had saved Mai, he had grabbed her and pulled her free-

But the thing in his arms was too small. He shook the burning water off his face and made himself open his eyes. A pair of fish, one black and one white, struggled in his arms. He'd save the Moon and the Ocean Spirits.
But not Mai.

He looked back at the koi pond, now a blackened hole of dried mud. A frigid wind brushed at his injuries— an artic wind. He could feel the garden changing around him, becoming bereft in a way that none of his physical senses could explain.

But Aang understood. This place no longer overlapped with the Spirit World. The connection was broken.

And Mai was trapped on the other side.

Aang’s cry was answered by that of every single Avatar that came before him, the past lives whose connections Mai had restored to him.

And all four elements responded with his pain.

Zhao was about ready to declare himself Acting Fire Lord when Iroh arrived, a little worse for wear but still quite alive.

Ah, too bad.

The evacuation from the Bastion had been rather panicked, and there had been no time to worry about searching for Iroh. Even the Crimson Guards had fled when the ground began shaking and the snows ripped their way into the scuttled battleship that was the fortress's top levels.

There was no doubt as to the cause. It seemed that the Avatar had triumphed over whatever else was inside.

So Zhao had taken command of the evacuation (heroically leading the way, at the front of the group), and brought all the soldiers who had been able to get out to an emergency supply depot a short distance away from the cliffs overlooking the Northern Water Tribe city. The ground wasn’t shaking much, there, so there was little chance of it falling into the sea.

Unlike the Bastion itself.

Once a sight like a massive dam holding back the ice cliffs, but really a prison around the Spirit Oasis, the fortress died that night. Light and mists and snows and smoke and ice and water filled the sky. Zhao had no idea if the Water Tribe city behind the fortress was also being torn apart, but he was sure that the soldiers down there were capable of taking care of themselves. Zhao himself had focused on the survivors from the Bastion, taking account of their supplies and trying to establish some lines of communication to the lab back near the North Pole.

And now Fire Lord Iroh had arrived to see Zhao's professionalism.

(Well, he had to work with what he had.)

Zhao bowed as Iroh stalked into the storage room he was using as an office. "My Lord, I am so relieved to see you alive! We feared the worst."

Iroh slowly turned his gaze on Zhao, almost as if he hadn't recognized him. "Yes. I am sure. I admit, I am surprised to find you here, Admiral Zhao. I last saw you in the Bastion, when the rebel spirits turned on us."

Zhao bowed again. "I am sorry, my Lord. I became separated from the group, and Maliq just insisted
I escape and bring reinforcements. Actually, it was one of my plans that perhaps saved your life. You see, I foresaw the need to evacuate some of the materials from the forest laboratory, and ordered Lian to create a device from the Unhccegila head—"

"Yes," Iroh interrupted. He turned and stared at something that didn't seem to exist. "I passed her on the way here. She was upset about something, I believe. Were you able to save those materials from the destruction of the fortress?"

"I made sure Lian saw to that." And he had, in a way. Confirming after the fact that she had done so on her own self-destructive initiative that was indeed making sure.

Iroh gave a short nod, as if he was barely paying attention. "Good. Our time and efforts here are at an end, but I can think of uses for those resources. Yes, it is good."

At an end? "My Lord?"

Iroh sighed, and finally focused his gaze on Zhao. "My son is dead. Completely and truly, this time. So it is time for a backup plan that I never hoped to use."

Zhao remembered the tour he'd tagged along with, back at the North Pole laboratory, where Lian had showed that annoying Tribal her strange miniature swamp. "The matter of the swamp and the platinum spider?"

Iroh's eyebrows rose. "Very well done, Admiral. Yes, that is it exactly. Some time ago, I arranged for a new invention, a kind of flying vehicle, to be hidden in the snows not far from here. Could you detail a group of Firebenders to uncover and prepare it? We need to get to Foggy Swamp, in the Southern Earth Kingdom, as soon as possible. We only have a maximum of 49 days before Lu Ten reincarnates."

Zhao had already been moving to issue the orders when he'd registered that last part. "What?"

"That is my backup plan. In case my efforts to save my son failed, I identified a spiritual nexus that contains the essence of time itself. It is amazing, Zhao. It must touch everything in the universe. The platinum spider will penetrate the tree's form with its legs, paralyzing the flow of energy through the nexus, and ending death itself. Then I enter the nexus, and set everything right."

Zhao's jaw had dropped. He couldn't think of even the first thing to say.

Iroh gave a rueful smile. "There's a reason it was a backup plan. But to defeat death itself, and restore balance to the world, is worth the loss of the North Pole, yes? Now, while you see to our escape, I think I need some tea. It was a long walk out of the fortress."

And that's when Zhao was finally sure that he was working for a madman.

END OF ACT 4: Spirit Purer Than Snow

TO BE CONCLUDED IN ACT 5: "Nailed to Tree"
Azula Alone

Chapter Summary

Azula takes a good look at the truth.

Azula Alone

Even if Azula could have remembered the dream, she wouldn't have spoken of it. Fear has no place in the heart of the Fire Nation.

It had come to her throughout her life, that same dream again and again. She could be sure because she always woke up from it in the same way, her arms snapping into a defensive Firebending position while her heart hammered an attempt to break free of her chest. Her bedroom would always appear monstrous to her, the elegant architecture and tasteful decorations appearing alien to her eyes, a nauseating backdrop to the true stuff of reality - the shadows that reached up to her bed to claw at her body and whisper that they loved her for her imperfections.

It would take a minute or so for sanity to return, for her to recognize her bedroom and realize that the cold prickling her skin was not the feeling of talons all over her body but simply her sweat-soaked robes sticking to her. With the restoration of sanity came the fading of the memory of the dream, and Azula would always be left with an emptiness in its place.

She wanted those memories. How could she conquer her fear if she couldn't identify it?

But in the end the dream would leave her alone in the dark, and she would pretend that she didn't really miss it. No matter how many times it happened, child or woman or something in between, she would never wipe away the tears she'd always find falling from her eyes.

To touch them would be to acknowledge them.

She'd always let them dry on her face, leaving behind lines of salty crust, and pretend to go back to sleep.

She'd never actually return to sleep after the nightmare, though. She'd never even try.

You can't fail if you don't try.

Azula had failed.

She stood at the edge of a chasm that was deeper than forever and maybe half as wide. In the past, this chasm had protected the Earth Kingdom city of Omashu, but now it separated her from the ashland she needed to get to. Omashu had always been one of the most secure strongholds in the Earth Kingdom, a city-state carved right into the tip of a solitary mountain. The only way to get to it was to cross a single stone bridge that extended out from a neighboring peak, a road that could be collapsed by a team of Earthbenders to dump any unwanted visitors into the void.

The Fire Army had toyed with various ideas for resolving that little problem, Azula knew, but none had gotten past the design phase before Sozin's Comet returned and opened up a much more efficient
way of dealing with the city.

It had all burned.

And now Azula had to cross that chasm without the aid of a Comet.

And she could have, she was sure, even if it meant walking for years. Neither time nor effort was any concern of hers, not with the stakes so high. She was on a quest to restore her mind. She would walk up and down however many mountains she had to—provided, of course, that the terrain was at all passable.

She could see the city at the center of the chasm, a brown smear atop a mountain pedestal, curtains of ash falling down the sloping sides into a dark roiling cloud that obscured any bottom the valley have had.

There was no way, she knew, that ash could fall at such a rate for so long without the ashland shrinking at all. Nor was there any truth to the way the falling cinders filled such a massive chasm so that neither sight nor air were available to any travelers. And yet, that is exactly what she was looking at. To descend into that storm of cinders would be to drown without water. She had come all this way and now she was stuck.

Less than perfect was less than acceptable. She could conquer any obstacle that the physical world might throw at her, but that was the problem, wasn't it? There was more at work here than the physical world.

This was all another trick of the spirits.

But that meant it might be what she needed. It might drive her sane again. She needed to be sane. Something had gone wrong in her back in the Fire Nation. When Father—

(Father was Mother.)

When Mother—

(Mother said she loved Azula. But Azula served her Father because her Mother didn't love her. But Father was Mother. Father was dead. Mother had killed and become him.)

When Mother—

-when-

-when-

Azula's favorite lie was that Mother had left without trying to say goodbye.

Zuzu had talked to her about it, a few times. (Although, given her consistent lack of reaction, it was more like he had talked at her.) He had last seen Mother being led out of the palace by Piandao, disappearing into the dark of the night. Piandao had returned, but not Mother.

(But Mother had returned.)

Zuko had asked both Piandao and Father about it, and neither one ever gave him an answer, not even a lie. He had sought Azula's help, but she rebuffed him. She didn't have time to coddle her own big brother. Mother was gone now. He had to get over it. Only babies cried for their mommies, not powerful royalty.
But even through his own tears, Zuzu would clench his fists and ask when the last time was that Azula had seen Mother.

Oh, probably at dinner. Who cares? Stop crying. You're pathetic.

(It wasn't at dinner.)

It was like Zuzu had said. Piandao had been leading Mother out of the palace, but they had barely begun their journey when Azula stumbled across them. Not that she'd actually stumbled, because she was far too graceful for that. She'd been looking for Father on the top floor of the palace tower, to see if he'd read her the end-of-day report on the war's progress, and walking quite regally because she knew Father hated it when people ran in the halls. She'd been nearly silent in her movements, and Mother and Piandao were surprised to see her.

Mother had whispered her name. Azula. A hand was raised, grasping-

Piandao's voice had been quiet but firm. I believe it is time for bed, young princess. Everything will be fine.

The hand remained outstretched. Mother was silent and blinking back tears.

Azula looked at Piandao. He was Father's personal servant, and the deadliest warrior in the entire Fire Nation. She was young, but she knew those two facts were related.

Azula had looked at Mother. Her mom.

And Azula had turned around and gone to bed.

She hadn't gone to sleep, though. She wound up watching the dawn, never having moved the entire night.

Piandao returned, but not Mother.

But Mother had returned.

Returned wearing Father's face-

We're here.

What?

"I said we're here." The Mud Man leaned over her and stared straight into her eyes. "You wanted to get to the ashland, right? Well, Uncle Mud Man has saved the day. Hooray!"

Azula backed away from him. What was he talking about? Where had he come from? She'd asked the strange man who lived in mud to help her escape from Zuzu and the loud blind girl, to take her to the Omashu ashland so that she could go sane there just like he claimed he did. But she couldn't remember- Sometimes he was with her as she journeyed, leading the way- Sometimes she'd been alone, somehow knowing exactly where to go- She tried to make herself think-

-and found that she'd woken up into a nightmare.

The sky was gone, lost in a wind-whipped haze the color of rot that forced her to squint. The air threatened to choke her with its grainy foulness, the stink of soot filling her nose and mouth and inflaming her sinuses. She raised her hands to cover her mouth so that she could breathe through it,
but some ash still got past her defenses and mixed with the spit in her mouth to scour it.

It was the ashland! Somehow- but the chasm- how-

She realized she was standing at a gate, at the base of the remains of Omashu. Behind her, a road stretched over the gap for a whole arm-span before coming to a jagged, torn end above an eternity of ash. Had it always been that way? Or had it just fallen while she dreamed?

The gate in front of her was a gate in name only. The stone pillars were missing chunks right where the door hinges should be, and the doors themselves were just a memory. If there was anything left of the wall that was supposed to be attached to the gate, it was lost beneath the flow of ash that tumbled down the slope of the black mountain to rain down into the chasm. The ash flowed over Azula’s boots like the breath of a ghost; it offered no resistance to her, not even as much as a stiff wind.

The gate was as brown and filthy as the air, but the pitch black scorch marks still managed to stand out.

But then she’d always had an eye for destruction.

Hadn't she?

It was so hard to be sure, when Mother could be Father and Father could be Mother. If weakness could defeat greatness and the great could be weak. If Mother could put on a mask and say 'I love you' time and time again-

Azula tried to shift her thoughts away from Mo- from-

It was so hard.

"So," the Mud Man drawled in her ear, "was there any place in particular you wanted to see? I'd take you to my favorite noodle joint, but it looks like someone went and burned it down!" He didn't seem bothered by the ash in the air, using his hands to shield his eyes from a sun that wasn't shining here and peering around with his pop-eyed gaze. The mud that normally covered his body (even in the dusty mountains around Omashu, somehow) had been coated and dried by the flying cinders, leaving him wearing a skin of rough clay. "Actually, come to think of it, a lot of this place has been burned down. Very sloppy. Ver-y sloppy. I wonder if that's why they call it an ashland?"

She ignored him and stepped through the gate. What had once been a tall city was now smoothed over ruins, worn down by winds and tumbling ash until all that was left was the strongest of the foundations. Filth ran down over her boots and the wind yanked at her hair until it flew free, but she braced herself and took a step. Then another. And another. Further. Onward. She found what could have once been a road, and pushed against the storm to follow it. She'd reached the ashland, and hadn't gone sane yet, so there was only one thing to do-

Go deeper.

Go higher.

Ascend the mountain and find heaven at the top.

Another step. And another. And anoth-

Her boot slipped and scraped against the cinders flowing across the ground-
-and she stumbled through the burnt remains of the house, smashing the last blackened bit of wall before collapsing into the dirt.

Dirt?

She ran her hands through it, squeezed the loamy soil so that it spilled out between her fingers, and inhaled its odor. There was a burnt edge to it, a legacy of recent ash, but it was still perfect gardening soil, nothing like the filth that now covered the ruins of Omashu. Gardeners would pay for soil like this, and the reason she knew was because Mother once did exactly that. Mother had kept a little potted herb garden on her bedroom balcony, for a while, and had been eager to explain every detail of its construction and operation to an eager mind like Azula's.

And Azula had learned, until Father had-

-Father had-

He'd corrected her behavior. A princess did not need to know about gardening. It was better to give her attention to history and tactics. He was adamant about that.

Mother's garden disappeared soon after.

Not unlike Mother.

Azula shook her hands free of the dirt and looked around.

It was easy to conclude that she was in what had once been a village. Aside from the scorched remnants of wooden buildings, including the mess she'd just tripped over, the packed gray dirt of a crude road was clearly visible in the harsh daylight. The buildings had been spacious, judging from the ruins, but still modest enough for peasants and unsuited for extensive storage. Homes, then. The gardening soil also hinted at lower-class residence, as no reputable merchant would do her own growing. Yet neither was this farming country; the homes weren't spread out enough, the gardens not large enough.

And she was fairly confident that there used to be a forest nearby. Now the horizon was just given over to death.

It wasn't an ashland, not in the formal sense. It was merely gray ground and scattered blackened stubs of tree trunks. There were no adversarial winds, no gloom, no malicious spirits. This was simply a forest that burned down, no stupid haunting required or requested. Someday, things would grow here again.

But-

Wait-

Wasn't Azula in an ashland?

Yes, she was in Omashu. But-

The landscape was the clue. Omashu was a city carved into a mountaintop, but this was the smooth, undulating landscape that could only be created by volcanic activity. This was the Fire Nation. She was in the Fire Nation. One of the Outer Islands, probably.

How could she be in Omashu and the Fire Nation at the same time?
Her head throbbed, and she shut her eyes against the white glare of the sun. Why did it hurt so much to think? Why was her mind burning in her skull? What had Mother-

-Father-

-done to her?

Mother had left. Father had corrected her because he wanted her to be perfect because he loved her so much. Less than perfect was less than acceptable! But-

-had Father ever said he loved her? He gave her attention, and taught her how to be perfect. She'd done everything he ever asked of her, made executing his will into her entire purpose of being, but he'd only started telling her he loved her - only started hugging and patting and looking her in the eyes - after he'd become Mother.

After Mother had become him.

So-

So did Father really love her?

Did Mother?

No.

No, it was a trick. No one loved Azula. Zuko was jealous and everyone else feared her and-

But if no one loved Azula, then how could Father?

What had she been to him?

She needed to get away. The sun was too hot on her head. She didn't even open her eyes as she forced herself to her feet and tried to follow the road away from this illusion. The ground made a futile attempt to dance away from her feet (or so it felt with her eyes closed) because it no doubt feared her, but she mastered it with the true grace and power of a Firebender and only stumbled a little as she tried to run away.

She didn't realize she hadn't found the road after all until she tripped and plunged into a pool of water deep enough to completely submerge her.

Azula spat water out of her mouth, but it didn't even get halfway to the ground before the hazy winds of the ashland battered it into vapor.

Wait, the Ashland?

She had to raise an arm to cover and protect her eyes from the gritty breeze, and the motion sent more droplets of water flying. She was soaked from head to toe, the moisture on her skin and clothes already mixing with the flying soot to cover her in something much more unpleasant than mud. But how could she be all wet if she was in the ashland? There was no water here. She had just fallen into water in that dead, empty pace in the Fire Nation, but-

-but-

She had no idea what was going on.
And the Mud Man was gone again. If he was ever here. If he even existed.

Perhaps this was all a good sign? She'd come here to be driven sane, after all. Hallucinations and strange experiences had assailed her and Zuzu in that other ashland, and as a result her stupid big brother had gotten his Firebending back. So all she had to do was survive this, and maybe she could get her mind back?

Or had Zuzu completed a trial of some kind, marking him as worthy despite his missing eye, low intelligence, and surly attitude?

She didn't know. Why had she come here without knowing? Why was she stupid? *When* had she become stupid?

Maybe she'd never really been smart. After all, she hadn't noticed when Mother became Father.

What else had she missed?

Maybe everything.

She'd also somehow missed walking up onto this bridge.

She wasn't sure where she was, but the entrance gate was completely lost to sight. She couldn't see the edge of city in any direction. The flow of ash passed over smoothed ruins on every side, and the bridge she was on rose up above it all. The ash in the wind still battered at her, but at least the ground was solid. Perhaps that was why she'd made her way to this bridge. Unless it led to a place where she wanted to go?

She decided to find out. With most of her face covered by the crook of an elbow, she followed the thin bridge into the gloom. There was an upward slope, but nothing that so much as inconvenienced her. She hadn't been exercising, since Mother- since Father- She knew she was a bit out of shape, but the journey to the ashland had restored some of her strength. She tried to think back to the last time she'd used her Firebending-

The bridge collapsed beneath her.

She plummeted just long enough to wonder if she would land in another hallucination.

Pain exploded throughout her entire body when she slammed into a stone slide.

She couldn't even try to fight it. She could only gasp for breath and wonder if she was dying as she slid down the ramp on her back. Ash flowed along with her as gravity and the wind combined to accelerate her. She fought against the agony in her body and arched her head to try to see where she was going.

And got just a glimpse of the wall before she crashed into it face-first.

---

Azula couldn't breathe.

Water filled her nostrils, filled her mouth, filled her *lungs*.

She was drowning, but not yet drowned. She needed to get to air, so she needed to survive, she needed to swim. But her body protested, still in agony from her fall from the bridge, leaving her flailing with all the strength of a pathetic, stupid child. The urgent need to breathe began to fade, and she fought against the desire to welcome it. The water was cold in her lungs, cold against her skin,
down here in the depths.

No.

These weren't the depths.

The sun was shining in front of her. The sun of the Fire Nation.

Azula realized that the water around her was up in the air, and the sun was either setting or rising on the horizon, shining and reaching out to her. If she could summon her fire than perhaps she could propel herself to some air!

But when she reached for the fire, she found nothing but ash within.

The sunlight dimmed, and her vision faded at the edges, surrendering to shadow and nothingness. She grew sleepy, struggling to remember why she ever wanted to breathe. This was so much nicer, and it was actually quite warm now that she thought about it. She could just go to sleep. The sunlight was reduced to a single point that would soon be overcome by blindness.

And then she found herself in freefall.

She and the water around here were dropping. Or was she in a river, being swept along with the current? Had the sun been above her, before? No, she knew she was falling now, and before the sun had been in front of her.

Then she hit the ground hard enough to expel the water from her lungs, leaving her coughing and choking and tumbling until she was swept against a half-buried rock that held her in place. A volcanic rock, a little sister to the islands of the Fire Nation. She clutched it until she could breathe again, and told herself that the wetness on her face hadn't come from any tears. Still, she squeezed her eyes shut, just to be sure.

"Azula," came the voices of the legion. "Look at me, Azula."

Azula opened her eyes and looked.

A monster rose up before her, the lone living thing in this dead forest.

Its base was the water, a swirling spout that seemed to have no end even as it flowed out across the ground and submerged the blackened tree stumps. Azula lifted her eyes to follow the spout, seeing the sun shining through it, but as she looked up and up and up she found herself beholding a massive tree, its flowing bark forming something like human musculature. How had the water become a tree? At the top was a pair of long clawed arms and a head that wore a crown of bare, stubby branches. On all sides of the head were faces, white glowing faces, delicate and beautiful faces whose eyes were covered by bark.

"Azula," said all the faces. "Daughter of Ursa."

"No." It came out choked and almost indecipherable. Azula coughed and tried again: "No."

The waterspout tree curved to loom over her, turning the sun a shade of blue that felt cold against wet skin and clothes. "Yes. You are Azula, Daughter of Ursa. She birthed you in the material world as I just birthed you here. You were hers, and now you are mine."

The arrogance made Azula smile. She stood up, leaning on the volcanic rock for support, and stared down the eyeless monstrosity that towered above her. "No. Ursa never loved me. She abandoned
me! I am not her daughter, and I refuse to accept you as a replacement."

"Stupid child. No wonder everyone believes you a liar." The white faces on every side of the monster's head grinned through green lips. "You utter obvious fantasies and pretend they are real, but all who hear them know their flimsiness."

"Shut up!" Azula once again called for her fire, but the only answer was another coughing fit. She hacked up more water, and kept herself on her feet.

The monster hissed something that could have been a laugh. "No matter the lies you tell yourself, your mother always loved you. She came back for you, didn't she? Came to me and asked for a new face she could use to destroy your father. The Avatar gave me Justice for Ursa's betrayal, and now I will have Vengeance by destroying her daughter. You were a fool to come here, Ursa Yu Azula."

Ursa Yu Azula, Azula of Clan Ursa.

It was a perversion of the Fire Nation's naming conventions, but Azula knew it was the only name she could claim at this point. She was disinherited from Uncle's dynasty, knew nothing of Father's fate, and would choose to die before swearing allegiance to a weakling like Zuzu. The Capital Caldera and its clan were both destroyed; the only home open to her was as a hostage in the court of the strange Earth King.

Mother was the only thing left in Azula's life to which she could belong.

She screamed her defiance, a roar of hatred for the mother and fire that had both forsaken her.

She screamed until she choked on ash, gagged, and then started screaming again. Repeat.

She didn't know where she was in the city, anymore. Not that she ever knew. The gate was a lifetime ago. The bridge was nowhere to be seen in this storm of cinders. The slide and the wall- she wasn't even sure they had been real. Her head hurt, but her head always hurt. Her thoughts wanted to break their way free and fly through the air like the embers of her life.

She was laying in what might have been a home, before the Comet and the fires and the endless rivers of ash. She screamed and let the ash pass over her, pausing only to gag again.

She didn't stop screaming when she tried to Firebend. She would bring her hands together, focus on the raw pain in her throat, and try to excite her anger and frustration into something. If she tried hard enough, wanted it enough, hurt herself enough, hurt the rest of the world enough, than perhaps it would come back to her.

"Oh, dear, perhaps this wasn't such a good idea after all," the Mud Man said. He was crouched beside her, still indifferent to the ash. "Walking into a valley of death to try to go sane is one thing, but doing it when you're being hunted by angry vengeful spirits? Well, I could think of easier ways to die- about fifty-seven, off the top of my head, but I admit I lost count once after 'mauled by a platypus bear' because it was such an int-er-est-ing image." He cackled.

Azula kicked at him from her position on the ground, her boot barely scraping his knee, and once more screamed and brought her hands together.

If there was even any smoke, it was lost in the storm of ash.

Was the Mud Man real? Or did she just want some company in her misery and wholly imagined him?
She was grateful for his company, whether or not he was real. Even if he wasn't Fire Nation. She had felt a kinship, now, to the natives of the Colonial Continent. Of the Earth Kingdom. They were just like her brother, poor little Zuzu who was chewed up and spat out by the Fire Nation. If she could be related to such a failure, why couldn't she be the sibling to any Earth Kingdom scum? Why couldn't the woman who birthed Azula love an Earth Kingdom failure more than her own daughter? And the people of the Fire Nation were hardly worth being proud of; they were petty, flawed beings who were no better than the supposed primitives they wanted to conquer.

Azula was better than them all.

And she was also more of a failure than them all, because they weren't lying in ash and filth, desperately praying for their Inner Fire to come back.

She once again willed flame to birth in her cupped hands, and once again nothing happened.

She sprawled on the ground, beneath the gaze of a mud-stained madmen, letting the remnants of a dead civilization wash over. She also felt kinship to the people those ashes used to be. She, too, had failed. They were her people, now.

Eventually, her screaming turned to laughter.

A cool morning is perfect for Firebending practice. There is no external heat to draw from; the Firebender would have to provide all the energy herself.

Azula likes to take that further by practicing in the shade. The Agni Kai chamber at the end of the east wing of the Fire Palace is open to the sky, but the tall walls prevent any direct sunlight from entering outside of the noon hour. The chamber is only used when a member of the Royal Family fights an Agni Kai, and it is otherwise avoided by everyone but the Low Servants who come to dust and chase away the spider-flies.

Azula can be alone to chase her own perfection.

It is not even a year after Zuko's 'friendly fire' injury and subsequent banishment. Azula is training herself one cool morning when Father comes to observe her.

Despite the warmth she's been generating for herself, a chill tickles its way up her spine. Failure is never an option for her, but now it is a danger. Zuko failed to provide Father necessary support at Ba Sing Se, and now he's traveling the world with a bandage over one eye, searching for something that doesn't exist.

The banishment had been declared by Fire Lord Azulon, Grandfather, but it had been Father's fire to mar Zuzu's face. An accident, it is reported.

Azula has not asked for the truth of the matter, but she knows in her heart of hearts that Father does not make mistakes.

But neither does she. A danger is not a threat. Father will never harm her because she will never give him reason to.

Azula is ready to demonstrate her perfection, to continue her routine under observation and add to it, to drive herself until either she is told that she has given enough or has nothing more to give. On this cool morning, she will outshine the sun itself, if that is what Father desires of her, and revel in the blasphemy.
She tenses in preparation for the Kulou A Zhanshi form.

Father calls out her name. Azula!

She is momentarily off-balance, but does not fall. Not from the interruption, because she is constantly on guard and is always ready to act on Father's word. It is Father's voice that is strange. The sound is recognizable, perfectly his own, but there is something additional in it that makes her skin prickle, that makes her think of nightmares and cold sticky robes that twist around her body.

She realizes that the new factor is emotion. Father had called out her name like he is fighting back the urge to sob.

Something is wrong.

Father steps up onto the arena floor from the audience pit. Azula, he says, my hard-working little girl. He approaches her- Azula doesn't know what to do when Father wraps his arms around her. She hasn't suffered a hug in years. Not since before Mother left. Long before. Azula had chosen to stop accepting hugs when Father said they were an act of foolish trust.

And now Father is hugging her.

A test?

But there is no attack. No fire on Father's hands as they pat her back. No pressure on the more vulnerable spots of her body. No disturbance to her balance.

And Father says, I love you so much. I love you.

This is wrong.

But being held like this, being told that she is loved- Azula does not lower her guard. Love is an avenue to defeat. Her heart thumps and she fights back a smile as she says, Thank you for your consideration.

Father leans back, letting go of her, but then he moves his hands to her face and caresses her cheek. Azula, I want you to do something for me. Will you? It is very important.

She thinks she understands. Father is finally going to do something about Uncle Iroh, and/or remove Grandfather from the throne he refuses to die on. And Father is going to make use of her to do it. She's been waiting for this. Hoping for it. Hurting for it.

Yes, Father. I always do whatever you command.

Something passes over Father's expression. But he eventually raises a smile, and gives her face one last pat. Thank you, Azula. What I want you to do is remember that I will always be here for you. Even if everything else falls apart around us. Even if Zuko never- never comes back to us. I will always be here for you. I will always love you. Can you remember that for me?

She doesn't know what to say. Father has never spoken in such a way. Never spoken so foolishly. But Father is no fool. Therefore, what he says must not be foolish. The fault must be in Azula for not being able to tell the difference between Father's words here and the old prattlings of Mother. She will have to work to address that fault, and for now she can give Father her obedience.
Thankfully, the one thing Father never demands of her is the truth.

Yes, Father. I can remember that for you.

It is a cool morning.

And Azula now realizes it was the morning she is reunited with her Mom.

It was some time before Azula realized she was being strangled and not embraced.

She was sprawled on top of what seemed to be a fountain of ash. It erupted beneath her back and flowed up to cover her limbs and face, not loose at all but compacted and pulling. It held her arms and legs down and constricted over her throat and forced its way into her nose. The pressure was almost comforting, a way knowing that she wasn't alone. It was a mother's hug, a promise of love and support, a pledge against abandonment.

A smart infant knows that they're most vulnerable to abandonment. Every other hardship can be faced, can be endured, can be conquered, but nothing can save them from a lack of care.

But there might just be a difference between care and destruction.

Azula struggled against the ash, but it was too cohesive, too heavy. She huffed it out of her nose only for it to try to crawl in again, and her arms and legs strained futilely to break free. It was just too much for her.

The ash pulsed beneath her, and new fountains rose all around her, the geysers forming a perfect circle. She strained against the ash that was flowing and pulling over her neck to look around, and could only see the brown smear of a sky behind the fountains. None of the ruins of Omashu were visible around her, nor even the peaks of the mountains.

Could she be at the center?

The highest point?

The fountains surged and arced and met in the air above her, but none of the ash fell down to bury her. It pressed together and balled and flowed and stretched and rose, and the arcs of spilling ash have formed a moving network of roots that joined together at their highest points to form the many-faced spirit.

Its form was that of the living wood, but its substances was all cinders. Life made of death.

The spirit held out its branch-like arms and squeezed its talon fingers together into a fist. The ash weighed even heavier down on Azula, and her capacity for air was reduced by the pressure.

"You shouldn't have come here, Daughter of Ursa." The monster rose up until it seemed to be scraping the sky itself with its crown of leafless stubs. "Now the Mother of Faces will have her revenge."

Azula huffed more of the ash out of her nose and managed a gasp of filthy air before the assault renewed. "Why? What did Ursa do to you, anyway?"

"She ordered the burning of my forest, the death of the creatures that lived as worship to me. She took what she wanted from me and then destroyed my power! She wanted it all for herself. Only her own children mattered to her."
Azula knew she could not survive this. She had been foolish to come to this ashland. She had effectively killed herself, a futile attempt to restore herself turned into self-destruction.

But no, no more lies.

This wasn't about fixing anything that was wrong with her.

It was because she couldn't believe that Ursa had come back to her.

Couldn't believe that she would choose her mother over her father.

But if Azula could not make herself a dragon, then perhaps she would be better as a phoenix.

She smiled up at the Mother of Faces. "Well, when you talk about her like that, I guess she must be my mom after all."

Azure flame erupted from Azula's hands and feet and nostrils and mouth and even ears. The ash did not burn, could not burn, but as the fires passed over it, every grain lost the life given to it by the Mother of Faces and fell dead. Soon Azula could shake free the dust of death and rise to stand.

"And now," she said, looking into the flames dancing in her hands, "I'm going to finish Mom's job for her."

She leapt up at the monster, flying and shining.

Azula rested her head on Mom's lap and gave a little hum when a warm hand brushed through her loose hair. "You were still far from a perfect mother."

There was no mirth in the answering chuckle. "Exactly what every mom wants to hear from her daughter."

"Hm." Azula let the hand run through her hair for a while. "You're not mad?"

"No mom wants to hear that, but who can claim to be perfect? Although, I know what you mean. It does hurt, but hurting others can't fix it. I think I know that now. And I would never hurt you."

Azula had claimed to be perfect. But that was just another lie. Admitting it was painful, made her want to let her fires free to burn herself and the woman whose lap she was laying in. Azula's ability to come to logical conclusions about the situation didn't affect how she felt.

But, perhaps, that was something she could practice. She could do anything with enough practice.

"I suppose," she said, because none of this would work without a little give and take, "I was far from a perfect daughter."

The hand continued to run through her hair, over and over. "True. And I don't think I'm a bad mother for admitting that."

Azula felt her lips twist. "Exactly what every daughter wants to hear from her mom."

They laughed, together. Or, perhaps, it as just a single laugh, shared between two voices.

"Lies and selfishness," Mom said. Or perhaps it was Azula who said it. "Lies to protect my family and myself, and the selfishness to spread as much pain and death as I thought I needed to keep us all safe."
"They made us well," Azula said. Or perhaps it was Mom.

For a while, they just rested together, a daughter in her mother's lap, a mother brushing her fingers through her daughter's hair. It felt real, as did the little garden around them. The smell of the flowers, the tinkling of the brook, the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the breeze. There was even the taste of plums on the air, the promise of a good harvest in a few weeks' time.

There was no sign of ash or death at all, and that was what made Azula doubt. "Are you really my mom? Or am I in the dream again?"

"Well, I don't know, honey. What do you think?"

Azula snorted. "I think moms aren't supposed to admit when they don't know things."

"Do you? Well, I suppose you'll have time to learn otherwise."

It was an acknowledgement of failure, for both of them.

And it was fine.

Azula smiled, closed her eyes, and enjoyed being in Mom's lap.

It was an epic battle, the grandest fight of Azula's life, and she regretted that there were no witnesses to capture it in rumors or paintings or poetry.

Here in this place - the pond at the center of a dead forest in a land where everything was merely a reflection of some kind - Azula could not use her Firebending, for it was beyond the reach of the elements. True, she had arrived here by crashing through the remnants of wooden houses, crawled across the packed dirt of a road, and nearly drowned in the waters that both contained and fed the form of the Mother of Faces, but all of that had been an illusion. Azula was learning to push past her illusions, and saw this place now for what it was- the Spirit World. She was in a world not her own, lacking the weapon she had always believed to be her greatest strength- her fire.

Nevertheless, she laid low the Mother of Faces. She herself was all the fire she needed, and it was enough.

She burned with something other than light and heat, and in the land of the spirits, that something could burn bright indeed. Her burning reduced the waters that fed the Mother of Faces to steam, and ate at the wood that formed the Mother's body. She was but a little flame against a massive enemy, but even a little flame could be the start of the death of an entire forest.

A woman named Ursa had once been but a little flame, not even a warrior, but her actions had destroyed the Fire Nation as its people knew it. All for the sake of her children.

Azula could at least destroy a spirit who was insulting her mom.

When the battle was over, Azula stood over the charred little bush that the Mother of Faces had been reduced to. "There will be no vengeance for you. Not against Ursa. Not against my mom."

All five faces laughed through the obvious pain of the blackened bark and stubs and branches. "Not the vengeance I sought, perhaps. But the Mother of Faces must continue. Without her, there is no Identity. It is within the Mother that the Individual forms out of the collective."

Azula shook her head. "Not anymore. The Spirit World will just have to let us humans figure it out
for ourselves."

"True." The little charred bush shook, and more of it flaked off into ash. "And false. Ursa Yu Azula, do you accept my face?"

"I-" Azula had become her own flame, and now, as she looked down at herself, she realized that she had burned away everything but the flame. Could she go back to the physical liked this? Did she even want to?

What was waiting for her, there. Zuzu, of course, but- but perhaps the only way they could both heal was on separate paths. Separate lives. Separate destinies.

And Azula had always loved a challenge. "I suppose I do."

She had never really fit in with other people, anyway. She might have, in the future, but this struggle offered just as much meaning. And, perhaps, even more reward.

Azula had always been The Daughter.

Perhaps peace could be found in becoming The Mother.

She let herself continue to burn as the charred bush gave one last shake and collapsed into a pile of leaves and a single featureless white mask.

Azula picked up the mask and put it on.

She could feel herself growing in relation to this world, both in size and energy, for one reflected the other except through choice. She still kept the basic shape of a human, for that was what she had been, but she took the fire of her essence and made that into a base, a foundation feeding heat into a form of liquid, living metal. She had once been a person of flame and armor, and as the new Mother of Faces, she would cherish those aspects of her identity even as she gave Identity to others. The metal echoed the form she had as a human woman, but fives faces with shining golden eyes looked out from beneath a crown of dancing blue flames.

She had barely taken on her new form when Koh the Face-Stealer arrived.

The volcanic rock she had clung to before, when the Mother of Faces had nearly drowned her, rose up from the dirt and shifted to the side. Something beneath it was pushing it up, and to Azula's revulsion, it turned out be a large chitinous insect with a human face - painted white and black in homage to a noh mask - that curled to face her, half its body still hidden beneath the rock.

She knew the creature's name in an instant, the power of her mask feeding that knowledge directly into her consciousness. She knew Koh in all ways, his name and his function and his history.

She knew that Koh was the offspring of the Mother of Faces.

She knew that she had killed his mom.

"You have come for vengeance," she said, speaking with five voices at once.

"It is my duty." Koh gazed at her through half-lidded eyes. "Nevertheless, I can admit that my mother and I didn't exactly have the closest relationship, and I could not take on her functions in addition to my own. I believe you humans would call it a 'conflict of interest.' So I would like to think we can reach an agreement of recompense, both of us being reasonable spirits."
Azula wasn't overly fond of bugs, but it was probably the best offer she was going to get today. "So let's deal. What do you want?"

Koh grinned, and skittered fully from beneath the rock. The middle of his long body was wrapped around something, and as Azula focused on it, she realized that it was a human. A woman.

Mai.

*Mai.*

All of this could be said to have begun when Mai found the Avatar and wrote back asking for instructions on how to save Zuzu. Mai had gone on to betray Azula, to facilitate the destruction of everything Azula had ever worked for.

She wanted to kill Mai for it.

But, really, that was a silly way of looking at it all. Mai had just been Mai. Silly, imperfect Mai. Just as Azula herself had been imperfect. As Mom and Father had been imperfect. Zuzu. The Fire Nation. Everyone and everything.

Why waste more effort on it? She had better things to do, now.

Azula looked at Koh with her primary set of eyes. "Well?"

"I want this one. Let me have her, and we'll forget what you've done to my mother." Koh skittered and curled so that he was whispering to the face on the back of Azula's head. "I think you'll agree I'm offering quite a bargain."

Azula considered it as she morphed herself so that she was once again facing Koh from the front. She considered everything she knew about herself, everything she knew about Mai, and all the knowledge that the Mother had passed on to her. Perhaps it was more knowledge than even Koh had.

She considered all that, and said, "Deal."

Azula and the bug bowed to each other, and her first work as the Mother of Faces was complete.

This stupid bug was going to be in for quite the surprise.

Omasahu did not often see its storm of ash settle. Since the fires of the return of Sozin's Comet had faded, it had been a riot of filth and motion and anger.

But on this day, the ash settled long enough to let a bit of the sun shine through. Settled long enough for an old man caked with dried mud to blink in surprise and look around.

Settled long enough for the man to find the body of the girl, buried in ash. Long enough for him to confirm that she no longer drew breath. Long enough to confirm she never would again.

Long enough for him to acknowledge her passing, and then leave her behind for her final rest.

Azula had one more thing to do, before she could set out on what came next. One more link to acknowledge before giving it up forever.

She looked in on Zuzu as he slept, his dreams brushing up against her new home in the Spirit World.
He was amidst allies, and perhaps even some friends, but he still slept fitfully, rolling over just when he seemed to be settled, covering his face with his arms every so often and speaking words that only made sense of the language of dreams. The weight of the coming war, the weight of his connection to Uncle, kept him from ascending to peaceful sleep.

Azula connected to him and whispered into his ear, "You did your best. Now, I free you from your obligation to me. Have a nice life, Zuzu." She was about to let the link fade, but on impulse, she maintained it for one last eternity. "Mom says she loves you.

"And I- I am glad we no longer have to fight each other."

He startled awake, sitting up on his bedroll in the darkness of his tent. "Azula? I thought- I heard-"

But she was already fading away.

She had a new journey to take.

Perhaps she would even enjoy it.

She left her brother to find the reality that came after the dream, as she herself went on to find the dream she had always known was waiting for her.

TO BE CONTINUED
A New Age, A New War

Aang's return to consciousness was slow, up until he remembered that Mai was gone forever. His eyes popped open as he sat up and drew breath for a shout and-

This wasn't the Oasis.

Aang was sitting on a blanket with some kind of padding underneath. Next to him, hunched on a little pile of furs, Sokka dozed with Momo asleep in his lap.

They were in the center of a room made of ice. At least, it looked like ice. The bits of the walls that peeked out from behind hanging blue banners were like polished white glass, and the air was crisp and cool. The ceiling was also made out of ice, although regular panels had been made translucent, letting in an illumination that reminded Aang of the moonlight filtering through the currents of the Ocean Spirit's domain of endless seas. Mai had come there to free him from Lu Ten-

Aang groaned. He'd lost her! He'd lost her! His chest tightened at the memory of how he'd tried - tried and failed - to grab her before she could fall back through the portal in the koi pond. She'd collapsed because- because of something Iroh had said, and Aang- he'd only managed to grab the Moon and Ocean Spirit fish before the gateway had closed and Mai was gone.

The air in the room started to swirl-

Sokka startled, waking both himself and Momo. "Wha- Oh. Oh! You're up! And hey, calm down, okay?"

Aang opened his mouth to give voice to the wind, the only thing he could think to do right now, but was cut off when Sokka leaned over and pulled him into a hug. Momo climbed up Aang's back and nuzzled against his neck. Aang couldn't help but remember the hug Sokka gave him at the Southern Air Temple, after he'd been forced to destroy the monsters that the remains of his people had become. Mai had hugged him then, too.

But they had been steadying arms, arms of the family he still had.

Sokka continued, "We'll get her back. I know that sounds trite and mollifying, but it's my promise to you." He pulled back to look Aang in the eyes. "We know Mai's tough and dangerously clever. She went into the Spirit World once already and beat it. That's better odds than Katara had, when they took her away as a kid. And we still found her, right? We'll find Mai, too. If she doesn't find us, first. And then we'll hunt Iroh down and solve that little problem."

Aang forced himself to breathe. Sokka made good points, but it didn't change the fact that Mai was gone. Anything could happen to her in the Spirit World. And who knew when Aang would get to
see her again? When would get to apologize for not being able to save her.

But there was a path forward. And there were friends and family who would help.

Aang said, "Everyone else is okay?"

"Yeah." Sokka leaned back and propped his arms against the floor as support. "Apparently, when you and Mai and Yue did whatever it was you did, you turned the Waterbending back on, so Katara could shield us. And you didn't make any volcanoes this time, so ice and water were fine to protect us from you ripping the Bastion up." He sighed. "I was out of it for all that, though. It's a shame. I would have loved to see that stupid place taken apart."

Aang frowned, and not just as the reminder of his accidentally activated a volcano under the Fire Nation capital. "You were unconscious? Were you hurt?"

Sokka was quiet for a long moment. "Iroh hit me with the same thing he used against Mai. Some phrase or something that just shut us off. He mentioned the Earth King, Katara said."

"Wait, what does this have to do with Toph?" Aang couldn't imagine her doing something to hurt Mai or Sokka. Nothing more than bruises, anyway.

Sokka shook his head. "We learned some stuff while you were asleep. Learned about what Iroh had been learning. And who he'd been learning it from. Amongst the stuff he got from Long Feng was notes about his keeping me and Mai prisoners. Apparently, we didn't get away as unscathed from that guy as we thought."

Long Feng? The thought of that betrayal nearly sent Aang into the Avatar State again, especially with Mai suffering for it, but he made himself keep breathing. "Iroh's always ten steps ahead of us! He hits us with things we can't even imagine!"

"Well, we're actually closing that gap." Sokka leaned forward and grinned. "Think about it. You removed the Lu Ten Problem, and destroyed the Bastion, and chased Iroh away. The Northern Water Tribe was only helping him because he had their special fish hostage. But they're okay now, thanks to you."

Aang shook his head. "What are you saying?"

Sokka stood up. "Come see." He walked behind Aang, over to the wall then, and reached under the Water Tribe banner hanging from it.

He placed his hands on the wall and it split apart in the middle, sliding like a pair of doors to reveal a balcony overlooking the Northern Water Tribe city.

Aang got up and joined Sokka out on the balcony.

The city stretched out ahead of them, and Aang saw that it was a hive of activity. People in blue coats were all over the place. Many were working, tearing down the Fire Nation's metal weapons and depots and walls. Others were simply running around and shouting- no, they were singing. At the far end of the city, a Fire Nation battleship was being towed into the central canal, and as Aang watched, a number of Waterbenders began cutting into the hull with spinning saws made from discs of ice and water.

Sokka said, "Without Iroh or any other reason to hold back, the Northern Water Tribe rose up and took their freedom back from the Fire Nation. Both the city and the lab by the Spirit Forest. They'd been waiting a while, and the Dreamcatchers were ready to help. Iroh and his immediate lackeys got
away with a bunch of the freakier stuff, but our friends captured some of it. Between that and what I saw in the lab, we know what he's doing."

Aang was almost afraid to ask, but if he was going to find a way to save Mai- "Tell me all about it."

Zhao had decided that while flying vehicles offered amazing military opportunities, he didn't feel a great need to ever be on any such vehicle. But he couldn't disobey his Fire Lord, and so on an 'airship,' he was.

(Couldn't disobey yet.)

Zhao looked out over the airship's rail, without leaning forward at all, at the moonlit Earth Kingdom coast that passed below. It was almost unbelievable that so much metal could not only float through the air, but travel at such speed. He didn't understand the exact principles or what was in the giant balloons at the top of the airship, but it was a shame the technology hadn't been ready before the end of the war.

Or, at least, Iroh claimed it had only become viable after the war. Since the Fire Lord hadn't seen fit to reveal the existence of airships to anyone outside his command until yesterday, Zhao couldn't dispute it.

Having confirmed the airship's speed and course, he turned away and grasped the railing as he made his way back to the enclosed main structure. He couldn't say he appreciated the view; it reminded him that he had only one of Lian the Maker's side-projects between him and falling to his death. She was aboard this airship, caring for some of the materials evacuated from the North Pole laboratory, and if this thing crashed, hopefully she'd be the first to die.

As Zhao stepped past a pair of Crimson Guards into the command cabin, he found Fire Lord Iroh kneeling at a floor desk with a brush in his hand and a messenger hawk on a perch beside him. The lamp-lighting aboard this vessel was similar to that on any warship in the Fire Navy, but somehow Iroh seemed to be- well, lacking. His skin was almost as gray as his hair. The shoulder-flares of his robes hung long on hunched shoulders.

Iroh looked up, and his cheeks twitched in what could have been an attempt at a smile. "Ah, Admiral Zhao. Thank you for coming. I'm just finishing my Royal Order to begin the deployment of the Jorogumo Project. We still have to cross most of the Earth Kingdom ourselves, and I'd rather they start without us. The Avatar and his friends already know about Foggy Swamp, after all. There might be some interference waiting for us."

The Avatar knew enough about all of this to already have plans in motion? Zhao had only just learned about this insanity! Only just learned about the giant spider constructed from platinum, only just learned how it would pierce and mount the tree that was supposedly a spiritual nexus at the center of a massive swamp.

Only just learned that Iroh believed this to be a way to take control of Time and Spirit so that he could destroy Death itself.

Only just learned that the Fire Lord was a madman.

Zhao had only just learned that he needed to do something about all of this, fast.

He bowed. "Of course, my lord. Please, take your time."

Iroh resumed his writing. "There is some tea on the table. Pour some for us, and I will be with you in
a moment."

"Thank you, sir." Zhao moved over to the table bolted to the floor and wall beneath one of the room's porthole windows. There was a steaming teapot on top of it, held in the same kind of clamp used by Navy ships in rocky seas. He unscrewed the pot, unlatched a pair of cups, and moved to pour.

Before he did so, though, he glanced around the room. He and the Fire Lord were alone here, and the guards weren't looking in.

So he reached into his belt and removed a small bottle.

He'd been keeping this for a while. Before Iroh was crowned, before the falling out with the Avatar, before the Caldera was destroyed by the reawakening of the volcano, Zhao had been able to run some errands in the Capital City. That included doing Iroh's bidding, such taking care of traitors like Fa- Lord Zhao, delivering a gift of gold for Prince Zuko, and attempting to get the Avatar back on track and getting his topknot severed by that brat Mai for his trouble!

-but, more profitably, it also included some work of his own, like having a quiet conversation with High Sage Xinghao.

And buying, from the High Sage, some of the contents of the cursed Lady Ursa's apothecary cabinet. Just in case.

He'd had no purpose in mind at the time, and even now couldn't know exactly what was in the bottle. But from what Xinghao had described, Lady Ursa was one of the most accomplished poisoners in Fire Nation history, so some of her work was bound to come in handy.

Zhao hesitated only a moment, acknowledging his regret that he might be providing a bit of aid to enemies like the Avatar and Lady Mai, and then emptied the bottle into one of the two teacups. He poured some wonderful-smelling Jasmine tea on top of it.

There was no Kyoshi spy here to take the blame, this time, but Zhao would think of something. Seizing opportunities had gotten him this far. And perhaps the poison would be slow-acting, leaving no link to him.

Across the room, Iroh rose and placed the rolled-up edict in the container strapped to the messenger hawk's leg. While Iroh took the hawk over to an open porthole, Zhao brought the cups over and laid them on the table, placing the poisoned one on the Fire Lord's side. Then he kneeled and waited.

Iroh soon kneeled opposite him, a cushion elevating the Fire Lord so that Zhao had to look up. "I apologize for not meeting with you before now, Admiral. I admit I was a bit distracted at the North Pole. Aside from the urgency of our escape, I- I had just lost Lu Ten." He stared down into his cup of tea. "I miss my son, Zhao."

Zhao didn't touch his own cup. "The situation has been- troubling, my lord, but I sympathize. No parent should lose a child like Prince Lu Ten. He was- is truly a shining torch for the Royal Family and Homeland. And- ah- hopefully he will be back with us, if Lian's spider does what it supposed to. You will be reunited with him soon."

Iroh looked up with watery eyes. "Y- yes. Thank you for your kind thoughts." He inhaled of the steam coming from his teacup, and squared his shoulders into something like his old posture. He picked up the cup, but didn't drink from it. "I'm eager to discuss how you can contribute to my son's happy return to our world."
Zhao took a sip from his own cup. This was going to be an awkward meeting. Awkward, and dangerous.

But he had no choice. He knew that to continue serving Iroh would lead to his own death, or possibly worse. And the rest of the world would offer no sanctuary, if he tried to leave.

Also, the Fire Lord would probably destroy the Fire Nation in his mad pursuits. That was bad, too.

Aang's friends mobbed him as soon as he stepped out of the moonlit palace with Sokka and Momo. There were only three of them, but Appa was practically a mob by himself.

The girls reached Aang first, wrapping him in twin hugs, and then Appa crashed down on all of them with an eager nose-nuzzle. They fell backwards onto Sokka and Momo, leaving the entire group in a heap in the snowdrifts. It was enough to make Aang smile again, until he realized that the tangle was missing a body.

Ty Lee was the first to notice his thoughts. She eased back from him and shook her head. "I made them check the Oasis place five times. We can't get to the Spirit World through there anymore."

"I know." Aang let Sokka help him back to his feet as everyone else got up, and reached out to pat Appa's nose. "Sokka told me about what Iroh is trying to do, with the swamp and everything. I-" He didn't know how to say it without sounding awful. "I think we need to stop Iroh before we can save Mai."

Sokka and Katara said nothing. Momo cooed as if he understood. Appa sighed under Aang's petting.

Ty Lee squeezed her eyes shut. "Go on."

Aang wondered what her ability to see auras was showing her. "If Iroh is trying to- to enter this 'Tree of Time,' then- well, then he has a way into the Spirit World, right?"

Sokka grunted. "So if we beat Iroh, we can steal his door, and then save Mai? Not bad. But it does presuppose that we can catch up to Iroh and then beat him. He has a head start on us, and they say he has a boat that can fly. I don't know what it's speed is compared to Appa, but-"

"We have to try." Ty Lee said. She opened her eyes again, but Aang saw that her hands were clenched into white-knuckle fists. "If that's the only way we have to go save Mai, then we'll do it." Her expression was hard, and there was no wavering in her eyes.

So this was what she looked like as a Weapon of the Fire Nation.

Katara leaned over to put her arms around Ty Lee's shoulders, and the tension seemed to drain out from both of their bodies. Ty Lee leaned her head against Katara's shoulder and whispered, "We'll do it."

Aang turned to the one who was most critical to this plan. Appa looked back at him. "Well, buddy? Can you get us down to the swamp? It will be a lot of flying, but we have to for Mai. And King Toph should be waiting for us there. You like her, right?"

Appa lifted his head and roared his dedication.

"Great!" Now Aang turned to the one who always worked so hard to make sure everyone's plans actually worked. "Sokka, what do we need to do?"
Sokka rubbed his chin with a gloved hand. "If we're going to catch up to the flying machine that I was told about, we'll need to travel light. As much as I'd like to bring an army, it's better if we keep the weight down for Appa."

Aang nodded. "I think Appa's recovered from getting shot by lightning by Zuko's sister, but it's best if we take it as easy on him as possible, considering how far we have to go. Almost to the other side of the world!"

"Right. So we keep it to just the people who can have the most impact. (I'm thinking that's us. Avatar, Weapon of the Fire Nation, Waterbending Master, and the guy who keeps you all mostly out of trouble.) Plus, only what supplies we need to keep in the air, so mostly food. Anything we might need on site, we hope that Toph can give us." Sokka looked around. "We'll need to ask for the Northern Water Tribe's help. I hope they can spare something for us."

Aang nodded. "Who do we ask?"

Katara looked out over the city of ice, and the people working hard even now to remove the Fire Nation's influence. "I don't know that there's a real leader, yet. Maliq was supposedly their Chief, but he's dead. So I guess--"

"Yue," Sokka said. "She's their Princess. Let's go find her."

Katara pointed down into the city. "She was helping with the recovery, last I saw her. This way!"

Aang ruffled the fur of Appa's arrow. "You wait here, buddy. Rest up."

Appa snorted his agreement, and then they ran off to find the Water Tribe princess.

As all they followed Katara, Ty Lee turned and said with complete solemnity, "I think Sokka should be the one to ask."

Aang shrugged. "Okay, if you think so. But why?"

Ty Lee glanced at Sokka, winked at him, and grinned. "Trust me. I'm on this."

Sokka groaned, and Aang decided that this was something he could hear about later. Much later. Maybe never.

They came to a plaza in front of what turned out to be the healing huts of the tribe. The uprising had to have been quick, for Aang to sleep through it (without being frozen in an iceberg again), but it apparently hadn't been without casualties. The healers had left their huts, and people were spread out on blankets all over the plaza, up against the canals and the walls of ice.

Some of the blankets were spread out on top of the casualties. The healers had either failed or been too late with those.

With their white coats, Aang almost missed the Dreamcatcher rebels moving around the edges of the healing area, not far from the collection of the still forms of the dead. The warriors were assisting the healers, and the elder Yugoda was herself working on an unmoving figure - Aang couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, not even by the remnants of the clothes - who was covered in burns.

Momo scampered free of Sokka's arms and went over to Yugoda, nuzzling her leg. As Aang approached, she sighed and nodded to Momo, and then cast her water away and stood up. The figure she had been trying to heal did not move.
As she approached, Aang said, "Uh, I'm glad to see you're okay. And- and I'm sorry I wasn't here for."

Yugoda stopped him with a wave of her hand. "You did your part, Avatar. That's all we could ask. This was what the Dreamcatchers have been preparing for - what we gave up our lives in the tribe for – all along. Now we deal with the aftermath, and perhaps someday we can return to our lives."

Aang looked at the others, to see if they understood that last part. He got confused expressions in return. It was Katara, who Aang understood to have been something of a student to Yugoda while they were here, who said, "Someday? But the Fire Nation is gone."

"And so we were, Katara." Yugoda picked Momo up and stroked his fur as she led the way to the next form laying in line for healing. "We are back now, yes, but we walked away from our roles, our friends, our families. We let them think we were dead. It has been years, for many of us. We lived in the sacred forest amongst beings our people only knew in dreams. That tends to make people look at you differently."

Aang thought back to before a hundred years of war, when he was just a young monk living happily in the Southern Air Temple. "Yeah, I know."

To Aang's surprise, Sokka inclined his head to Yugoda, "Um, all due respect, ma'am, but that might not be it. Your rebels were the ones who found a way to fight back, when everyone else felt like they had to collaborate in order to protect the world. That- that kind of guilty feeling can keep people from reaching out. Trust me. I used to- well-"

Momo suddenly stiffened in Yugoda's arms, and then burst free to fly away from the little gathering. He glided a short distance across the plaza, to where the regular blue-coated healers were working. Momo landed on the ice near where another gray-haired healer called for more water as she leaned over a patient.

And Rafa, the leader of the Dreamcatcher warriors, came over to her with a bucket. He placed it next to her, and as she turned to take command of the liquid, she glanced up at his face.

Her eyes widened.

Rafa nodded.

"That's Misu," Ty Lee said. "She helped fix me up after Iroh hurt my head."

Yugoda added, "And she's Rafa's sister."

Misu smiled, nodded back, and then called the water out of the bucket with a save of her hands and returned to work on her patient.

Aang finally found a reason to smile. "I think you'll be part of your Tribe again sooner than you think. And I have an idea. Do you know where we can find Princess Yue?"

Yugoda pointed across the plaza, and Aang bowed to her before taking off in that direction.

Kneeling at table with his Fire Lord, Zhao bowed his head and said, "I am yours to serve in any capacity, my lord." And he waited for Iroh to drink the poisoned cup of tea and keel over, already, the old fool.

Iroh, though, simply looked down at the teacup in his hands. His lips trembled for a moment before
he spoke. "But you are a bit out of your element, yes? You're a Navy man, Zhao, and through no fault of your own, you're quite far away from such business. I mean to invade a swamp, and possibly deal with rebel activity there. And after that I will move on to my great task. I worry that I am leaving you nothing within your expertise."

"Then I will shovel coal for this vessel's boilers, if I can serve you in no other way." Why wasn't this fool drinking the tea?! Iroh was practically addicted to the stuff. "You saved me from my ambitions in the Capital, my lord, and it is only right that I pay back the life you granted me."

Iroh lifted the tea up and inhaled deeply of the steam- before placing it back on the table. "Oh, don't worry, I would never waste your time shifting coal!" He gave a chuckle, an echo of his old joviality, but it died quickly. "Perhaps it is time for you to return to the Homeland. I have been focused on my son, and neglected most other matters. I sent the sages and military command back after my crowning, but you can brief them on the latest events and prepare for Lu Ten's return."

Zhao fought against revealing his surprise. That wouldn't be a poor fate. He could flee before Iroh's poisoning could be investigated, and mournfully use his new orders take command back in the Fire Nation and build up a defense. Iroh might have his fanatics here, but elsewhere Zhao could forge new alliances in the name of guiding the Fire Nation back to the matter of creating a worldwide empire that would stand forever. After the games of Azulon and 'Ozai,' after the loss of the Capital, people would be desperate for a leader with his head on straight.

Or was Iroh setting a trap? Was he sane enough to play such games?

Zhao elected to honor the time-proven art of waffling. "I will serve as my lord wills."

"I'm sure." Iroh looked down at his tea again, but left it on the table and leaned forward. "Can we talk honestly for a moment? I know that, above all else, you desire power and prestige. When you can't get that, you'll take survival. I've counted on it, really."

Zhao wondered if he should act offended, but decided against it. "I don't think I'm unusual in that regard, my lord. It has served our nation's warriors well for a century now."

"Among other motivations, perhaps." Iroh's eyes narrowed and a little color came back to his face. "And I'm not sure we can look at the state of the world and say our ambitions have served us well." He looked down at the teacup, and what little life had come back to his face flickered and died. "Perhaps we grasped our desires too tightly. Will you make the same mistake?"

For a moment, Zhao wondered if he had been right to try to poison the Fire Lord. This didn't sound insane. But no, Iroh was always good at rhetoric. He'd beaten the Fire Sages in their old political games, and maintained a position as Azulon's favored child despite acts of disobedience. Zhao had to remember that this old fool believed himself on a path to somehow eliminating death with magic. He had to die.

So Zhao finished off his own tea and gave a polite smile. "I've found, my lord, that there is a time for patience, but when the right opportunity comes along, grasping can bring great rewards. It's just a matter of knowing when to strike, yes?"

Iroh's eyebrows rose. "Perhaps I am being too subtle. Admiral, let me be plain: I am offering you an assignment suited to your ambitions, away from this ship and matters of spirits and death. We head towards frightening things- even I am frightened." He met Zhao's gaze with his pure golden eyes, and with a long exhalation, let his whole body droop. "But as long as I return Lu Ten to life, it will be worth it. My boy- he deserves a chance at life. Perhaps everyone does- as long as they do not make themselves my enemies. So take your chance, Admiral. Don't let foolish ambition and
misinformed fears destroy you."

Was-

Was Iroh implying that Zhao was afraid?!

This fool needed to die.

And yes, Zhao needed to be here to spin the matter of Iroh's death before returning home in triumph. He wouldn't be left as a glorified messenger when Iroh's ashes were scattered to the winds. He'd be at the head of the Fire Lord's own air fleet, all the power in the Fire Nation his for the taking.

"My lord, you are - understandably upset after the- the difficulties with your son." Zhao gave his most ingratiating smile and motioned at the poisoned cup in front of Iroh. "I'm sure you'll feel better after some tea and perhaps a nap. You're our Fire Lord, after all, and need to take care of yourself."

Iroh stared back, thoroughly unimpressed.

Then he picked up the teacup-

(Zhao bit down on the smirk that threatened to overtake his face.)

-and spilled the contents out on the table.

Zhao's jaw dropped.

Iroh shook his head. "I wouldn't have expected you to use poison, but I suppose your options were limited. Was it a grab for power, or fear? I'm truly curious."

Zhao tried to speak a denial, but his mouth had gone dry. The words wouldn't come out. He managed to gasp, "I- I am your loyal-"

"I am too tired for denials." Iroh leaned his bearded chin on his chest. "Guards!"

But how did- "But how di-"

"Dreams, Admiral. I walk them, when I will." Iroh gazed down on the puddle atop the table that vibrated in time with the thrum of the airship's engines. "I seem to be haunting yours."

Heavy gloved hands landed on Zhao's shoulders, and he snapped into motion, pulling away and summoning his fire and preparing to fight for his life. Life, and glory and the very world itself-

-and an armored leg snapped out, tripping Zhao just after he had shifted weight onto his feet. He fell face first towards the table, striking the edge hard enough to send it tumbling away in a spray of poisoned tea. Two guards piled on top of Zhao's back, driving him to the metal floor as they twisted his arms behind his back and completely immobilized him.

"They broke your root," Iroh mumbled. "You should work on that if you survive long enough for me to defeat death."

Zhao screamed as he was dragged away.

Aang, with Sokka and Katara and Ty Lee (and Momo) behind him, found Princess Yue standing amidst a group of old men in front of the Healing Huts. Yue herself was talking with a woman with short, reddish hair.
Ty Lee whispered, "That's Malina. Her brother is- was that Chief Maliq guy. The one who designed the Bastion."

Aang skidded to a stop and then took two very respectful steps towards the women, with Sokka at his side. "Hi, everyone! Yue, Malina, and- uh, everyone." Behind him, he heard the distinctive sound of Sokka doing a forehead-smack.

The women and the elders all turned to him, and Yue's face lit up with a smile. "Avatar, it soothes my spirit to see you - and your friends - well."

Malina bowed. "Avatar. I- I thank you for driving away the evil forces that took my broth- the Chief's life. He served the Fire Nation, building their fortress, and believed in their culture. But- but some things have too high a price. He did love his Tribe, always."

Aang took that to mean there were no hard feelings, which was good, because he really didn't have time for grudge fights right now. He bowed back to her. "I hope you and your Tribe can now be at peace."

Malina nodded her acknowledgement, bowed to Yue and the elders, and then moved off to assist with the healing.

One of the old men said, "What matters capture your attention, Avatar? Is there something we can do for you?"

Aang took a breath and stood up as straight as he could. "Yes, but first there's something I need to do for you." He wanted to get in the air to Mai as fast as possible, and he knew what he was about to do next might delay things, but he couldn't abandon his job again. And this might be important for finding Mai. "Have you figured out who will lead your Tribe?"

Yue started to say something, but then closed her mouth and lowered her head as the old man who had spoken before said, "The council of elders will have to choose a husband for our beloved princess, so that the line of Arnook can continue to guide us into the future."

Aang heard Sokka give a choking sound, but ignored it. "That's- that's a, um, good plan, but I have another idea. As the Avatar, as the Bridge Between Worlds, I can't ignore the forces that Iroh was disturbing here. You can look after your Tribe, but I need to know that the, uh, spiritual sanctity of the North Pole is maintained."

He waited for the elders to nod. People didn't usually contradict him on this stuff. When they had committed themselves to what he'd just said, Aang went on with, "So I am, uh, appointing Princess Yue as- as High Sage of the Northern Water Tribe. Yue has been to the Spirit World, and is bonded with the Moon Spirit. She must be free, fully empowered to take any action whenever spiritual matters are involved." As he'd been speaking, he had felt more confident in his words, and like he was standing taller. The wind had picked up, and he was aware of the waves beyond the walls of the city moving with more than just the rhythm of the tides. "The friends known as the Dreamcatchers will contribute to her guards, and they will also serve as ambassadors between the Spirits and the Water Tribe."

And it was with Avatar Kuruk's voice, and Avatar Kuruk's mouth, and Avatar Kuruk's body, that he said, "Princess, do you accept this burden?"

The elders all stared with hanging jaws.

Yue was wide-eyed, but she bowed her head and kneeled at Kuruk's feet. "I do, Avatar."
"Then I so name you High Sage Yue. Rise."

She did, looking up at him.

And then the winds died, the waves fell, and where Avatar Kuruk had been a moment before, Aang slumped. "Okay, good. Wow, I'm tired all of the sudden." He stumbled backwards, and was caught by Katara and Ty Lee. "Sokka can handle this next part for me."

As he sat down on the ice, he watched Sokka approach Yue with his hands clasped together in front of him at first but then crossing them behind back for a moment before letting them hang at his sides. "Uh, we need to go after the Fire Lord. And you probably need as much food and stuff as you have, what with just fighting a war and having to take care of yourselves." He folded his arms across his chest, and then brought them down and clasped them in front of him again. "But, um, the Avatar (and the rest of us) needs your support and some food and blankets. Please?"

The brilliant smile that Yue turned on Sokka might have warmed the air itself. "Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe, brave warrior and ally to the North, what you ask is good. You will have what you need, so that you may set right this world as you have set right my Tribe." She turned to the elders. "As High Sage, I ask you to give them their supplies."

The old men stood still for a moment.

Then Rafa, in his white coat, stepped away from the healing field and raised his fists into the air. "For the Avatar! And High Sage Yue!"

Other Dreamcatchers echoed the call, raising their arms and cheering.

The old men bowed to Yue, one by one, and then rushed away, calling for preserved food and blankets to be made ready.

Within an hour, Appa was loaded up what supplies Aang felt were safe to carry. He was in his place on Appa's head with the reins, Momo in his lap, while Sokka, Katara, and Ty Lee waved back to Yue and her tribe from the saddle.

Aang said, "Yip, yip," and then they were off into the air.

He tried to believe that they would be in time to save the world- and in time to save the person most closely connected to him.

Mai couldn't say when she actually awoke. The usual clues (light in her eyes, hunger, the need to hit the bathroom, the feel of blankets or fur or even her own hair on her skin, the emergence of coherent thoughts, or hearing the noise of some overly-chipper friend when all decent people were trying to let the sunrise get on with its business) were absent.

But although there was no specific point of transition, Mai did indeed drift from a state of nothingness into an awareness of herself and the universe. But one looked very much like the other, wherever she was. Around here was nothing but stillness and dark.

And, eventually, the giant bug with the white face.

Red lips smiled. "Welcome back, Lady Caldera Yu Mai. I do hope you remember me."

Mai had never seen the entirety of Koh the Face-Stealer before, except in a dream - a nightmare - the night before she left the Fire Nation for the last time. It turned out that the reality (was this reality?)
matched the dream exactly. A giant centipede hung down, the segmented body curled so that the face painted like a white Noh-mask loomed in front of her. Sharp, thin legs clung to old, petrified roots that meandered over the walls of- where was this?

It could have been a cave, with the uneven surfaces, but that would have supposed that it had a form that we merely covered by all the shadows, and not that it was a place of darkness patched by whatever pieces of reality had been salvaged from an ancient age.

The last time Mai had seen this monster was in the mirror-like blade of a sword, when she was told that if she showed any expression, her face would be taken, killing her so dead she'd never even reincarnate.

With a perfectly blank face, she stood up from where she was crumpled on the floor of the cave. "Is this another dream?"

"You dream about me?" Koh's legs clicked as they stretched and contracted, that white face rising to stay in the center of her vision. "I have to say, I'm quite flattered."

It was just like the kind of taunting that Azula used to do, back when Mai was a kid. And there was just as much of a threat behind it. "If this isn't a dream, then what is it? The last thing I remember-" Her voice trailed off as she tried to make her mind reach beyond the great nothingness from which she had just emerged. "Aang? Yue? And that Spirit Ocean- but something- we were leaving-"

"And you came so very close." The white face of Koh disappeared in a blink of the surrounding bug-flesh, replaced by a draconic visage that could have been the living battle-mask of the Agni Warrior himself. "But the Fire Lord out-maneuvered you once again, closing the path before you could fully return to the physical realm. You are still in the Spirit World, if your lack of a heartbeat hasn't already made that clear."

Yes, Mai remembered most of that. "That doesn't explain why I'm here, specifically. With you. I presume this is your home?"

"That might be a word for it. The transition between worlds can be dangerous and chaotic, especially for one with no ability to navigate it. You could have wound up in some rather strange places, indeed, perhaps paying a toll with your memory or voice. You're lucky I was there to-" The draconic face smiled, revealing teeth that curved in a chaotic mix of directions. "-catch you."

Yeah, lucky. Mai gave a low bow, and let all her feelings of sarcasm drain out of her thoughts, lest they reach her face or voice. "Thank you for your assistance. And for sheltering me while I recovered. But I've imposed on you for long enough."

"Oh, it's not an imposition at all. I do so enjoy your company." A long tongue flopped out of the mouth to polish drool off the teeth. "But if you have a way back to your friends, then by all means, be on your way. I would hate to delay you when the Avatar is on such an important errand."

Mai wanted, more than anything, to flee. This was a creature that had brought down a past Avatar, and she had nothing with which to fight it. No weapons, not if this was the Spirit World.

But this spirit liked to use helpfulness as bait. Mai would be risking herself to remain in its company, but where else could she go? Yue had been her previous guide through the Spirit World, but now Mai was alone.

She folded her hands in her sleeves and met Koh's gaze, resisting the urge to quirk an eyebrow. "That was a nice tease. Is there something you want to tell me about Aang, or are you going to make
me work for it?"

Koh laughed, a sound that had more than a little dragon-growl to it, and then another blink of surrounding flesh replaced the inhuman face with that of an old man whose features were hidden by wiry gray hair. A beard fell to dangle to the floor. "You are so very different from the other people the Avatars have loved, refreshingly so. I cannot help but wonder why. Was it mere chance, just the right circumstances amidst the chaotic swirling of destinies? If you had met differently, would he have barely given you a second thought while pursuing one with a more fervent heart?"

Mai ground her teeth together within her mouth, counting until she was sure she could speak without so much as tilting her head. "If you want an answer in return for your help, I'm afraid I'm left in your debt. I don't know, and I couldn't care less. But I'm interested in what's going on at the North Pole right now."

"No, you're not. It took quite some time for your spirit to recover from your forced return." Koh idly swung around as if pacing on the shadows. "The Avatar left the North Pole three days ago to chase Iroh. And he's going to be too late."

"What?!"

Koh snapped around, grinning madly beneath the face's overwhelming beard.

But Mai was already hiding her feelings again, thanks to instincts honed in the company of Princess Azula, or amidst rivals like the other Weapons of the Fire Nation, and even at the gatherings her parents would host where ministers traded jokes about Zuko's banishment. She couldn't stop herself from feeling, but she had learned to strangle such things before they could show on her body. Traveling with Aang and all her friends had eroded that control, but she was still practiced enough to beat out a giant, arrogant bug.

Mai said in her most bored tone, "How do you know that?"

"I watch. How else could I do my job?" The face shifted again, the blink of an eye all the transition between the bearded old man and a woman whose every contour was enhanced with green makeup that shimmered metallically even in this dim lighting. "Would you care to watch as well?"

Mai nodded, swallowing all eagerness to sit heavy in her stomach.

That's when two insectile legs snapped down to pierce her back, sharpened points bursting out through her chest, the tips dripping glowing blue light that faded to nothing before it could hit the ground.

But there was no pain, just a shock that ran through her being in a manner very much like physical agony, and the difference was enough for her to suppress everything but a slight parting of her lips as she was lifted off the floor.

Koh twisted to hang over her, the woman's emerald-brushed face filling her vision. "Follow my connections, Lady Caldera Yu Mai. Trace the paths to every face worn by every living thing. They are my bequeathal, my windows to your world. Wear my faces and see."

Mai could only feel the cold, hard legs angling through her non-body, but as that frigid feeling stretched through her, she realized that it wasn't an empty cold. It was a cold with depth, a cold so solid that it could be used as a bridge over the emptiness that filled most of the universe. Bridges back to the material world, bridges to new eyes, such as this one, to a man in a swamp whose name had become as interchangeable as the seasons, known more by his work and knowledge than any
It was over a week ago that all of the Swampbenders' Waterbending had ceased to function for exactly one hour and forty-four minutes, and the man called 'the Mech-\textit{anist} o' the Swamp' (by his local patrons, of course) was ready to unveil the results of his latest experiment. As distressing as the loss of Waterbending had been for his hosts, he'd found it inspirational, making him ponder the very nature of the element of water itself.

He had started several different projects, put into action several different intriguing suppositions, but this was the first to bear fruit. He was sure his patrons would be most pleased. \textit{Most} pleased.

"Ahem," he began. "Thank you all for attending. Today, I will demonstrate something that will both expand the realm of human knowledge and provide a better way of life for us. I do not forget that I owe everything to you, the generous Swampbenders, for offering my people - offering me, my son, and our friends - shelter after the loss of our homes. I have worked to repay your kindness by applying my mind and interests to our collective betterment, and today, if I may say, I believe I have developed my most impressive invention yet."

On the other side of the village square, the gathered denizens of Foggy Swamp all stared at him.

One tall, thin man wearing a pair of large leaves (one on top of his head, the other elsewhere) said, "Hey, Tho, what all them words mean?"

His shorter, plumper, equally clothing-challenged companion answered, "Well, Due, he real happy to be here and thinks this thing goin' be pretty good."

"Nii\textemece."

The Mech-\textit{anist} (as his patrons insisted on calling him), nodded his agreement and stepped over to his invention. "If I may direct your attention, this is my revolutionary Water Filtration Device. I have collected some of the local swamp water into this hollowed-out pumpkin, where it evaporates under the hot shine of the sun, fueling the transition from a liquid to gaseous state, a process known by many as 'evaporation.' Left behind are what we will call 'impurities,' for lack of a better term."

His audience continued to stare.

The Mech-\textit{anist} took that as a good sign and motioned to the large, curved leaves suspended over the pumpkin by a carefully constructed support system of sticks. The leaves were the same kind used by the locals - including, these days, the Mech-\textit{anist} and his fellow refugees - for hats and other clothing, broad and coated in a natural waterproof layer. "The water vapor rises to be caught by the leaves, where they collect without being absorbed, undergoing condensation - er, the gas becomes a liquid again upon touching the cooler, shaded bottom of the leaves. The water droplets flow down the curve of the leaves, where they drip into the prepared, sanitized cups. And to demonstrate the results of the process, I have asked my own beloved son, Teo, to assist me."

"Hi, Dad!" Teo, dressed like the Swammbenders except for the goggles he wore atop his head, wheeled his assistive chair over to one of the cups and picked it up. He lifted it to his lips and drank down the contents without hesitation. When he was done, he lifted the cup and smiled. "Clean water!"

The Mech-\textit{anist} turned to his audience and waited for their reaction.

They all stared at him.
Then Tho said, "You took out all the flavor?"

The Mech-anist clasped his hands behind his back and nodded. "That is an excellent point, and demonstrates why your perspective has been so helpful to my work. Yes, the 'impurities' do include the minerals that provide natural water with its perceived flavor. Future versions of the Filtration Device may include cups that are prepared with beneficial additives to make the water more flavorful and healthier. But what I think is most important about today’s demonstration is that we, my friends, have found a way to distill water to its primal, most elemental state. We have found a way to separate water from the other elements, so that we can perform further experiments on its nature without any other possible contamination. Perhaps the lack of Waterbending we experienced almost a week ago might have been caused by the Earth within the local water, and with this process, we will be able to determine that the next time we experience such troubles."

"And then," Due said, "you can be fixin' the problem?"

The Mech-anist nodded. "It would be a good start."

And so the gathered denizens of the Foggy Swamp began applauding.

The gratifying moment was eclipsed, literally, by a shadow that passed over the clearing where the village stood. The Mech-anist looked up. His weather forecasts were not expecting clouds today. What could-

His jaw dropped at the sheer size of the machinery that was passing through the air above the swamp canopy.

Oh.

Yes, that would indeed do it.

The murmured confusion of the Swampbenders was soon drowned out by the buzz of fast-moving propellers, backed up by a chorus of thrumming internal combustion engines.

Oh, dear. The Mech-anist understood what was going on, now.

The Fire Nation had found them.

He turned back to his audience. "And that must conclude today's symposium, as we seem to be under attack by the Fire Nation. I'll go investigate further, while everyone else should-"

But the Swampbenders were already rushing out to defend their homes, scrambling out of the village to where their boats were pulled up on the spongy shores.

Yes, they might not be the most sophisticated folk, but the The Mech-anist had no complaints about the people who had chosen to give him shelter. And now it was time to help them fight their mutual enemy. As Teo rolled over to sound the Danger Horn to warn any of those who hadn't come to view the experiment, while Mech-anist ran to the tallest tree on the village's border and followed the wooden ramp that spiraled up the trunk. At the top of the tree, above the canopy of the sprawling Foggy Swamp, he was able to get a good look at the flying colossus.

Six massive maroon balloons - similar to some ideas the Mech-anist had toyed with before becoming diverted by the possibilities of fungal farms, but on far grander scale than he'd imagined - were sailing across the sky in two rows. Hanging from them was a mechanical vehicle of some kind that was as large as a Comet-class Fire Navy battleship, if the ship had been cut into segments and then folded up. And made from an especially reflective metal. Certainly, the center of the structure was
similar to a conning tower, although the other segments had too many hinges to really resemble anything from even the most modern metal ships.

Hinges.

The Mech-\textit{anist} followed their patterns, and realized that they were \textit{joints}. And if they unfolded, then the rest of the construct would extend outward like legs. Eight legs, four on each side.

Ah.

How efficient. The Fire Nation had taken a design already proven to work in nature, and applied it to this rather spectacular engineering effort. Just as certain spiders could fly through the air by creating webs that caught the wind, these balloons were carrying a spider-shaped machine as large as a warship. It had gone unnoticed because of the swamp's thick canopy blocking out the view of the sky, until it had flown right over the village.

And it was on a direct course for the towering banyan-grove tree at the very center of the swamp.

Perhaps the Fire Nation was going to be more of a complication than he had been able to anticipate.

The cold grew within Mai, but it had nothing to do with the long bug-legs spearing her chest and suspending her above the floor. She was \textit{there}, in that swamp, connected to the weird inventor and his crippled son and the Waterbenders (\textit{Waterbenders!}) living amidst the ancient soggy trees, but she was also here in the Spirit World. Is this what it was like to be a creature such as Koh?

And where was Aang?

Were all those people about to be slaughtered?

"Yes," cooed Koh, "it's starting to get interesting now, isn't it?"

'Interesting' was one word for what was about to happen.

'War' was another.

Mai had missed the first one, not being alive for most of it and having it end before she was old enough to be married. Had the Fire Lord not already been making plans for the return of Sozin's Comet, perhaps her designation as a Weapon of the Fire Nation could have gotten her deployed in some capacity, but she'd lucked out there. For a certain definition of 'luck.'

And now it seemed that she would be missing the sequel, too. The armed forces of the Fire Nation were violently seizing control of a part of the Earth Kingdom, and anyone who stood in their way would die. Would Mai be standing in that way, if she was there? Aang would, as well as all her friends. Even Sokka. Mai would certainly stand to fight with and protect the people who she had traveled with, lived with, grown with- but strangers?

Perhaps not.

But she didn't see the world in terms of colors on a map. She had come to believe that the Fire Nation was corrupt because it had nearly killed Ty Lee, and set Zuko against Aang. She knew it would continue to damage the world because Iroh was now running it. And she wanted to fix the world to make it better for the people like Aang and Ty Lee and Sokka and Tom-Tom and too many others. She wanted to create the world that they believed in.
And, fortunately, someone else would be taking up that fight.

The coldness emanating from the glowing wounds in her chest intensified, pushing the coldness all the way up to the back of her throat. It was a coldness full of life, somehow, full of people she knew she could rely on. Full of connections that led her back to the swamp.

Connections to friends.

Friends who might be about to die.

Zuko never thought he'd see anything more intimidating than a monster made of all the ash of the ruins of Ba Sing Se. That creature had loomed so high that even the sky seemed small in comparison. In terms of sheer size, nothing could ever possibly beat it, and so surely there was nothing that could rival it in its terrifying impressiveness.

And yet he couldn't tear his eye away from the sight of the massive machine in the air above his head. It reminded him of a floating lantern, like the army would sometimes use for long distance signaling, but there was no candle heating the air. It hung in the sky in a way that just seemed unnatural. And this machine was merely as large as the Royal Fire Palace, but something about it flying made it scary in a whole new way.

"Were there a bunch of those things in the Fire Nation," King Toph asked after he described it, clutching his arm to keep steady on the deck of the boat they were sharing, "and no one ever mentioned them to me?"

"Nope." Zuko continued to stare at it. "I've never seen anything like it before."

But his gaze was pulled away when Toph turned, not letting go of his arm, and aimed her sightless gaze in the general direction of the woman standing at the rear of their boat. "Matagi, you still there? I feel your breeze."

Sister Matagi, in the white and gold robes of her order of nuns, didn't pause the Airbending forms that were propelling their boat through the swamp. "I am, Your Majesty. I assume you would like me to investigate the flying machine?"

King Toph nodded. "Take a few of the other nuns, too. Hot Stuff here sounds pretty freaked out, so I'm betting that there's going to be some nasty surprises waiting up there for you. But first get us to where the rest of the Fire Nation force is. It sounds like my kind of business."

Matagi moved her body through a motion that almost could have been a fairly inefficient way to summon Fire, but it was a wind that stank of rotting swamp vegetation that sped the boat along. "Will you need our help with the fighting? My sisters and I aren't warriors, but we will assist in what ways we can."

Toph grinned and waved a dismissive hand. "Nah, it's just going to be a war. I've been waiting for this for a while. You go have your fun with the flying machine of death."

And with that, the boat ran aground on a slick muddy shore. Toph immediately let go of Zuko's arm and leaped down. Her feet were the first to touch down on the slop, but she wasn't alone for long. Other boats - some bigger, some smaller, some no more than a repurposed barn wall and others reliable vessels borrowed from the fishermen of the Earth Kingdom coasts, all propelled by an Airbender nun under the leadership of Mother Malu - emerged from the twisted waterways of the Foggy Swamp and beached themselves.
And each boat brought with it a portion of Earth King Toph's rebel army.

Zuko climbed down from his boat and made his way through the ranks of soldiers, warriors, and goons. He passed by Earthbenders with bare feet and escaped Southern Water Tribe slaves in waterproof boots. He caught sight of the swarm of Airbender nuns riding the winds with gliding sheets, moving towards the floating machine with the emblem of the Fire Nation on it.

It had been that flying machine that had tipped them all off to the activity here in the swamp. Zuko still didn't know exactly what his uncle had planned, but it had been clear to Toph that it was time for them to act. They'd made their way through the bogs to intercept the floating machine's path, and found that it had brought war with it.

A war, that if Zuko had his way, he wouldn't fight.

He made his way to a tall tree at the edge of the shore with a wooden walkway built into the trunk. He didn't go all the way up; just about halfway. That was enough to see the full battle that was underway.

This seemed to be one of the larger landmasses in the swamp, boasting a whole village near one of the shores, but there was still plenty of the room for the battle that was already raging.

Firebenders and other soldiers of the Fire Army were engaged with what seemed to be a local force consisting of men and women in clothes made out of leaves. Flames bloomed in the chaos, arrows arced up and down, and swords and spears were raised up violence as the invaders attacked without mercy. New kinds of boats - metal, with what seemed to be a giant motorized propeller on the back that served the same function as the Airbender nuns in Toph's makeshift fleet - raced up and down the waters next to the village, bringing more soldiers in red and black armor. There seemed to be no end to the invaders.

But, to Zuko's surprise, the locals were defending themselves with some success.

It turned out that they were Waterbenders.

And joining them were the Earthbenders of Toph's rebel movement, as well as warriors from all over the world- former slaves from the Southern Water Tribe, natives of the Earth Kingdom, defectors from the colonies or the Fire Nation itself. The new Airbenders were in the sky making their own contribution to the situation.

It was as if the whole world had united against Uncle Iroh and those who served him.

Zuko had pledged to merely witness, to not go into battle with the last of his family. His father had taken his eye, his mother had murdered his father in retaliation and then took her own life when her deceptions collapsed around her. Azula had gone catatonic, before disappearing without a trace. And then there was that dream he had about her-

Would he be able to keep his promise? Would Toph's forces be enough to save him from making himself the last of his family?

The wooden walkway shook in time with footsteps, and a man came down around the curve of the ramp to join Zuko near the railing. He was an older man, with dark wild hair that seemed to be missing in both natural and flame-singed patches. A bushy beard and mustache seemed to try to make up for the rest of the hair, but any dignity it might have imparted was ruined by the patchwork nature of the man's clothes.

Nevertheless, it was with a cultured voice that the man said, "Ah, it seems that another army has
arrived. I have to say, if I knew we'd be hosting a full battle, I would have devoted more of my efforts to defensive measures and less to Elemental Theory."

"Sorry," was all Zuko could think to say.

"Quite all right, young man. You weren't to know." The man scratched at his beard. "I'm called the Mech-anist. I take it you're with the side currently fighting the Fire Nation?"

"Close enough." Zuko closed his single eye. "The Fire Lord is endangering the world, and we're trying to stop him."

"Indeed? And what does the Fire Lord want with Foggy Swamp?"

Zuko opened his eye and shrugged. "That's what the Avatar was going to try to find out, but we haven't heard from him lately. This might all be because he failed."

"I see." The Mech-anist turned away from the view of the battle and pointed up to the strange machine floating onward. "Well, based on what I've observed, the objective is to bring that device over to the banyan-grove tree at the swamp's center. It's on a direct path."

Zuko squinted against the sun, and sure enough, a large dome of vegetation that could have been a tree rose up in the distance of the flyer's slow path. "Why?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." The Mech-anist clasped his hands behind his back. "After all, I've only dabbled in botany, so although I've been informed that the swamp is actually a giant, interconnected plant organism with the tree as its central node, I haven't done much exploration of the practical possibilities. Additionally, I'm not a spiritualist, so despite Hue's claims that the tree and the swamp have a will and intelligence manifesting as supernatural phenomena, I haven't been able to design any conclusive tests to determine the truth of the matter. Yes, I expect you know as much about it as I do."

Zuko's stomach flipped. A Spirit Swamp of unknown scale and power? What are you doing, Uncle? He turned to the Mech-anist. "Can you take me to this tree?"

And where was the Avatar when they needed him?

TO BE CONTINUED
Aang realizes that he forgot set his alarm clock, while Zuko finally commits.

Aang looked up at the setting sun and could feel that, somewhere, he was desperately needed. But also knew that he was too late.

It was a feeling that reached past the soothing nature of the paradise around him, the river and lush grass banks and the rising mountains in the distance and the pale rocks that glowed golden in the sunset. Even though he'd spent the day just sitting on Appa's head with reins in hand, he felt as exhausted his buddy must be after flying south all night and day again. Aang couldn't even do more than nod as Sokka organized sleeping shifts so that someone would always be awake to prod everyone else as soon as Appa was rested enough to get going again. When Momo crawled up Aang's robes and motioned for a feeding, Aang just passed on his bag of dried fruit and didn't even make the lemur play some games for it.

It was like he had never fully returned from the Spirit World, back at the North Pole.

Just like Mai, still trapped there.

And the swamp where Fire Lord Iroh might already be ruining the whole world was still a day's flight away.

Aang had to assume that Iroh, with his flying machine, was outpacing a sky bison. Appa was a good friend and the best flyer around, but this last year had been hard on the big guy. He'd been shot with lightening back in the spring by Princess Azula, and never really recovered his old speed and endurance. Over the last few days, he'd been forced to fly all the way down from the North Pole as fast as he could go. Appa had been slowing up more and more, and even if they arrived at Foggy Swamp tomorrow, he probably wouldn't be able to help with any fighting.

And they hadn't encountered Iroh on their journey south. That didn't definitely mean he was ahead of them; he could have just been on a different path. But Aang knew, in his heart of hearts, that the Fire Lord was approaching the swamp. Something in his spirit could feel the danger.

If Aang couldn't catch up with Iroh, he wouldn't be able to save anyone. There was no telling what would happen to the world if Iroh tried his weird plan to harness a spiritual nexus (an unfortunate part of Aang hoped that Iroh would learn a lesson about sticking his hand into a fire, at the very least), and Aang would definitely miss his best chance to retrieve Mai from the Spirit World.

He sighed and sat down on the riverbank near where Appa was settling in to sleep. Ty Lee already had a campfire going, and Sokka and Katara were working on yet another quick dinner of jerky-seaweed stew. Momo was probably off hunting bugs somewhere.

And the Avatar had nothing to do but think about how he was late for saving the world again.
He had already been one-hundred-and-one years too late to keep the Fire Nation from destroying the world's balance. The oppressed nations, the spiritual disturbances, the ashlands— all of it was the result of Aang's first big failure. Now, he had a chance to keep things from getting worse, a chance to at least save the girl he loved from a fate worse than death, and again he couldn't manage to be where needed to be when he needed to be there.

Maybe he should take his glider and just go on alone, all through the night. It would be slower than Appa, and he'd have to sustain his speed with his Airbending the whole time, but maybe by setting out now he'd be able to shave an hour or so off the trip. He might be exhausted when he arrived, but—maybe he'd get there ahead by a few minutes.

And those minutes might count!

Seconds could count.

By resting for the coming fight, was he betraying his duty?

He was so distracted by his worries that he almost missed the body floating face down in the river, moving with the current.

When he saw it, he screamed.

The body twitched and suddenly sank into the water. By the time his friends ran over, everything was perfectly normal again.

Sokka held his boomerang in one hand and a knife in the other. "What? What's going on? Did Momo hack up a hairball again?"

That's when the mud of the riverbank rose up in the shape of a man—the same shape as the body that had been in the river.

Aang pointed. "That's what's wrong."

Ty Lee nodded. "That's worth screaming over." Then she screamed, too, startling Katara.

The man made of mud opened his eyes. They were green and lopsided, one wide and staring, the other narrow and calculating. "What's with all the noise? Can't a geezer take an epic journey face-down in a river without people screaming at him? No one has any sense of decorum anymore." Then he cackled and finished it up with a wet snort.

Ty Lee screamed again.

Aang wished he could join her. This looked weird, and he was getting tired of that kind of thing.

It turned out that traversing a swamp without a boat was harder than it looked. The ground would often turn out not to be ground at all, which Zuko considered to be more than a little dishonorable.

He jogged along what was either a massive low-hanging tree branch or a huge up-reaching tree root, right behind the so-called Mechanist of the (well-named) Foggy Swamp. "How much further is this banyan-grove tree?" He couldn't see very far ahead in the fog and gloom, with the forest canopy completely blocking out the sky.

He also couldn't see where Uncle Iroh's floating spider-machine might be. It could have reached the big tree already, or he might have overtaken it without noticing. He couldn't even tell how long he'd
been traveling, but it had to have at least been an hour.

It was hard to fight without an enemy in sight.

"We don't measure travel by distance, here in the swamp. We use time." The Mechanist gingerly stepped off the branch-root-thing and onto a patch of wet grass that rose up from the water. "And the time will depend on when we meet Huu. Without him, it might be another few hours of travel."

Zuko followed, and held back a grimace at the muddy squelch his boots made as they sank into the ground.

He wondered how King Toph and her rebels were doing against the Fire Army. Had they won, and Zuko was doing this for nothing? Or could they already be defeated, and Zuko was the only left to oppose his uncle?

Did he oppose Uncle Iroh? He still didn't know what the man was planning, or what exactly a giant mechanical spider was supposed to do here in a swamppy spirit nexus.

The flying bugs that had been flitting around Zuko's head through this whole journey must have taken his pause as a sign of weakness, as they started swooping in at his face. He shut his good eye and swatted at them, feeling some disturbingly large impacts. Hopefully that would chase the disgusting things away. He opened his eye again, ready to continue his journey into this heart of gloom-

-and stepped back when he found a lumbering green monster of sinew and shadow rising up from the swamp-water to glare at him with a dead face-

"Ah, Huu," the Mechanist said. "I'm so glad we found you!"

Huu?! The Mechanist's sage friend was a monster? Or was it a spirit, a non-corporeal form given to the life-force of the swamp itself? Zuko prepared to bow in supplication.

And then the sinews parted like the vines that hung from the trees here, and Zuko realized that they were vines. From the shadows within the monster's body, a portly man stepped out onto the grass wearing nothing but shortpants made of leaves. He scratched at his beard as he looked at the Mechanist, and then Zuko. "This wouldn't have anything to do with the big machine thing flying towards the banyon-grove tree," he drawled, "would it?"

Okay. Unexpected, but Zuko could work with this. "We need to get there! My Uncle- the Fire Lord-the Fire Nation is invading the swamp! I don't know what they're planning with the tree, but I need to find out."

Huu nodded. "So you would be Prince Zuko, then."

Zuko's jaw dropped. "You've heard of me?"

"No, I met you, the other day. You looked older, but there aren't many one-eyed men with that pouty regal look." Huu shifted into a Waterbending stance, and the vines that made up his monster 'costume' flowed into something like a platform. "Hop on. I can get you to the tree faster than that flying machine."

Zuko was too confused to move until the Mechanist gave a little hop to land on the vine-vehicle, and then he followed quickly while still trying to figure out where he could have met Huu before. Certainly, the man seemed memorable.
Huu leaned forward and waved his arms out like he was swimming through the air, and the vines beneath them pulsed and surged through the water as though pushed. The platform remained stable, and Zuko realized what the Mechanist meant about Huu being able to quicken their traveling pace.

But how could he have met this swampy Waterbender before?

Zuko shook his head. "I give up. Where could we have met? I only just got to the swamp a few days ago, and I was with Toph's people the whole time."

Huu chuckled. "Oh, we didn't meet physically. Not at that point in time, anyway. The swamp is a network of connections, branches and roots intertwining and becoming one over time. It's all one big living organism. And so's the rest of the world, if you think about. You're Fire Nation, and I live in this swamp, and your friends and allies come from all over, but we're still all connected. Even when we haven't met yet, we're connected through the time when we will meet."

Oh, great. This guy was a mystic. Zuko never knew what those people were talking about. "That's—um, nice. But how did you know who I am?"

"Well, in most places, those connections are as easy to see as friendship and family, love or hate, feelings and thoughts." Huu continued his Waterbending forms as he spoke, carrying them through the swamp as quick as a dream. "It's invisible to the eyes, even if it's something we feel."

The Mechanist raised a finger. "Theoretical connections, then."

"Sure. But here in the swamp— it's a special place. Lots o' life here, free to grow and find its own balance without worrying about thinkin'. And so sometimes folk see those connections. Visions of people we've lost, people we loved, folks we think are gone."

Zuko blinked. "You're saying you had a vision of the future? Of me?"

Huu grinned. "Time is an illusion, and so is separation."

Zuko wasn't sure he actually believed this. But Uncle wanted something here in this swamp. Perhaps he wanted to affect the past in some way? Was that even possible?

Zuko sighed. "This sounds like Avatar stuff." He was starting to hate Avatar stuff.

Toph wasn't sure what she hated more— war, or this soggy fuzzy swamp.

She'd long thought that her grand uprising, the day when her forces would finally fight back against the Fire Nation for the first time since the return of Sozin's Comet, would be quick and bloody and effective. She'd imagined lightning strikes that would break Fire Nation supply lines, hardened populaces that would suddenly revolt with secretly acquired weapons, captured tanks that would infiltrate the enemy lines and take out commanders before anyone knew what was going on. All of it would be firmly unfair in the Earth Kingdom's favor, because only chumps fought fair. It wouldn't so much be a war as a country-wide string of assassinations.

But this wasn't that.

Toph pressed her feet deeper into the muddy, sloppy, moldy ground of this patch of the swamp and extended her senses through her Earthbending, trying to sense the movement she could hear around her. There were screams and shouts, boots splashing through water and bare feet slapping on mud, the roaring of Firebending and the swooshing of Waterbending. Trees creaked as they were brought down and engine-driven machines thrummed like massive metal insects. Through it all, the swamp
beneath Toph's feet reverberated with activity, but it was distributed and indistinct, not the sharp
telltale shapes that she was used to. Her usual level of Earthbending precision was impossible, in this
water-logged pit of despair.

She was lost in a storm of war.

From somewhere near her, Bato of the Southern Water Tribe called out, "The Swampbender village
is burning down!"

Toph decided to be the leader the situation demanded. "So get the Swampbenders to put out the fires,
smart guy," she called back. "They're Waterbenders! Hello!"

"And there aren't any of them near us right now," Bato growled back. "They're helping our people
spread out through the swamp. We need to get their women and children to safety for them! They
trusted us!"

Well, how was Toph supposed to know that the Swampbenders were all away? She hadn't given any
orders like that. She'd been busy at the time getting Mother Malu's report on the Big Flying Thing.
Probably. There was a lot of stuff going on in this war, and Toph had been forced to delegate a bit.

She was going to have to get used to that if she was going to rule the largest landmass in the entire
world.

"Fine. Bato, gather up your distant kinfolk or whatever. Anyone here have eyes that work and isn't
busy defending us from evil Firebenders?" Toph put her hands on her hips and stood tall, projecting
as much kinglyness as she could.

"Um," came a young voice, "I'm a runner but don't have any messages to pass on right now. My
name is Ohev-"

"Great, Olive," Toph cut the kid off. She didn't have time for introductions. "Which way is our best
bet to get the non-combatants to safety?"

"Um, that way will get everyone out behind our better defensive lines, but the bridge is on fire and
without it we'll all get stuck in the mud."

"Mud? No problem." Toph stretched her limbs. "Now, which way is the 'that way' you mentioned? I
can't sense pointing arms in this slog."

The kid Olive (or whatever) grabbed Toph by the shoulders and turned her in the right direction. By
the time they worked out where the bridge and the mud were, a steady thrum of reverberations
signaled Bato's arrival with the evacuees. She was able to make out voices of higher pitch, shouting
words like "Help" and "Please" and "Our homes are on fire oh no oh no oh no."

These must be the women and children stories always went on about protecting. Toph wasn't sure
why these women and children couldn't fight, but whatever. Maybe none of them were Benders.

Toph went out in front of the group, coasting along on a wave of mud with the runner-kid hanging
onto her.

"There," he barked. "We're at the bridge! It's almost completely burned! It'll never hold!"

Toph nodded. She didn't actually care about whether anyone could cross the bridge. She just needed
its shape. She was going to make her own.
She brought her personal mudslide to a stop, pushed Olive (or whatever) off of her waist, and sank into a low horse stance. She shoved both of her fists towards the ground, taking control of the soupy mud beneath the bridge. It was heavier than she was used to, but she knew that wasn't because of any real weight. It was the water that was mixed with the dirt, the same thing that was keeping her from fully sensing her surroundings. As she raised her arms, holding on to her spiritual grip on the Earth within the mud, that water tried to resist her, tried to pull everything back where it was supposed to be according to gravity.

Toph ignored that water. It could come along for the ride if it wanted, but she wasn't going to stay here hanging out with it. And gravity could get stuffed. Because even if she couldn't be precise here, she was still powerful.

And so the mud rose to cover the bridge, a geyser that put the fires out and covered all the paths and supports. Some of it broke under the weight of the mud, but that was fine. She rose from her horse stance and brought her arms in towards her body, tensing her muscles and letting out all the breath in her lungs. The mud didn't move, but it started to compact, the Earth pressing together to tighten and harden and force out all the water within. As the mud solidified into dirt and stone, the coating all over the bridge became the bridge. The burned wood was now simply the inner core of a solid Earthbending bridge.

"Let's go," Toph called back to her evacuees.

She held her position as Bato led them all past her, adding her strength to the bridge. She hadn't had the time to make a really reliable structure, so better safe than sorry. She could feel the vague reverberations through the soggy ground, amidst explosions and the cries of people burning to death in the distance and clangs of metal, and wished for everyone to hurry up. She was absolutely positive that she could hold everything up long enough, but who knew when the lines of battle would change and Firebenders would be all up in her business? That would be annoying.

Amazingly, it wasn't Firebenders who eventually got her.

"The last two are on the bridge," the runner-kid said from somewhere on her left. "Two ladies who are- uh, with child. They're a little slow."

"Yeah, yeah, give them my congratulations." Toph clenched her jaw as she shifted her position to ease the strain on her muscles. The bridge wouldn't need as much strength if there were only two people crossing it now.

And then she felt the ground move in a way that it shouldn't, a way that didn't match this type of landscape at all, a way that had human intelligence behind it.

An Earthbender.

Hey, reinforcements. Nice.

Then a good-size chunk of hardened clay slammed into her stomach.

Toph's breath burst out of her and she folded up around the projectile, but she didn't fall. Instead, she told the pain in her middle to go take a hike, and focused on keeping upright. She sank her fingers into the clay boulder, and went into a low stance that let her take on its full weight.

Then threw the thing back with all her Earthbending strength.

Amazingly, she didn't hear anyone give a surprised death-cry. "Did I hit him? What's going on?"
"The pregnant ladies," Ohev gasped. "The bridge is coming apart!"

Great. Toph swung and reached out to the mud again, telling it that no, now was not a good time to lie down. Suck it up and stay solid, you good-for-nothing ex-mud!

"Get them across," Toph bit out, "even if you need to carry them!"

She heard Ohev's running more than felt it, on this soggy ground. At least the kid knew how to take orders. The problem was that she couldn't be sure that he knew how to complete orders. How long would it take him to get a pair of mothers-to-be across her mud bridge? How long would she have to hold it up?

As she wondered, she felt the ground shift again like it did before, and she tensed for another battering.

Then the ground beneath her opened up, leaving her freefalling, and when she reached out to pull the dirt walls to come to her aid-

-the Earth resisted her.

Because she was fighting another Earthbender, and he wasn't distracted by having to save anyone.

She slammed to the ground with a suddenness that drove fear into her heart, because the impact was both unexpected and not hard enough to let her sense her opponent. She was at a major disadvantage, simply because she was her, and that hurt more than any injury.

And then the mud fell in around her, trying to bury her, or maybe drown her, and when she pushed at it, it pushed back. She put all her strength into it, sure that she was the most powerful Earthbender in the world, and in a pushing match she had to be able to beat anyone. Right?

But the mud pushed in from behind her as well, and the sides, and she was surrounded by enemy Earthbenders. What-

But she didn't stop pushing. Even when it flowed down over her head and buried her.

All her sense went as dark as her sight.

But then the mud became lighter, moving more easily according to her will. She kept up her pushing, creating a bubble of dirt filled with water, and she felt the water moving away from her, too. Either she'd somehow just become the Avatar, or some help had arrived.

The water surged upward, punching a hole in the makeshift tomb that had been constructed around her, letting in a flow of air. Along with it came the impact of a heavy pair of boots that even she could sense, and strong arms scooped her up. In that grip, she could recognize the heartbeat of her helper, and relaxed as Bato of the Southern Water Tribe leaped up out of the hole and ran with her over her bridge. As they passed across the hardened mud, she focused on her Earthbending, and sensed the vibration of two Swampbenders running alongside Bato.

A whole rescue team just for her.

Toph deigned to let Bato carry her royal person. "Thanks. What was that all about?"

"I don't know." She could hear the stress in his voice. "The Fire Nation just got reinforcements. Warriors in robes of blue and white, and not in any style that belongs to the Water Tribes. Earthbenders and Waterbenders and plenty of Firebenders, not to mention how good some of them
are with weapons. Anyone you know?"

Toph didn't say anything. Better for a King to remain silent than admit complete ignorance.

Aang wasn't sure what to do when the mud-covered weird guy slopped over to their campsite and began poking around. Air Nomads believed in friendliness and hospitality, but this was really, really creepy.

Sokka leaned over and whispered, "Should I attack him?"

Katara slapped Sokka's shoulder. "He's a confused old man. We aren't attacking him."

Aang nodded. "Katara's right. We should probably help him. I think? And- uh, Ty Lee should be the one to do it."

But Ty Lee took a step backwards and raised her hands. "Nope, not me, not doing it!"

Katara came over and put an arm around Ty Lee's shoulders. "Come on, he can't be that dangerous. Not to someone like you. And you're so good at charming people."

"Pffff!" Ty Lee leaned her head against Katara's. "His aura is silver, Katara, and normally I'd be asking him to show me the path to enlightenment, but he also has these flashes of dark reds and black! I'm not going near that mix. None of us should."

Sokka raised his boomerang. "So, we attack? Normally, I'd be against listening to aura-based advice, but I like the idea of attacking the inconvenient weirdo."

Aang sighed. "I'll go talk to him." He went over to the camp, where the mud-covered man was having what looked like a staring contest with Momo. "Um, hi! I'm Aang. Um, the Avatar. Do you need help- or-"

The weird guy swung to stare into Aang's eyes from a very uncomfortably close angle. "I don't need help. Keep it straight, sonny! I'm the Mud Man, and I'm the wise-but-slightly-disturbed-mentor figure who sometimes loses students in ashlands and tells Grand Lotuses to go jump off a cliff. You're the young chosen one in need of help."

"Right." Aang backed away using only the power of his toes. "Good to know."

Reinforcements arrived in the form of Katara, who held up her hands and stepped in front of Aang. "Do you at least need help cleaning yourself off, sir? The river is right-"

"Clean my mud off?! What are you children trying to do, kill me?!" The- uh, 'Mud Man' sat down on the ground next to Momo, who took that opportunity to scamper off like Sokka had stepped on his tail (again). "I might as well cut my own ears off and serve them in dumplings! Ear-dumplings, chewy and waxy and full of flavor! No, I need my mud. Otherwise, I won't be able to get updates from The Tree, and we're just getting to the good part of the story!"

Katara looked back at Aang, her wide eyes delivering a stirring recitation on the critical need for compassion in elder-care but also an admission that she was starting to get a little freaked out.

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Aang put on a polite smile and stepped forward again. "Okay, we'll leave your mud. We- uh, wouldn't want The Tree to get lonely, right?"

The Mud Man snorted. "Oh, it won't be lonely. Prince Zuko is already on his way, and the big metal
The Mud Man gave a grin that was only partially insane. "Everything is connected, Avatar. I would have expected you to know that. Whether it's through mud or friendship or even time itself." All of the sudden, he was standing again, pushing past Katara to get right into Aang's face. "And you, young man, are going to be late!"

"I-" Aang looked at Katara, but she just shook her head at him, clearly as overwhelmed as he was. He looked to Sokka, who just raised his boomerang again in a useless suggestion. (Why had they even let him keep that thing?) And Ty Lee was cowering behind Sokka.

Ty Lee had said that the Mud Man's aura was silver, that he was on the path to enlightenment. And he knew about Zuko, the platinum spider, and that Aang wouldn't get to the swamp in time. Was this a trick?

Or-

Aang bowed his head. "I'm sorry. We've been going as fast as we can, but things kind of got away from us."

The Mud Man slowly leaned backwards until he toppled to the ground, but he transformed the moment of impact into a roll that left him sitting in front of the campfire. "Yes, I know how that can be. A century can go by, in the blink of a rooster-pig's eye, and then all we can do is die. Also: fly, pie, sigh, and why! Heh, I love rhyming." He snorted. "Well, you might be sorry, but you're still late. The only way you could possibly do your job properly, Avatar, is if you reached back through the past to harvest the goodness you've seeded across the world."

Wha- Aang shook his head. "Okay, well, I'm also interested in knowing more about The Tree, so if you could explain about that-"

"Oh, very well, I'll teach you how to reach beyond the veil of time with your Avatar powers." The Mud Man blinked. "Wait, that wasn't what you were going to ask, was it? Oh, phooey, I messed this up. Let me go back into the river and we can try this again. I knew I should have just floated along until I reached Foggy Swamp!" He got up and began skipping (and oozing) his way towards the river.

Aang reached out to him with a hand. Was it possible that the Mud Man actually knew what he was talking about? And something about him was so familiar, too.

Sokka grabbed Aang by the wrist before he could reach the Mud Man. "You're not actually taking this nutjob seriously, are you? Offering strange new powers that defy the laws of science is how they get you! Everyone knows that!"

Aang was about to object, because more and more he was getting a feeling about the Mud Man, but then he realized that the pop-eyed, mud-covered visage of the man himself was leaning right into the space between him and Sokka.

Both boys shrieked and jumped back.
The Mud Man cackled. "Well, you convinced me! I'll teach you the secrets of Timebending!" His laughter abruptly cut off and he sidled over to Katara, stage-whispering to her, "Actually, I was going to do it, anyway. I'm kind of on your side already, and the mud knew you'd be stopping by here. But don't tell anyone I said that! I have a reputation to maintain."

The Mud Man hopped back over to the campfire and raised his arms dramatically. "Now I shall reveal secrets that have been remembered only by the mountains themselves, secrets lost since before the first Avatar rose up to cleave the world!" He slumped and pointed an arm off to the side. "And to do it I'm going to need that thing."

Aang looked.

The Mud Man was pointing at Momo.

Momo's ears flattened as he tilted his head.

Zuko had to admit, it was the biggest tree he'd ever seen. Its trunk might have filled the whole Royal Caldera.

Too bad he was seeing such immensity by the light of the fires of warfare.

After a long stretch of travel that had been even smoother than a carriage ride, Huu the Swampbender's walking platform of vines rose upward in a burst that took them straight into the canopy. Leaves and branches slapped at Zuko, but before he could so much as hiss in discomfort, they were clear of the foliage and the fog and the bugs, rising in the light of the moon and the stars.

What had to be the banyan-grove tree rose up in front of him, blocking out so much of the sky-and above it, the flying mechanical spider obscured the rest.

And it looked like a spider, now. The sides had extended and opened to dangle above the tree, the tips coming to sharpened points that looked like needles from this distance but had to be as wide as a rhino even near the end. Flames glowed beneath the balloons that kept the thing aloft, and plumes of fire shot out randomly for reasons Zuko couldn't discern. Could the machinery be malfunctioning?

No, wait.

There were shadows flitting around the balloons and the spider.

The flames were from Firebenders keeping attackers away.

As Zuko watched, several the shadows drew fire and moved towards the south. He immediately looked to north, and sure enough, another shadow was moving against the backdrop of the cosmos above. It seemed to contract in shape for a moment, then expanded into something like the shape of a bird.

No, not a bird.

Zuko squinted his good eye.

The balloons moved and contracted on the north side as if battered by something, and the whole spider drifted as the leaves of the trees below fluttered in the same direction.

Airbenders.
The Airbender nuns were attacking the spider.

The spider continued to drift so that it was no longer directly over the trunk of the tree. In the light of its torches, Zuko saw massive fans turn and push the whole thing on a curve that would eventually take it back to its original position.

Next to Zuko, the Mechanist said, "Ahhhh! The placement needs to be precise! And if it isn't in the right position, it can't land! Perhaps there's a balance issue? Although I still can't fathom the purpose behind all of this."

Huu grunted. "All I know is that I have to protect the tree. Join in or not, but I need to-"

"Take me up there," Zuko interrupted. He pointed to the mechanical spider dangling from the balloons. "I have to know what's going on. And it might be the only way to stop all this without anyone getting hurt."

Huu looked at him, expression not giving anything away, and then nodded. "What about you, Mechanist? You sticking around?"

"Ah, perhaps my expertise can be of use, and of course I want to help defend my home. Also, my lack of skill in personal defense leaves me requiring your assistance, if you would be so kind, in protecting my-"

And that's when Huu sank into a low stance, raised his arms, and pushed towards the sky.

The vines beneath them tightened and rose-no, jumped-and it was all Zuko could do to keep his balance as the legs of the platform swung up to become tentacle-like arms that grasped the branches of the banyan-grove tree and began climbing its way into the night.

As they passed into the thick canopy of the tree, thicker even than that of the whole swamp around it, they were covered in darkness deeper than the night itself. Zuko thought about raising a flame, but decided against it. He didn't need to see right now, and didn't want to distract Huu.

Soon enough, they burst through the top layer of branches and back into the light of the stars and the moon and the flames. Zuko could see the Airbender nuns clearly now, their white and gold robes glowing a bit in the moonlight, but they became blurs as the vine-crawler began grappling its way up one of the legs of the spider. Huu was moving his arms in time with the vine-tentacles, and despite his pudgy build, he didn't seem at all winded by the activity.

Then they were pulled up over a railing onto something like the deck of a navy ship, the central body of the spider-form. Before Huu settled, Zuko leaped forward, kicking flames in one direction even as he punched a fireball in the other, knocking two nearby soldiers off their feet. He landed between the pair of groaning bodies in a crouch, quickly orienting himself. He recognized something, a short distance away, like a command tower from a battleship. That seemed like the best start. He moved forward, Huu and the Mechanist following him.

A shadow passed in front of Zuko-faster than he could react-something hard jabbed into one shoulder-
-then the other-

-pain exploded where he was struck-

-traveling up and down his arms-

-and then they both flopped down to hang useless at his sides. He tried to raise his arms again, but they didn't respond. There was only a cold tingling and lingering achiness.

No.

No.

He tried to will some life back into his arms, to channel his Inner Fire into heat and light and fight, but they wouldn't obey. He heard Huu grunting in pain and turned to help - somehow - but the shadow moved away again and Huu sagged to the ground bonelessly.

There were only two people he knew who could do such a thing. Ty Lee was one, and she was supposed to be with Aang. The other-

"Prince Zuko?!"

Zuko turned as the shadow finally stood still, and his eye was able to resolve the figure's features in the moonlight.

Bangfei, former Weapon of the Fire Nation, stood in a fighting stance. He was, oddly enough, wearing robes of blue and white, with a mantle on his shoulders decorated like a White Lotus tile.

Zuko didn't recognize the uniform, but knew that anything having to do with Pai Sho must belong to Uncle. "What's going on here? What is this machine?"

"Something wonderful!" Bangfei actually smiled as he folded his hands together. "The Fire Lord has found a way to set the world right! No more death, no more imbalance. This machine will allow him to touch the flow of energy throughout the entire world and fix it."

It was what every decent person could ever want to hear. Zuko distrusted it immediately. "Then why fight a war for it?"

"Not everyone is enlightened enough to accept the Fire Lord's word. The locals would oppose anyone who sought to exploit their swamp, and the Earth rebels are mired in the Avatar's misunderstandings." Bangfei shook his head and sighed. "I hate that more people have to suffer, but this time it's for a reason! A war to really end all wars!"

Zuko snorted, even as he tried to will some life back into his hands. If he could just keep this idiot talking- "What makes this one so different? My grandfather said the Hundred Year War would do the same thing. It's why I went to Ba Sing Se with my father." And something made him add, "My eye wasn't the only thing I lost there, but it took me a long time to realize it."

"Because," Bangfei replied, his own pair of eyes shining in the starlight, "people will never want to stop fighting. They'll always be flawed, disgusting warmongers. Death is a part of us- of us. To change, we need to take it away."

Zuko shook his head and opened his mouth as if to disagree- and leaped up and kicked out and summoned his fire-
Bangfei ducked under the flame, under the kick, and jabbed a pair of fingers into Zuko's extended leg right under the knee.

When Zuko landed, his leg gave out under him, sending him crashing to the deck.

Bangfei loomed over him. "We have no prison onboard, but I'm sure your uncle would want you to live. We'll have to find a way to keep you out of harm's way."

And then he jabbed Zuko in the neck, taking away the light of the moon and the stars and the flames of war.

Mai wore many faces, as she observed the physical world through Koh's power. She had no control over who she became and no access to anyone's thoughts but her own. She didn't even know if Koh was controlling all of that or if it was simply the nature of this power.

She also didn't like how her spirit-self was hanging, speared through the chest, from Koh's insectile legs in the center of the creature's domain.

All in all, it was almost as bad as one of Mother's dinner parties.

"Aang is trying to get there," she managed to gasp in between spying sessions. It was disorienting, having her existence brush up against the life-energy of other people so directly, connecting with them and sharing their lives for a few minutes here and there. Sometimes, she came back to this cave and had forgotten who she really was for a moment or two. But her face was trained not to move without her permission, so she was safe enough from Koh. "You can't punish him for trying."

"Can't I?" Koh's legs lifted, raising Mai's skewered form further up into the gloom of this cave-like pit. She was tilted until she was splayed out horizontally, limbs hanging lifelessly. Without her knives, she didn't have much use for them right now.

Koh was looking straight down on her with the face of a chubby-cheeked child peeking out from the bug-flesh and glistening plates, though whether a boy or a girl was impossible to tell.

"You said you only punish traitors, including traitors to their duty." Mai licked her lips (whatever the point was here in the Spirit World) and kept all pain and disgust from her voice. "If you count failure as betrayal, then you're no cosmic force. You're just a thug with a flimsy excuse and a grudge against the world."

Koh loomed over her, the child's face going blank, the eyes going glassy. It could have been the face of a porcelain doll, if not for the soft skin and the tears that glistened on the delicate eyelashes.

Then Koh laughed, a grating sound that echoed painfully off the cavern walls. Mai swallowed a wince.

Koh twisted so that the face pressed against hers, cheek-to-cheek. The skin was cold. "It's the way you fight me that makes you truly delicious. So many try to oppose me physically, but I cannot be destroyed, not without destroying all the spirits I've removed from the reincarnation cycle. Others fight me with their passion for the ones I've taken from them, and I'm sure you can imagine how far that gets them. But you-"

Koh's voice lowered to a whisper. "You fight with your heart, a sharp little loathing for all that I am, and yet you give me nothing with which to fight back. It's beautiful, in a certain way."

"I bet you really do think that's flattery." Mai blinked up at him. "So which one was Kuruk? Physical
"fight or passion?"

The child's face smiled. "I doubt you'll be surprised to hear that he was both. The Avatar contains multitudes, after all. I defeated him so completely that I even felt sorry for the man, offering him a boon of recompense. Sadly, he never collected; I have always wondered what he would have asked for, once he emerged from his grief."

"Is that why you focus on Aang? And me? To see if you can play the same game again?"

"Oh, don't worry, my interest genuinely comes from finding you interesting. Avatar Aang, on the other hand, is merely business. You've seen how I observe the world, but not the paths I can map into the future. We spirits are talented, that way." Koh pulled back, and began lowering her down again so that the tips of her boots didn't quite reach the floor. "No, this boy who loves you has a choice coming up. And in making it, he might give me the chance to add some rather delightful faces to my collection. Everything else is- well, how I have my fun."

Fun.

It was the same kind of fun that Azula used to like, the fun that came from all the extra little tortures she could add to an already draining life. And, to be honest, Mai had kind of enjoyed that thing, too, for a long time.

That was what happened when there were no other real joys to be found. Or no way to find the joys that might be there.

But that didn't mean Mai felt sorry for this creepy bug. She was still going to stab it the first chance she got.

The faces in the real world descended on her spirit once more, familiar faces whose voices rang in her heart like the lullabies of her earliest days.

Aang sat in a lotus position across from the Mud Man, the only light coming from the campfire nearby. He tried to relax, breathing in and out and seeking the part of the world - the part of himself - that existed beyond the physical.

It was kind of hard with the Mud Man noisily chewing on something pulled out of the river- and with Sokka, Katara, and Ty Lee sitting off the side and staring at Aang protectively.

The Mud Man slurped up the last of his- uh, 'meal' and belched. "Well, have you made Time your plaything yet? It's just a matter of acknowledging that Now doesn't really exist and finding the extra dimensions of our connections that can't be put into nice visual metaphors because our minds can only process three dimensions. Simple stuff! Also, don't forget to use your lemur; that part is verrrrrrrrrrrrrrry important."

In Aang's lap, Momo looked up and trilled.

Aang breathed in and out again. "I'm trying. I can sense my connections to my friends, and even the paths to the people I've met during my travels. But- um, I'm not sure what you mean by extra dimensions?"

"Really? I thought it was as plain as the mud on my handsome misshapen face." The Mud Man scratched what was presumably a little beard and not, for example, a mud-covered prawn hanging from his chin. "Maybe you need to ask The Tree for help. I've never actually moved outside of time before, so I might not be describing it right."
Aang looked over to his friends. Sokka shook his head, Katara nodded her head, and Ty Lee waved.

Aang didn't find that helpful at all. "Um, aren't I trying to get to The Tree? It's not here, sooo- not sure how I can ask. Sorry."

The Mud Man blinked.

The Mud Man blinked again.

The Mud Man sniffled.

Then the Mud Man slapped his own forehead, splattering mud as far as the campfire. "I knew I forgot something! Now, where did I put it?" He stood up, turned in a slow circle, scooted through the campsite poking things, climbing up on a sleeping Appa to get mud all over the inside of the saddle, and then hopping down to stand in front of Aang again in his original position.

As Aang was about to ask what the guy was looking for, the Mud Man stomped a foot on the ground and something popped up out of the dirt right between them. It was-

-a leafy twig stuck to stand in a clay pot full of dirt?

Aang could only stare at it in confusion.

It was Katara who finally said, "Maybe I'm misunderstanding something, but that's not a tree."

"No, but it was," the Mud Man hissed, "and someday it will be again. I snapped that off the tree at the center of the Foggy Swamp so that you could talk to it. The Tree knows all about ignoring time. Or you could just stick the twig in your ear and listen to its echoing whispers, but then you'd look silly."

So instead of looking silly, Aang gave a helpless shrug at his friends (who all averted their gazes), and addressed the twig in the pot with, "Um, hello, can you help me?"

"No," barked the Mud Man, "no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no NO!!" He picked up the twig-in-a-pot, shoved it into Aang's lap right next to Momo (who startled and tried to escape but the Mud Man caught him and put him right back where he started), and snorted. "It's a plant, Avatar. It doesn't really talk. Well, so much for not looking silly. I guess the gloves are off, now! Here it comes! The whole and terrifying truth!"

Aang tensed, ready to dodge an attack-

The Mud Man crouched in front of him and sighed. "It's all about connections, Aang. Everything is connected, whether or not we realize it." His voice was soft, now, lacking its previous force. "You and I share a connection that you don't have time to figure out. You and Momo have another that's deeper than you guess. And you and The Tree will join together, soon. You already have a connection to it, in the future, and so you have the same thing with what was once part of it. It's not a matter of looking or sensing, like you've already been taught to do. Take the twig in your hands, and use the connection that's already there, whether or not you can feel it."

That-

That almost made sense. Aang put one hand on the twig, and gave Momo some soothing rubs with the other. He closed his eyes, focusing on the feel of the twig's bark against his skin, the way the leaves tickled him between his fingers, and the moisture within that imparted life and kept the twig from drying out into nothing more than firewood.
As Aang concentrated on the twig, breathing in and out, the Mud Man whispered, "Connections aren't even real, to tell the truth. They're just a little lie we tell ourselves so that we can acknowledge the One but pretend we're still separate individuals. There really isn't a Self at all, not like we think about it. We're all One, just a One that expresses itself in lots and lots of different ways at the same time. And not even as the same time, because there is no time. Those who know how to look past the Self have had visions of the future, and Avatars talk with the past regularly."

"So you're saying," Aang whispered back, as he basked in the light of the spirit that was shining out the twig in a place beyond vision, "that if we're One, we've always been one."

"That's what reincarnation is all about." The Mud Man gave a chuckle. "Just ask Momo."

And Aang did.

But he didn't talk directly to Momo. He let himself fall into the infinite depths of the twig in his hand, riding the light within across an eternity to a tree in a swamp, but not just a tree in a swamp. That was merely a glimpse of a shadow of a reflection of the true tree, one whose roots ran through both the Spirit World and the Material World. There was a tree in the Spirit World, too, but that was just another mere glimpse at the truth. They all were just glimpses, the trees and forests and nations and ashlands and people.

Clothing himself in that truth, Aang looked to Momo, following his connection to the lemur in his lap.

And the Tree of Time remembered Momo, remembered Momo from before there was a Momo, and Aang found another connection to follow.

When he opened his eyes, he was sitting in front of a Pai Sho board in a room in the Southern Air Temple. The air was sweet with the fragrance of the coming harvest, the floor warm beneath him, and sunlight angled in through the tall windows.

Across the Pai Sho board, Monk Gyatso smiled and bowed his head. "Hello again, Aang."

Aang gaped, and then had to laugh. "So you were Momo all this time?"

"This time, and all times, from what your friend says." Gyatso raised his head and gave his own chuckle. "Friendships can last more than a lifetime, it seems. And being reborn as a lemur has been very enlightening." He reached his hands across the board.

Aang reached out and took them in his own, finding a warmth there so familiar he nearly burst into tears. "I'm not really sure of most of what the Mud Man was talking about, to be honest. It's pretty high-level stuff."

"But you were able to find me." Gyatso motioned around with an incline of his head. "You were able to find this place, in our shared past. Think of what else you might be able to find, with the help of your Tree."

Aang thought about it. Now that he had reached into the past he shared with Momo, he thought he could do it again, at least in his current state. But what could he actually accomplish? Seeing Monk Gyatso was a little different than somehow reaching into the past to make himself defeat Iroh sooner, or wake up earlier at the North Pole and leave before it was too late.

Gyatso let go of Aang's hands and motioned at the Pai Sho board between them. "Can you take back a move you've made once your finger has left the tile?"
Aang looked down at the Pai Sho board, but found that instead of a game grid, it was a spread of the entire world, a living and moving representation of everything, so detailed that he could even see a war going on in the Foggy Swamp if he squinted. "No, not if I play by the rules."

"Good answer. But cheating has its own consequences, and you haven't lost the game yet. If you make a wrong move, how do you fix it?" Gyatso folded his hands in his sleeves and waited.

Aang looked up at his teacher, and then down at the world again. But now it was just a Pai Sho board again, with tiles placed as if in the middle of play. He'd played lots of games against Gyatso, games that the other Elder Monks said were waste of time he could have spent training. "I try to play better?"

"More specific, please. Let's say you left your White Lotus tile all alone, and I've cut it off from everything else. Its movement abilities are useless without other tiles to which it can lend support."

"Well, I'd try to move my other tiles in to get to it, so that it could boost their functions before your tiles take them."

Gyatso's smile was radiant. "Good answer. Now, what's your next move?"

Aang blinked, and the board was once again replaced by the entire world. "Do you think the Tree of Time will help?"

"I think it already has." Gyatso winked.

Aang laughed again, and soon Gyatso joined in. It was a sound better than music.

Dreams could be walked by more than the Spirits, more than Wise Men. Memories could inhabit dreams, too, including memories of things yet to be.

A memory of a swamp, and a tree, floated across the dreams of certain people. It floated beyond time, reaching out to before the dream was even spun by a boy with an arrow on his head. It found resonance in sacred lands, in ceremonies honoring the earth, in drunken hallucinations, in celebrations of the dawn, in drowsy contemplation of a beach sunset, visions in a fire, and nightmares fed by anxiety. All of them occurred at different times, and yet all were happening now.

All those dreams, but just one dream, shared amongst people connected in ways they couldn't imagine. They had yet to meet, but in a way they already had.

Momo trilled in his lap. Aang looked down at him, but the lemur looked back with animal dullness, the light of the campfire reflected in big staring eyes. Had it been a dream?

Well, yes. But that didn't mean it wasn't real.

Aang looked up again, and across from him, in the light of the campfire, the Mud Man nodded.

Aang looked over at his friends.

Ty Lee's eyes were wide, and her hands were clasped together. "I've never seen your aura so beautiful." She sniffled, and wiped tears from her eyes.

Sokka and Katara exchanged glances with each other, and then Sokka said, "Well, you were
glowing and we didn't get any dangerous weather or volcanos, so that's good. Right?"

Katara glared at her brother for a moment. "So, Aang, did you do what you needed?"

"I think so." Aang looked down at Momo again, and then at the twig he still had in his other hand. "But we're not done yet. Let's wake Appa. We still have a long trip ahead of us."

Zuko had been battered by the winds for hours now. He'd lost his eyepatch at some point in the night, and perhaps had seen it as a small shadow plummeting down into the canopy of the swamp. Or perhaps that had merely been a dream. He might have also dreamed about the Airbender nuns who landed beside him to try to free him from his chains; he preferred that to the idea that those nuns had been real, and they'd simply failed in their rescue when Bangfei attacked them.

He didn't know how much more his body could take of this.

The mechanical spider didn't have a brig, Bangfei had said, so the soldiers aboard had lashed Zuko to the front rail of the spider's body-deck with chains, letting him hang over the open air cradled only by links of solid metal. He could have tried heating them, but the concertation it would take to melt them would have left him nothing with which to prevent a plummet to the ground far below.

He could only presume Huu the Swampbender was suffering the same fate on another side of the central body of the spider, and maybe the Mechanist as well.

The other option was that both his new allies had been tossed over the railing with limbs numbed by Bangfei's Qi-blocking arts.

Zuko wished had stopped to tell Toph where he was going. But then, Azula hadn't said anything to him before disappearing. Ozai and Ursa had not raised children with much common sense, it seemed. He wondered if Toph would miss him, if he died. She seemed to really be his friend, but it was hard to tell if that was the truth or just an especially long-term exercise in sarcasm.

Out of the corner of his eye, Zuko saw a flicker of motion, and raised his head to see Bangfei take a leap from the top of one of the balloons that kept the spider aloft. The former Weapon of the Fire Nation intercepted one of the Airbender nuns who were still trying to bring the floating craft down. Zuko couldn't make out what happened next, both because of the distance and the dim light provided by the moon and stars, but when it finished, Bangfei was leaping off the nun's body to arc back towards the deck, while the nun herself plummeted from the sky with loose limbs.

Some of other nuns angled their wing-like robes to dive after their sister, but they all passed out of Zuko's vision, so he couldn't see what the result was. He offered his own hope that Bangfei's victim could be saved.

He kept none for himself.

It was hard to breathe, now.

Bangfei hadn't wanted to kill Zuko, but the man was a fanatic. He'd rather risk Zuko's life than risk this mad scheme. And the rest of the soldiers on board didn't seem concerned. They knew that Zuko was an exile, not even in the royal line of succession anymore. They could treat him like an honorless criminal.

Zuko agreed with them. He should have fought more fully against the Fire Lord. Against Uncle Iroh. He didn't want to lose what family he had left, but he would give everything up to save the world. More than his own loss, he feared the suffering of others. He could bear his own suffering, but knew
the agony so well that he couldn't stand the thought of it touching others.

This had to be what had driven Mai to save Aang, back on Crescent Island. He wished he had been kinder to her about that. He wished she could have been kinder to him about it, too.

The winds battered him again, perhaps naturally or maybe as the result of Airbenders nuns' ongoing assault. He had to acknowledge their tenacity; they'd fought for so long, with his own efforts against this mechanical beast lasting only a blink of the eye. They weren't even warriors, just monastics who had been gifted by fate with the legacy of a lost nation. They might not stop his uncle, but they'd held the line and kept this spider-vehicle from landing.

Zuko couldn't even feel the cold of the winds, anymore. He'd tried to summon his Inner Fire, but fire came from the breath, and breathing was so difficult while hanging from these chains.

He wouldn't close his eye and give up. He would witness, just as he promised Toph. His witnessing might be lost when he died, but he would not fail in his vow.

Somehow, though, he managed to miss the rising of the sun.

The mists that hovered over the swamp canopy diffused the light, and he didn't even realize that the darkness was fading until he saw a black shape rise up from the trees and arc towards the railing on the deck. It would have been lost in the night sky, before.

It landed with a clank a short distance from Zuko, and he realized it was a grappling hook. A long rope trailed down into the treetops.

The guards didn't seem to notice, so concerned were they with the Airbenders. Zuko strained his neck to see, and realized that the nuns had increased the intensity of their attack, engaging the Firebender guards directly rather than the balloons of the spider-construct. They dove and dodged around fireballs, shooting funnels of wind back, and kept everyone's gazes upward.

Zuko's neck started to cramp, so he lowered his head again.

And saw the person climbing up the rope.

The person moved quickly, obviously practiced at this kind of mission. A well-trained warrior, then. Had Toph's forces finally arrived? Zuko had seen the lights of Firebending and the echoes of warfare in the distance, all through the night, so he couldn't imagine that they'd been able to get this far. So who could it be?

And would this newcomer be defeated as soon as Bangfei noticed?

Zuko forced his single eye to focus. The sun started to rise above the pooling fog of the swamp, and in the new light, the climber looked up to meet his gaze-

And Suki of Kyoshi Island smiled up at him.

But-

How-

As Zuko gaped, she doubled her speed, hauling herself up with an agility that would have put a tiger-monkey to shame. She reached the railing and tied the roping around her waist, anchoring herself as she started exploring his chains.
But first she leaned over and dropped a kiss on his lips. "Hi, Zuko. I found you."

Zuko could only blink at her, the warmth of her lips lingering on his own. "I- You went home! And- how-"

"I had a dream," she said in a voice that almost drifted away on the wind, one hand gripping the railing and the other working a pin in the padlock on his chains, "of this exact tree. I just- I knew how to find it. So I followed my dream and found- well, you."

"Oh." He felt his face warming, even in the cool winds. "I'm- I'm really glad to see you."

"And I found a lot more!" Something clicked, and the chains loosened, but Zuko barely started to drop before Suki's arm snaked around his chest and pulled him against her. Despite his added weight, she was able to climb up over the railing, letting him sit and rest of the deck. He desperately sucked in air now that his lungs could properly expand, while Suki crouched next to him and rubbed his back. "On the way here-"

Zuko looked up at her beautiful face, saw Bangfei coming up behind her, and barked, "Look out!" He snapped an arm up to punch a fireball, but it was a weak thing, a messy mix of light and smoke that Bangfei avoided simply by stopping short and standing still for a moment.

Suki stepped in front of Zuko and took a fighting stance.

"Please," Bangfei said, bowing his head to her. "I don't want to have to hurt you. I'm a Weapon of the Fire Nation. You can't win."

"Not by myself." Suki took a step towards him.

Bangfei shook his head. "Prince Zuko can't help you. Not enough."

"I know." Suki launched herself at Bangfei, who raised his fists-

-and a woman in aquamarine clothes with a tonfa-club in each hand flipped up over the railing and sprang past Suki to swing her club at Bangfei's head-

-who managed to duck beneath it and roll away from Suki's sweeping kick-

-and another woman in clothing identical to the first's except for its yellow color climbed over the railing and attacked with another pair of tonfa clubs, managed to tag Bangfei's back with echoing smacks-

-and more tonfa-women in clothes of bright blue and green and purple and orange joined the fight on the deck, moving with coordination and precision and a speed that was the almost the equal of Bangfei's. But they outnumbered him and had him surrounded.

And all of them shared a single face, a face Zuko knew best as belonging to Ty Lee.

Her sisters had come all the way from Ember Island to join this war. But why?

As the sisters all fell on Bangfei with their clubs, Suki came over to Zuko to help him to his feet, saying, "I was trying to tell you: on the way here, I found more people who wanted to help. The Ty Sisters and I bonded back when I was staying with Mai on Ember Island, so they came with me to find and help you. And they're good enough to impress even Mai, so six of them together must add up to more than a single Weapon."
Zuko tried to make himself understand, but either he was too tired or just not smart enough. "I don't get it. Why- how- you just happened to meet up with them on the way here?"

Suki shrugged. "I know. I can't explain it. So many people-"

Wait. She had met more than just the Ty Sisters? "How many people?"

King Toph had become blind to her own war.

She had completely lost track of where she and her army were in this stupid swamp. The fighting had spread out beyond the Swampbender village, and then the new arrivals in the weird blue and white Pai Sho robes had joined in with the Fire Nation to scatter her army across the bogs. With Bato's help, she'd managed to pull together a core group of warriors - Earthbenders, fights with spears and swords and clubs and slings, newly recruited Swampbenders – to try to punch a hole or win a rallying point, but after a long night's work, it was starting to seem like she had just been setting up for her last stand.

That was really annoying.

People had died through the night, fallen in the waters and mud, and it was likely that no one would ever be able to find the bodies.

Toph was almost, sort of, starting to expect it to be her fate as well. The last stand of the last Earth King (more or less).

But she was going to take a huge chunk of Fire Lord Iroh's army down with her, if she had any say in it. On the patch of muddy grasses where she'd chosen to make her stand, she stomped a foot with all of her Earthbending power, sending tremors through both the solid and more liquid parts of the swamp. She couldn't see or sense the enemy's response, but she heard the crackling of burning foliage, the buzz of motorized swamp boats, and the ringing of weapons clanged against armor to form a marching beat. The Fire Army was coming for her.

Toph stomped her foot again, sending another seismic wave, and called out at the top of her lungs, "Get ready! Fight for your king! Or I'll save the Fire Nation the trouble and beat up all up myself!"

Behind and around her, her rebels and allies answered back with a cheer. It was enthusiastic, and she loved them for it, but there were far too few voices. She hoped most of the lost were simply turned around the in the swamp and not dead. But even if they had passed on in the reincarnation cycle, she knew she still would have started this war. Losing was no worse than not doing anything. Not against this enemy.

And then another seismic tremor shook the swamp.

Except Toph hadn't moved.

It had come from behind the massing Fire Army. Toph plopped down to lie fully on the ground, her whole body acting as a receiver, and stomped her foot again.

Another seismic wave went out, and another answered her.

But this time, she 'heard' more in it. It wasn't being produced by a single powerful Earthbender, like her. More of these weird 'Pai Sho Warriors?'

Toph got and lifted her arms to raise herself on a column of sloshy earth, rising high above her army.
She reached within herself with all her power and put what she found there in every last bit of earth and dirt and mud around her, so that when she shouted, it echoed along with her, "Who are you people anyway?"

Bato started to say, "Your Majesty, it's not them! It's someone else-"

There was another seismic pulse, and then Toph felt *a whole mudslide burst through the trees and scattered a portion of the Fire Army.* A deep, booming voice called out, "Tyro and the hidden Earthbenders will fight for the Avatar and the Earth King! Haru, let's take back our homeland!"

And there was a roar of water, as if the whole swamp had suddenly decided to become a waterfall, and so many of the fires whose crackling had been a constant noise through the night went silent. An aged voice called out, "The free Waterbenders of the Southern Water Tribe have come to avenge our imprisonment!"

And another voice added, "The Faceless Tribe of the North will stand with our sister tribe and fight for the Avatar!"

And that was all good, but even with the newcomers and their attacks, there was still a lot of noise and ground-rumbling come from the Fire Army's side. Toph could feel the air heat up and hear the whooshing of incoming fireballs-

-but a voice called out, "The Sun Warriors will no longer let Fire be used as a tool of death! For the dragons and the Avatar!" And the heat in the air immediately cooled, as if all the fires were snuffed out, and only a smoky breeze was left in its place.

More cries rose up, some representing villages or groups and some just announcing individuals whose names Toph had never heard before. Mercenaries declared patrons, weird Water Tribes came out of ancient history, and one nice voice even told something called Nyla that maybe if they helped save the world someone would pay them.

So Toph answered them all. "For the Earth Kingdom and the Avatar, *let's trounce these flame-heads and shoves their faces in their toilets! Yeah!*

And then she twisted a foot to have her platform launch her forward into battle.

Her army - her new army -followed.

Bato stuck close to her, as he had since last night, and while she fired off boulders of mud and peat, she said to him, "Tell me what's going on. Be my Royal Eyes."

"It's-" Bato's voice faltered. "It's amazing. I see warriors- *hardened* warriors, in armor, with sprigs of dogwood pinned to their hats."

Toph nodded and buried a Firebender in mud. "That's how mercenaries acknowledge their patron. They wear a token on their hats."

"I see men and women in red loin-clothes and golden jewelry, their faces painted in burgundy and white, overwhelming the enemy soldiers with Firebending that's brighter and hotter than any other I've seen."

Toph grinned and wondered if Ham Gao was somewhere in there complaining about everything.

"I see warriors and Waterbenders, some in blue and some wearing black, some young and some older than my parents would be."
Toph hadn't personally met anyone like that. "Northern Water Tribe?"

"I- I don't think so. The ones in black move in a style different from those who served Iroh. And- and amidst it all, a creature as big as a sky bison is swimming through the swamp, its tongue lashing the enemy and bringing them down with a single blow. Riding atop it is a woman in black with a whip. I- I'm very confused, Earth King."

Toph grinned. "That's fine. We don't have to understand; we just have to win. Now point me in the direction of the most enemies. I want to put some royal hurt on people."

Zuko couldn't believe what he was hearing from Suki. "All those people arrived at the same edge of this swamp at the same time, coming from all over the world, and claimed they had the same dream about the Avatar needing them here?"

Suki shrugged as she watched the Ty Sisters wrap Bangfei up in the chains that had once held Zuko to the spider-construct's railing. "Everyone had the same story. And I had that exact dream. I don't know how Aang did it, but he is the Avatar."

Yes, he was. Zuko would have liked a better answer, but he supposed that this was what it was like to live in an age guided by the Bridge Between Worlds. And Zuko still had his part to do.

He put a hand on Suki's shoulder, got a wink in return, and turned to the Ty Sisters. "We need to bring this thing down. If you can protect me and Suki from the guards, we can handle the rest. Ready?"

Six identical faces, all of them eager (except for one, who just seemed annoyed by everything) nodded. And then they broke into coordinate motion.

Firebenders from the Crimson Guard, the Fire Lord's personal unit, tried to stop them. They did their duty honorably, and Zuko could not fault them for that. But that didn't stop him from fighting them. It didn't stop him from storming the command tower and making his way to the bridge as the Ty Sisters and Suki watched his back.

And it didn't stop him from capturing the bridge crew, finding the lever that would release the balloons, and allowing the mechanical spider to crash down on the swamp canopy beside the banyan-grove tree, where it could do no harm.

They'd won.

Iroh wished he could have arrived at his destination to find victory waiting for him, but he supposed that no part of this was going to be easy for him. That was, in a way, appropriate, because he certainly deserved to have to work for this.

As his airship glided over the swamp, he stood at the front of the bridge and looked out with a spyglass through the window. He studied the main battleground just ahead of the airship, where in between the gabs in the tree leaves it appeared that his army was losing to a rather colorful opposition group. He shifted his view to the distance, where the platinum spider sat like a drunken pest on the wrong set of trees.

No, this was not going to be easy. But it victory was still possible.

He lowered the spyglass and turned to his airship captain. "Could you please summon Lian the Maker? And also bring Zhao from the brig. Sadly, it seems we are going to have to make use of one
of the more extreme tools in our possession."

He had hoped to avoid this particular gambit. But he would do anything for Lu Ten.

Anything. No matter how hard it was for him.

But Iroh could admit, at least, that it would be much harder for Zhao, as well as those who had made themselves into Iroh’s enemies.

TO BE CONTINUED

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